

## TEXT COMPLEXITY

### WHY DOES TEXT COMPLEXITY MATTER?

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The Common Core State English Language Arts Standards require that students read and understand texts of increasing complexity. This requirement is in place to help prepare students to be college and career ready, because both college and workplace readings tend to be of greater complexity than those typically found in K-12 programs, and there is a greater emphasis placed on independent reading in both college and the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT MAKES TEXT COMPLEX FOR READERS?

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Appendix A to the Common Core State English Language Arts Standards outlines three interconnected and equally important aspects of text complexity: quantitative dimensions, qualitative dimensions, and reader and task considerations.

### QUANTITATIVE DIMENSIONS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY

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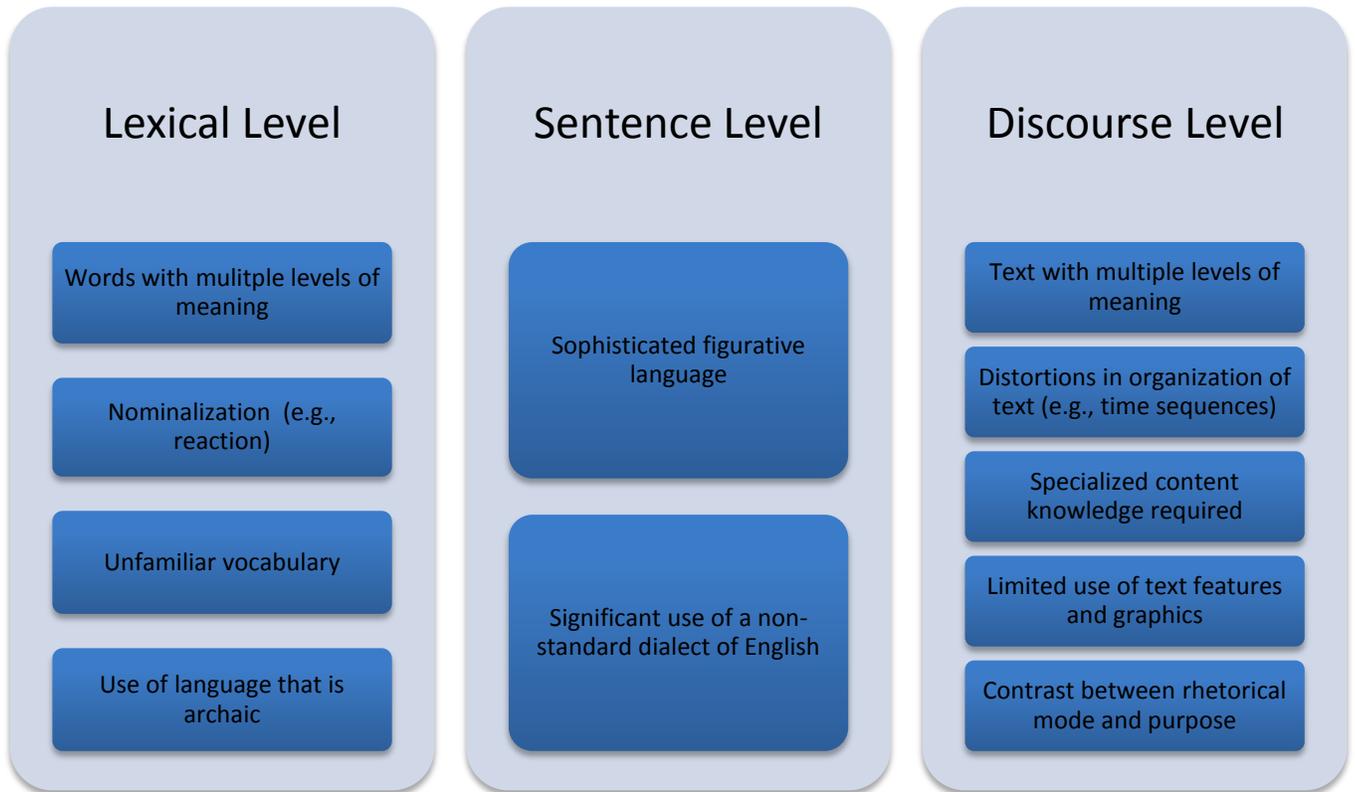
Quantitative measures of text complexity assess text on dimensions that can be measured efficiently by a computer program; for example word length, sentence length, and frequency of words found at different grade levels. Some common programs used to rate the quantitative complexity of texts include the Lexile Framework, ATOS, Degrees of Reading Power, Flesch-Kincaid, Reading Maturity, and SourceRater. The authors of the Common Core State Standards, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, and The Council of Chief State School Officers, have released a document that describes each of these measures, including the text features used as factors in their measurements and a table of grade ranges associated with their measures. The document is titled [Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity](#) and can be accessed online.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & The Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common core state standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Appendix A*. Washington, DC: Authors.

