Guide to Text Complexity

What is Text Complexity?

Every text has a level of complexity or readability that affects the way the reader interacts with it. Novels, articles, poems, short stories, textbooks, etc. have wide ranges of complexity that are appropriate at different grade levels and for a variety of purposes. An important focus of Indiana's Academic Standards is making sure students are being exposed to texts with increasing complexity in all subject areas as they move toward being college and career ready. While determining the appropriate placement of a text in accordance with the reading standards for text complexity (Learning Outcome Standards RL.1 and RN.1), it is important to evaluate quantitative measures, qualitative measures, and reader and task considerations.

Quantitative Measurements of Complexity

Quantitative dimensions and factors are those aspects of a text (e.g., word length and frequency, and sentence syntax) that are not easily measurable by a human and are typically measured by a program. While these tools are helpful, they should NOT be the only measures for determining text complexity. Poetry, plays, and texts below a second grade reading level cannot typically be measured by quantitative means.
Multiple measures are recommended when possible.

Qualitative Measurements of Complexity

Qualitative dimensions and factors are those aspects of text complexity (e.g., levels of meaning and structure) only measureable by an attentive reader.

The **Qualitative Considerations for Literature** and **Qualitative Considerations for Nonfiction** worksheets can assist in making finer distinctions about where a text should fall in the grade-level span. There are three categories: accessible, moderately complex, and highly complex. An accessible text should be accessible for students to be able to interact with independently at the low end of the grade-level span. A moderately complex text may require scaffolding for students at the low-end of the grade-level span, but should be accessible with no scaffolding once they reach the middle or high-end of the grade-level span. A very complex text will require scaffolding for students until they reach the high-end of the grade-level span, at which point they should be able to interact with the text independently.

Reader and Task Considerations

Reader and task considerations can be individual to schools, classrooms, and students. This includes taking factors like cognitive capabilities, reading skills, and motivation into consideration.

Suggested Considerations for Reader and Task

Cognitive Capabilities

Do readers at this grade level possess the necessary…
- o attention to read and comprehend this text?
- o ability to remember and make connections among the various details presented in this text?
- o visualization skills to imagine what is occurring or what is being discussed in the text?

Also consider if this text will help to develop the attention, memory, and critical/analytical thinking skills necessary for future reading endeavors.

Reading Skills

Do readers at this grade level possess the necessary. . .
- o inferencing skills to make connections among elements that may not be explicit in this text?
- o visualization skills to imagine what is occurring or what is being described in this text?
- o questioning skills to challenge the ideas being presented in this text and consider multiple points of view?
- o comprehension strategies to manage this text?

Also consider if this text will help to develop the inferencing skills, visualization skills, questioning skills, and comprehension strategies necessary for future reading endeavors.

Motivation and Engagement with Task and Text

Will the readers at this grade level be able to. . .
- o understand the purpose of reading this text- which might shift over the course of the reading experience?
- o be engaged with the topic of this text?
- o be engaged with the style of writing and the presentation of ideas within this text?

Also consider if this text might help readers develop an interest in the content.

Prior Knowledge and Experience

Do the readers at this grade level possess adequate prior knowledge and/or experience regarding the. . .
- o topic of this text to manage the material that is presented?
- o vocabulary used within this text to manage the material that is presented?
- o genre of this text to manage the material that is presented?
- o language (i.e. syntax, diction, rhetoric) of this text to manage the material that is presented?

Also consider if this text might help readers develop knowledge of topic, vocabulary, genre, or language.

Content and/or Theme Concerns

Do the readers at this grade level possess the. . .
- o maturity to respond appropriately to any potentially concerning elements of content or theme?

Also consider if there are any potentially concerning elements of content or theme that might contribute to students, teachers, administrators, and/or parents feeling uncomfortable with the reading of the text.

Complexity of Associated Tasks

Will the complexity of. . .
- o any tasks associated with this text interfere with the reading experience?
- o any questions asked or discussed concerning this text interfere with the reading experience?

