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Understanding the Core: Text Complexity

by Christina Hank

Listen in on any group of English language arts teachers preparing plans for common core implementation, and you are bound to hear the terms **rigor**, **grade-level texts**, and **text complexity**. Venture to conversations with groups more well versed in common core lingo, and you may even hear references to **quantitative measures**, **qualitative measures**, and **reader considerations**. As we work to implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), we know some texts that have been held as traditional in specific grade levels may have to move to other grade levels to meet complexity guidelines. If you, like so many other educators, find yourself struggling with the idea of relinquishing your *Hunger Games* unit to teachers well below your high school grade level, perhaps a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding text complexity will help ease your mind and aid in the process of letting go of those cherished, but not-quite-rigorous-enough, texts.

Why Do We Care About Text Complexity?

At some point in the last year, you have probably heard the statistics and seen the graphs that show that our students are not reading at a level that will have them prepared to read college- and career-level texts. The need for choosing appropriately challenging grade-level texts comes from research showing that although college and workplace text difficulty has risen in recent decades, the level of difficulty in the textbooks, literature, and informational texts we use in our classrooms has steadily declined. When looking solely at Lexile scores (a quantitative measure of text difficulty based on a mathematical formula), research shows a discrepancy in high school texts anywhere from 100 to 300 Lexile levels below appropriate grade-level complexity (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). What does this mean for our students? It means, based on quantitative measures alone, we are currently graduating students who lack the skills to read and comprehend college- and workplace-level texts because what they are reading in high school is not challenging enough.

We have to care about the complexity levels of texts we use because ultimately we want our students to be prepared for the difficulty of the texts they will read in college and their careers. But it isn’t just the English teacher who should be concerned about complexity. The CCSS recognizes that teaching literacy is not solely the job of the English teacher, and it goes so far as to set literacy standards for other content areas as well. Though we typically discuss text complexity in terms of ELA, it is important to remember that it applies across the content areas.

The CCSS evaluates a text’s difficulty by analyzing three components of the text: (1) quantitative measures, (2) qualitative measures, and (3) reader and task considerations, as shown in the CCSS triangle of complexity:

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Quantitative Measures

To measure a text’s quantitative value, you could use one of the many already-created scales for readability such as the Flesch-Kincaid or a Lexile score. Most of the time, these are readily available on the Internet. To search for a book’s Lexile score by keyword or title, for example, you could consult the Lexile book search tool (http://www.lexile.com/search/filters/results/?page=2). These types of measures use a mathematical formula based on word length and other criteria.

The Council of Chief State School Officers has provided us with this most updated guide (as of this writing) for grade-level-appropriate readability scores. You can use the chart on page 3 to guide you when making decisions about the quantitative measure of a text.
Quantitative measures are one part of the complexity triangle, but the triangle is slightly misleading in that it makes it seem like quantitative, qualitative, and reader-task considerations should all be given equal weight in evaluating a text. But the quantitative measure seems to be the least reliable piece (Appendix A, 2010; Hiebert, 2011).

For example, Appendix A of the CCSS (2010) explicitly recognizes that a text with very complex narrative structures such as figurative language and multiple levels of meaning (such as *The Grapes of Wrath*) might have a low quantitative score because it uses shorter words, more dialogue (naturally more simplistic language), and dialect (which will, again, throw the readability score off). Quantitative measures, then, are not entirely reliable. They may serve as a starting point for discussion, but we need to use our professional judgment and rely more on the other measures.

**Qualitative Measures**

A seemingly more reliable measure of complexity is the quality of the text. A text’s qualitative measures depend more on our professional expertise and common sense. A work with multiple plot lines is obviously more complex than one with a single plot line. A work with multiple narrators and changing perspectives is clearly more complex than one with a single narrator or perspective. “Fall of the House of Usher” is more difficult than “Gift of the Magi.” Texts that are nonsequential or books that require the reader to fill in more of the background information (think Hemingway) are more challenging than sequential or linear texts that are straightforward.

The Kansas Department of Education has developed some excellent rubrics for evaluating the qualitative complexity of both informational and literary texts. You will find the rubrics at [http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=4778](http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=4778), where you will also find blank evaluation templates and sample evaluations for Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* and other texts.

