

Module 2: Selecting High-Quality and Appropriately-Complex Texts for Read Aloud

[TAB PAGE]

Course of Study

Read to be Ready

Selecting High-Quality and Appropriately-Complex Texts for Read Alouds

Planning Repeated Interactive Read Aloud Lessons

Creating Text Sets that Build Knowledge and Vocabulary

Designing Your Literacy Block

Module 2: Selecting High-Quality and Appropriately-Complex Texts for Read Aloud

Objectives

- Understand measures of text complexity as a basis for analyzing and selecting read aloud texts in the early grades classroom
- Understand the importance of balancing text complexity measures when selecting texts
- Explore characteristics of high-quality and content-rich texts

Link to Tennessee Academic Standards

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

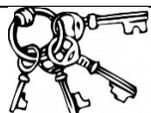
TEAM Alignment

- Teacher Content Knowledge
- Standards and Objectives
- Activities and Materials



Key Idea #1

All students need regular practice with high-quality, appropriately-complex texts that build knowledge and vocabulary. In the early grades, the primary method for engaging students with these kinds of texts is through read alouds.



Key Idea #3

The primary focus of reading comprehension instruction is for students to gain a deep understanding of texts, their content and structure, and their vocabulary, with the end goal of building knowledge about the world.

Rationale Surrounding Reading Aloud to Children

“Specifically, reading aloud builds oral language and vocabulary, listening comprehension - a precursor to reading comprehension - content knowledge, concepts about print and alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. **Equally important, reading aloud is one way we enculturate young children into literacy - helping them acquire the language, values, practices and dispositions of the literate world.**”

- Hoffman, Teal & Yodata, 2015

Activity

Create a list of books that you read aloud to students this past year and the reason(s) why you chose each particular text.

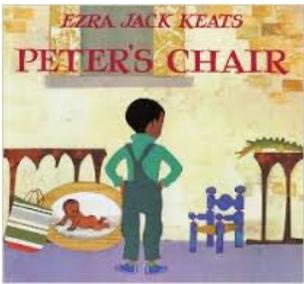
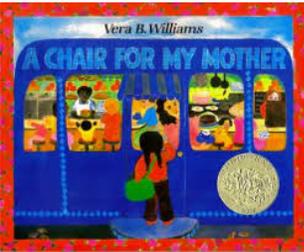
| Read Aloud Book Titles | Reason for Selecting |
|------------------------|----------------------|
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| | |

Selecting Texts with Purpose

Before analyzing the text, reflect on the following questions:

- **Does engagement with this text make sense given my current instructional aims?**
- **Is the content of this text appropriate for the age of my students?**

If you answer “no” to either of these questions, consider selecting a different text.

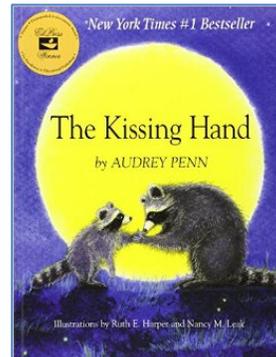
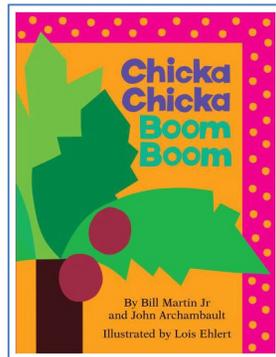
| | |
|---|--|
|  | <p>Does engagement with this text make sense given my current instructional aims? <i>Yes! We're really working on making inferences, and this text gives students many opportunities to make inferences about characters' feelings and actions and how and why they change throughout a story.</i></p> <p>Is the content of this text appropriate for the age of my students? <i>Yes! A handful of my students had younger siblings born recently, so they'll be able to relate to this plot.</i></p> |
|  | <p>Does engagement with this text make sense given my current instructional aims? <i>While this story gives students many opportunities to make inferences, the real power is recognizing the symbolism of the chair. I think we need to scaffold up to this text – maybe in a few months, after lots of practice making inferences and interpreting author's implied meaning, my students will be ready to comprehend and analyze this text.</i></p> <p>Is the content of this text appropriate for the age of my students? <i>The themes of poverty, and even the event of having a house burn down, are pretty serious for young readers. Similar to the previous question, I think this is a wonderfully complex text and my students will be more ready to take it on a little later this school year when they're a bit more mature.</i></p> |

Discuss

- Have you ever selected a text and, after review, decided to use it in a different setting or to not use it at all? If so, why?

Text Complexity and Why It Matters

Text complexity is a measure of how challenging a text is for a child at their particular grade level. One of the key shifts of the Tennessee Academic Standards for English Language Arts is that all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through grade levels. By the time they graduate, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in postsecondary and the workforce.



Activity

In a group of four, read the following excerpts about text complexity. Each group member should read one section. Highlight information that is personally impactful. Then, reflect on and discuss the following:

- What is text complexity and why does it does it matter?
- Why is exposing children to complex texts in early grades important?
- How can we expose children to complex texts in ways that are developmentally appropriate?

Section 1

Text Complexity Defined

What is meant by text complexity is a measurement of how challenging a particular text is to read. There are a myriad of different ways of explaining what makes text challenging to read, from the sophistication of the vocabulary employed to the length of its sentences to even measurements of how the text as a whole coheres. Research shows that no matter what combination of factors is considered when defining text complexity, the ability to read complex text is the single greatest predictor of success in college. This finding is true regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic status. The implication is that teaching that focused solely on critical thinking would be insufficient: it turns out that being able to proficiently read complex text is the critical factor in actually understanding complex text.

Yet that same research also shows that while the complexity of text in college and career has remained steady, the complexity of texts students are given in elementary and secondary school has diminished over time. The result is a significant gap between the reading ability of students and what will be expected of them upon graduation—a gap so large that less than 50% of high school graduates are able to read college and career ready complex text independently.

It is undeniable that the challenge of reading complex text is even more taxing for those students who arrive at school unable to read on grade level. Students whose families have less education are exposed less to complex text at home, and hence arrive at school with fewer reading skills than their classmates who have been encouraged to become independent readers. Yet being able to read complex text is critical for success in college and the workplace, and research shows that working with complex text is the only way to gain mature language skills. It is critical that all students develop the skill, concentration, and stamina to read complex texts. The ultimate goal of instruction therefore is to move students in the direction of independent reading at successive levels of text complexity, culminating in college and career ready reading proficiency.

- The Aspen Institute, 2012. Retrieved from files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED541442.pdf

Section 2

Text Complexity Matters

Being able to read complex text critically with understanding and insight is essential for high achievement in college and the workplace (Achieve, 2007, ACT, 2006). Moreover, if students cannot read challenging texts with understanding, they will read less in general, extending the societal effects the Reading at Risk report already documented. If students cannot read complex expository text, they will likely turn to sources such as tweets, videos, podcasts, and similar media for information. These sources, while not without value, cannot capture the nuances, subtlety, depth, or breadth of ideas developed through complex text. Consequently, these practices are likely to lead to a general impoverishment of knowledge, which in turn will accelerate the decline in ability to comprehend challenging texts, leading to still further declines. This pattern has additional serious implications for the ability of our citizens to meet the demands of participating wisely in a functional democracy within an increasingly complex world.

The ACT findings in relation to performance on the science test bear repeating. The need for scientific and technical literacy increases yearly. Numerous “STEM” (Science Technology Engineering Math) programs are beginning to dot the educational map. Yet only 5% of students who did not meet the ACT reading benchmark met the science benchmark. Science is a process, but it is also a body of knowledge. This body of knowledge is most efficiently accessed through its texts. This cannot be done without the ability to comprehend complex expository text. A final thought: the problems noted here are not “equal opportunity” in their impact. Students arriving at school from less-educated families are disproportionately represented in many of these statistics. The stakes are high regarding complex text for everyone, but they are even higher for students who are largely disenfranchised from text prior to arriving at the schoolhouse door.

- Retrieved from http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Why_Text_Complexity_Matters.pdf

Section 3

The Importance of Read Alouds

Considerable diversity in children’s oral and written language experiences occurs in these years (Hart & Risley 1995). In home and child care situations, children encounter many different resources and types and degrees of support for early reading and writing (McGill-Franzen & Lanford 1994). Some children may have ready access to a range of writing and reading materials, while others may not; some children will observe their parents writing and reading frequently, others only occasionally; some children receive direct instruction, while others receive much more casual, informal assistance.

What this means is that no one teaching method or approach is likely to be the most effective for all children (Strickland 1994). Rather, good teachers bring into play a variety of teaching strategies that can encompass the great diversity of children in schools. Excellent instruction builds on what children already know, and can do, and provides knowledge, skills, and dispositions for lifelong learning. Children need to learn not only the technical skills of reading and writing but also how to use these tools to better their thinking and reasoning (Neuman 1998).

The single most important activity for building these understandings and skills essential for reading success appears to be reading aloud to children (Wells 1985; Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini 1995). High-quality book reading occurs when children feel emotionally secure (Bus & Van Ijzendoorn 1995; Bus et al. 1997) and are active participants in reading (Whitehurst et al. 1994). Asking predictive and analytic questions in small group settings appears to affect children’s vocabulary and comprehension of stories (Karweit & Wasik 1996). Children may talk about the pictures, retell the story, discuss their favorite actions, and request multiple rereadings. It is the talk that surrounds the storybook reading that gives it power, helping children to bridge what is in the story and their own lives (Dickinson & Smith 1994; Snow et al. 1995). Snow (1991) has described these types of conversations as “decontextualized language” in which teachers may induce higher-level thinking by moving experiences in stories from what the children may see in front of them to what they can imagine.

- Learning to Read and Write. A Joint Position Statement of IRA and NAEYC, 2008

Section 4

Text Complexity and Classroom Read Alouds

Different approaches to reading aloud in early childhood classrooms have recently garnered increased attention in the United States because of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards call for all students to engage with complex texts that offer opportunities for higher-level thinking (for a discussion of complex text, see CCSS for English Language Arts, Appendix A [NGA & CCSSO 2010]). Because most children kindergarten through second grade have not yet developed foundational reading skills well enough to independently read complex picture books, read-alouds offer the most robust opportunities for such interactions to occur (IRA 2012).

Read-alouds that engage young children with complex texts rely on interactive discussions focused on interpretations of texts that may vary with the backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences of the children listening. In other words, discussing multiple interpretations of texts helps children realize that there are many possible responses to complex literature. Interactive read-aloud discussions focused on interpretations of complex texts promote basic comprehension and have the potential to extend from basic comprehension to analysis of text elements, integration of ideas to make connections, and critical evaluation of the texts themselves and the ideas in them.

- Hoffman, Teale & Yodota, *Young Children*, 2015



Key Idea #4

In the early grades, children must be exposed to complex texts in order to build strong foundations for high level reading and writing. Because children's independent reading skills are still developing, interactive teacher read alouds create opportunities for children to engage with appropriately-complex texts.

Text Complexity Measures

Text complexity encompasses three interdependent measures: qualitative complexity, quantitative complexity, and reader and task demands.

- *Quantitatively complex texts* provide experience with high-level vocabulary, sentence length, and word structure that build a foundation in the continuum towards postsecondary and workforce preparedness.
- *Qualitatively complex texts* present interactions with multiple levels of meaning, irregular text structures, unconventional language, and other stylistic features that provide a context for close reading and critical thinking.

In turn, as readers explore both quantitatively and qualitatively complex texts, speaking and writing skills are addressed as they discover multiple ways to express meaning.

A Three-Part Model for Measuring Text Complexity

As signaled by the graphic at right, the Standards' model of text complexity consists of three equally important parts.

1) Qualitative dimensions of text complexity.

In the Standards, qualitative dimensions and qualitative factors refer to those aspects of text complexity best measured or only measurable by an attentive human reader, such as levels of meaning or purpose, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands.

2) Quantitative dimensions of text complexity.

The terms quantitative dimensions and quantitative factors refer to those aspects of text complexity, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult if not impossible for a human reader to evaluate efficiently, especially in long texts, and are thus today typically measured by computer software.