## QUALITATIVE DIMENSIONS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY

Qualitative aspects of text complexity are not as easily identified by a computer program, because they are related to the depth of the reader’s knowledge and experience. There are three levels at which a text can be complex: the lexical, or word level; the sentence level; and the discourse, or whole text level.<sup>2</sup> Note that some of these dimensions can apply to multiple levels of text.



*The Secret Garden* (by Francis Hodges Burnett, 1911), one of the CCSS Grade 4-5 text exemplars, exhibits several qualitative aspects of complexity, shown in the table below. (The full text of *The Secret Garden* is available [here](#) as part of Project Gutenberg.)

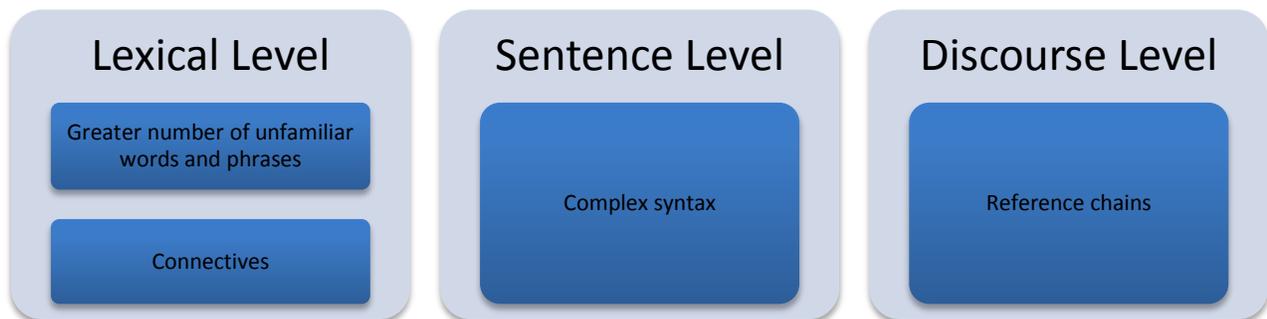
<sup>2</sup> See also Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2012). *Text complexity*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

<b>Lexical Level</b>	
Words with multiple levels of meaning	<p>Many English words have multiple meanings. They might be polysemes, or words with different, but related, meanings (e.g., <i>bank</i> meaning a financial institution and <i>bank</i> meaning to rely on). Other multiple meaning words are homonyms, or words that look and sound the same, but have completely different meanings (e.g., <i>bank</i> meaning a financial institution and <i>bank</i> meaning the side of a river).</p> <p><i>SG: She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin <u>light</u> hair and a <u>sour</u> expression.</i></p>
Nominalization	<p>Nominalization is the use of a verb, adjective, or adverb as a noun.</p> <p><i>SG: She had... a <u>sour</u> expression.</i>  <i>SG: Her father had held a <u>position</u> under the English <u>Government</u>.</i></p>
Unfamiliar vocabulary	<p>Use of words and phrases that are unfamiliar to readers makes text more challenging.</p> <p><i>SG: [Mary's mother's] hair was like curly silk and she had a <u>delicate</u> little nose which seemed to be <u>disdaining</u> things.</i></p>
Use of language that is archaic	<p>Words and phrases that are no longer in widespread use can make text more difficult, because readers may be unfamiliar with their meanings.</p> <p><i>SG: She awakened feeling very <u>cross</u>, and she became <u>crosser</u> still when she saw that the servant who stood by her bedside was not her Ayah.</i></p>
<b>Sentence Level</b>	
Sophisticated use of figurative language	<p>Idioms, personification, hyperbole, symbolism, irony, and other literacy devices can add to the levels of meaning and increase text complexity.</p> <p><i>SG: [Mary's mother's] hair <u>was like curly silk...</u>, and she had large <u>laughing</u> eyes. All her clothes were thin and <u>floating</u>.</i></p>
Use of non-standard dialects of English	<p>Use of non-standards dialects lends authenticity to text, but can also make it difficult to comprehend.</p> <p><i>SG: The station-master spoke to Mrs. Medlock in a rough, good-natured way.... "I see tha's got back," he said. "An' tha's browt th' young 'un with thee."</i></p>