**Reader and Task Considerations**

The third measure for evaluating complexity is to consider the reader and the task. Questions you might ask yourself to address this might include “What do I want the student to learn in reading this text?” and “Will this text keep the student engaged?” Appendix A of the CCSS cites a RAND reading study that identifies the following important factors to consider in accounting for the reader and task:

The reader brings to the act of reading his or her cognitive capabilities (attention, memory, critical analytic ability, inferencing, visualization); motivation (a purpose for reading, interest in the content, self-efficacy as a reader); knowledge (vocabulary and topic knowledge, linguistic and discourse knowledge,
knowledge of Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects comprehension strategies); and experiences.

The Kansas Department of Education also has a list of questions for educators to reflect on as they consider the reader and task in text complexity.

What Am I Supposed to Do Now?

This issue of *In Perspective* will give you practical strategies for addressing text complexity in your classroom. Teri Lesesne, nationally known author, will guide you through matching texts to readers as a way to engage students while still meeting the rigor requirements of the common core. Tara Boyer, literacy coach in Newark Schools, provides a district-level view of what Newark is doing to meet the needs of struggling readers in the district. Kim and Brent Garee, high school teachers in Licking County, discuss starting conversations around text complexity as a place to begin. These articles will give you practical advice while providing you with enough background to be a part of those conversations about complexity.

References


Christina Hank is an English language arts specialist at ORC. Before coming to ORC, she taught English language arts in middle and high school.
Engage, Excite, Enrich: Selecting the Right Book

by Teri S. Lesesne

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Goldilocks. One day, she left her seat in class and wandered over to the bookshelves in search of something new to read. A gleaming golden cover beckoned, and she picked it up. “Too long,” she murmured and placed the book back on the shelf. She picked up another, this one with a colorful cover. “Too short,” she muttered, and placed it, too, back on the shelf. Finally, she selected a book with the picture of a gloomy castle on the cover, lifted it from the shelf, and declared it was “just right.” However, after returning to her seat and reading the first few pages, she again returned it to the shelf. The book was not for her. Goldilocks turned to her teacher and wailed, “Where is the book I am meant to read?”

Where indeed is the book for Goldi? And for Brandon and Jessica and all the other students seeking that just-right book? How do we assist students in finding books that excite and motivate but are also appropriate and perhaps even a bit challenging? What factors play a role in this process? How do we gauge text complexity in meaningful ways so that we can be the person who helps students find books that will become part of their “just-right” reading lives? In a classroom that invites student selection, helping them make good selections is a crucial step toward encouraging reading and also toward creating more independent readers.

Some have been content to utilize software and applications to identify texts that are at the correct level of complexity. Iview such programs with more than a little skepticism. Reading level, and even interest level, is not a significant factor when it comes to matching readers to books. If we relied on these scientific measures, we would not allow our youngest readers access to Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak (a readability level of 3.4 is too far above grade level), or permit high school students to read the latest winner of the Printz Award, Where Things Come Back by John Corey Whaley (it only has a 5.7 readability). Science cannot truly measure complexity. Where Things Come Back has two separate story lines that eventually intertwine, along with a savvy and quite literary narrator. The book demands much from the reader, and it delivers much as well. So if we do not turn...
Character

**Dead End in Norvelt** by Jack Gantos (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011) is the 2012 Newbery winner. It is the story of one fateful summer in the life of a character named Jack Gantos.

**Jasper Jones** by Craig Silvey (Knopf, 2011), a Printz Honor book, focuses on Charlie, a 13-year-old, who becomes friends with Jasper Jones, an outcast in their small town.

**Stupid Fast** by Geoff Herbach (Sourcebooks Fire, 2011) gives readers insight into jerk turned jock, Felton, who discovers his athletic ability.

**The Girl of Fire and Thorns** by Rae Carlson (Greenwillow, 2011), one of the finalists for the 2012 Morris Award, explores themes of religion, politics, and love.

**The Watch That Ends the Night** by Allan Wolf (Candlewick, 2011) is a novel in verse set aboard the ill-fated *Titanic*.

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...to science, how do we assist readers in the search for those books whose complexity will provide a satisfying reading experience?

We need to begin with a thorough knowledge of books. That means, bottom line, reading as much as we can from the field of young adult (YA) literature. How to go about this methodically? There are resources that will guide us in the right direction. For example, if I am trying to locate books for reluctant readers, readers who might struggle with text due to learning difficulties or deficiencies in vocabulary, I would turn to the Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers list (http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/quickpicks) from the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) of the American Library Association. The list, produced annually, recommends books that we might call Hi-Lo, high interest, low readability. Fiction and nonfiction have places on this list.