3) Reader and task considerations. While the prior two elements of the model focus on the inherent complexity of text, variables specific to particular readers (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to particular tasks (such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed) must also be considered when determining whether a text is appropriate for a given student. Such assessments are best made by teachers employing their professional judgement, experience, and knowledge of the subject.

English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects
Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards

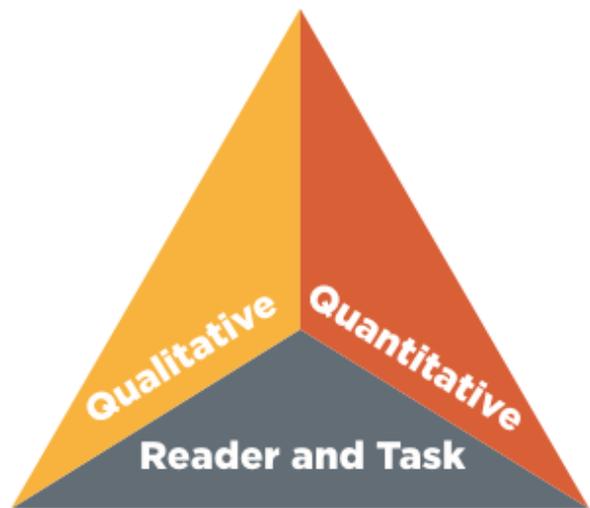
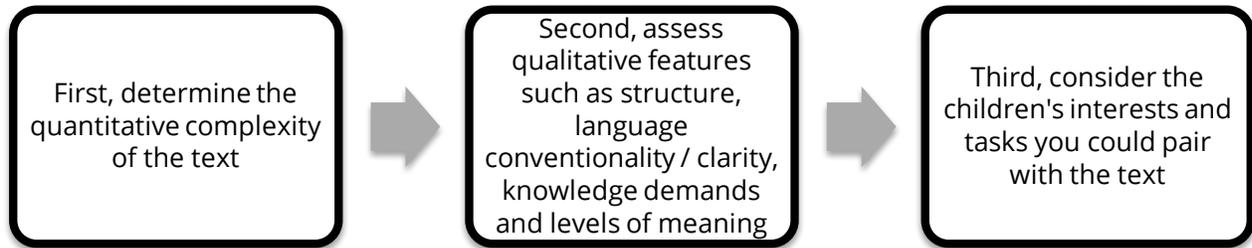


Figure 1: The Standards' Model of Text Complexity

Guidelines for Text Complexity Analysis



First, determine the quantitative measure to place a text in a grade-level band.

Quantitative complexity – such as word frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion – is best analyzed by a computer and is difficult for a human reader to evaluate. There are multiple tools for determining the quantitative complexity of a text (such as ATOS, Degrees of Reading Power, Flesch-Kincaid, The Lexile Framework, SourceRater).

For a read aloud to be quantitatively complex, its lexile should be 1-2 grade levels above students’ current grade level. In early grades classrooms, the lexile may be even more than two grade levels above.

Second, using your professional judgment, perform a qualitative analysis of text complexity to situate a text within a specific grade level.

Qualitative tools measure such features of text complexity as text structure, language clarity and conventions, knowledge demands, and levels of meaning and purpose that cannot be measured by computers and must be evaluated by educators.

Structure. Text structure refers to the ways authors organize information in a text. Structure can range from complex to simple.

| Complex Structure | Simple Structure |
|---|---|
| Implicit and unconventional structure | Well marked, conventional structure |
| Use flashbacks, flash forwards, multiple points of view, and other manipulations of time and sequence | Sequenced in chronological order |
| Informational texts that conform to the norms and conventions of a specific discipline (such as an academic textbook or history book) | Informational texts that do not deviate from the conventions of common genres and subgenres |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Graphics are complex, provide an independent source of information, and are essential to understanding a text *</p> | <p>Graphics are simple and supplementary</p> |
|--|--|

** Note that many books for the youngest students rely heavily on graphics to convey meaning and are an exception to the above generalization.*

Language Conventionalty and Clarity. Texts that rely on literal, clear, contemporary, and conversational language tend to be easier to read than texts that rely on figurative, ironic, ambiguous, purposefully misleading, archaic, or otherwise unfamiliar language (such as general academic and domain-specific vocabulary).

Knowledge Demands. Texts that make few assumptions about the extent of readers’ life experiences and the depth of their cultural/literary and content/discipline knowledge are generally less complex than are texts that make many assumptions in one or more of those areas.

Levels of Meaning (literary texts) or Purpose (informational texts). Literary texts with a single level of meaning tend to be easier to read than literary texts with multiple levels of meaning (such as satires, in which the author’s literal message is intentionally at odds with his or her underlying message). Similarly, informational texts with an explicitly stated purpose are generally easier to comprehend than informational texts with an implicit, hidden, or obscure purpose.

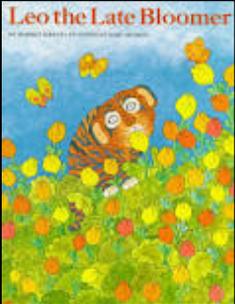
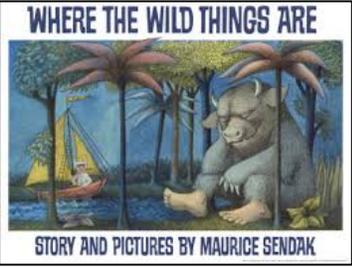
Third, educators should evaluate the text in light of the students they plan to teach and the task they will assign.

Consider possible struggles students might face, as well as brainstorm potential scaffolding to support students in unpacking the most complex features of the text. Reader and Task Considerations enable the educator to “bring” the text into a realistic setting—their classroom.

Some elementary texts contain features to aid early readers in learning to read that are difficult to assess using the quantitative tools alone. Educators must employ their professional judgment in the consideration of these texts for early readers.

- Retrieved and adapted from
www.ccsso.org/Navigating_Text_Complexity

Example: Quantitative Analysis Comparison

| | | |
|--|---------------------------|---|
|  | <p>Lexile: 120</p> | <p>“Leo couldn’t do anything right. He couldn’t read. He couldn’t write. He was a sloppy eater. And, he never said a word. “What’s the matter with Leo?” asked Leo’s father. “Nothing,” said Leo’s mother. “Leo is just a late bloomer.”</p> |
|  | <p>Lexile: AD 740</p> | <p>“That very night in Max’s room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are”</p> |

Lexile to Grade Level Correlation

| Grade | Independent Reader Measures 25 th percentile to 75 th percentile |
|-----------|---|
| 1 | Up to 300L |
| 2 | 140L to 500L |
| 3 | 330L to 700L |
| 4 | 445L to 810L |
| 5 | 565L to 910L |
| 6 | 665L to 1000L |
| 7 | 735L to 1065L |
| 8 | 805L to 1100L |
| 9 | 855L to 1165L |
| 10 | 905L to 1195L |
| 11 and 12 | 940L to 1210L |

Example: Qualitative Text Analysis

Leo the Late Bloomer by Robert Kraus

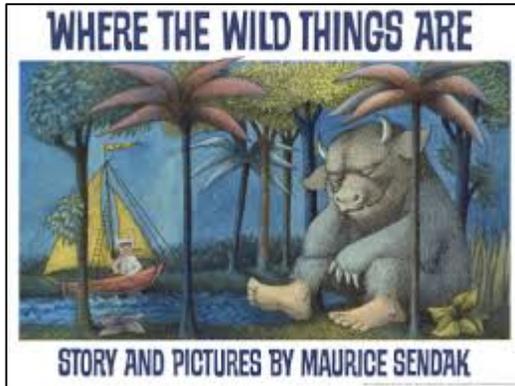


Lexile: 120L
Grade Level Band:
K-1st grade

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Levels of Meaning/Purpose</p> <p>The levels of meaning in this text are moderately complex. Leo's slow development is explicitly documented throughout the story, as is his parents' feelings about it. However, the conclusion that everyone learns and grows at their own pace – and that we should all be patient and optimistic about this growth – must be inferred.</p> | <p>Structure</p> <p>The structure in this text is slightly complex. The story is written in a simple, chronological order and the illustrations are highly supportive of the text.</p> |
| <p>Language Conventinality/Clarity</p> <p>The language conventionality and clarity in this text is moderately complex. There are some sophisticated Tier II vocabulary words, such as <i>sloppy</i>, <i>patience</i>, and <i>neatly</i>. Most language complexity comes from the use of idioms, such as “better late than never” and “in his own good time”, as well as the overall understanding of what “late bloomer” means.</p> | <p>Theme and Knowledge Demands</p> <p>The theme and knowledge demands of this text are moderately complex. The themes of development readiness and parental expectations may be complex for some children. However, the specific knowledge demands are not complex: animal names are familiar, as are the actions of reading, drawing, eating, etc.</p> |

Example: Qualitative Text Analysis

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak



Lexile: AD740
Grade Level Band:
2nd-3rd grade

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Levels of Meaning/Purpose</p> <p>The levels of meaning in this text are very complex. The reader must infer what actually happens to Max, and theme is not explicitly stated.</p> | <p>Structure</p> <p>The structure in this text is very complex. There are multiple manipulations of time and place. Graphics are complex and are essential to understanding the text; the illustrations provide information that is not otherwise available in the text.</p> |
| <p>Language Conventionalty/Clarity</p> <p>The language conventionalty and clarity in this text is very complex. Many sophisticated Tier II vocabulary words are used, such as <i>rumpus</i>, <i>mischief</i>, <i>tumbled</i>, <i>private</i>, and <i>gnashed</i>. Dialog is used, and there is some ironic language, such as Max shouting that he'll eat his mother.</p> | <p>Theme and Knowledge Demands</p> <p>The theme and knowledge demands of this text are moderately complex. The theme of imagination may be complex for some children. However, the specific knowledge demands are much less complex: while Sendak creates a fictional world, no prior knowledge of this world is assumed.</p> |

Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric¹

LITERATURE

| Text Title _____ | Text Author _____ | |
|--|--|---|
| Exceedingly Complex | Moderately Complex | Slightly Complex |
| <p>TEXT STRUCTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Organization: Is intricate with regard to such elements as point of view, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail <input type="radio"/> Use of Graphics: If used, illustrations or graphics are essential for understanding the meaning of the text <input type="radio"/> Conventionalality: Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language <input type="radio"/> Vocabulary: Complex, generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading <input type="radio"/> Sentence Structure: Mainly complex sentences with several subordinate clauses or phrases; sentences often contain multiple concepts <p>LANGUAGE FEATURES</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Organization: May have two or more storylines and occasionally be difficult to predict <input type="radio"/> Use of Graphics: If used, a range of illustrations or graphics support selected parts of the text <input type="radio"/> Conventionalality: Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning <input type="radio"/> Vocabulary: Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic <input type="radio"/> Sentence Structure: Primarily simple and compound sentences, with some complex constructions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Organization: Is clear, chronological or easy to predict <input type="radio"/> Use of Graphics: If used, either illustrations directly support and assist in interpreting the text or are not necessary to understanding the meaning of the text <input type="radio"/> Conventionalality: Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand <input type="radio"/> Vocabulary: Contemporary, familiar, conversational language <input type="radio"/> Sentence Structure: Mainly simple sentences |
| <p>MEANING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Meaning: Multiple competing levels 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 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Meaning: Multiple levels of meaning clearly distinguished from each other; theme is clear but may be conveyed with some subtlety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Meaning: One level of meaning; theme is obvious and revealed early in the text. |
| <p>KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Life Experiences: Explores complex, sophisticated or abstract themes; experiences portrayed are distinctly different from the common reader <input type="radio"/> Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge: Many references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Life Experiences: Explores several themes; experiences portrayed are common to many readers <input type="radio"/> Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge: Few references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Life Experiences: Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are everyday and common to most readers <input type="radio"/> Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge: No references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements |

¹ Adapted from Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies and Science and Technical Subjects (2010).

Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric INFORMATIONAL TEXTS

| Text Title _____ | Text Author _____ | Exceedingly Complex | Very Complex | Moderately Complex |
|---|--|--|---|----------------------------------|
| Text Structure | Text Structure | Text Structure | Text Structure | Text Structure |
| <p>TEXT STRUCTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organization: Connections between an extensive range of ideas, processes or events are deep, intricate and often ambiguous; organization is intricate or discipline-specific ○ Text Features: If used, are essential in understanding content ○ Use of Graphics: If used, intricate, extensive graphics, tables, charts, etc., are extensive and integral to making meaning of the text; may provide information not otherwise conveyed in the text | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organization: Connections between some ideas or events are implicit or subtle; organization is evident and generally sequential or chronological ○ Text Features: If used, enhance the reader's understanding of content ○ Use of Graphics: If used, graphic, pictures, tables, and charts, etc. are mostly supplementary to understanding the text | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organization: Connections between an expanded range of ideas, processes or events are often implicit or subtle; organization may contain multiple pathways or exhibit some discipline-specific traits ○ Text Features: If used, directly enhance the reader's understanding of content ○ Use of Graphics: If used, graphics, tables, charts, etc. support or are integral to understanding the text | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organization: Connections between ideas, processes or events are explicit and clear; organization of text is chronological, sequential or easy to predict ○ Text Features: If used, help the reader navigate and understand content but are not essential to understanding content. ○ Use of Graphics: If used, graphic, pictures, tables, and charts, etc. are simple and unnecessary to understanding the text but they may support and assist readers in understanding the written text | <p>SLIGHTLY COMPLEX</p> |
| <p>LANGUAGE FEATURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conventionality: Dense and complex; contains considerable abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language ○ Vocabulary: Complex, generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading ○ Sentence Structure: Mainly complex sentences with several subordinate clauses or phrases and transition words; sentences often contains multiple concepts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conventionality: Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning ○ Vocabulary: Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely overly academic ○ Sentence Structure: Primarily simple and compound sentences, with some complex constructions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conventionality: Fairly complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language ○ Vocabulary: Fairly 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 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conventionality: Explicit; literal, straightforward, easy to understand ○ Vocabulary: Contemporary, familiar, conversational language ○ Sentence Structure: Mainly simple sentences | <p>Moderately Complex</p> |
| <p>PURPOSE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Purpose: Subtle and intricate, difficult to determine; includes many theoretical or abstract elements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Purpose: Implied but easy to identify based upon context or source | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Purpose: Implicit or subtle but fairly easy to infer; more theoretical or abstract than concrete | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Purpose: Explicitly stated, clear, concrete, narrowly focused | <p>Slightly Complex</p> |
| <p>KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Subject Matter Knowledge: Relies on extensive levels of discipline-specific or theoretical knowledge; includes a range of challenging abstract concepts ○ Intertextuality: Many references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Subject Matter Knowledge: Relies on common practical knowledge and some discipline-specific content knowledge; includes a mix of simple and more complicated, abstract ideas ○ Intertextuality: Few references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Subject Matter Knowledge: Relies on moderate levels of discipline-specific or theoretical knowledge; includes a mix of recognizable ideas and challenging abstract concepts ○ Intertextuality: Some references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Subject Matter Knowledge: Relies on everyday, practical knowledge; includes simple, concrete ideas ○ Intertextuality: No references or allusions to other texts, or outside ideas, theories, etc. | <p>Slightly Complex</p> |

Reader and Task Considerations

After analyzing a text for complexity, consider

1. the needs and interests of the **reader (your students!)**, and
2. the type of **task** that will support students in comprehending the text's meaning(s).

Reader Considerations

- Will my students enjoy this text? Will they find it engaging?
- What will challenge my students most in this text? What supports can I provide?

Task Considerations

What do you want students to demonstrate after reading this text? (e.g. key text understanding, academic vocabulary, fluency, etc.?)

- Use the answer to identify which **Tennessee Academic Standards** will be the instructional focus of the text and the content of questions about the text.

Based on clear understanding of each child's reading ability, what aspects of the text will likely pose the most challenge for your children?

- Use the answer to guide the design of instructional **supports** so that all the children can access the text independently and proficiently through multiple readings of the text.

How is this text best presented to children and how can this text be used with other texts?

- Use the answer to determine how the text "fits" with a larger **unit** of instruction. Can the text serve as an "anchor" text? Does the text require background knowledge that could be learned by reading other texts?

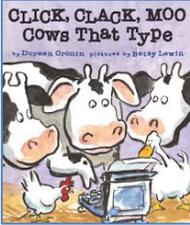
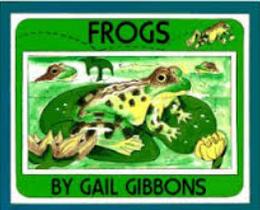
- Retrieved from www.ccsso.org/Navigating_Text_Complexity

Reader and Task Considerations – What is a Task?

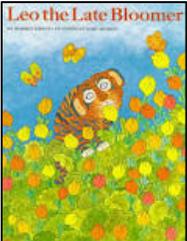
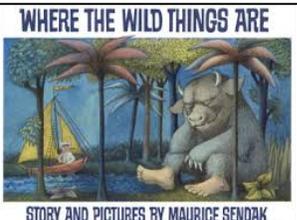
A task is an instructional activity that students complete after reading or listening to a text. An effective task should:

- Support students in comprehending the meaning(s) of the text
- Hinge on a thoughtful prompt that is based on Tennessee Academic Standards
- Provide opportunities to express comprehension through speaking, drawing, writing, or dramatic play
- Be appropriately complex

Example

| Text | Possible Instructional Task |
|---|--|
|  | <p>Draw a timeline that illustrates the sequence of the story. Then, add captions, using specific words from the story to help the reader understand the different events that happened.</p> |
|  | <p>Draw a picture that illustrates the life cycle of a frog. Use specific words you learned from the text to add labels to your illustration.</p> |

Practice

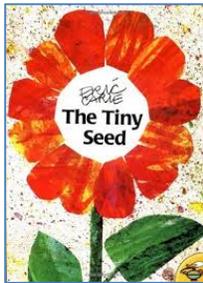
| Text | Possible Instructional Task |
|---|-----------------------------|
|  | |
|  | |

Example: Text Complexity Analysis

The Tiny Seed by Eric Carle

1. Quantitative Measure

Go to <http://www.lexile.com/> and enter the title of your read aloud text in the Quick Book Search in the upper right corner of the home page. Most texts will have a Lexile measure in this database.



400L

The texts that we read aloud should be more complex than what students can read independently. It is recommended that read alouds be **1-2 grade levels above** students' current grade.

2nd -3rd Band 420-820L

4th -5th Band 740-1010L

2. Qualitative Features

Consider the four dimensions of text complexity below. For each dimension, note some examples from the text that make it more or less complex.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Levels of Meaning/Purpose</p> <p>Very Complex. There are multiple levels of meaning in this text - this is a story about the life cycle of a plant and also a tale of perseverance. The theme of perseverance is subtle and is revealed over the entire text.</p> | <p>Structure</p> <p>Slightly Complex. The text is organized clearly and and chronologically. Graphics are used to support and extend the meaning of the text.</p> |
| <p>Language Conventionalty/Clarity</p> <p>Moderately Complex. There is some figurative language; fairly complex vocabulary, including many Tier II words, such as <i>drowns</i>, <i>shines</i>, <i>drifts</i>, and <i>bends</i>; some complex and varied sentence structure.</p> | <p>Theme and Knowledge Demands</p> <p>Moderately Complex. Some knowledge of seeds, plants, and different types of landforms is helpful in comprehending the text.</p> |

3. Reader and Task Considerations

Will my students enjoy this text? Will they find it engaging?

The children in my classroom have demonstrated an interest in the newly sprouted dandelions on the playground. This text will provide children with an appropriately-complex text that provides engaging illustrations, a direct correlation to their growing interest, and an interesting look at the fictional story of a seed.

What will challenge my students most in this text? What supports can I provide?

The main idea of this text is the life cycle of a plant/flower. To provide some background knowledge, I will surround this text with pieces of literature that clearly depict that cycle, as well as identify plant structures. Some of the vocabulary in the text will be unfamiliar to the children, so I will plan for moments of explicit instruction throughout the reads.

How will this text help my students build knowledge about the world?

This text will build knowledge about the life cycle of a plant (flower), and specifically develop an understanding that living things change over time.

How can I connect this text to other texts we've read or will read?

*The children are familiar with texts such as *Pumpkin Pumpkin* (by Jeanne Titherington) that depicts the stages and growth of pumpkin plants from seeds to plants. I will plan to briefly revisit that text, as well as build in new resources. The *Tiny Seed* connects well to the literary text *The Carrot Seed*, and to the informational text *The Mystery Seed*.*

Considering the quantitative measures of complexity, what kinds of tasks would be rigorous and appropriate for my students?

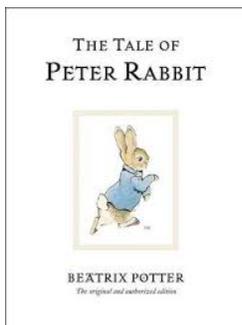
In order to connect this reading to a writing response experience, one task will include illustrating a diagram of a plant (using the text, the informational text, and seed observations for reference). For a deeper look into the text specifically, the children (with adult modeling, guidance and support) will be prompted to use the text to answer the question "What dangers did the seed face and what dangers did the plant face?"

Practice: Evaluating Text Complexity

Complete the text complexity analysis template below using a book you brought. Or, practice with *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, located on the next few pages and also in the appendix.

1. Quantitative Measure

Go to <http://www.lexile.com/> and enter the title of your read aloud text in the Quick Book Search in the upper right corner of the home page. Most texts will have a Lexile measure in this database.



AD660 L

The texts that we read aloud should be more complex than what students can read independently. It is recommended that read alouds be **1-2 grade levels above** students' current grade.

2nd -3rd Band 420-820L
4th -5th Band 740-1010L

2. Qualitative Features

Consider the four dimensions of qualitative text complexity below. For each measure, note examples from the text that make it more or less complex.

| | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| Levels of Meaning/Purpose | Structure |
| Language Conventinality/Clarity | Theme and Knowledge Demands |

3. Reader and Task Considerations

Will my students enjoy this text? Will they find it engaging?

What will challenge my students most in this text? What supports can I provide?

How will this text help my students build knowledge about the world?

How can I connect this text to other texts we've read or will read?

Considering the quantitative measures of complexity, what kinds of tasks would be rigorous and appropriate for my students?

- Template modified from What Makes This Read Aloud Complex?
Retrieved from achievethecore.org

THE GREAT BIG TREASURY OF BEATRIX POTTER

The Tale of Peter Rabbit

Once upon a time there were four little Rabbits, and their names were—

Flopsy,
Mopsy,
Cotton-tail,
and Peter.

They lived with their Mother in a sand-bank, underneath the root of a very big fir-tree.

“Now, my dears,” said old Mrs. Rabbit one morning, “you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don’t go into Mr. McGregor’s garden: your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor.”

“Now run along, and don’t get into mischief. I am going out.”

Then old Mrs. Rabbit took a basket and her umbrella, and went through the wood to the baker’s. She bought a loaf of brown bread and five currant buns.

Flopsy, Mopsy,
and Cotton-tail,
who were good little bunnies, went down the lane to gather blackberries;

But Peter, who was very naughty, ran

straight away to Mr. McGregor’s garden, and squeezed under the gate!

First he ate some lettuces and some French beans; and then he ate some radishes;

And then, feeling rather sick, he went to look for some parsley.

But round the end of a cucumber frame, whom should he meet but Mr. McGregor!

