



Module 1 of 5

Instructor Edition

What is Text Complexity?

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Overview

Read and Learn

Activity 1

Read foundation material:

- *Common Core State Standards, Appendix A* (2010b), pp. 2–15
- *Reading Between the Lines* (ACT, 2006), pp. 1–27

Reflect and Respond

Activity 2

Respond to the purpose-setting questions.

Analyze and Apply

Activity 3

Analyze the two foundation readings (*CCSS Appendix A, Reading Between the Lines*) using the “staircase” of text complexity.

Activity 4

Read the Text Matters article *7 Actions that Teachers Can Take Right Now: Text Complexity* (Hiebert, 2012) and compare this article to the two foundation readings.

Activity 5

Apply what you know about text complexity to supplemental texts from two grade bands (4–5 or 9–10).

Background

Instructor Edition

This edition features margin notes of special interest to instructors (with additional content or activity notes), but is otherwise identical to the participant edition.

Text levels have typically been addressed indirectly within past generations of standards documents. For example, a standard might describe fifth graders as needing to identify figurative language in “grade-level” but grade-level text was not defined. Readability estimates were of some help; however, they are limited measures that cannot fully capture the complexity of a novel or expository text. By contrast, Standard 10 of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010a) turns the spotlight of the English/language arts standards to ensuring an increase in students’ ability to comprehend more and more complex text across their school careers.



Key Terms

CCR: An acronym for “College and Career Ready” and refers to the idea that standards should be aligned with and prepare students for college and work expectations. College and career readiness builds in “steady and increasing complexity of texts and tasks.” (CCSS, Appendix A, 2010b, p. 2).

Close reading: Close reading is characterized by the use of evidence from the text to support, analysis, conclusions, or views of texts. For example, responses to the definition of text complexity would begin with a reference to the place in the text where the term is defined.

Lexile: A Lexile measure is a valuable piece of information about either an individual’s reading ability or the difficulty of a text, like a book or magazine article. The Lexile measure is shown as a number with an “L” after it—880L is 880 Lexile (MetaMetrics, 2012).

Readability measures: Over the last several decades, a number of measures have been devised to quantitatively estimate the difficulty of texts intended for student use. These include the Fry Readability Estimate, Flesch-Kincaid, and others. Each estimates readability, typically in terms of grade level, based on a variety of factors such as sentence length, word length, or a count of words that are more or less frequent in the English language. Additional examples are available [here](#).

Staircase: The staircase represents the idea, embedded in the Common Core State Standards (2010a), that the texts students are asked to read and the tasks related to them are increasingly and steadily more complex and challenging.

The Activities

Read and Learn

Activity 1

This module has been designed to fit into a three-hour block or less and to focus specifically on one aspect of the Common Core State Standards—text complexity. The Standards have numerous other elements that deserve attention. A PowerPoint of all elements of the CCSS was prepared by the Center for the Advancement of Reading (2011) for use in California’s teacher education programs. The underlying framework

In this module, you will learn what factors and features make text complex for reading and apply close reading techniques.

Purpose-Setting Questions

- ▶ How do the CCSS standards define text complexity?
- ▶ What does the “text complexity band” mean?
- ▶ What are the three factors for “measuring” text complexity?

Reading

Read sections on text complexity within the *Common Core State Standards, Appendix A* (2010b, pp. 2–15), and a portion of *Reading Between the Lines* (ACT, 2006) (pp. 1–27). *Reading Between the Lines* served as an impetus for the Standards’ em-

for all participating states is the same one so this presentation (available for free download) could be useful to instructors.

phasis on college and career readiness. As you read, you may want to make notes in the margins and highlight key areas of the text using a paper copy of the readings or using digital annotation tools (e.g., Evernote, Adobe Reader, any of several apps for tablet computers). The [SOAPSTone](#) (Morse, 2012) strategy from the College Board may provide a guide for your annotations.