Outstanding Books for the College Bound (http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistsawards/booklists/outstandingbooks/2009/literature) is another YALSA list that would be beneficial to those students who wish to stretch themselves as readers. And the Printz Award (http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz), the YA equivalent of the Newbery, recognizes literary merit as well.

The International Reading Association’s Young Adult Choices List (http://www.reading.org/Resources/Booklists/YoungAdultsChoices.aspx) is a list of books that teens vote for as their favorite books annually. The same is true for YALSA’s Teens Top Ten (http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teenstop10).

In addition to these annual awards and lists, I follow blogs and Twitter feeds and Facebook postings from colleagues whose knowledge about YA informs the books they discuss. Jennifer Huber Swan (http://www.readingrants.com/) and Donalyn Miller (http://www.bookwhisperer.com/) are two of those whose “reviews” I seek. I also maintain a blog (http://professornana.livejournal.com/) and try to post about new books and their potential readership.

Knowing the books is essential. So, too, is knowing as much about the readers as I can. Helping readers find a book that is “just right” has been the topic of much of my teaching and my writing. And, now, having taught in a library science program, I also know it is about asking some good questions, sort of a reference interview/
reader’s advisory approach. When readers seem to be searching for a book with little success, I ask some questions such as the following:

- What was the last book you read that you really enjoyed?
- Who are some of your favorite authors?
- Is there a particular type of book (genre, format, etc.) that you enjoy (or do not enjoy)?
- Do you prefer a funny book or one that is scary or one that is sad?
- If an author could write a book just for you, what would that book be like?

Finally, text complexity may mean different things to different educators. When I consider complexity, I tend to focus on literary elements such as plot, character, and theme. Here, then, in the sidebars, are some recommendations of new books that provide text complexity within these three literary elements. Are these the just-right books for your readers? Some of them might be. However, only you know the needs and interests of your readers. Check out summaries and reviews. Better still, read these books yourself, always with that perfect reader in mind.

Teri Lesesne teaches classes in children’s and YA literature in the Department of Library Science at Sam Houston State University in Texas. She is the author of three professional books and numerous articles on books and reading. Her newest book is Reading Ladders: Leading Students from Where They Are to Where We’d Like Them to Be (Heinemann, 2010). You can find Teri on Twitter as @ProfessorNana.

A District Perspective

Scaffolding Text Complexity for At-Risk Readers

by Tara Boyer

We all know that the Common Core for English Language Arts will increase the rigor of academic expectations for our students. We have students, however, who are not achieving at the expectations of the current Ohio Academic Content Standards for English Language Arts. Consequently, questions about the common core exist for teachers. How can we ensure that our at-risk readers are getting what they need so that they can continue to grow as readers, by necessity at more than one grade level per year, resulting in their ability to catch up with their grade-level peers? How do we integrate the common core into the curriculum for our at-risk readers, especially those who read many grade levels below the required text complexity, without frustrating them or hindering their reading growth? How can we give our at-risk readers access to more complex texts?

Perhaps the increased rigor of the common core will help us to eradicate the gap between those students who are reading at grade level and those who are not. Even so, the process will not be immediate. And while I support the common core, I also realize that not all students will be able to read independently at the lowest level of the text bands without scaffolding, let alone at the high end of the text bands.

Scaffolding Reading Growth for At-Risk Readers

At Newark High School, we implemented a program for our at-risk readers in ninth and tenth grades. This program is an essential part of scaffolding for students, scaffolding their reading growth.

Using reading data, the high school places students, some with identified disabilities, into a two-period class that includes direct, or guided, reading instruction. Two teachers, a regular language arts teacher and an inclusion specialist, are in the classroom.

In the first period, students are flexibly grouped by their instructional reading levels and meet several times a week with one of the two teachers for small-group reading instruction. While the small groups are meeting with the teachers, the other students work independently on writing or reading skills. The groups are flexible, and as soon as a student is ready to move up in a reading level, he or she is moved. The student does not wait for the entire group to move forward.

The second period of the class is a more traditional language arts class. In this period, students work on whole-group novels, poetry, and nonfiction pieces and writing. This program has been in place for 2½ years at our high school, and we have seen very positive results on the state reading test for students who have participated in the program.

In addition to direct reading instruction in language arts classes, the ability of all teachers to teach and facilitate cross-curricular reading strategies in their classrooms will benefit students who struggle with reading. Facilitating literacy strategies in other content areas will also assist in the implementation of the Common Core Literacy Standards for Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.