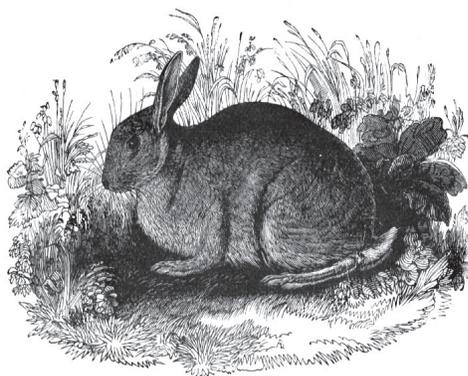
Mr. McGregor was on his hands and knees planting out young cabbages, but he jumped up and ran after Peter, waving a rake and calling out, “Stop thief.”

Peter was most dreadfully frightened; he rushed all over the garden, for he had forgotten the way back to the gate.

He lost one of his shoes among the cabbages, and the other shoe amongst the potatoes.

After losing them, he ran on four legs and went faster, so that I think he might have got away altogether if he had not unfortunately run into a goose-berry net, and got caught by the large buttons on his jacket. It was a blue jacket with brass buttons, quite new.

Peter gave himself up for lost, and shed big tears; but his sobs were overheard by some



friendly sparrows, who flew to him in great excitement, and implored him to exert himself.

Mr. McGregor came up with a sieve, which he intended to pop upon the top of Peter; but Peter wriggled out just in time, leaving his jacket behind him.

And rushed into the toolshed, and jumped into a can. It would have been a beautiful thing to hide in, if it had not had so much water in it.

Mr. McGregor was quite sure that Peter was somewhere in the toolshed, perhaps hidden underneath a flower-pot. He began to turn them over carefully, looking under each.

Presently Peter sneezed—“Kertyschoo!” Mr. McGregor was after him in no time,

And tried to put his foot upon Peter, who jumped out of a window, upsetting three plants. The window was too small for Mr. McGregor, and he was tired of running after Peter. He went back to his work.

Peter sat down to rest; he was out of breath and trembling with fright, and he had not the least idea which way to go. Also he was very damp with sitting in that can.

After a time he began to wander about, going lippity—lippity—not very fast, and looking all around.

He found a door in a wall; but it was locked, and there was no room for a fat little rabbit to squeeze underneath.

An old mouse was running in and out over the stone doorstep, carrying peas and beans to her family in the wood. Peter asked her the

way to the gate, but she had such a large pea in her mouth that she could not answer. She only shook her head at him. Peter began to cry.

Then he tried to find his way straight across the garden, but he became more and more puzzled. Presently, he came to a pond where Mr. McGregor filled his water-cans. A white cat was staring at some goldfish; she sat very, very still, but now and then the tip of her tail twitched as if it were alive. Peter thought it best to go away without speaking to her; he has heard about cats from his cousin, little Benjamin Bunny.

He went back towards the toolshed, but suddenly, quite close to him, he heard the noise of a hoe—scr-r-ritch, scratch, scratch, scritch. Peter scuttered underneath the bushes. But presently, as nothing happened, he came out, and climbed upon a wheelbarrow, and peeped over. The first thing he saw was Mr. McGregor hoeing onions. His back was turned towards Peter, and beyond him was the gate!

Peter got down very quietly off the wheelbarrow, and started running as fast as he could go, along a straight walk behind some black-currant bushes.

Mr. McGregor caught sight of him at the corner, but Peter did not care. He slipped underneath the gate, and was safe at last in the wood outside the garden.

Mr. McGregor hung up the little jacket and the shoes for a scare-crow to frighten the blackbirds.

Peter never stopped running or looked behind him till he got home to the big fir-tree.

He was so tired that he flopped down upon the nice soft sand on the floor of the rabbit-hole, and shut his eyes. His mother was busy cooking; she wondered what he had done with his clothes. It was the second little jacket and pair of shoes that Peter had lost in a fortnight!

I am sorry to say that Peter was not very well during the evening.

His mother put him to bed, and made some camomile tea; and she gave a dose of it to Peter!

“One table-spoonful to be taken at bedtime.”

But Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail had bread and milk and blackberries for supper.

Balancing Measures of Text Complexity

Exposure to appropriately-complex texts is critical for children to develop strong literacy foundations and to build knowledge and vocabulary. However, that doesn't mean that we should just give students hard texts. Texts and tasks must be appropriately complex.

Teachers should be mindful of balancing the three measures of text complexity in a way that is developmentally appropriate and scaffolds expectations for children. For example,

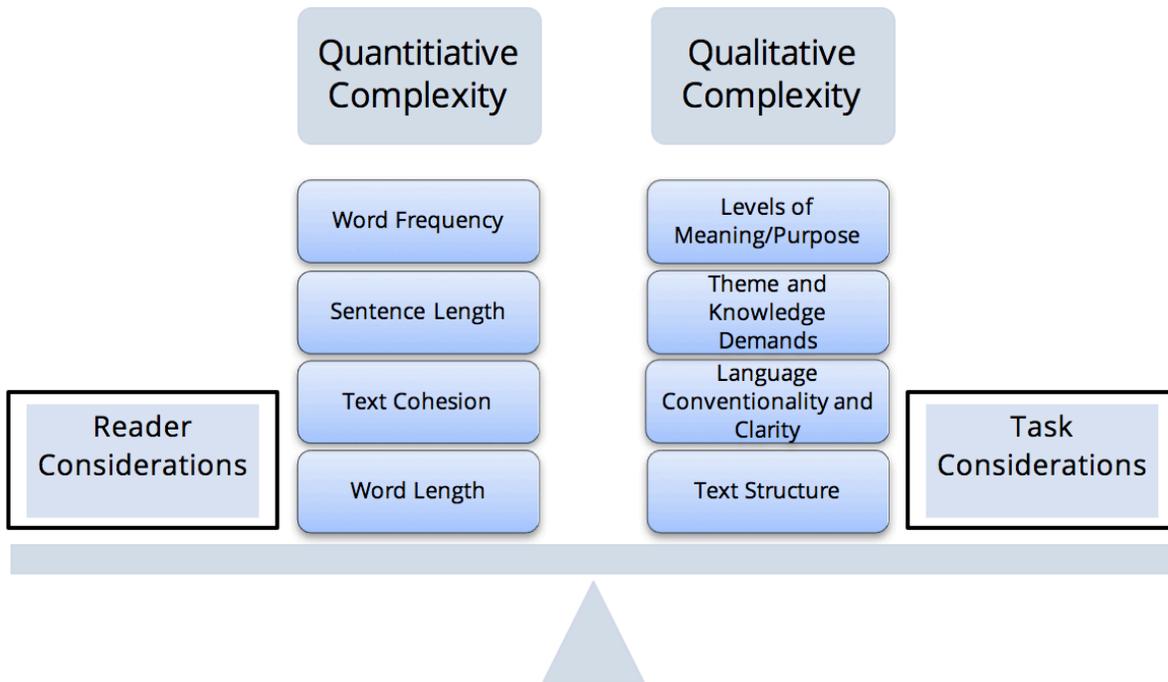
- A teacher may choose a text with **lower quantitative complexity if the qualitative measure is especially complex**, such as a text that addresses complex themes like grief or prejudice, as in *The Story Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles.
- A teacher may choose a text with **lower qualitative complexity in theme and knowledge if the language is especially complex**, such as a text with sophisticated vocabulary, syntax, or word play, as in *Skippyjon Jones* by Judy Schachnar.
- A teacher may choose a text with **lower qualitative or quantitative complexity if the demand of the task is especially rigorous**, such as analyzing the characters' inferred motivations, writing a parody of the story using the same structure as a mentor text, or comparing and contrasting a series of texts.
- A teacher may choose a **less rigorous task if the quantitative or qualitative measures of the text are especially complex**. For example, a teacher reading *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by Eleanor Coerr might choose to focus time on building background knowledge so children understand the setting of post-WWII Japan, a time and place children are unlikely to be familiar with.

Likewise, teachers must be intentional in selecting read aloud texts that diversify reader experience *within* each measure of complexity. Because it is impossible for a single text to meet every complexity measure, teachers must knowingly select a range of texts in order to provide opportunities for children to engage with various types of text complexities across the year.

Discussion

- What does it mean for texts to be appropriately complex?
- Can you think of a text that represents each of the four examples listed above?

Balancing Measures of Text Complexity

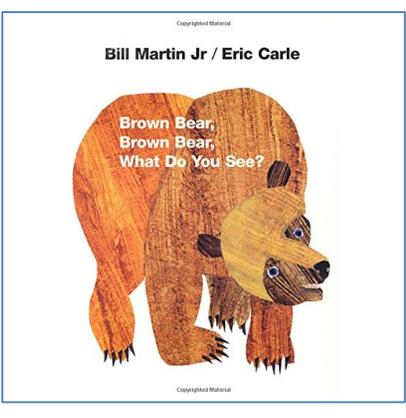


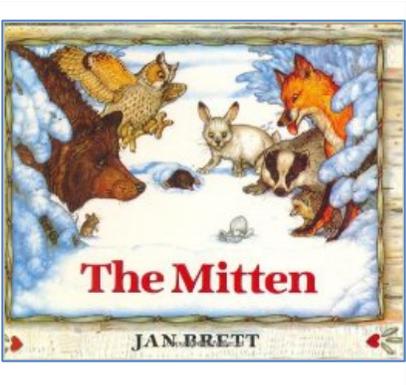
Text Complexity and Purpose for Reading

Engaging students with complex texts is important for developing their knowledge and vocabulary and preparing them for the demands of future grade levels. However, not every text students engage with should be complex. The purpose of the reading activity should inform the type, and complexity level, of the text selected.

Compare the two texts described below and discuss the following questions:

- How are these texts different?
- How would you use these two texts in your classroom? What is the difference in purpose?

| | | |
|--|---|---|
|  | Structure | Conventional structure; predictable rhythm |
| | Language Conventionality/Clarity | Simple knowledge demands; straightforward |
| | Knowledge Demands | Moderate knowledge demands |
| | Levels of Meaning/Purpose | Single level of meaning |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
|  | Structure | Conventional structure; complex illustrations |
| | Language Conventionality/Clarity | Ambiguous language; fairly complex vocabulary and sentence structure |
| | Knowledge Demands | Cultural elements |
| | Levels of Meaning/Purpose | Multiple levels of meaning |

Layering Texts to Balance Complexity

It is important to consider a variety of text genres and complexities in read aloud experiences with children. By creating **text sets**, teachers can ensure that children are intentionally exposed to a variety of interesting and complex literary and informational texts.

What is a Text Set?

A text set is a collection of related texts organized around a topic, theme, or line of inquiry. Text sets are related texts from different genres and media, such as books, charts, maps, informational pamphlets, poetry, videos, etc.

The purpose of study for a given text set is determined by an anchor text. An anchor text is a complex read aloud text that introduces the themes and major concepts that will be explored through the text set. The anchor text is often read aloud to students more than once.

The number of texts in a set can vary depending on purpose and resource availability. What is important is that the texts in the set are connected meaningfully to each other, build knowledge and vocabulary of a specific topic, and that themes and concepts are sufficiently developed in a way that promotes sustained interest for students and the deep examination of content.

Features of Strong Text Sets

| Strong Text Sets | Weak Text Sets |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds student knowledge around a topic • Meaningful connections to the anchor text • Authentic, rich texts worthy of study • Range of text types (literary and informational) and formats • Supports student achievement through text complexity • Includes texts that represent various forms of complexity • Includes visual media, such as videos, images, maps, timelines, and other graphics or text features. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superficial connection or no connection across texts in the set • Only commissioned texts or textbook passages • Focused on one genre or format (unless that set is a genre study) • Text complexity levels are not appropriate for students (too low or too high) • Text set does not represent diverse types of texts or diverse measures of complexity |

- Borrowed and adapted from *Guide to Creating Text Sets*, retrieved from www.ccsso.org

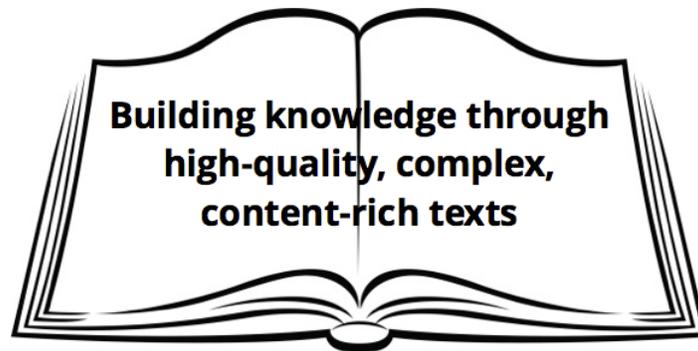
Activity: Exploring Text Sets

As a group, analyze one of the text sets located in the appendix section of this manual. using what we have learned about text complexity as well as the text set strengths and weakness.

