

Understanding Text Complexity

The Common Core State Standards separate text complexity into three parts: **qualitative dimensions, quantitative dimensions, and reader and task considerations.**

Staircasing Complex Texts

Research indicates a gap between the complexity of reading in college and the workplace compared with the skills of high school graduates. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide a backward-mapped staircase of text complexity, working from the expectations of college and the workplace down through the grades. The CCSS use three criteria—qualitative measure, quantitative measure, and reader and task—to define text complexity.

Evaluating Text Complexity

Determining the complexity of a text requires examining three criteria.

Quantitative Measure

The quantitative portion of text complexity includes these measures:

- word length
- word frequency
- word difficulty
- sentence length
- text length
- text cohesion

Qualitative Measure

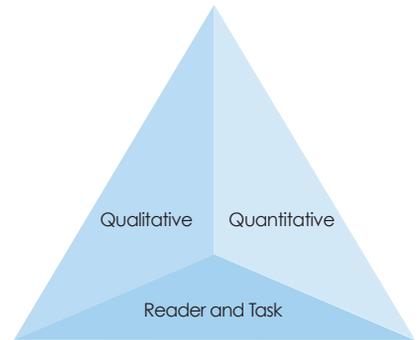
The qualitative portion of text complexity includes these measures:

- levels of meaning
- levels of purpose
- structure
- organization
- language conventionality
- language clarity
- prior language demands

Reader and Task

The third part of text complexity looks at reader and task, considering these factors:

- knowledge and experience
- purpose for reading
- complexity of text-based task
- complexity of text-based questions



A three-part model

is used for determining how easy or difficult a particular text is to read.

Common Core Says

While reading demands in college, workforce training programs, and life in general have held steady or increased over the last half century, K–12 texts have actually declined in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students' ability to read complex texts independently. These conditions have left a serious gap between many high school seniors' reading ability and the reading requirements they will face after graduation.

Common Core State Standards,
Appendix A, 2010

Quantitative Dimensions of Text Complexity

These refer to word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion. This is most commonly measured by computer software.

Qualitative Dimensions of Text Complexity

These refer to levels of meaning or purpose, structure, language convention, and knowledge demands. For example,

- Does the text have a single level of meaning or are there hidden meanings, as in satire?
- Is the structure easy to follow—for example, chronological order, or are there flashbacks and other manipulations of time and place? Are graphics supportive or necessary to comprehend text?
- Is the language literal and clear or does text include figurative language or domain-specific vocabulary?
- Is everyday knowledge enough or is specific background knowledge necessary in order to understand new concepts?

Reader and Task Considerations

These will vary as to reader motivation, knowledge, and experiences or as to the purpose of tasks assigned. Such assessments are best made by teacher judgment based on knowledge of students. Although the CCSS require grade-by-grade growth, the ability to read complex text does not always develop in linear fashion. Students need to be challenged to stretch their reading abilities, but also need occasions to read easy texts. Students interested in a particular subject may read highly complex text above grade level. All students, whether reading above or below grade level, need support and scaffolding to master higher levels of complexity.

Exemplar Texts

The Common Core State Standards for ELA expect students to have experience reading texts ranging from classical tales to America's founding documents. Each grade should be exposed to a variety of sophistication and complexity appropriate for that level. While the CCSS do not specify a list of required reading, they include samples of exemplar texts. The samples include informational texts, poetry, read-alouds, stories, speeches, and drama. As the name implies, these texts are worthy of being imitated.