Finally, a research-based reading intervention program for students identified through response to intervention or another reliable process will provide support outside the student’s language arts class.

Scaffolding the Common Core for At-Risk Readers

When implementing the common core, many districts will want teachers to teach whole-class novels that the district, using the text complexity model, has determined are at grade level. At Newark City Schools, we have already begun the task of determining grade levels based on text complexity. For example, using the text complexity model, our district determined that The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins would work best at grade 7. While the text was at a 5.3 reading level according to scholastic.com, the content, genre, and writing task assigned raised it to grade 7 readability. We know that some seventh grade students will be able to read this text easily, but others will not. Our task is to make those texts that are
at grade level (and above) accessible to all our students, and we can do that by using scaffolding.

The place to begin is with the student’s reading level. At different points during the year, we need to determine at what grade level each student reads. This can be done with whatever reading test your district uses. By understanding student reading levels, we have a better sense of which students may struggle with a text.

The text is the next place to focus. Prior to teaching a whole-class novel, we need to determine which chapters are independently accessible, which are accessible with scaffolding, and which are too difficult without extreme support for the at-risk readers. For independently accessible chapters, all students, including the at-risk readers, should be expected to read these chapters on their own.

To facilitate our at-risk readers’ access to parts of the text that will frustrate them, various scaffolding techniques can be employed. The challenging parts of the text fall into two categories:

1. If a chapter (or reading piece) is deemed too challenging for the at-risk reader without some scaffolding, we can support the student in various ways:
   - Use small-group direct instruction (guided reading) to help the struggling student access the whole-class novel.
   - Make sure that the struggling student is introduced to challenging vocabulary before he or she reads the chapter.
   - Create an anticipation guide for that specific chapter to help build a struggling student’s background knowledge prior to reading the chapter.
   - Create a graphic organizer to access the information in the chapter.
   - Do a class or small-group reading of a short piece (poetry, nonfiction) that will help the struggling student access background knowledge needed for the chapter.
   - Work with note-taking strategies to help students access the content.
   - Create a short summary for the student to read before he or she accesses the chapter.

2. If a chapter is deemed too difficult without extreme support for the at-risk reader, then we can implement these strategies:
   - Allow the student to listen to the chapter on CD as he or she reads along in the text.
   - Have the at-risk reader do a shared reading with a peer who is able to access the text, with teacher-highlighted sections so that the accessible parts of the chapter are read by the at-risk student and the more difficult parts are read by the student who is able to access the text.
   - If the student has academic assist time (study skills) established through an Individual Education Plan, then determine if the academic assist teacher can give the student direct instruction for the chapter.

**Complex Texts for At-Risk Readers**

To make sure that students who are not reading at grade level have access to complex texts, we have several options. Again, we need to understand the reading abilities and levels of the students. If we know the students’ reading levels, then we can make sure that we stretch the students through differentiating some of the pieces chosen. For example, if the student is in eighth grade and reads at a fifth grade level, then we can try to choose some complex fifth or sixth grade pieces for him or her to read independently when not doing whole-class pieces. Finding texts that are complex, while still at a level where the student can work independently and not get overly frustrated and quit, takes time and effort. Hopefully, more resources will become available to assist teachers in making the common core accessible to at-risk readers.

Another way to use complex texts for at-risk readers is to choose short pieces that reach the text complexity level at which the students should be reading. These pieces can be taught as a whole-class activity where we model close reading skills for the students. This will allow at-risk readers to be exposed to texts that are at their grade-level band in complexity, but since they are taught using whole-group instruction, there is less opportunity for the students to reach their frustration level. The instruction can also be differentiated so that those students who need more support receive it, while those who can work independently move forward on their own.
Raising the Bar

The Common Core English Language Arts Standards will raise the bar so that, in theory, our students will be more ready for college and the world of work. It is good that we are moving ahead with our expectations for our students—and it’s all the more reason that we keep making opportunities for our struggling readers to achieve.

Reference


Tara Boyer was a high school English and history teacher for 17 years at Newark City Schools in Ohio. For the last six years, she has held the position of literacy curriculum coach for the three middle schools and one high school at NCS. Tara has a Ph.D. from Ohio University in curriculum and instruction.