Then, discuss the following questions:

- How do these different text sets layer resources to create a balance of text types and complexities?
- What kind of knowledge and vocabulary would students develop as a result of engaging with these texts?

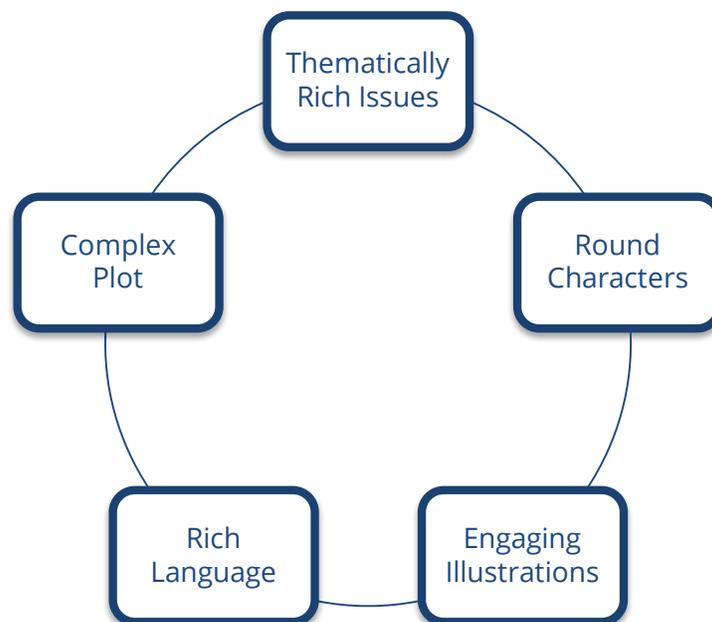
High-Quality Texts



Read an excerpt from the article *The Book Matters! Choosing Complex Narrative Texts to Support Literacy Discussion*. Specifically, read the section titled “Characteristics of literature that support complex processing in read-aloud discussions” (annotated with a star).

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What does it mean for a text to be high-quality?
- How do these characteristics of high-quality literature help children build knowledge and become better readers?



It's Elementary!
Supporting
Literacy in the
Primary Grades

Jessica L.
Hoffman, William
H. Teale, and
Junko Yokota



Kindergarten Through Grade 2

The Book Matters! Choosing Complex Narrative Texts to Support Literary Discussion

VIRTUALLY ALL TEACHERS IN THE early grades value reading aloud as an essential classroom literacy practice. Decades of research document that reading aloud to kindergartners through second-graders promotes development of early literacy skills and establishes a foundation for positive attitudes toward literacy (Van Kleeck, Stahl, & Bauer 2003; Trelease 2013).

Specifically, reading aloud builds oral language and vocabulary (e.g., Hargrave & Sénéchal 2000; Wasik & Bond 2001; Blewitt et al. 2009), listening comprehension—a precursor to reading comprehension (e.g., Brabham & Lynch-Brown 2002; Zucker et al. 2010)—content

knowledge (Pappas & Varelas 2004; Hoffman, Collins, & Schickedanz 2015), concepts of print (Piasta et al. 2012), and alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness (Aram 2006; Brabham, Murray, & Bowden 2006). Equally important, reading aloud is one way we enculturate young children into literacy—helping them acquire the language, values, practices, and dispositions of the literate world (Heath 1983).

Interacting with complex texts through read-aloud discussions

Not all read-alouds are created equal, however. Different approaches to reading aloud in early childhood classrooms have recently garnered increased attention in the United States because

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of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards call for all students to engage with complex texts that offer opportunities for higher-level thinking (for a discussion of complex text, see CCSS for English Language Arts, Appendix A [NGA & CCSSO 2010]). Because most children kindergarten through second grade have not yet developed foundational reading skills well enough to independently read complex picture books, read-alouds offer the most robust opportunities for such interactions to occur (IRA 2012) (see “Literacy Instruction With Complex Literature Aligned With Common Core State Standards”).

Read-alouds that engage young children with complex texts rely on interactive discussions focused on interpretations of texts that may vary with the backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences of the children listening. In other words, discussing multiple interpretations of texts helps children realize that there are many possible responses to complex literature. Interactive read-aloud discussions focused on interpretations of complex texts promote basic comprehension and have the potential to extend from basic comprehension to analysis of text elements, integration of ideas to make connections, and critical evaluation of the texts themselves and the ideas in them.

Read-aloud discussions that include complex processing of texts by young children have been considered in terms of children’s literary understanding (Sipe 2000, 2007; Pantaleo 2007; Hoffman 2011), and in studies of children’s development of critical literacies (Vasquez 2010) and multiliteracies (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers 2007).

Literacy Instruction With Complex Literature Aligned With Common Core State Standards

Below are two examples, using books discussed in this article, of ways teachers can incorporate strategies for choosing and sharing complex literature with young children in instruction, as specified in the K–5 College and Career Readiness anchor standards corresponding with CCSS (NGA & CCSSO 2010).

Reading Standards for Literature 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

In Bob Graham’s *April and Esme, Tooth Fairies*, the story is conveyed in ways that clearly communicate the sense of awe felt by the young tooth fairies their first assignment without their parents, and the anxiety felt by the parents when they allow their children to go out on their own for the first time. Teachers can help students consider these differing points of view. During the first read-aloud of the book, support basic comprehension of the language, visuals, and plot. Follow up a day or two later with a second reading in which students are asked at different places in the text to consider whose point of view is represented and how it impacts the story—for instance, “How do April and Esme’s parents feel about them collecting a tooth alone?” “How do April and Esme feel about going out without their parents?” Students should also consider how the story might be different if it was told from only one point of view (the viewpoint of the girls or that of the parents). Teachers might even guide students to interactively rewrite part of the story from a single point of view to see how it differs from the original. Questions similar to these will guide students’ consideration of differences in points of view of characters. With continued experience, children will build toward interpretation of how point of view contributes to the content and style of texts.

Reading Standards for Literature 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* strongly demonstrates the way visuals and text work collaboratively to convey a story. To guide children’s interpretations of the relationship between visuals and text, teachers can ask children to first examine the illustrations without reading the text and tell the story as they see it. Encourage them to go beyond the plot to consider mood, setting, and theme. Then, read the text to children without showing them the illustrations. Discuss what roles the text and illustrations separately have in contributing to understanding the whole story. For example, consider instances where the text and image are conflicting, such as when the image of friendly-looking Wild Things is paired with the text “roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth.” Examine how the illustration becomes increasingly prominent and dominates the pages as the story develops, but then quickly diminishes after the climax and words alone remain at the story’s resolution. Discussions like these will support children’s evaluation of text, a complex literacy skill.

About the Authors

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Why the Book Matters for Literary Discussion in the Early Grades

To illustrate how children and teachers might interact in literary read-alouds, we present a portion of a read-aloud discussion about *Jamela's Dress* that was observed in Ms. Maddox's kindergarten classroom. Anticipating that her students may not readily relate to the situations in the text, Ms. Maddox scaffolded the children's learning by linking an experience the children understand with the experience and emotions of Jamela's mother. The resulting connection to Jamela's mother was crucial to the children's ability to interpret the broader implications of Jamela's actions and thus supported their attempts to interpret the complex meanings throughout the reading.

A look at a read-aloud discussion of complex text

Ms. Maddox: The story opens with Jamela and her mother shopping for fabric. (Ms. Maddox reads.) "Mama was very pleased with the new material she'd found. She had worked hard to earn the money for it." (Ms. Maddox pauses.)

Ms. Maddox: Have any of you ever worked hard or done something around the house so you could earn something?

Hannah: I did it. I did it.

Ms. Maddox: What have you done, Hannah?

Hannah: I cleaned the refrigerator.

Ms. Maddox: So when you clean the refrigerator, do you earn something?

Hannah nods yes.

Ms. Maddox: What do you earn?

Hannah: A dollar.

Ms. Maddox: You earn a dollar. So, have you ever, when you clean the refrigerator and you earn all these dollars, do you ever go out and buy yourself anything special?

Hannah: Yes.

Ms. Maddox: What's something special that you bought before?

Hannah: Um, clothes for my toys.

Ms. Maddox: Clothes for her toys, which I'm guessing is probably one of your dolls. So, Hannah can relate to this. She said she worked really hard at home cleaning out the refrigerator, and she earns money for it, and when she earns money for it, she goes out and she buys herself something special which is clothes for her dolls.

Ms. Maddox continues reading the story. She and her class discuss other characters and events. Toward the climax of the story, just as Jamela's mother is about to discover that Jamela has ruined her material, Ms. Maddox pauses again to prompt students' connections to the character of Jamela's mother.

Ms. Maddox: Hannah, let's go back to you. Do you remember how you said you worked hard cleaning out the refrigerator to get dollars, and you take those dollars and you buy clothes for your doll? . . . How would you feel if [your sister] came in your room and took those doll clothes that you worked so hard for and destroyed them?

Hannah: I would be mad.

Ms. Maddox: You would be mad? (to the whole group) How do you think Jamela's mama's going to feel?

Children: Mad, happy, mean, sad (many talking at once).

Ms. Maddox: Mean. Sad. Happy.

James: I think she feel like this (pretends to faint).

Dion: Yeah, he's right. I agree.

Ms. Maddox: I think she's gonna be, not mean, but probably a little bit upset.

Through the discussion in this example, the teacher's questioning developed her students' connection to a character, prompting them to relate a student's experience to the character's emotions at significant points in the text where skilled readers make such connections.

These studies reveal how teachers and 5- to 8-year-old children can work collaboratively to construct multilayered interpretations of texts in read-alouds (see “Why the Book Matters for Literary Discussion in the Early Grades”).



Characteristics of literature that support complex processing in read-aloud discussions

Although *how* to read is a frequent topic of studies in the read-aloud literature, much less often researched is the issue of *what* to read—how the quality of literature impacts the quality of the read-aloud discussion (Teale, Yokota, & Martinez 2008). Essentially, some children’s books provide

more to think and talk about than others. To help children process complex texts in read-aloud discussions, it is important for teachers to first choose texts that can support complex interpretations. Although this article focuses on choosing high-quality narrative literature or stories, similar principles apply to selecting informational books. Appropriate narratives for young children contain accounts of connected events that typically surround a central problem and lead to a resolution.

The following sections outline characteristics of high-quality narrative children’s literature to guide teachers’ selections of texts. For each characteristic, we begin with a definition and explanation, followed by an exemplar text.

Resources for Locating Complex Children’s Literature

| Associations and centers book lists | |
|--|---|
| American Library Association—Recommended Reading www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet23#children | American Library Association—Notable Books www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/notalists/ncb |
| International Literary Association—Choice Books List www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html | Barahona Center for the Study of Books in Spanish for Children and Adolescents https://chicanolitbib.wordpress.com/2007/12/02/barahona-center/ |
| Children’s literature review journals, best/notable lists, blogs, and reviews | |
| <i>HornBook</i> www.hbook.com/category/choosing-books/reviews/#_ | <i>Kirkus Reviews</i> www.kirkusreviews.com/ |
| <i>Booklist</i> www.booklistonline.com/book-reviews | <i>Publishers Weekly</i> www.publishersweekly.com/pw/reviews/ |
| <i>School Library Journal</i> www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6703692.html | |
| Newspapers— children’s book reviews | |
| <i>The New York Times</i> www.nytimes.com/column/childrens-books | <i>The Washington Post</i> www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/ |
| Book enthusiast social media sites | |
| Goodreads www.goodreads.com | Shelfari www.shelfari.com |
| LibraryThing www.librarything.com | |
| School libraries’ collection development/selection tool | |
| Titlewave: Collection Development by Follett www.titlewave.com | |
| Children’s literature databases | |
| See public or school libraries for access information | |
| Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database www.clcd.com/#/welcome | NoveList www.ebscohost.com/novelist |



The exemplar texts include all of the characteristics of quality narrative literature. In the interest of space, we use each book selection to illustrate a single characteristic. We also present online and print resources to help teachers find and select complex children’s literature (see “Resources for Locating Complex Children’s Literature”).

