Definition

Text complexity can be defined as the level of difficulty in reading and understanding a text based a series of factors: the readability of the text, the levels of meaning or purpose in the text, the structure of the text, the conventionality and clarity of the language, and the knowledge demands of the text (Appendix A, pg. 5).

Purpose and Overview

When planning instruction for the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (CCSS for ELA/Literacy), it is important to select texts that provide students with the opportunities to meet the expectations of the CCSS for ELA/Literacy.

The CCSS for ELA/Literacy ask that teachers use a three-step process to determine text complexity. The first two steps of the process determine the grade level of a text, and the third step determines the appropriate use of a text in a classroom based on the students in the class and the related tasks.

Process

*When planning at the **year level** and designing text sets:*

Step One: Identify a grade-level band based on the text's readability. Use a quantitative measure[1] for determining readability and the CCSS Grade-Level Band Chart.

Step Two: Identify an appropriate grade for the text based on how hard it is to understand the text. Use the informational or literary rubric[2] with colleagues.

*When planning at the **unit and lesson level**:*

Step Three: Determine how the text should be used in the classroom. Use the Questions for Reader and Task Considerations.

There are a few exceptions to this process:

- The readability of narrative fiction in grades 6-12 is not always reliably measured. For these texts, preference should sometimes be given to the results from Step Two, rather than Step One. This type of exception should rarely be exercised with informational text. It is critical that students have extensive practice with texts whose readability falls in the appropriate grade-level band.

- The readability of poetry and drama is also not reliably quantified; therefore, teachers should start the process at Step Two for these types of texts.

- Texts written for students learning to read should be written to correlate to students' independent reading and word knowledge level. As such, complex texts determined through this process should be used as read-aloud texts in grades K and 1.

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[1] The CCSS for ELA/Literacy require a staircase of text complexity so that students will meet the demands of reading for college or a career. To ensure that text increases in the appropriate manner, a single quantitative measure (such as Lexile™ (www.lexile.com/fab) or ATOS™ (www.arbookfind.com)) should be used districtwide.

[2] To do this, read the text first. Then select the appropriate rubric (literary or informational). Begin with the first feature (Meaning or Purpose). Read the description for Exceedingly Complex or Slightly Complex. Continue reading the descriptions in the other columns and place a check mark next to the description that best describes the text being analyzed. Repeat the process for the other features. The final results are used to justify the placement of the text within a grade-level band and place a text in a specific grade; however, there is no exact result. As such, Step Two is best done in collaboration with colleagues, in the hopes of reaching consensus about which texts will be taught in which grades.

An Example of Text Complexity throughout the Standards

The following chart illustrates the different levels of text that meet the expectations of the Common Core State Standards for ELA and Literacy.

Grade Level	Common Core State Standard	Level of Text	Instructional Use of Text
Kindergarten	**RL.K.10** Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.	Complex text from the grades 2-3 text complexity band or higher	**Read Aloud** (heavy scaffolding) during whole-class instruction
Kindergarten	**RF.K.4** Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.	Texts written to match student's independent reading ability (not complex)	**Read Along** (some scaffolding) during small-group instruction **Read Alone** (minor scaffolding)
First Grade	**RI.1.10** With prompting and support, read informational texts appropriately complex for grade 1.	Complex text from the grades 2-3 text complexity band **or** Texts with readability suitable for grade 1 and high quality, meaningful content	**Read Aloud** of complex text (heavy scaffolding) during whole-class instruction **Read Along** of grade-level texts (some scaffolding) during whole-class and small-group instruction
Grade 4	**RF.4.4a-c** Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension. a. Read on-level text with purpose and understanding. b. Read on-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings. c. Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.	Complex text from the grades 4-5 text complexity band	**Read Along** (some scaffolding) during whole-class and small-group instruction **Read Alone** (minor scaffolding)
Grade 8	**RL.8.10** By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.	Complex text from the grades 6-8 text complexity band	**Read Along** (some scaffolding) during whole-class instruction **Read Alone** (minor scaffolding)

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Qualitative Measures Rubric:
Determining Complexity of Informational Texts