Editor’s note: See Tara’s video Scaffoding Complex Texts (ORC #15456), http://www.ohiorc.org/record/15456.aspx.
Text Complexity: Accessing Exemplar Texts Across Disciplines

by Brent Garee and Kim Garee

Found yourself leaving professional development lately with a strange tightness in your chest? Trouble breathing? If you’re teaching ELA in a Race to the Top district, these symptoms may be pointing more toward a series of unsettling questions rather than to an actual medical condition, as more information rolls out about new expectations for text complexity and assessment. What are exemplar texts, and how do we get them into the hands of students in districts with limited resources? And perhaps even more important, what is the best way to approach these informational texts in light of the fact that our teaching destinies are now linked, more than ever before, to those of our colleagues in other disciplines? Arming ourselves with information and initiating conversations about these texts with people we may never have had “reading” chats with before may help ease the anxiety.

Exemplar texts that are part of the Common Core State Standards’ model curriculum have been determined for each grade level based on recalibrated Lexile levels. Often, a text you might find in your district’s eleventh grade literature book is now on the exemplar list for freshmen as text complexity is redefined. While in no way “required” reading, those texts can serve as a good starting point for curriculum mapping. You can easily download the list of exemplar texts from Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards (http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=1699&ContentID=86942&Content=123270).

As always in education, creativity will be the key to adjusting to changes in text complexity. Temporary textbook and novel swaps between ELA classrooms, free e-book and Kindle access to those texts, and other electronic methods are some options we have considered on the literary front. Yet those suggested exemplars also include a host of informational texts that point to that shared destiny mentioned earlier.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), the company contracted to design end-of-year assessments, has emphasized that our students—and, therefore, we as ELA teachers—will be assessed primarily on nonfiction informational texts about math, science, and history/social studies. In the past, when we’ve designed nonfiction units, we’ve focused on biographies, memoirs, and personal essays. Now we’re talking nonfiction without a plot. We’re talking about a need for teachers to work together on literacy instruction like never before. So even as we explore issues of text complexity in our English classrooms, we are pointing colleagues in other disciplines toward the same jumping-off point we used: the Reading Standards for Literacy for other core subjects and Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards, which also lists some exemplar texts for those subjects.

Open the Conversation

Since we’re talking literacy, we as ELA teachers may understandably be called upon to lead the drive toward the levels of text complexity indicated by exemplar texts and toward preparation for determining text complexity. As teachers of high school English (in two different districts), we’re easing into this by opening the conversation with our peers in other disciplines. We’re looking at that list of texts together to determine which could be useful in collaborative projects, and just as importantly, we are researching rubrics for complexity that will allow us to make decisions on incorporating additional texts based on quantitative and qualitative measures and on reader and task considerations (ensuring we do not become entirely dependent on someone else’s suggested reading list).

In terms of access, which treaty does the history teacher already have in his textbook? Which environmental study is in a journal the science teacher has on her shelf? Do we really need to teach the entirety of a given text, or can we work with segments? Take, for example, The Tipping Point by Malcolm Gladwell, an exemplar for science, mathematics, and technical subjects which deals with how trends and fads develop. While the calculus teacher may not have the time or inclination to teach the entire 301-page book, we as ELA teachers can put a chapter or
two in her hands, along with appropriate literacy strategies.

In terms of literacy, what are just one or two solid strategies all grade-level teachers can agree to teach and use regularly to help students comprehend more complex texts? As Stephens and Brown (2005), in their book *Handbook of Content Literacy Strategies*, remind us in the type of analogy we English teachers all adore, “Content knowledge is to content literacy as an automobile is to an engine. While the knowledge of subject matter is the framework, it needs something to propel it. Content literacy strategies are vehicles to transport students beyond rote learning to higher-order thinking” (p. 2). Their book is a great resource with which grade-level teacher teams can start tackling these texts together, because it offers quick, easy, and practical literacy strategies for use in any classroom.

After initiating conversations with colleagues, our next step is to map out our own curriculum based on text complexity. Using exemplars as a starting point, we can begin our process at the classroom level, and our hope is that the process will spread from there. Part of that process will be to trust ourselves and our departments as professionals to make qualitative decisions about text complexity and to come together to research, utilize, or develop a rubric that meets our district’s needs.

To use a specific example, we could go back to *The Tipping Point*, which we are looking at using both in a high school English class and in other subjects. Cross-curricular team units may not be new, but what is new for us is the idea of the cross-curricular teaching of reading. By having educators from multiple disciplines determine the appropriateness of the text from a complexity standpoint, each teacher can approach the passages in the spirit of comprehension and higher-level connections specific to his or her subject matter.