Thematically rich issues

Theme is a broad, overarching idea in a text that is usually communicated implicitly through multiple features of the narrative, including plot, character, character actions, dialogue, and setting. Theme is considered a central literary element of narrative, and thus discussion of theme is important in building young readers’ capacity to understand narratives as more than sequences of events. In some cases, the theme may be expressed as a moral, but many books appropriate for children kindergarten through second grade express themes in more subtle and multifaceted ways, much like literature for older children and adults. Because theme is abstract and implicit, readers must engage deeply with a book to consider theme and will often interpret different themes within the same text.

One book with rich thematic possibilities implied through character and plot is *The Empty Pot*, by Demi (1990). In this book, the aging emperor of China announces that the next emperor will be the child who grows a seed in a year’s time. Children from all over China come to receive their seed from the emperor. A year later, they return with their flowering plants—all except Ping, who, despite his best efforts, has been unable to grow anything at all. It turns out the emperor had cooked all the seeds before distributing them. Ping, the only honest child to come before the emperor, is rewarded with an appointment as the next emperor.

The following are examples of themes in this story:

- **Sense of self.** Ping experiences both shame and pride when he goes before the emperor.
- **Doing one’s best.** Though Ping appears to be unsuccessful at fulfilling the emperor’s task, he does not give up.
- **Honesty.** Despite feeling incompetent, Ping brings his empty pot before the emperor amidst a sea of children with beautiful flowering plants.

Round characters

High-quality narratives include round characters—characters who are dynamic, changing, and malleable. In contrast, flat (stock) characters are stable, fixed, and unresponsive to differences in particular events or characters. In other words, round characters are like real people—they act, think, and speak differently depending on the immediate context.

Discussion of theme is important in building young readers’ capacity to understand narratives as more than sequences of events.

Kevin Henkes is a master of character development in children’s books. In his book *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse* (1996), readers are introduced to a girl-mouse character with a new purse who is quite self-absorbed. Lilly cannot wait to show the other children at school the purple purse, but when she shares it with them at an inopportune time, her teacher takes the purse away and says he will keep it until the end of the day. Lilly grows despondent at having her prized possession confiscated and then becomes increasingly enraged at being put in time-out. By the end of the day she is furious with her teacher, even drawing a picture depicting him as a monstrous figure. However, when her teacher hands her the purse as she leaves for the day, Lilly finds a note and treats from the teacher inside it and suddenly realizes how “small” she feels. Thus, Lilly is depicted as a round character who exhibits a range of emotions and also grows through her experience. As she becomes less self-centered, she learns to temper her emotions and behavior more appropriately for the social situation.

Engaging, complex illustrations

Narrative picture books are a unique form of narrative literature in that they construct meaning through the interaction between text and illustrations. High-quality narrative picture books involve an artful, synergistic blending of text and illustration in which the meaning from the text and the illustrations are interconnected so that the

whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This complex relationship between text and illustration is known as transmediation, and it demands constant construction and reconstruction of meaning from text to image and back (Sipe 1998). Research on children’s use of illustrations to construct meaning in picture books during teacher read-alouds has demonstrated that even young children are quite capable of transmediating text and image, especially when supported by the teacher (Sipe & Bauer 2001; Sipe 2007).

High-quality narrative literature includes rich and mature language—words and phrases that develop complex meaning and imagery for the reader.

The book *April and Esme, Tooth Fairies*, by Bob Graham (2010), is a sophisticated example of how an author artfully combines words and illustrations to create a rich, sophisticated narrative. This fantasy book depicts the first time two young tooth fairies exchange a lost tooth for a coin. Graham’s story begins before the title page, as 7-year-old tooth fairy April is shown on her cell phone. The text, which provides her side of the conversation, indicates

a request to pay a tooth fairy visit to the caller’s grandson, Daniel. April, thrilled beyond belief to be asked, convinces her (ponytailed) father and her (tattooed) mother that she and her younger sister Esme are up to the task. After a number of tense moments on the mission to collect Daniel’s tooth and deliver the coin, the sisters prevail and return home, travelling across a dangerous highway, to excited and proud parents.

Throughout the book Graham creates a subtle interplay between text and illustration. Good examples of this are the three double-page spreads in the book depicting the formidable highway, with its constant string of huge, fast-moving 18-wheelers, contrasted with the tiny tooth fairy cottage and the almost minuscule tooth fairies. In one illustration the parents are shown in the lower left corner of the page while April and Esme hover in the upper right corner, framed by the white moon, “lift(ing) off into the night.” Large trucks loom between these two images. The visual contrast effectively conveys the scale and danger of April and Esme’s mission.

Rich language

High-quality narrative literature includes rich and mature language—words and phrases that develop complex meaning and imagery for the reader. Such text introduces

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young readers to words that may be new or somewhat unknown as well as to familiar words used in new ways (e.g., figurative language). Rich language is not flowery or longwinded; rather, it is carefully crafted by the author, who chooses each word and structures each sentence to create an original, artistic, and tightly constructed text.

Jamela's Dress, by Niki Daly (1999), is the story of a young girl in South Africa who unintentionally destroys fabric that her mother was going to use to make a new dress, when she gets wrapped up (literally) in her own desire to dress up. Daly carefully constructs his language to create imagery for the reader through word meanings and sound quality. For example, in a close reading of the sentence, "Dreamily, Jamela swayed between the folds of material as they flapped and wrapped around her into a dress," readers feel the breeze blowing through the material, long and slow at first, "swayed between the folds of material," followed by two short, quick snaps of wind that "flapped and wrapped" the material around Jamela, seemingly through no fault of her own. In other places, Daly fluidly infuses imagery through simile—"Down the road went Jamela, proud as a peacock." At other times, it is the simplicity of language that contributes to the meaning, such as the dawning dread readers experience when Jamela's mother calls to check on her but "there was no answer." Words and language are Daly's artistic tools to create rich images for his readers.

Engaging, complex plot

Plot is the series of events in a story and the relationships among the events, particularly how they relate to the narrative's problem and resolution. An engaging, complex plot interests readers and drives their desire to know what happens next, especially in relation to a story's resolution. Although older, more sophisticated readers can engage with problems far removed from their life experiences, younger children typically engage best with plots that relate to their more limited experiences and perspectives (Schickedanz & Collins 2012).

In Maurice Sendak's classic *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), Max misbehaves and is sent to bed without his supper. His room transforms into a forest, and soon he sails into the land of the Wild Things, who name him King and honor him with a Wild Rumpus.

But Max becomes homesick and returns to his house to find his supper waiting for him, still hot.

This plot essentially revolves around disobedience, frustration with parents, thoughts and dreams, and perhaps even real instances of running away—all issues that resonate in young children's lives. Sendak's text and illustrations work together in a seamless exploration of plot paralleled with character—Max's journey is both a dream of a physical journey (the plot) and an instance of an emotional journey (character). Sendak's plot prompts children to consider issues central to childhood.

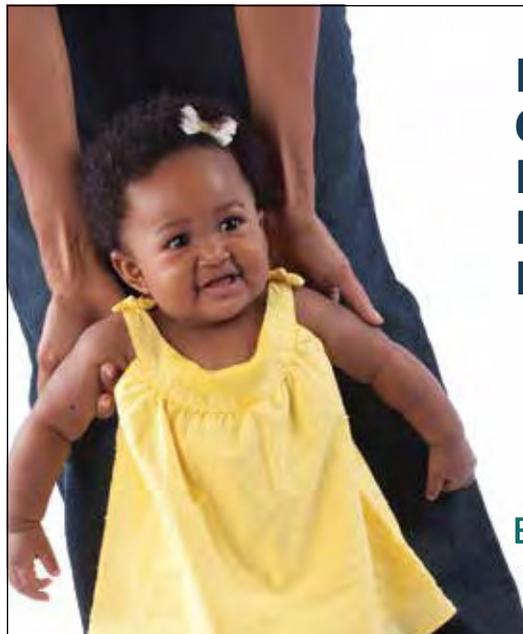
Conclusion

In this article, we have provided examples of features of high-quality narrative literature that can support complex processing of texts in read-aloud discussions. The texts are not meant to be used as a short reading list for teachers, but rather as exemplars of the wide body of high quality children's literature available. Children's literature that is carefully crafted with the characteristics we discussed can support read-aloud experiences through which teachers apprentice children into complex processing of texts. Frequent opportunities to collaboratively process complex texts in the early grades help children learn how to approach such texts both as emergent readers and, later, as independent ones, thus contributing to their lifelong development as skilled readers.

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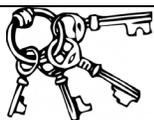
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Additional Considerations for High-Quality Literature

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <p>Theme</p> | <p>High-quality texts center on themes that children enjoy or that are important for students to think about or learn. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Darcy and Gran Don't Like Babies</i> by Jane Cutler – helps students adjust to life with new siblings • <i>Officer Buckle and Gloria</i> by Peggy Rathmann – teaches the importance of friendship • <i>Hooway for Wodney Wat</i> by Helen Lester – reminds students that our unique differences are special and powerful • _____ • _____ • _____ |
| <p>Characters</p> | <p>High-quality texts include protagonists who are inspiring, model positive traits, are dynamic and interesting, and remind students of themselves. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Wilma Unlimited</i> by Kathleen Krull – the inspiring story of Wilma Rudolph, who overcame crippling polio to win three gold medals at the Olympics • <i>Akiko on the Planet Smoo</i> by Mark Criley – a science fiction thriller for young readers, where Akiko transforms dynamically from an ordinary girl into an intergalactic hero • <i>Amazing Grace</i> by Mary Hoffman – young girls and African American students can be inspired by Grace's perseverance and her desire to break stereotypes • _____ • _____ • _____ |
| <p>Plot</p> | <p>High-quality texts contain plots that are engaging, surprising, and new. They make students want to keep reading, or spark conversations about the book outside of the classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Doctor De Soto</i> by William Steig – readers are on edge wondering if mouse-dentist Doctor De Soto should trust his fox patient • <i>The Mysteries of Harris Burdick</i> by Chris Van Allsburg – fourteen black-and-white pictures accompanied by a title and caption invite children to make up their own stories • _____ • _____ • _____ |

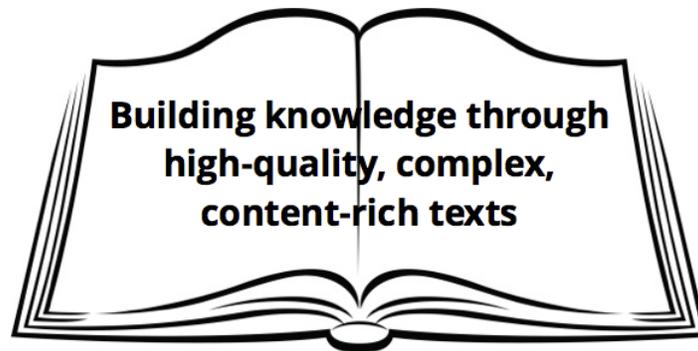
| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <p>Setting</p> | <p>High-quality texts contain settings that are interesting and that teach students about different places and time periods. High-quality fictional settings capture students' imagination and encourage creative thinking.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Legend of the Bluebonnet</i> by Tomie DePaola – a folktale about the Comanche tribe and the history of the bluebonnet flower • <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> by Lewis Carroll – a fantastical world of interesting creatures • _____ • _____ |
| <p>Language</p> | <p>High-quality texts contain rich language that promote the acquisition of Tier II vocabulary, as well as knowledge of figurative and idiomatic language. High-quality texts utilize various language structures to convey meaning and information, including descriptions, dialog, and characters' internal monologs. High-quality texts also use rhythm and rhyme and build students' phonological awareness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Skippyjon Jones</i> by Judy Schachner – includes many Tier II words, such as <i>scolded</i>, <i>bounce</i>, <i>exclaimed</i>, and <i>junk</i>, as well as a playful rhyme scheme, monolog, and dialog. • <i>The Velveteen Rabbit</i> by Margery Williams Bianco – text introduces children to language from a different time period; includes Tier II vocabulary such as <i>splendid</i>, <i>rustling</i>, and <i>snubbed</i>; and includes interesting sentences and phrasing, such as "On Christmas morning, when he sat wedged in the top of the Boy's stocking, with a sprig of holly between his paws, the effect was charming." • _____ • _____ |
| <p>Illustrations</p> | <p>High-quality texts include illustrations that are accurate to the plot, characters, and setting and that are also interesting and beautiful to look at. They utilize various media – drawing, collage, photography – and teach students about artistic and visual elements such as line, color, shape, and texture. (The Caldecott Medal is awarded annually to the artist who created the most distinguished picture book for children, and is a helpful reference for finding high-quality illustrated literature.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Polar Express</i> by Chris Van Allsburg • <i>Mirette on the High Wire</i> by Emily Arnold McCully • _____ • _____ |



Key Idea #5

Engaging students with high-quality texts makes reading enjoyable and fosters a love of reading.

