



*Instructional Implications of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.  
Text Complexity, Grades 6–12 ELA*

**Session Description**

Participants will consider the three types of CCSS criteria for assessing text complexity, use the qualitative factors to analyze the challenges presented in a text, and brainstorm scaffolding and support strategies to make the text more accessible.

**Expected Outcomes**

- Become familiar with the CCSS criteria for text complexity;
- Become familiar with the "staircase" of text complexity from grade to grade;
- Explore some strategies and resources for making the central grade-appropriate text accessible to all students.

**Agenda**

- Welcome and Introduction (5 minutes)
- Text Complexity ( 20 minutes)
  - Partner activity – Identify qualitative challenges in text exemplars
- Scaffolding and supports (10 minutes)
  - Partner activity – Brainstorm scaffolding activities to use with the text exemplar
- Reflection (10 minutes)
  - Partner activity – How did we do?
  - What's next?
  - Reflection

**Time**

- 45 minutes

**Audience**

- Designed to be used with groups of 6-12 leaders and English language arts teachers working with grade-level partners.

**Materials**

- Handout copy of PowerPoint slides
- Handout Qualitative Dimensions of Text Complexity
- Handout Text Exemplars for 6-12 ELA
- Handout Reflections

**Resources/References**

- Appendix A, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)
- Appendix B, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_B.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf)
- Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

### **Slide 1**

**Welcome** participants, and introduce the subject for today.

**Suggest** that participants sit in small groups with others who teach the same grade level(s).

**Check** to see that everyone has the handouts.

**Explain** that one of the instructional implications of implementing the CCSS will be an increased level of text complexity at all grades.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Preparing students to be college and career ready by graduation will mean an increased emphasis on teaching all students to handle high-quality, complex text at all grade levels.”

### **Slide 2**

**Go over** the expected outcomes for this session.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Today we will look closely at the criteria that are used to determine text complexity in the CCSS as well as why text complexity is considered such an important component of the Common Core. We will also examine some exemplar texts at various grade bands and discuss scaffolding strategies aimed at making the grade-appropriate texts accessible to students whose reading skills are below grade level.”

### **Slide 3**

**Explain** that the level of complexity of the texts students are able to read has been found to be a predictor of college and career readiness and that the CCSS includes a “staircase” of increasing text complexity from kindergarten through high school.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Research by ACT showed that performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not. This is found to be true regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or family income levels.

The Common Core State Standards use a ‘back-mapping’ design, starting with the level of reading proficiency required for college and career training success. The result is a ‘staircase’ of increasing text complexity from kindergarten to grade 12 in order for the end goal to be attainable.”

### **Slide 4**

**Explain** that, while the reading demands for success after high school have increased, the level of text complexity in K-12 instructional materials has actually declined.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“And yet, while the reading demands of college, workforce training programs, and citizenship have held steady or risen over the past fifty years or so, K–12 texts have, if anything, become less demanding. This finding is the impetus behind the Standards’ strong emphasis on increasing text complexity as a key requirement in reading.”

### **Slide 5**

**Explain** that the focus on age- and grade-appropriate high-quality complex texts is designed to be for *all* students, not just those reading at or above grade level, and this will require providing necessary supports for struggling readers.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“It is important to remember that we are talking about access to high-quality, central complex texts for *all* students, including those who are not yet reading at grade level.

Why? Because, while the consequences of insufficiently high text demands are severe for everyone, they are disproportionately so for those who are already most isolated from text outside the classroom. As the CCSS document notes, the problems with reading achievement are not ‘equal opportunity’ in their effects.

This will require that teachers create more time in the curriculum for close and careful reading and provide appropriate and necessary supports to make the central texts accessible to students reading below grade level.”

**Slide 6**

**Explain** that the CCSS uses three factors to determine or define the level of text complexity: Qualitative factors in which a proficient adult reader assesses the challenges in a particular text; quantitative measures that usually rely on a computer algorithm to generate a “readability” score; and the judgment of a professional acquainted with the individual readers and specific tasks asked of them – generally, the classroom teacher.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“What do we mean by text complexity? The CCSS uses three factors to determine appropriate placement of texts.

The first factor requires that a proficient adult reader assess the challenges presented by the particular text: Does it present a subtle or ironic message below a superficial story? Does comprehension depend upon understanding arcane vocabulary or archaic phrasing? What life experiences does a reader need to draw upon? What domain knowledge is requisite to comprehension?

The second factor is probably the most familiar to most of us – the quantitative measures that use word frequency, sentence length, and other measurable features fed into a computer program.

The third factor requires professional judgment about the readers themselves and the tasks they will be presented with – in most case a classroom teacher’s professional judgment.”

**Slide 7**

**Explain** that the qualitative factors are the challenges resulting from how the ideas are presented in the text and the structure and language of the text itself. In addition, texts are more complex if they require broad or mature life experiences; cultural or literary background knowledge (for instance, to understand allusions); and specific content or domain knowledge.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“A look at the handout *Qualitative Dimensions of Text Complexity* shows the range of complexity we would expect to see in texts.