Maybe talk of shared destinies through assessment is only adding to the chest tightness, but take heart. These cross-content literacy conversations may go over better than you expect them to. Some of the teachers we’ve talked to, including those in math and science, are not only receptive to teaching literacy but excited about the list of exemplars and about weaving them into their existing curriculum. So take that deep breath. Simply start the conversation, help identify and obtain exemplar texts, propose one or two strategies, and encourage colleagues as we all start to unravel what text complexity means for us as a whole.

Reference


Brent Garee has been teaching high school English for 15 years. He is currently lead teacher at Southwest Licking’s Watkins Memorial High School in Pataskala, where he teaches Advanced Placement English Language and Composition, as well as College English 12.

Kim Garee teaches freshman English courses at Northridge High School in Johnstown, and also spent 13 years as a journalist and freelance writer and editor.
A Look at the Common Core

Implications for the Common Core: Getting Started with Text Complexity

by Carol Brown Dodson

In the six years that Adolescent Literacy In Perspective was published on the ORC website, the online magazine included a column titled “A Look at the OGT.” These thirty-five archived columns (http://ohiorc.org/adlit/InPerspective/Archive/?id=ogt) are still available and valuable, not only for helping to prepare for the OGT, but also for finding methods other than using practice tests to prepare for any large-scale assessment. In addition, the columns include formative assessments with suggestions for intervention.

ORC has created a new column for In Perspective that replaces the OGT columns. And, in fact, you are reading the first one. The new column will focus on implications for planning instruction to teach, assess, and provide intervention for the Common Core (also referred to as CCSS and the Core).

A good way to begin is to focus on the words of NCTE author Sarah Brown Wessling, who offers inspiring ways to think about the CCSS and reminds us that the Core standards are more than a checklist of tasks. She views the standards as a map for student learning filled with rich, open-ended questions and learning experiences. Wessling’s keynote speech for Chicago teachers is captured in a You Tube video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzKO5wxwFGw) which is 18 minutes long and includes a great deal of information. You might want to view parts of the video and stop to review some of the Common Core standards. If you are viewing the video with colleagues, Wessling’s comments can be used to inspire rich discussions of the implication for instruction as we transition to the Common Core.

What Are People Saying About the New Tests?

Some are saying not to worry about the new tests. They won’t be given until 2014. Others warn that districts must embrace the Common Core State Standards now and that teachers must increase the rigor of their instruction.

Higher hurdle

Ohio plans to introduce more-difficult academic tests in 2014. The state hopes predictions of how schools would fare, based on last year’s test scores in grades three through eight and 10, can push districts to update lessons sooner rather than later.

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Source: Ohio Department of Education test data

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Ohio’s superintendent of public instruction Stan Heffner is credited by the Cleveland Plain Dealer (March 24, 2012) with saying, “The report cards will also show predicted grades for when the new, more rigorous learning standards and state tests take effect in three years.” Heffner’s comment is made in reference to the school report cards that will be issued during each of the three years before the new tests are in place.

The Columbus Dispatch published its predictions, based on state test data from the Ohio Department of Education, that show how percentages of students passing the
new state tests would drop if the tests were given now. In her column “Harder Tests = Fewer Passing” (http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2012/04/08/harder-tests--fewer-passing.html), on April 8, 2012, Dispatch education columnist Jennifer Smith Richards included a chart, reprinted on the previous page, comparing current passing rates in central Ohio school districts to predicted passing rates.

As you view the chart, note that predicted drops are severe for both high-performing and low-performing school districts. Upper Arlington’s reading scores are predicted to fall from the current 94.3 percent passing rate to 65.4 percent.

What Can Teachers Do?

Two of the major shifts in the CCSS reading strand are the emphasis on text complexity and the emphasis on close reading. This issue of In Perspective provides suggestions from teachers and experts in the field for increasing the rigor of learning by scaffolding students as they read challenging texts, including novels, nonfiction books, drama, poetry, and short stories.

Here are some things you can do right now.

1. Read the CCSS.
   a. The Maine Department of Education suggests that you think of Appendix A as a preface to the ELA Core that should be read first.
   b. The department also recommends reading Appendix B side by side with the reading standards.

2. Work with others at department or grade-level meetings by:
   a. Reviewing whole-class books to determine text complexity, using the criteria found in Appendix A of the CCSS. Remember that it’s essential to use your professional judgment in making the decision.
   b. Talking about how you can stop asking students the “what” of the text and focus more on the layers of meaning and major questions addressed by the text.