Text Title _____   **Text Author** _____

	Exceedingly Complex	Very Complex	Moderately Complex	Slightly Complex
PURPOSE	○ Subtle, implied, difficult to determine; intricate, theoretical elements	○ Implied, but fairly easy to infer; more theoretical than concrete	○ Implied, but easy to identify based upon context or source	○ Explicitly stated; clear, concrete with a narrow focus
TEXT STRUCTURE	○ **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between an extensive range of ideas or events are deep, intricate and often implicit or subtle; organization of the text is intricate or specialized for a particular discipline ○ **Text Features**: If used, are essential in understanding content ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, extensive, intricate, essential integrated graphics, tables, charts, etc., necessary to make meaning of text; also may provide information not otherwise conveyed in the text	○ **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between an expanded range ideas, processes or events are deeper and often implicit or subtle; organization may contain multiple pathways and may exhibit traits common to a specific discipline ○ **Text Features**: If used, greatly enhance the reader's understanding of content ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, essential integrated graphics, tables, charts, etc.; may occasionally be essential to understanding the text	○ **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between some ideas or events are implicit or subtle; organization is evident and generally sequential ○ **Text Features**: If used, enhance the reader's understanding of content ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, graphics mostly supplementary to understanding of the text, such as indexes, glossaries; graphs, pictures, tables, and charts directly support the text	○ **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between ideas, processes or events are explicit and clear; organization of text is clear or chronological or easy to predict ○ **Text Features**: If used, help the reader navigate and understand content but are not essential ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, simple graphics, unnecessary to understanding the text but directly support and assist in interpreting the written text
LANGUAGE FEATURES	○ **Conventionality**: Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language ○ **Vocabulary:** Generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading ○ **Sentence Structure:** Mainly complex sentences often containing multiple concepts	○ **Conventionality**: Complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language ○ **Vocabulary:** Somewhat complex language that is sometimes unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic ○ **Sentence Structure:** Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words	○ **Conventionality**: Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning ○ **Vocabulary:** Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic ○ **Sentence Structure:** Simple and compound sentences, with some more complex constructions	○ **Conventionality**: Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand ○ **Vocabulary:** Contemporary, familiar, conversational language ○ **Sentence Structure:** Mainly simple sentences
KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS	○ **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Extensive, perhaps specialized or even theoretical discipline-specific content knowledge; range of challenging abstract and theoretical concepts ○ **Intertextuality:** Many references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc.	○ **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Moderate levels of discipline-specific content knowledge; some theoretical knowledge may enhance understanding; range of recognizable ideas and challenging abstract concepts ○ **Intertextuality:** Some references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc.	○ **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Everyday practical knowledge and some discipline-specific content knowledge; both simple and more complicated, abstract ideas ○ **Intertextuality:** A few references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc.	○ **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Everyday, practical knowledge; simple, concrete ideas ○ **Intertextuality:** No references or allusions to other texts, or outside ideas, theories, etc.

Qualitative Measures Rubric:
Determining Complexity of Literary Texts

Text Title _____ **Text Author** _____

	Exceedingly Complex	Very Complex	Moderately Complex	Slightly Complex
MEANING	○ Several levels and competing elements of meaning that are difficult to identify, separate, and interpret; theme is implicit or subtle, often ambiguous and revealed over the entirety of the text	○ Several levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify or separate; theme is implicit or subtle and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	○ More than one level of meaning with levels clearly distinguished from each other; theme is clear but may be conveyed with some subtlety	○ One level of meaning; theme is obvious and revealed early in the text.
TEXT STRUCTURE	○ **Organization:** Organization is intricate with regard to elements such as narrative viewpoint, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, minimal illustrations that support the text	○ **Organization:** Organization may include subplots, time shifts and more complex characters ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, a few illustrations that support the text	○ **Organization:** Organization may have two or more storylines and occasionally difficult to predict ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, a range of illustrations that support selected parts of the text	○ **Organization:** Organization of text is clear, chronological or easy to predict ○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, extensive illustrations that directly support and assist in interpreting the written text
LANGUAGE FEATURES	○ **Conventionality**: Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language ○ **Vocabulary:** Generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading ○ **Sentence Structure:** Mainly complex sentences often containing multiple concepts	○ **Conventionality**: Complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language ○ **Vocabulary:** Somewhat complex language that is sometimes unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic ○ **Sentence Structure:** Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words	○ **Conventionality**: Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning ○ **Vocabulary:** Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic ○ **Sentence Structure:** Simple and compound sentences, with some more complex constructions	○ **Conventionality**: Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand ○ **Vocabulary:** Contemporary, familiar, conversational language ○ **Sentence Structure:** Mainly simple sentences
KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores complex, sophisticated themes; experiences are distinctly different from the common reader ○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Many references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores themes of varying levels of complexity; experiences portrayed are uncommon to most readers ○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Some references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are common to many readers ○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** A few references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are everyday and common to most readers ○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** No references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements

At the **year level**, before placing a text in a specific grade, consider the following:

1. Will my students be **interested** in this text?
2. Is the content of this text **appropriate** for the age of my students?

If you answer no, the text should not be used with your students.

At the **unit and lesson level**, after placing a text in a specific grade, use the information gathered from the readability measures (e.g., Lexile™) and qualitative measures (e.g., meaning/purpose, text structure, knowledge demands, etc.) to plan for instruction. Consider the following:

What knowledge and skills should students demonstrate after reading this text (e.g., theme, academic vocabulary, fluency, etc.)?	Use the answer to this question to identify which grade-specific Common Core State Standards will be the focus of instruction and the content of questions about the text.
How can this text be used with other texts and how is this text best presented to students (read aloud, read along, or read alone)?	Use the answers to this question to determine where this text "fits" within a larger unit of instruction (e.g., Can the text serve as an introduction to students? Does the text require knowledge that can be learned by reading other texts first?)
Based on a clear understanding of each student's reading ability, what aspects of the text will likely pose the most challenge for your students?	Use the answer to this question to guide the design of your instructional supports so that all students (even those who struggle) are able to access the text independently and proficiently through multiple and purposeful rereadings of the text.