Multiple levels of meaning, such as the abstract meaning conveyed through a literal story line or symbolism, for instance, make a text more challenging to fully comprehend. Subtle or ambiguous themes and those revealed over the entirety of the work raise the level of text complexity. Even more so would be satire, where the intended underlying message is intentionally the opposite of the literal message.

Informational texts with a single, explicitly stated purpose are generally easier to comprehend than those with multiple or implicit purposes.

In literature, subplots, time shifts (flashbacks, flash-forwards instead of strictly chronological order), multiple narrative viewpoints, and complex characters have a higher level of complexity than simple, well-marked and conventional story structures.

Complex informational texts are more likely to conform to the conventions of a specific discipline and have complex graphics whose interpretation is essential to understanding the text or which provide an independent source of information within the text.

Texts that rely on figurative, ironic, ambiguous, or archaic language or domain-specific vocabulary are more complex.

Finally, fully comprehending complex texts often requires the readers to draw upon literary, cultural and content knowledge to understand references or allusions; broad life experiences that equip them to grasp and grapple with such themes as moral dilemma or government control; and the ability to conceptualize experiences and entertain perspectives distinctly different from their own.”

### **Slide 8**

**Invite** the participants to work with partners to examine one or more of the exemplar texts provided on the handouts and identify the elements that make them more or less challenging for readers.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Let’s look at some texts to identify a few specific examples of these qualitative factors. The purpose here is not to gauge the grade level of text complexity, but to better understand the factors themselves.

Working with a partner, the activity will be to jot down qualitative aspects of the text that make it more or less challenging, or complex, for the reader.

Since teacher modeling is such a powerful classroom strategy, let me model the task for you first using Anna Quindlen’s ‘A Quilt of a Country,’ a text identified as 9-10<sup>th</sup> grade complexity level.”

*[Model the task – next slide.]*

Ok, your turn. Take a few minutes to identify the challenges in one or more of the text exemplars. These and others are from *Appendix B, Common Core State Standards for ELA & Literacy*. We’ll report out what we find.”

*[Allow time to work. Invite groups to identify the challenges in the text, as well as comment on the elements that are not expected to present particular challenges to most students.]*

### **Slide 9**

**Read** the text “A Quilt of a Country” aloud.

**Model** assessing the qualitative text complexity factors.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

*[Read the text aloud.]* “My task is to think about what makes this text more complex for 9-10th graders, and what makes it less complex.

The first thing that occurs to me is that it seems much, much simpler than, say, the “Gettysburg Address” that follows it. Most of the language in Quindlen’s piece is contemporary and conversational, though there are a few vocabulary words I would probably pre-teach: *disparate*, *discordant*, maybe *improbable*, especially because they are critical to understanding the main idea. The sentence patterns and lengths are varied, but don’t seem particularly challenging to follow. Perhaps some of the phrases used in apposition might be difficult for some students. And, it is so short; that would make it less challenging, too.

So what is complex about it? Why is this at 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> level? I think it is the ideas themselves that will be difficult for students: The concept that America is presented as an idea, a concept, rather than a nation or geographical region will tax some students' ability to conceptualize. The inherent paradox she points out -- people being held together by their belief in a principle (or 'notion') that they don't actually hold to be true for themselves -- is certainly difficult to grasp.

To fully understand this piece, one has to have the cultural background to know what the "ever-changing disparate parts" or the "discordant" "bits and pieces" are – because Quindlen doesn't actually tell us what they are or how they change. Instead, she uses the easily visualized simile of the crazy-quilt; a reader without cultural knowledge of the 'melting pot' concept would get only the idea that there are a bunch of different 'things' that go together to make 'America.'

Finally, a student without the cultural knowledge of 'E Pluribus Unum' would miss the import – and perhaps the meaning – of the sentence "out of many, one."

So, in supporting students as they approach this text, I would probably plan to concentrate on levels of meaning and cultural demands in this text."

### **Slide 10**

**Recall** for participants that the second factor is qualitative 'readability' measures.

**Explain** that one widely used measure, Lexiles, has been realigned to match the text complexity grade bands in the Common Core State Standards.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Many qualitative measures that give texts a grade level 'readability' score are familiar to teachers. Among those widely used are Lexile ranges. So, it is important to note that the Lexile ranges we may be familiar with have been adjusted – upward – to match the text complexity grade bands of the CCSS in order that the 11-CCR grade band is aligned with the college and career readiness level."

### **Slide 11**

**Draw** participants' attention to the graphic display of the shift in Lexile ranges.

**For example, the facilitator might say,**

"Here is a graphic display of the same information. This illustrates just how significant is the shift to greater text complexity as we implement the CCSS.

Let's look at the third factor in text complexity, Reader and Task Considerations, and then we'll talk about some resources to help us accomplish this."