Discourse Level	
Text with multiple levels of meaning	<p>Texts may contain multiple meanings revealed at a variety of levels. Words and phrases may reference specific historical events, political systems, or cultural norms, or the entire text may be metaphorical for an event or system.</p> <p><i>SG: The <u>Mem Sahib</u> -- Mary used to call her that oftener than anything else -- was such a tall, slim, pretty person and wore such lovely clothes.</i>            [Mem Sahib is a form of address for a European woman, used by servants in India. The fact that Mary calls her mother Mem Sahib indicates that she seldom speaks to her mother or hears her mother spoken to except by servants.]</p>
Distortions in organization of time	<p>Variations from chronological order in text organization can increase complexity, as can variations in tense or time within a sentence or passage.</p> <p><i>SG: [Mary's mother's clothes] <u>looked fuller of lace than ever this morning.</u></i></p>
Specialized content knowledge required	<p>Texts that presume specialized or technical knowledge are more complex than those which explain the prerequisite knowledge.</p> <p><i>SG: <u>She had been born in India</u> and had always been ill in one way or another.</i>            [This text assumes knowledge of the British occupation of India.]</p>
Limited use of text features and graphics	<p>Text features and graphics can provide readers with an alternative way to understand the information being presented. These features might include signal words that convey temporal or causal structure (e.g., <i>first, second, because, as a result</i>), overviews, margin notes, graphic organizers, and visuals.</p>
Contrast between rhetorical mode and purpose	<p>Rhetorical modes include exposition, argumentation, description, and narration. In some cases, the rhetorical mode may be different than the author's purpose (e.g., an advertisement meant to persuade presented as narration of a person's experiences).</p>

## TASK AND READER CONSIDERATIONS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The final consideration for the complexity of a text is whether it is appropriate to the task for which it will be used, and whether it is appropriate for its readers. One large and growing demographic of students is English language learners, who need to meet grade-level standards, but who may struggle with complex language. In selecting texts for these students, it is important to consider additional aspects of text complexity at the lexical, sentence, and discourse levels.



Again, *The Secret Garden* (by Francis Hodges Burnett, 1911) provides several examples of text complexity for English Language Learners.

Lexical Level (ELLs)	
Greater number of unfamiliar words and phrases	ELLs tend to have smaller English vocabularies than their English-proficient peers, so they are more likely to encounter unfamiliar vocabulary in text.  <i>SG: [Mary's mother] was such a <u>tall</u>, <u>slim</u>, <u>pretty</u> person and wore such <u>lovely</u> clothes.</i>
Connectives	Connectives link ideas, like coordinating conjunctions (e.g., for, and, nor, but) or conjunctive adverbs (e.g., also, anyhow, besides, however, instead).  <i>SG: She always did this <u>when</u> she had a chance to see her [mother], <u>because</u> the Mem Sahib -- Mary used to call her that oftener than anything else -- was such a tall, slim, pretty person <u>and</u> wore such lovely clothes.</i>
Sentence Level (ELLs)	
Complex syntax	Complex syntax includes compound sentences, which have two more independent clauses, or complex sentences, which have one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses.  <i>See the example sentence for "Connectives," above, which includes two independent clauses ('She always did this' and 'Mary used to call her that...') and two dependent clauses ('when she had a chance to see her' and 'because the Mem Sahib... was such a tall, slim, pretty person...').</i>

Discourse Level	
Reference chains	<p>English texts make frequent use of references to earlier people, topics, and ideas through the use of reference chains. Readers must pay careful attention to what each referent refers to, a task that can be especially difficult for ELLs.</p> <p><i>SG: When <b>Mary Lennox</b><sub>1</sub> was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with <u>her</u><sub>1</sub> uncle everybody said <u>she</u><sub>1</sub> was the most <u>disagreeable-looking child</u><sub>1</sub> ever seen... <u>Her</u><sub>1</sub> <b>mother</b><sub>2</sub> had been a great beauty <u>who</u><sub>2</sub> cared only to go to parties and amuse <u>herself</u><sub>2</sub>.</i></p>

## Why am I Reading?

A reference chain tracks a single character, idea, or concept throughout the text. Usually the first “link” introduces the character or idea by name and may give other details. Subsequent links may give less information, as in the case of pronouns. However, subsequent links may also refer to the original link or concept by a different name and provide additional details.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR INSTRUCTION?

While it is critical for all students to have access to grade-level texts, some students (like English language learners) will need additional support to help them understand complex text. Supports may include auxiliary lessons about aspects of English that make text confusing (e.g., distortions in time organizations, reference chains); vocabulary development in the context of reading (e.g., explaining a word and providing a visual, asking students to use context clues to guess a word’s meaning, providing a student glossary with home language definitions and easy to understand English definitions); and multiple readings with additional questions to help students arrive at the meaning of a complex passage.