

The Common Core's Staircase of Text Complexity: Getting the Size of the First Step Right

by Elfrieda H. Hiebert

"K-12 reading texts have actually trended downward in difficulty in the last half century" — Common Core State Standards, English/Language Arts (CCSS), Appendix A, page 2¹

There can be no argument that texts used in high schools—and even those in middle schools—have been “dumbed” down over the past 50 years. If high school graduates are to be reading texts of college and careers, text difficulty levels for middle- and high-school students *do* need to be raised in accordance with the staircase of text difficulty identified by the CCSS.

However, it is not at all clear that the increase in text difficulty levels needs to start with primary-level texts, as is recommended in the CCSS staircase of text complexity. The claim that K-3 texts have been dumbed down over the past 50 years is simply not true. With respect to kindergarten, there were *no* kindergarten texts in core reading programs 50 or even 20 years ago.² The difficulty levels of kindergarten texts in current core reading programs are comparable to those of first-grade texts in the 1980s.³

For first-grade texts, the dumbing down claim was true when Jeanne Chall made it in 1967. Chall based her claim on a review of texts used between 1956-1962.⁴ However, first-grade texts have changed a great deal since then. Shortly after Chall's critique, basal publishers retired characters such as Dick and Jane and along with them word repetitions (e.g., Run, run, run) and other “controlled” features that dominated beginning reading texts. By the late 1980s, controlled text had been entirely eliminated⁵ from core reading programs.

In fact, an obstacle for many beginning readers today is that the texts are too hard. Several reviews describe the changes in first-grade texts that started in the late 1980s and remain prominent



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regardless of whether the texts come from leveled books, decodables, or trade books.⁶ In the texts of the 2010s, beginning readers must process large numbers of new words—typically 25 or more new words for every 100 words of text (regardless of the program's philosophy). The majority of words in today's beginning reading programs are included among the 300 most-frequent words in written English. However, many of the other words in the text—around 40%—appear a single time. Texts with many new words that are rarely if ever repeated make it hard for beginning readers to develop automaticity with core sound-letter patterns and critical words.

How much harder can the texts for primary-level students get? The CCSS suggests a whole lot. On the Lexile (L) scale that the CCSS uses for its staircase of text complexity, the step for grades two-three ends at 790L, approximately one grade level higher than previous recommendations. Two-thirds of the American fourth-grade cohort is failing to reach the current proficient reading standard on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.⁷ Before raising the size of the first step on the staircase of text complexity and asking young students to climb bigger steps faster, two critical questions about the CCSS's staircase of text complexity need to be addressed.

First, what is the evidence that raising levels of text complexity, especially for primary-level texts, fosters the goal of college and career readiness? In particular, what is the evidence that attaining the 790L point at the end of third grade is necessary to be on track for college and career reading at high school graduation? Existing evidence suggests that exiting third-graders who read texts in the range of 540L to 585L proficiently

are likely to be successful in subsequent grades. This complexity level—540L to 585L—is approximately 200L to 250L *lower* than the recommendation of the CCSS. The evidence for 540L to 585L as a reading proficiency standard for exiting third graders comes from two venerable sources.

The first comes from the report *Double Jeopardy*⁸ that used the National Longitudinal Survey of 4,000 children from birth through young adulthood. This study reported that students who left third grade without proficiency on a standardized reading test (the texts of tests average around 540L⁹) were unsuccessful in subsequent grades.

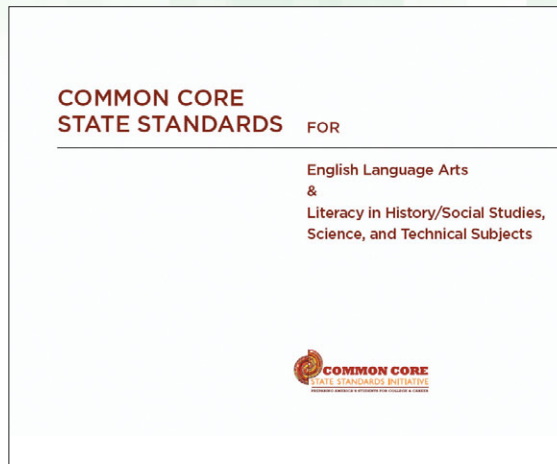
The second source of evidence is Jeanne Chall—the scholar who first identified both the dumbing down of text and the fourth-grade slump (a phenomenon among students who leave third grade without reading on-grade level). In 1996, Chall¹⁰ and her colleagues identified benchmark texts from Grades 1-12. Panels of teachers and school administrators validated these benchmark texts. The third-grade texts, including science and social studies texts, have an average complexity level of 585L—200L lower than the third-grade exit level recommended in the CCSS.

The second question asks: Why aren't more third-graders able to read at proficient and advanced levels on the research-based standard identified by the NLS and Chall? At present, two-thirds of a third-grade cohort fails to attain the proficient standard with *current* levels of text complexity.¹¹ What if, rather than being harried by another new standard that has yet to be validated, we were to do some serious soul-searching? What if, rather than asking what is hot and not, we asked what is working and what is not? For example, how well do current texts and pacing guidelines support beginning and struggling readers?

To read proficiently at third grade means that students read many informational texts, use media, think critically about texts, and write responses to what they read—all prominent recommendations in the CCSS. But it is not at all clear that college and career readiness at high school graduation will be supported by raising the height of the staircase step at third-grade and asking young students to jump higher and faster. Before we increase the levels of text complexity in primary-level reading programs, we need to examine why it is that so many exiting third graders are not reading proficiently at current complexity levels—levels that

are linked to future school success. Until we do that, the pursuit of “harder, faster, earlier” will do little to support the many students who depend on schools to become literate at the levels required for the digital age.

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