### **Slide 12**

**Explain** that the third factor in considering the level of text complexity involves characteristics of the readers themselves and the tasks they are being asked to perform. Direct participants to *Appendix A, Common Core State Standards in ELA & Literacy* for more information.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"The third measure of text complexity involves educators employing professional judgment to match texts to individual students and tasks in determining whether a given text is appropriate for him or her.

The first three items on the slide describe how each reader brings a unique set of variables to the act of reading:

- Cognitive capabilities, including the ability to draw inferences from the text and visualize what is being described;

- Motivation. Highly motivated readers are often willing to put in the extra effort required to read harder texts that are deeply interesting to them;
- Knowledge, including both background knowledge and experience specifically relevant to the content of the text, as well as knowledge of comprehension strategies they can draw upon.

Task related variables are also considered: The reader's purpose, (which may shift over the course of reading), the type of reading, and the intended outcome (which could be solving a real-world problem, learning content, or engagement for pleasure). More complex tasks may require students to read more complex texts than they would normally be required to."

### **Slide 13**

**Read** the scaffolding strategies on the slide and discuss how they can be used to support comprehension for students reading complex texts.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"All students will require at least some extra help as they take steps up the 'staircase' of text complexity, and some struggling readers will need even more support – before, during, and after they approach the text.

Non-text sources such as multi-media and class activities can build background and vocabulary knowledge. For example, in approaching Quindlen's piece, I might bring in a crazy-quilt and examples of various fabrics and pre-teach a few vocabulary words.

For students who may have trouble with the abstraction of America being an 'idea,' the teacher might spend some time talking about concrete symbols and abstract concepts and giving the students time to engage with some others (for instance, Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Beauty never slumbers/ All is in her name ...").

Students reading below grade level might read easier books at their instructional level that deal with the same topic before approaching this text – perhaps contrasting the 'melting pot' metaphor with the 'crazy quilt' (or 'ethnic stew') metaphors. It is important to remember, though, that these would be supplemental texts, for the purpose of making the central text accessible. It is important that *all* students be able to engage in the rich classroom conversations and activities surrounding the central text.

Using instructional techniques such as teacher read-alouds of related material or excerpts, partner reading, graphic organizers, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can scaffold the reading task for students who cannot perform it independently.

Finally, since all this takes time, texts need to be 1) high quality and worth the time, and 2) selected around topics or themes – within and across grade levels – that generate knowledge and allow students to study those topics and themes in depth. It is easy to see how situating Quindlen's piece in the context of immigration, ethnicities, etc. would help students fully understand it. This approach gives students the opportunity to work across and among multiple texts, finding logical and purposeful connections, applying reading skills and strategies, and building content knowledge."

### **Slide 14**

**Invite** participants to brainstorm instructional activities that they might use to help students have success with the text(s) they analyzed in the previous activity.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

"Your turn." With partners, think again about the challenges you identified in the text(s) you analyzed in the previous activity, and brainstorm possible instructional activities that would help readers access the text.

We are using a very broad notion of ‘scaffolding’ here to include any activities – before, during, or after reading – that are designed for the purpose of helping a student fully comprehend and retain content that he would not be able to read completely independently.

We will take a few minutes to report out on some of these.”

### **Slide 15**

**Explain** that reading materials for students should encompass a range of levels of difficulty.

**For instance, the teacher might say,**

“All students need to engage with central text at an age- and grade-appropriate level of text complexity in order for everyone to share in the rich classroom conversations and activities that build comprehension strategies, vocabulary, and content knowledge.

However, students reading below or above grade level also need to engage with texts at their instructional level that will allow them to make progress reading independently.

Also, all students need opportunities to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of easy, fluent reading.

The important thing to remember is the general movement during a given school year is toward texts of higher levels of complexity for everyone.”

### **Slide 16**

**Emphasize** that the purpose of scaffolding tasks is for students to become increasingly independent, so it is important to plan for how the scaffolding will be gradually removed.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

“Finally, it is important to remember that though support is educationally necessary and desirable, instruction must move generally toward decreasing scaffolding and increasing independence, with the goal of students reading independently and proficiently within a given grade band.

On the last page of the Handout Text Exemplars are two examples of scaffolding for Quindlen’s piece. As you can see, the first includes heavy scaffolding (supplying information and context) while the second example (in this case, a partner activity designed to activate prior knowledge relevant to the central idea of the text) represents less scaffolding. A blank, generic note-taking form would supply even less scaffolding support.

Scaffolding and support are more structured and multilayered at the beginning of implementation and support an increasing level of complexity. Plans should include how these structures will be gradually removed as students begin to read more complex texts independently.”

### **Slide 17**

**Invite** participants to turn to partners to answer the questions.

**For instance, the facilitator might say,**

Let’s take a few minutes for the ‘think-pair’ part where you consider the question, think about the answer, and discuss it briefly with a partner.”

### **Slide 18**

**Suggest** the activities listed as possible follow-ups to this session.

**Invite** participants to fill out the Reflections page.