Content-Rich Texts



Providing balanced book collections at all grade levels is vital to engagement during both reading instruction and self-selection. This work suggests that a balanced collection includes lots of informational titles and a variety of print materials. Pappas (1993) found that children as young as kindergarten showed a preference for informational text and Mohr (2006) noted that nonfiction books were the overwhelming choice of first grade students. In addition, Marinak and Gambrell (2007) found that third grade boys and girls valued reading newspapers and magazines as well as books.

- Reading Motivation: What the Research Says, retrieved from www.readingrockets.org

Considerations for Content-Rich Texts

- Does the text contain **new information** that students likely don't already know?
- Does the text **build background knowledge** that will help students comprehend later texts and experiences?
- Does the text contain information that is **useful** in the real world?
- Does the text contain information that is **relevant** to students' needs or interests? Does it help them **answer questions** or **solve problems**?
- Does the text contain information that helps students **connect** their own experiences and situations to others and to the broader world?
- Is the content of the text **authentic** and does it lend itself to **further research, exploration, and inquiry**?

- List borrowed and modified from two sources: *The importance of content rich texts to learners and students*, retrieved from Oxford University Press English Language Teaching Global Blog; and *Informational Text and Young Children: When, Why, What, Where, and How* by Dr. Nell K. Duke



Information Books in Early Childhood

Nell K. Duke

The *Mitten*, *Little Bear*, *Caps for Sale*—What do these and so many other books in early childhood classrooms have in common? They are stories or narrative texts.

Research indicates that storybooks are indeed the most common type of text found in early childhood classrooms (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, & Roberts 2002). Literacy research and theory both provide lots of good reasons for including so many storybooks in young children's lives (e.g., Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998). However, research and theory suggest that other kinds of books, in particular information books, also belong in early childhood classrooms.

Contrary to what many believe, there are numerous indications that informational text is appropriate for young children and can have significant benefits for them. Informational literacy can be developed from the very beginning.

What is informational text?

I define *informational text* as text written with the primary purpose of conveying information about the natural and social world (typically from someone presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject to someone presumed to be less so) and having particular text features to accomplish this purpose. Features commonly found in informational texts include graphic

elements, such as diagrams and photographs; text structures, such as compare/contrast and cause and effect; access formats, such as headings and an index; language forms, such as use of timeless verbs and generic nouns (e.g., “Birds eat insects” versus “That bird is eating an insect”); and others.

Traditionally, informational text is the text that we *read to learn*, as distinguished from the text that we *learn to read*. Many educators believe that children begin to read to learn around fourth grade and that before this, children are only learning to read (Chall 1983). However, as I discuss in this article, research suggests that children are indeed able to read to learn (and be read to, to learn) from a much earlier age. Just as nonfiction is common in the everyday lives of adults, so too can it be part of the daily lives of children.

Informational text is developmentally appropriate for young children

Young children can interact successfully with informational text when given the opportunity to do so.

Perhaps the most important point to establish is that informational text *is* developmentally appropriate for young children. Although a number of influential theorists have argued that narrative is primary for young children (e.g., Moffett 1968; Bruner 1986), that it must “do for all” (Moffett 1968, x) in early

childhood, there is little research to support this contention. A variety of studies suggest young children can interact successfully with informational text when given the opportunity to do so. Several examples follow.

An often cited study by Christine Pappas (1993) notes that kindergarten children repeatedly read to from a set of information books were able to pretend to read those same books using many of the key linguistic features of

Nell K. Duke, Ed.D., is an assistant professor at Michigan State University in East Lansing. She has worked extensively with teachers on developing children's informational literacy. Her book on the subject—*Reading and Writing Informational Text in the Primary Grades: Research-Based Practices*—is due out later this year.

Illustrations © Diane Greenseid

“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.”

— Francis Bacon

the books. In fact they could read them with as much skill as they read storybooks. The children showed strong interest in both types of text (see also Duke & Kays 1998).

Other research (Moss 1997) demonstrates that not only can children reproduce or reenact the language of informational text but also they can comprehend such texts with considerable skill. Eighteen of 20 first-graders Moss studied could produce retellings of information books read to them at a level of 3 (out of 5) or better on the challenging Richness of Retelling Scale (Irwin & Mitchell 1983).

Research also indicates that young children can respond to informational texts in sophisticated ways. Researchers document that first grade students can make intertextual connections—associations between one text and another with related content or style—during an informational text read-aloud (Oyler & Barry 1996). Some primary grade children are even able to talk about unique characteristics and purposes of informational texts, given exposure to them (Donovan 1996). One researcher chronicles the range and complexity of her daughter’s responses to informational texts from age three to six (Maduram 2000).

The Maduram study is particularly important because it examines read-alouds and responses to read-alouds by a pre-K child. Almost all of the research related to informational literacy focuses on grades K and above. It is noteworthy that what little research exists on pre-K also suggests that informational text is developmentally appropriate.

Why informational text for young children?

But just because young children *can* interact with informational text, *should* they? Is this simply another case of “push down” curriculum? Available research and theory suggest otherwise. The next section outlines some long-standing beliefs about early childhood that actually suggest why informational text might be *particularly* appropriate during this period.

Building on young children’s inherent curiosity

Young children are inherently curious about the world around them. One need only witness children’s fascination with cars and trucks passing, a puppy playing in the park, or worms that wash up after the

rain to recognize the young child’s great interest in the natural and social world. Thus books whose purposes are to convey information about the natural and social world—like Caroline Bingham’s *Big Book of Trucks*, Gail Gibbons’s *Dogs*, or Linda Glaser’s *Wonderful Worms*—seem a natural for young children (see Reese & Harris 1997; Yopp & Yopp 2000).

The dominance of narrative text in early childhood may be inconsistent with children’s own preferences. Although the research in this area is riddled with problems (Kletzien 1999), taken as a whole it suggests that children do not show overwhelming preferences for narrative to the exclusion of other text forms. Rather, children often select nonfiction, informational texts when given a choice.

Notably, one study indicates that younger primary children are particularly likely to show preference for informational text (Kletzien & Szabo 1998). In this study children in first, second, and third grades preferred information books at least as often as narratives when asked to choose between them (with book topic held constant). Fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders, however, more often selected narratives. Boys in general were more likely to select informational texts, but as with nearly any study in this area, there were substantial individual differences. Some children, both boys and girls, exhibited a strong preference for narrative texts, some for informational texts, others for neither.

When children’s preference is for narrative, they fit well with the typical text offerings of early childhood classrooms. When their text choice is informational, children fit considerably less well. For children at risk for or struggling with learning to read, there is particular reason to pay attention to research on reading interests and preferences. Interest has an important influence on children’s enthusiasm for reading and can even support children’s reading development (Schiefele, Krapp, & Winteler 1992). As teachers we also know that struggling readers typically show less interest in and motivation to read than do their more successful peers (Guthrie & Wigfield 1997). One might suspect then that making high-interest reading material available to students at risk or struggling to learn to read may be particularly important.

In case studies conducted with my colleague Linda Caswell (Caswell & Duke 1998), we examined the progress of two boys struggling substantially with their

Some children, both boys and girls, exhibited a strong preference for narrative texts, some for informational texts, others for neither.

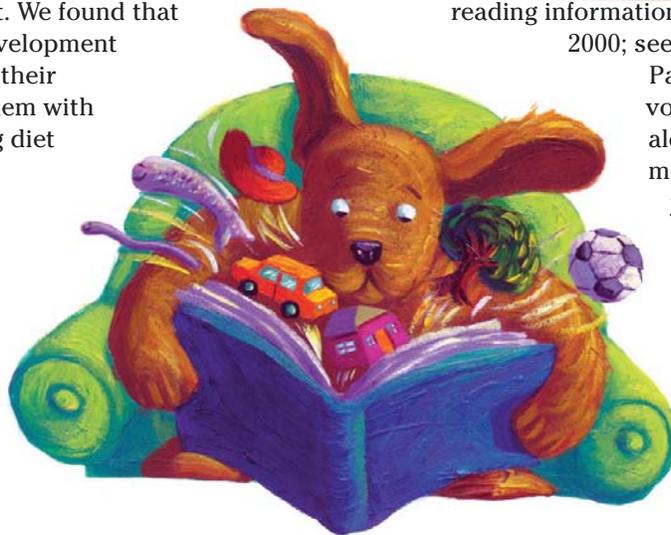
reading development. We found that the boys' reading development finally took off when their teachers provided them with a reading and writing diet rich in informational text—a type of text these boys strongly preferred. Although providing these children with informational reading material was by no means the only factor contributing to their progress, we argue that it was one important factor.

Research involving highly successful adults with dyslexia shows that one factor the adults had in common was a childhood history of high-volume reading in topic areas of passionate interest to them—areas quite often addressed in informational texts (Fink 1995/1996). While not definitive on the point of interest, these studies do suggest that young readers at risk or struggling will benefit from high-interest materials, including informational texts. For many young learners the high-interest nature of informational texts is one argument for their inclusion in early childhood education.

Supporting vocabulary and world knowledge development

There are substantial individual differences in children's development and learning, but there is no question that early childhood is a time of notable growth of vocabulary and world knowledge (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). By definition, informational text is written to convey information about the world around us and contains specialized vocabulary toward that end (e.g., Purcell-Gates & Duke 2001). Thus informational texts may be particularly well-suited to contributing to young children's development of vocabulary and world knowledge.

Even before children can read independently, there is evidence that they learn vocabulary from texts read aloud to them (e.g., Elley 1989). Although studies on this point have been conducted primarily with storybooks, it is reasonable to think the same would hold true with information books (Dreher 2000). In one study kindergarten teachers included more discussion of vocabulary and text concepts when reading aloud informational texts than when reading aloud narrative texts. A first grade teacher in another study devoted more attention to comprehension in general when



reading informational text aloud (Smolkin & Donovan 2000; see also Mason et al. 1989).

Parents may interact more around vocabulary and concepts when reading aloud informational text. A study of mothers of Head Start children did find just that; the mothers asked more questions and introduced more vocabulary when reading aloud informational rather than narrative texts (Pellegrini et al. 1990; see also Lennox 1995). If anything, we might expect reading aloud informational text to have a greater effect on the development of vocabulary and concept knowledge.