3. Gather lists of additional texts to use before or during the reading of a fulcrum text.
   In her book Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards: English Language Arts, Grades 9–12 (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2011), Sarah Brown Wessling addresses text complexity and close reading by looking at three types of texts: context texts, fulcrum texts, and texture texts. She defines context texts as “accessible ‘anchor’ texts that create a reservoir of prior knowledge that gives context to the complexity of further reading.” Instead of introducing a novel with a summary of the book or a lecture about the background needed to read the book, Wessling might start with a short story, poetry, a film excerpt, or a number of other kinds of text. The fulcrum text is usually the “traditional whole-class text,” perhaps a book, a collection of short stories, or drama. She then uses texture texts to “juxtapose two major texts to create reading texture” (p. 24).

4. Ask text-dependent questions.
   a. Review the questions you currently ask students when they read a class novel. If they ask the “what” questions, try substituting “what if” and “why” questions.
   b. Develop questions that cause students to search the text for answers, not for a word or phrase, but for a layer of meaning or an analysis of character.


6. Watch for future issues of In Perspective. Each issue will focus on a key component of the CCSS. Topics for the next three issues are:
   - Close Reading and Reader Response
   - Digital Writing and e-Reading
   - Writing Arguments

Carol Brown Dodson is the outreach specialist for the Ohio Resource Center. Dodson was an English language arts consultant for the Ohio Department of Education and is past president of OCTELA (Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts). Dodson, formerly a high school English teacher, department chair, and supervisor of English language arts in Columbus Public Schools, serves on the Ohio Graduation Test Reading Content Committee.
More Resources for “Digging Deeper into the Common Core: Text Complexity”

Professional Reading

**ORC #9478**
**Reading Strategies: Scaffolding Students’ Interactions with Texts**
http://ohiorc.org/record/9478.aspx
“Reading Strategies,” a site linked from the English language arts home page of the Greece Central School District, provides teachers with an extensive list of reading strategies which can be used by students to promote their comprehension and understanding. The reading strategies themselves—RAFT, Reciprocal Teaching, QAR, Think Aloud, and Writer’s Craft Seminar, to name but a few—are set up in columns that show their relationship to before, during, and after reading. A description of each strategy makes it easy for teachers to skim through the list, and PDF links offer examples and how-to suggestions.

**ORC #8032**
**“Making the Match: Engaging Reluctant Readers in YA Literature”**
http://ohiorc.org/record/8032.aspx
In this article from *In Perspective*, Teri Lesesne discusses “gauntlet” kids, those who know how to read but choose not to. She talks about variables in books that can encourage reader motivation.

**ORC #12585**
**What Is a Scaffolded Reading Experience?**
http://ohiorc.org/record/12585.aspx
This professional resource is a chapter from *Scaffolding Reading Experiences: Designs for Student Success*. In the chapter, the authors explain what a scaffolded reading experience is—“a set of prereading, during-reading, and postreading activities specifically designed to assist a particular group of students in successfully reading, understanding, learning from, and enjoying a particular selection,” then define the purpose, framework, and components of scaffolded reading experiences. Descriptions, examples, and activities (including how to go about planning such activities) are included, as is a section that explains specifically what scaffolded reading experiences are not designed to do. Teachers will find especially helpful sections on guided reading, questioning, activating and building upon prior knowledge, writing, and vocabulary strategies.

**Making the Match The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time, Grades 4-12**
http://ohiorc.org/r/DF01C
In her book *Making the Match*, Teri Lesesne expands her discussion of matching texts to readers to maintain motivation while encouraging appropriate levels of complexity.
Rubrics

**ORC #15354**  
Qualitative Measures Rubric for Informational Texts  
[http://ohiorc.org/record/15354.aspx](http://ohiorc.org/record/15354.aspx)

This rubric, available through the Kansas State Department of Education, guides educators in making decisions about the qualitative measures of informational texts. It uses guidelines set in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards to evaluate texts based on levels of purpose, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands.

**ORC #15355**  
Reader and Task Considerations  
[http://ohiorc.org/record/15355.aspx](http://ohiorc.org/record/15355.aspx)

This resource, available through the Kansas State Department of Education, guides educators in making decisions about the reader-to-task appropriateness of a text. As the third component in evaluating the complexity of a text according to the Common Core State Standards, reader-to-task considerations rely on professional reflection about a student’s cognitive capabilities, reading skills, motivation and engagement with task and text, prior knowledge and experience, content and/or theme concerns, and complexity of associated tasks. The list of questions in this resource addresses each of these areas. Pair this resource with the “Qualitative Measures Rubric for Literary Texts” or the “Qualitative Measures Rubric for Informational Texts” to better assess the overall complexity appropriateness of a text.

