



AREA V REGIONAL SUPERINTENDENTS OF SCHOOLS

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Instructional Implications of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. Text Complexity, Grades K-5

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 K-5 leaders and teachers working with grade-level partners.

Materials

- Handout copy of PowerPoint slides
- Handout Qualitative Dimensions of Text Complexity
- Handout Text Exemplars for K-5
- 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
- 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
- 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

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 ‘Garden Helpers,’ a text identified as a kindergarten-to-first grade complexity level. That means that students ‘on track’ would be able to read this independently by about the end of the first grade. This text was accompanied by illustrations that are not included here. We’ll use our imaginations.”

[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 “Garden Helpers” 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 first graders, and what makes it less complex.

I’ll start with the first element: Purpose or main idea. I see the main idea is stated very explicitly – that some bugs and worms help the garden grow, which would make it less complex. And it is stated right at the very beginning, which makes it even more straightforward. Does it have two main ideas? That all bugs and worms are not pests? It doesn’t really talk about how bugs ARE pests, so I think it isn’t really a different idea, just a different way of stating the same one. And the purpose seems to be simply to illustrate that main idea with specific examples.

The second element, structure: It has a very regular and simple structure. It is divided into parallel little paragraphs that tell about each different garden critter. (And probably have illustrations that go with each one.) Each little paragraph starts by naming the worm or bug and tells what it does. The second (and third) line explains how this helps the garden. The sentences are short and direct, all starting with the subject. All that makes it less complex.

The third element, language: Most of it is pretty everyday language. They use 'bugs' instead of 'insects,' for instance. I wonder if all students know what earthworms are? Maybe. But I'll bet most of them think 'rich' means 'wealthy.' The less common use of that word makes it more complex, I think. And I'm pretty sure that 'preying mantis' will be unfamiliar to most of them. But maybe that's best put under content knowledge.

So, for content knowledge, I'd say this is pretty complex. To fully understand the second paragraph, a student would need to understand how dirt can be 'rich and healthy' in the first place, then how earthworms could make it so. And what that has to do with plants growing strong. The text doesn't explain any of that.

So, in supporting students as they approach this text, I would probably plan to concentrate on the vocabulary and background knowledge 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 my 'Garden Helpers' example, students might view a short YouTube video clip showing a praying mantis capturing an insect. Classroom discussion and illustrations could clarify why the term 'praying' is used.

Students reading below grade level might read easier books at their instructional level that deal with the same topic before approaching this text. 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, 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. For example, explaining the multiple meanings of 'rich,' how it applies to soil, how earthworms can enrich the soil, and what that has to do with strong plants is more than a simple vocabulary lesson. So, this text might be part of a life science theme about plants or animals. 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.

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.