With respect to development of world knowledge in general, research is also suggestive. One study shows evidence that kindergarten children develop content knowledge from information books read to them (Duke & Kays 1998). Children's journal entries regularly contained content linked to information books that were read aloud. For example, after hearing the book *Potato*, by Barrie Watts, about how potatoes grow, one child drew a cross-section of a sprouting potato plant. After hearing books about spiders, a child drew a spider and spider web complete with entangled prey (an idea discussed in one of the books). Research involving third grade children whose science unit contained both firsthand observation and informational texts shows they learned more than those children whose science unit contained only firsthand observation (Anderson & Guthrie 1999).

With regard to intervention on behalf of children who might have difficulty learning to read or who were already struggling to build literacy skills, using informational text as a means of developing early vocabulary and world knowledge may be significant. Researchers find that on average these children's vocabulary knowledge is weaker than that of their peers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998), and they are more likely to struggle with reading later in school when substantial informational reading is a demand (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin 1990).

Encouragingly, one study of poor readers notes they are particularly

Informational texts may be particularly well-suited to contributing to young children's development of vocabulary and world knowledge.

likely to improve vocabulary development from repeated read-alouds (Elley 1989). Thus, while more direct research is needed, the evidence suggests that incorporation of information books in early childhood settings may lead to improved development of vocabulary and world knowledge.

Developing children's concepts of reading and writing

In the United States and other relatively literate societies, early childhood is a time to build children's conceptions of the purposes and nature of reading and writing (e.g., Harste, Woodward, & Burke 1984; Clay 1993). These conceptions may differ depending on the nature and uses of literacy to which children are exposed (e.g., Heath 1983; Purcell-Gates 1995, 1996). Thus if early childhood settings do not offer informational texts, children may not learn that literacy is a means of obtaining or communicating information.

In research I conducted in first grade classrooms, teachers offered children very little experience with informational text: an average of 3.6 minutes per day, even less for children in low socioeconomic-status settings (Duke 2000). As a result, the idea that one important purpose of reading and writing is to obtain or communicate information about the natural or social world did not get attention within these classrooms.

In addition, no one conveyed the notion that text can be read nonlinearly. Children had not learned that we can read just parts of a text, not necessarily in order, often using tools such as the index, headings, and table of contents to guide us. The literacy to which children in my study were exposed was almost exclusively linear, proceeding from the beginning to the end of the text, in order, and in its entirety. This experience stands in sharp contrast to much of the reading that adults do in their daily lives, which in fact is nonlinear in nature (Venezky 1982). Nonlinear reading will become more dominant with increased use of technology (Kamil & Lane 1998).

Hynes (2000) illustrates the possible impact of this restricted representation of literacy in early childhood by describing a struggling student who did not consider himself a reader because he did not read narrative literature for pleasure. This student and others were described by Hynes as "living outside the dominant

genre of school." Their views of what constitutes reading and literacy were shaped accordingly.

Research demonstrates that kindergartners and first and second grade students who have had little experience with informational text at home or at school show limited knowledge of such text; their literacy knowledge is directly tied to the types of literacy they have experienced (Kamberelis 1998). Limited knowledge of the multiple purposes and types of literacy is particularly likely to be a problem among children who get most of their literacy knowledge and experience at school.

Steps toward bringing informational text to young children

The joint position statement of the International Reading Association (IRA) and NAEYC (1998) clearly calls for young children to experience a variety of texts, including informational texts, in child care and pre-school settings. Early childhood educators have an important role to play in increasing the availability of informational texts for young children. Here are some of the things we can do:

1. Be aware of the types of text to which we are (and are not) exposing our children.

Look at your classroom libraries, at the books you send home with children, at what you read aloud every day. How much is informational? Do children experience a wide array of texts in your classroom? Do you have colleagues who would benefit from increased awareness about this issue?

2. Devote some funds for books and other materials to the purchase of informational texts.

For a while we may need to overcompensate, spending a larger portion of funds on nonfiction to help balance our collections. Information books, children's nature magazines, and many other nonstorybook texts can increase the diversity of our libraries and their appeal to a greater number of children with varied needs and interests. Find out from children the kinds of texts and topics they would like to see in their classroom library.

If early childhood settings do not offer informational texts, children may not learn that literacy is a means of obtaining or communicating information.



3. Raise parents' awareness of the appropriateness and value of informational texts.

Parents magazine recently listed "The 50 Best Children's Books" (Seid 2002). All 50 books are stories, and all but one are fictional. We need to supplement these resources with suggestions for informational and other types of books for young children. When lending children's books for home reading, include information books as well as storybooks.

4. Include more informational texts in classroom activities.

Although there is limited research identifying an accepted set of best practices for using informational texts with young children, I have seen a number of activities work effectively. Some have a basis in research.

There is much early childhood educators can do to incorporate informational text into our classrooms. And as more early childhood educators develop ways of using information books in their classrooms, early childhood researchers will need to study their impact on children's learning. Researchers need to look especially at what happens when children are exposed to a significant amount of informational text from very early on and throughout several years of schooling. Currently we know little about the outcomes. Early childhood researchers and educators have important contributions to make in developing informational literacy.

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Some Information Books for Children

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Classroom Activities Using Information Books

• Interactive read-alouds.

Reading aloud informational texts, especially with a great deal of teacher-child and child-child interaction, is likely to have many benefits. Some, such as building vocabulary and developing knowledge of the linguistic features of information book language, are discussed in this article. It is especially important to ask higher-order questions—questions that require going beyond information given directly in the text to reading between the lines, thinking ahead, making connections between the text and prior knowledge or experiences, and so on. Questions that ask “Why do you think . . . ?” “How does . . . ?” “Have you ever . . . ?” “Does this remind you of . . . ?” “What does the author mean by . . . ?” “What if . . . ?” can easily lead to higher-order discussions.

• **Interest groups.** Children who share an interest in particular topics—such as ocean animals, cars and trucks, or farming—can gather for a group activity involving both information books and hands-on experience. Groups might look through informational texts on their topics and listen to a text read aloud or played on tape. Children might watch a relevant video (many free or low-cost videotapes related to science and social studies are available through PBS and other sources),



explore materials firsthand, or go on a field trip. As groups become experts on topics, they can share what they learn with their classmates or with families and the community at school-family nights.

• **Purposeful writing.** Because one purpose of informational text is to convey information about the natural or social world, children should whenever possible write informational text to convey information to others who want or need it. Children could write brochures about exhibits for use at the local science center. They can create posters about the school garden to display in school hallways or write books on underrepresented topics to donate to the school library. For very young children, parents or other family members, adults in the child care setting, and familiar groups in the community (police officers, grocers, librarians) can all become meaningful audiences for information children are learning about the world around them.

• **Innovations.** Children can use an existing text plus their innovations to create a new text. For example, I’ve seen innovations on the

storybook *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin, that start with a title like “Ms. Smith’s Class, Ms. Smith’s Class, What Do You See?”

Similarly we can create innovations on information books with young children. The information board book *Do Monkeys Tweet?* by Melanie Walsh, could be rewritten to feature other animals. A book about the development of an apple from seed to fruit (there are several books on this topic) could be a model for children’s writing about the development of a pumpkin from seed to vegetable. A book about one cultural celebration could be a model for new text about another type of celebration.

• **Teaching about text.** Children may need help understanding differences in the purposes and features of different kinds of text. Some children may not have used a book as a reference or may be unfamiliar with the wide range of text features—index, table of contents, page numbers, headings, captions—that help us find information we are looking for. Children may notice that some books use photographs as illustrations without realizing that those photographs depict real animals, people, objects, or events. Teaching children about text through hands-on use, demonstration, and explanation can promote literacy development.

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Some Information and Other Nonfiction "Little Books" Series

Many publishers now have series of nonfiction little books intended for young children. These are usually for grades K–2, but in some cases they are appropriate for preschoolers. Not all books in these series are information books as defined in this article. Readers can review these and similar series of nonfiction little books to determine which are most appropriate for the children they teach.

National Geographic—Windows on Literacy
www.NationalGeographic.com

Newbridge—Discovery Links Science and Discovery
Links Social Studies
www.newbridgeonline.com

Sadlier-Oxford—Content Area Readers
www.sadlier-oxford.com

Scholastic—Science Emergent Readers and Social
Studies Emergent Readers
www.Scholastic.com

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Practice: Content-Rich Texts

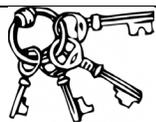
With a group, brainstorm a list of informational texts you've read with your students. Then, make notes about how those texts line up with the criteria for content-rich texts. Reflect on the following questions:

- Which texts on your list are the most content-rich?
- What other texts can you think of that stand out in terms of the richness of their content?

| Text | Notes |
|------|-------|
| | |
| | |
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Considerations for Content-Rich Texts

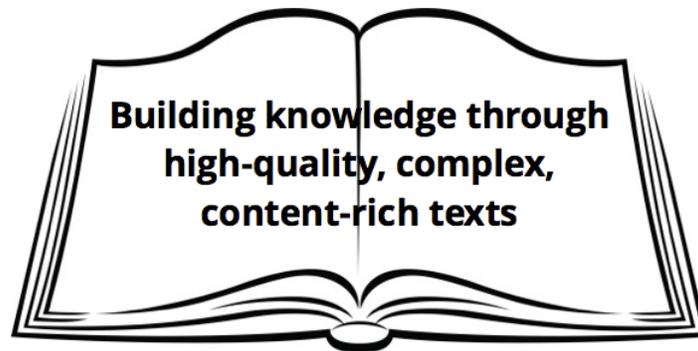
- Does the text contain **new information** that students likely don't already know?
- Does the text **build background knowledge** that will help students comprehend later texts and experiences?
- Does the text contain information that is **useful** in the real world?
- Does the text contain information that is **relevant** to students' needs or interests? Does it help them **answer questions** or **solve problems**?
- Does the text contain information that helps students **connect** their own experiences and situations to others and to the broader world?
- Is the content of the text **authentic** and does it lend itself to **further research, exploration, and inquiry**?



Key Idea #6

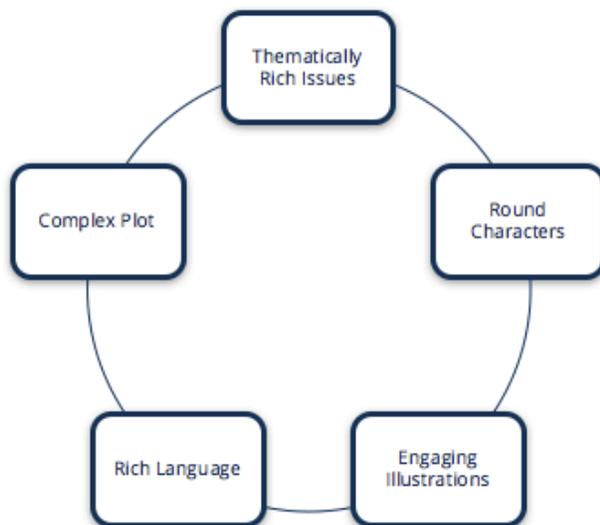
Engaging students with content-rich texts builds knowledge and invites students to pursue interests and questions.

High-Quality and Content-Rich Texts



Discuss

Which characteristics are the same for both literary and informational text?



- Does the text contain **new** information that students likely don't already know?
- Does the text **build background knowledge** that will help students comprehend later texts and experiences?
- Does the text contain information that is **useful** in the real world?
- Does the text contain information that is **relevant** to students' needs or interests? Does it help them **answer questions** or **solve problems**?
- Does the text contain information that helps students **connect** their own experiences and situations to others and to the broader world?
- Is the content of the text **authentic** and does it lend itself to **further research, exploration, and inquiry**?

Reflection

Revisit the list of read aloud texts you generated at the beginning of the module. Then, answer the questions below.

- Considering the information on text complexity and quality, would you still choose those same texts in the future?

- How will this information on text complexity and quality impact the way you select texts for future read alouds?



Key Idea #7

Early grades teachers should purposefully select read aloud texts that are complex, high-quality, and content-rich. These kinds of texts support complex interactions with text, develop a love for and interest in reading, and build students' knowledge and vocabulary.