**ORC #15356**  
Text Complexity Analysis—Final Recommendation Template  
[http://ohiorc.org/record/15356.aspx](http://ohiorc.org/record/15356.aspx)

This template, available through the Kansas State Department of Education, provides an organizational tool for analyzing the three components of text complexity according to the Common Core State Standards in either literary or informational texts: qualitative measures, quantitative measures, and reader-task considerations. By pairing this with the “Qualitative Measures Rubric for Literary Texts” or the “Qualitative Measures Rubric for Informational Texts” and the “Reader and Task Considerations” guide, you can better assess the appropriateness of a text’s complexity.

**ORC #15353**  
Qualitative Measures Rubric for Literary Texts  
[http://ohiorc.org/record/15353.aspx](http://ohiorc.org/record/15353.aspx)

This rubric, available through the Kansas State Department of Education, guides educators in making decisions about the qualitative measures of literary texts. It uses guidelines set in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards to evaluate texts based on layers of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands.
Videos

**ORC #15456**

Scaffolding Complex Texts  
http://ohiorc.org/record/15456.aspx

In this video from the English Language Arts Supervisors Meeting, December 2011, Tara Boyer, literacy coach in Newark City Schools, explains the process teachers underwent in determining complexity levels of texts in Newark middle schools. She also discusses scaffolding complex texts for struggling readers.

**Common Core in ELA/Literacy: Shift 3—Staircase of Complexity**  
http://ohiorc.org/r/RE4GF

This 15-minute video, produced by Engage NY, features a discussion between New York Commissioner of Education, John King, and writer of the Common Core State Standards, David Coleman. The video examines the staircase of text complexity as addressed in the standards.

Webinars

**Text Complexity and the Kansas Common Core Standards**  
http://ohiorc.org/r/UFEEQ

This webinar contains a wealth of detailed information and resources for evaluating the complexity of texts. Although some information is focused on state-specific needs, the referenced links and information are valuable for all common core states.

**ORC #15352**

The Common Core State Standards: Supporting Districts and Teachers with Text Complexity (Webinar)  
http://ohiorc.org/record/15352.aspx

To provide states with additional Common Core State Standards implementation support, the Council of Chief State School Officers hosted this one-hour webinar to share tools and resources to support teachers and districts in understanding text complexity. The webinar features Sue Pimentel, a member of the Common Core State Standards English language arts writing committee, as well as representatives from the Kansas and Louisiana Departments of Education. This presentation defines the reasons for considering text complexity and provides a walk-through of evaluating texts using qualitative, quantitative, and reader-to-task considerations.

ORC Records

In case you are not familiar with ORC’s records, here is a very brief explanation of the resource commentaries and other resource information found in the records.

Each commentary is part of a larger record created by the Ohio Resource Center. The commentaries describe high-quality Internet-based resources in the areas of mathematics, science, reading, and social studies. In addition to the commentaries, the records specify grade levels appropriate to the resources and align the resources to the relevant Ohio standards, benchmarks, and indicators (providing an excellent way to help teachers implement the Ohio standards in their classrooms) plus much more. Each resource can be accessed directly from the record.

To find out more about ORC resources and records, go to ORC’s Frequently Asked Questions page (http://ohiorc.org/about/FAQ/).
Each issue of *Adolescent Literacy In Perspective* highlights a topic in adolescent literacy. Here you can read teacher-written articles, see what experts in the field are saying, gain insight from students, and find resources for classroom use.

**What Is AdLIT?**
Advancing Adolescent Literacy Instruction Together (AdLIT) is designed to address the unique literacy needs of adolescent learners by promoting and supporting effective, evidence-based practices for classroom instruction and professional development activities in Ohio’s middle and secondary schools.

**About the Ohio Resource Center**
The Ohio Resource Center works to improve teaching and learning among Ohio teachers by promoting standards-based, best practices in mathematics, science, reading, and social studies for Ohio schools and universities. The Center’s resources are available primarily via the web and are coordinated with other state and regional efforts to improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness in K-12 mathematics, science, reading, and social studies. To learn more about ORC, visit the website at [www.ohiorc.org](http://www.ohiorc.org).

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