

Quick Reference Guide: Text Complexity and the Growth of Reading Comprehension

Text complexity refers to the level of relative difficulty in reading and comprehending a given text. Many educators are familiar with using quantitative measures (e.g., Lexile levels) to assess text complexity. This Guide focuses on two other dimensions of measuring text complexity: **qualitative evaluation** and **matching the text to reader and task**.

Anchor Standard 10 for Reading

Independently and proficiently read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts.

Qualitative Evaluation

The grade-level versions of Anchor Standard 10 for Reading define a “staircase” of increasing text complexity. Experienced educators, often working in teams that include teachers from adjacent grades, use their professional judgment to determine the range of complexity appropriate for particular grades or for a particular student. **Qualitative evaluation** commonly uses these criteria, adapted from [rubrics published by the Council of Chief State School Officers](#):

- levels of meaning (literary texts) or purpose (informational texts)
- text structure: organization/presentation of ideas
- format and text features: illustration, graphics, and page layout
- conventionality, vocabulary, and sentence structure
- knowledge demands: life experiences, culture and literature (literary texts), and subject-matter knowledge (informational texts)

Literary texts tend to be more complex if they involve...

- Multiple layers of meaning
- Subtle themes subject to interpretation
- Several narrators, speakers, or points of view
- Unfamiliar or archaic vocabulary
- Varied sentence structure
- No predictable narrative, dramatic, or poetic pattern
- Numerous shifts in time and place
- Characters using ambiguous, subtle, or ironic language
- Reliance on background knowledge of literary genres
- Many unexplained allusions to other texts
- Reliance on knowledge of cultural experiences and situations unfamiliar to most 21st-century children or young adults in American schools

Informational texts tend to be more complex if they involve...

- Several abstract ideas and concepts
- Complicated connections among ideas, processes, or events
- Several organizing structures (e.g., sequential, cause and effect, problem and solution)
- Reasoning hard to follow due to dense, ambiguous, or inconsistent ideas
- Illustrations and other graphics containing essential information
- Dense and academic vocabulary
- Many compound-complex sentences
- Many references to other texts, ideas, or theories
- Reliance on knowledge of historical, scientific, technical, or artistic content unfamiliar to most 21st century children or young adults in American schools

Matching Text to Reader

In selecting reading materials, teachers need to take into account the reading ability, motivation, knowledge, experiences, and interests of their students. A primary-grades student may comprehend a great deal of content read aloud from a text far beyond her independent reading level. A middle school student mesmerized by everything to do with Egyptian archaeology may be so motivated by interest that books and academic articles written for adults pose no comprehension challenge at all. But when even an adult reader is encountering a new subject for the first time, a simple introductory text may be the best choice.

Matching Text to Task

In assigning texts, teachers should consider what students will be asked *to do* with what they read. What is the purpose of the task? How complex is the project? How much inference is required to answer questions or write about a particular set of readings? Will students work alone or in groups?

Range of Reading and Text Complexity

To experience complex writing, students need to read extended texts: well-written, full-length novels, plays, long poems, investigative journalism, arguments, speeches, and informational texts chosen for the importance of their subject matter and excellence in language use. Learning to persist in reading complex texts predisposes students to become adults who read voluntarily for pleasure, for further education, for information on public policy, and for advancement in the workplace.

High Literacy Expectations for All Students

In short, as Guiding Principle 4 of the [Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy](#) states, “Students should be exposed to complex and challenging texts at their grade level and above, with extra supports and scaffolding as needed, reflecting high expectations for all students.”

Resources for Choosing Texts

- [The Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy](#) includes:
 - Examples that cite texts to illustrate standards
 - Author and book recommendations by grade span
 - Charts that present characteristics of complexity for literary and informational texts
- [The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System](#) releases passages, questions, and examples of student writing from its English Language Arts assessments for grades 3–8 and 10 every year. Teachers and families can view passages from five years’ worth of tests to get an idea of grade-level reading expectations.
- [The Massachusetts Writing Standards in Action](#) project has annotated examples of student writing from Massachusetts PK–12 classrooms. Many samples were written in response to texts.
- A collection of text-centered lesson plans and assessments, ESE’s [Model Curriculum Units for English Language Arts and Literacy](#) show how texts can be used in curriculum units lasting several weeks.
- For research on text complexity, see *The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy* [Appendix A](#) and the [Supplemental Information for Appendix A](#). For selected passages organized by grade span, see *The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy* [Appendix B](#). For rubrics on using qualitative measures, see The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) [Qualitative Measures Rubric](#) (2012).