Text Complexity, Close Reading & Evidence-based Questions for the Elementary Classroom

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Reading, Language, and the Mind

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NYSED Network Team Institute
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Uncommon Schools
Reading Workshop

NYSED
November 29, 2011
| Shift 1 | PK-5, Balancing Informational & Literary Texts | Students read a true balance of informational and literary texts. Elementary school classrooms are, therefore, places where students access the world – science, social studies, the arts and literature – through text. At least 50% of what students read is informational. |
| Shift 2 | 6-12, Knowledge in the Disciplines | Content area teachers outside of the ELA classroom emphasize literacy experiences in their planning and instruction. Students learn through domain-specific texts in science and social studies classrooms – rather than referring to the text, they are expected to learn from what they read. |
| Shift 3 | Staircase of Complexity | In order to prepare students for the complexity of college and career ready texts, each grade level requires a “step” of growth on the “staircase”. Students read the central, grade appropriate text around which instruction is centered. Teachers are patient, create more time and space in the curriculum for this close and careful reading, and provide appropriate and necessary scaffolding and supports so that it is possible for students reading below grade level. |
| Shift 4 | Text-based Answers | Students have rich and rigorous conversations which are dependent on a common text. Teachers insist that classroom experiences stay deeply connected to the text on the page and that students develop habits for making evidentiary arguments both in conversation, as well as in writing to assess comprehension of a text. |
| Shift 5 | Writing from Sources | Writing needs to emphasize use of evidence to inform or make an argument rather than the personal narrative and other forms of decontextualized prompts. While the narrative still has an important role, students develop skills through written arguments that respond to the ideas, events, facts, and arguments presented in the texts they read. |
| Shift 6 | Academic Vocabulary | Students constantly build the vocabulary they need to access grade level complex texts. By focusing strategically on comprehension of pivotal and commonly found words (such as “discourse,” “generation,” “theory,” and “principled”) and less on esoteric literary terms (such as “onomatopoeia” or “homonym”), teachers constantly build students’ ability to access more complex texts across the content. |
Appendix A:
Research Supporting
Key Elements of the Standards

Why Text Complexity Matters

➢ Why focus on text complexity?
➢ What is text complexity?
➢ How do we help students understand more complex texts?
• K - 12 textbooks have become easier since the 1960s.
• Text demands of college and careers have remained consistent or increased.
• Result?

• Compounded by . . . Little time for students to interact with informational text on a *deep* level, not superficial skimming and scanning.

CCSS. Appendix A
Lexile Framework® for Reading Study
Summary of Text Lexile Measures
Interquartile Ranges Shown (25% - 75%)
ACT (2006)
College Readiness for Reading

Only 51% of students* met or exceeded the benchmark score for college and workplace success.

*college-oriented high school students who paid to take the test.)
Why not?
Not Literal versus Inferential Questions

![Graph showing the relationship between ACT Reading Test Score and Average Percentage of Questions Correct, comparing Literal and Inferential questions. The graph indicates that Inferential questions are generally answered correctly at a higher percentage compared to Literal questions across various ACT Reading Test Scores.](image)

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Why Not?
Not Textual Elements

- Main Idea/Author’s Approach
- Supporting Details
- Relationships
- Meaning of Words
- Generalizations & Conclusions

ACT Reading Benchmark

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Why Not?
Text Complexity

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Average Percentage of Questions Correct

- Uncomplicated
- More Challenging
- Complex

ACT Reading Benchmark

ACT Reading Test Score

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What makes a text complex???
What makes text “complex”?

- Uncommon words
- Background knowledge requirements
- Long sentences
- Complicated sentences
- Cross-references between sentences
Text Complexity

Levels of meaning
Structure
Language Conventions
Knowledge demands

Qualitative
Quantitative
Reader and Task

The Common Core Standards’ Model of Text Complexity

CCSS, Appendix A
Word Difficulty:
High School Reading Material vs. “Grown-up” Text
Sentence Length:

High School Reading Material vs. "Grown-up" Texts

H.S. English Reading
# Learning New Words Depends on Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed Texts</th>
<th>Rare Words per 1000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scientific articles</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult books</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic books</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s trade books</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool books</td>
<td>16</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult Prime Time</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Prime Time</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoons</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Rogers, Sesame Street</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adults Speaking to Adults</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College graduates to friends</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert Witness testimony</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strong Correlation: Vocabulary & Reading Comprehension

- Weak vocabulary impedes reading comprehension.
- Vocabulary grows larger and richer through reading with comprehension.
The Complex Text Dilemma

- If we want students to learn, then we have to give them text that they can understand.
- If we restrict texts to those that students will understand, we must choose texts in which nearly all of the words are already known.
- If we stick with texts in which nearly all of the words are already known, then we deny the opportunity to learn new words (information).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Bands in the Standards</th>
<th>Old Lexile Levels</th>
<th>Common Core Lexile Levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>450-725</td>
<td>450-790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>645-845</td>
<td>770-980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>860-1010</td>
<td>995-1115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>960-1115</td>
<td>1080-1305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-CCRR</td>
<td>1070-1220</td>
<td>1215-1355</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Credits: Common Core Appendix A)
In addition, a shift in balance—
## Recommended Distribution of Literary & Informational Text by Grade