Reflect and Respond

Activity 2

Complete the chart below to respond to the purpose-setting questions. Note page numbers and key words that support your responses. You may use “CCSSA” as an annotation code for *CCSS Appendix A* and “ACT” for *Reading Between the Lines*.

Purpose-Setting Question	Evidence (Note source, page number, and key words or phrases)
How do the CCSS standards define text complexity? Response:	
What does the “text complexity band” mean? Response:	
What are the three factors for “measuring” text complexity? Response:	

Working in a small group of three or four, compare your responses with those of your colleagues. Add any information from the discussion that would improve your initial response. Your instructor may ask you to post your responses in an online discussion forum.

Analyze and Apply

Activity 3

Now that you have read to establish a foundational definition of text complexity, we will apply the ideas found there to the two texts, *CCSS Appendix A* and *Reading Between the Lines*, plus one other professional text of your choice.

Working in a small group, use these questions to examine the complexity of *CCSS Appendix A* and *Reading Between the Lines*.

- Were particular sections more challenging to comprehend than other sections?

Texts of participants’ choice could include an article or chapter from a course syllabus or an article from a professional journal (e.g., *The Reading Teacher*, *Reading Research Quarterly*).

Table 1
Features of Texts for Teachers on Text Complexity

Text	Lexile	Mean Sentence Length	Mean Word Frequency (Vocabulary Difficulty)
CCSS Appendix A (pp. 2–15)	1640	28.74	3.04
<i>Reading Between the Lines</i> (pp. 1–27)	1520	25.25	3.11
<i>7 Actions That Teachers Can Take Right Now: Text Complexity</i>	1240	19.43	3.33

- What is gained by making texts more readable for readers?
- What could be some potential downsides of making texts more readable?

Activity 5

In Activity 4, we developed an understanding about how texts can vary in their complexity, even for proficient readers. Activity 5 extends this understanding to texts read by students in kindergarten through grade 12. The means of studying these demands are considered in comparisons with texts identified in Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards (2010c) as exemplary at different grade levels. Texts for two grade levels representing distinctive periods of reading and thinking development are our focus: One set for Grades 4–5 and another set for Grades 9–10. Readability information for the two texts for each grade band is given in Table 2 below.

Selections from each text are included in this module’s resources for you to use as a reference. You will work with a small group of about four participants. Choose a grade band (4–5 or 9–10) and review the information in Table 2, then examine the text selections that correspond to each text. Your instructor may ask you to divide your group in half with some group members analyzing one text while the other half of the group analyzes the other text.

- What proficiencies do readers need to have to comprehend these texts? Proficiencies are cognitive skills readers bring to bear when they approach texts, particularly those that are complex relative to their age, developmental levels, and experiences as readers. These proficiencies include summarizing, predicting, visualizing, and so forth.

Table 2
Readability Features of Exemplar Texts from the Common Core State Standards: Grades 4–5 and 9–10

Exemplars from the CCSS	Grade Band	Lexile	Mean Sentence Length	Mean Word Frequency (Vocabulary Difficulty)
<i>The Black Stallion</i>	4–5	690	10.24	3.53
<i>Secret Garden</i>	4–5	1190	16.52	3.15
“Gift of the Magi”	9–10	880	13.3	3.5
<i>Metamorphosis</i>	9–10	1360	26.1	3.6

- What proficiencies might teachers want to teach with these texts to support students' increasing capacity to read complex texts?
- What are the differences in the demands of the texts for readers? Are the texts at a grade level equally complex?
- What features of a text might challenge readers?

Compare the text features you found in the selection with the Lexile, mean sentence length, and mean word frequency information in Table 2. Develop a list of proficiencies that readers would need for each selection. Prepare an example from the text selection to support the proficiencies you identify. Two or three proficiencies should be enough. Compare your list with those of the other half of your group. Note similarities and differences using your examples to support your findings.

Looking Ahead

Keep what you have learned in this module in mind as we move on to Module 2—the consideration of the pros and cons of readability formulas.

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