Qualitative Features of Text Complexity Explained for Nonfiction

Accessible Features	Complex Features
Background Knowledge	
How much background knowledge is necessary to understand the text? *(Consider content-specific knowledge and references/allusions to other works)*	
○ Everyday knowledge and familiarity with genre conventions required	○ Extensive, perhaps specialized discipline-specific content knowledge required
○ Low intertextuality (few if any references to/citations of other texts)	○ High intertextuality (many references to/citations of other texts)
Purpose	
How clear are the purpose, point of view, and central idea of the text? *(Consider if they are explicitly stated or implicit)*	
○ Explicitly stated purpose	○ Implicit purpose, may be hidden or obscure
Text Structure	
How is the text structured? *(Consider if it is a familiar structure [e.g., chronological] or a more complex structure that may be unfamiliar to students at this level)*	
○ Simple	○ Complex
○ Explicit	○ Implicit
○ Conventional	○ Unconventional
○ Traits of a common genre or subgenre	○ Traits specific to a particular discipline
Language Features (continued on next page)	
What are the language features of the text? *(Consider if the language used is mostly literal or figurative, clear or abstract, familiar/contemporary or archaic/jargon)*	
○ Literal	○ Figurative or ironic
○ Clear	○ Ambiguous or purposefully misleading
○ Contemporary, familiar	○ Archaic or otherwise unfamiliar
○ Conversational	○ General academic or domain specific vocabulary
○ Light vocabulary load, few unfamiliar or academic words[1]	○ Many words unfamiliar and high academic vocabulary present
○ Sentence structure straightforward[2]	○ Complex and varied sentence structures
Illustrations/graphics	
How are illustrations/graphics (if included) used? *(Consider if the illustrations/graphics add clarification or add to the complexity)*	
○ Simple graphics	○ Sophisticated graphics
○ Graphics unnecessary or merely supplemental to understanding	○ Graphics essential to understanding the text and may provide information not elsewhere provided

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[1] While vocabulary can be measured by quantifiable means, it is still a feature for careful consideration when selecting texts. A helpful tool for evaluating academic vocabulary is located here: http://achievethecore.org/academic-word-finder/

[2] While sentence length is measured by quantifiable means, sentence complexity is still a features for careful consideration when selecting texts.

Quantitative Measures

Grade Band	ATOS	Degrees of Power®	Flesch-Kincaid	The Lexile Framework®	Reading Maturity	Text Evaluator
2nd-3rd	2.75-5.14	42-54	1.98-5.34	420-820	3.53-6.13	100-590
4th-5th	4.97-7.03	52-60	4.51-7.73	740-1010	5.42-7.92	405-720
6th-8th	7.00-9.98	57-67	6.51-10.34	925-1185	7.04-9.57	550-940
9th-10th	9.67-12.01	62-72	8.32-12.12	1050-1335	8.41-10.81	750-1125
11th-CCR	11.20-14.10	67-74	10.34-14.2	1185-1385	9.57-12.00	890-1360

For grade _____, holistically, this text should be considered:

_____ ACCESSIBLE

_____ MODERATELY COMPLEX

_____ HIGHLY COMPLEX

Qualitative Features of Text Complexity Explained for Literature

Accessible Features	Complex Features
Background Knowledge	
How much background knowledge is necessary to understand the text? *(Consider cultural familiarity and literary knowledge necessary to understand allusions to other works)*	
○ Common everyday experiences or clearly fantastical situations	○ Experiences distinctly different from one's own
○ Everyday knowledge and familiarity with genre conventions required	○ Cultural and literary knowledge useful
○ Low intertextuality (few if any references/allusions to other texts)	○ High intertextuality (many references/allusions to other texts)
Levels of Meaning	
Does the text have a single level of meaning or are there multiple/hidden levels of meaning? *(Consider the clarity of the theme(s))*	
○ Simple theme	○ Complex or sophisticated theme(s)
○ Single theme	○ Multiple themes
○ Single level of meaning	○ Multiple levels of meaning
○ Single Perspective	○ Multiple perspectives
Text Structure	
How is the text structured? *(Consider if the structure is conventional or unconventional, if there is a single narrator or multiple narrators, if events are related in chronological order or if there are flashbacks and other manipulations of time)*	
○ Simple	○ Complex
○ Explicit	○ Implicit
○ Conventional	○ Unconventional
○ Events related in chronological order	○ Events related out of chronological order
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What are the language features of the text? *(Consider if the language used is mostly literal or figurative, clear or abstract, familiar/contemporary or archaic/jargon)*	
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○ Light vocabulary load, few unfamiliar or academic words[3]	○ Many words unfamiliar and high academic vocabulary present
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