*2011 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) reading framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Literary</th>
<th>Informational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## A Variety of Reading Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading Silently</th>
<th>Reading Aloud</th>
<th>Being Read to</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>🙁</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Silent Independent Reading</td>
<td>Students Reading Aloud</td>
<td>Teacher Reading Aloud to Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
<td>• The format that students read-in on exams and in college... and for most of their lives.</td>
<td>• Students hear and model expression and fluidity.</td>
<td>• Allows the best reader in the room to model and create drama/meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It’s efficient in terms of miles.</td>
<td>• Provides rich and constant data. Highly accountable and enables immediate correction.</td>
<td>• Allows students to learn vocabulary, syntax and story structure more complex that what they can read on their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Replicable in any setting</td>
<td>• Connects students with the fun of reading.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limitations</strong></td>
<td>• Low accountability-readers can practice reading poorly and this effect is likely to be most pronounced with the weakest readers.</td>
<td>• Can lack “leverage”- i.e., if one student is reading what’s everyone else doing?</td>
<td>• Involves more modeling than practice; can prepare students to engage with texts without being able to read them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Doesn’t fully prepare students to read on their own</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Open the door to complex texts

**Tools** to make the text approachable
AIR: Accountable Independent Reading

- Developing the Habits of Mind that allow students to fully experience a text independently
- Increasing text complexity while increasing independence
- Maximizing reading time
Elements of AIR

• **Practice Success**
  – Start small
  – Re-read

• **Accountable**
  – Assign an observable task

• **Gradual Release**
  – Gradual increase in length and complexity
  – Gradual increase in time between reading and reporting back
  – Gradual reduction in specificity of the reading task – widen the lens
Close Reading

• Selection of Text:
  – Prioritize: most important info; sections that present difficulty

• Frame the Reading:
  – A pressing question, controversy
  – A statement open for debate
  – A sense of justice: Is it fair? Is it unfair?
Close Reading

“The Microscope Replaces the Telescope”

- **Don’t Wait Questions:** pivotal questions to avoid misunderstandings/misinterpretations; asked frequently and **throughout** the reading, rather than waiting until the end

- **Sharpen the Focus Questions:** targeted questions on a particular word/phrase, sentence or paragraph to support close reading
Sharpen the Focus Examples:

- “What does it mean that the lion “turned on them”? How is that different from turning around?”

- “The author says, ‘It was the worst thing imaginable.’ What’s the ‘it’ she’s referring to there?”
Practice: Sample Texts

Sarah, Plain and Tall
by Patricia MacLachlan

Number the Stars
by Lois Lowry
Read the chapter. Note 3 places where word or phrase level questions are needed to prevent misunderstanding or emphasize an important part of the text.

Write a question for each of the above noted places that would help students better understand the reading. (See p. 9)
Share with a partner

• **Explain your choices:** What is important about asking questions where you did?

• **Provide feedback:** How did your partner’s questions support students in reading closely? What did you like about the questions? What suggestions do you have for improvement?
Evidence-Based Questions and Higher Order Thinking
EBQ or Not? (p. 13)

Step 1: Review the list of questions from the supplementary texts. For each question, determine if it is an “EBQ” or “Not”.

Step 2: For those questions which are not evidenced based, re-write the question to require evidence.
Review the Four Variables in EBQs on page 14.

• Which type of question do you think teachers ask most frequently?

• Least frequently?
More Tools and Tiering

• Evidence-Based & HOT Graphic Organizers
  – Characterization
  – Drawing Conclusions
  – Chain of Evidence
  – Prove or Refute

• Tiering with Similes & Metaphors
Writing EBQs

• Find 3 places in your text where you could ask an evidence-based question. Try to use three different types of EBQs (p. 14).

• How could you incorporate one of the graphic organizers to scaffold learning for students and help them to develop higher order thinking skills?
Sharpen the Focus & Evidence-Based Questions
Promote Close Reading
Close Reading Questions

- Require students to cite and/or explain all (or the great majority) of the evidence presented in a segment of the text. Far more rigorous challenge than simply asking for evidence. Students can’t “cherry pick” a simple or obvious piece.

- Ask students to paraphrase a particularly dense and complex (in language) passage that is critical to the understanding of the text.
Close Reading Questions

• Focus on finite chunks of challenging text that are short, dense and critical to the story/article.

• Come in clusters that build upon one another to reveal how and why a critical passage was written.

• Involve re-reading of the passage line by line, multiple times, as well as any sections the passage may allude to.
Resources

• Engage NY:  http://engageny.org

• Common Core Standards with NY additions:

• PTA:  http://www.pta.org/common_core_state_standards.asp
One strategy that I can implement *immediately* with *my* students to promote close reading and higher order thinking:
Thank YOU!!!

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