

## Introduction to Text Complexity

One of the primary threads in the Common Core State Standards for Literacy is text complexity. The Anchor Standard for Literacy 10 states that students will be able to: read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. Text complexity is explained in detail in Appendix A. But the purpose of this video is to introduce the concept and how it can be used to strengthen instruction. For educators, understanding text complexity can improve the odds of successfully engaging students with the complex text they must read.

Appendix A guides us to think about three elements that interact dynamically to determine the complexity of a text. Quantitative measures of texts, qualitative characteristics of text, and considerations for the reader and the tasks, these work together to determine text complexity. To help illustrate this point, let's draw an analogy between the complexity of the text and the complexity of a person. Meet Chris. Chris has quantitative traits. These quantitative traits are observable and measurable. For example, Chris is 42 years old. Chris lives in New York City. Chris is a woman. Chris also has qualitative characteristics but it requires close observation and analysis to discover what they are.

After taking the time to observe Chris, it's clear she is organized, follows a regular schedule and enjoys yoga. Considering quantitative and qualitative traits about Chris can help us increase our odds of successful interaction with her. However, additional considerations need to be made for the reader and the task, "who is interacting with or reading Chris, and why". Thinking about Chris' quantitative and qualitative characteristics, as well as who engages with her and why, can lead to a successful interaction.

Now let's apply the same thinking about the complexity of a person to the complexity of a text with a sample passage from Appendix B of the Common Course State Standards for Literacy. The text we'll be using is Jearl Walker's "Amusement Park Physics."

The quantitative aspects of these texts are represented here by a lexile measure. A lexile is one indicator of readability. This readability formula is used to determine the difficulty of a text using factors such as word frequency and sentence length. The qualitative dimensions of this text have engaged using a rubric that assesses the layout, meaning, structure, language features, and knowledge demands of a text.

Recognizing the quantitative elements of the text, educators would most likely introduce its ninth and tenth grade students. Understanding its qualitative elements' complexity, educators might predict that readers will find this text difficult because of its unconventional organizational structure and its knowledge demands.

So now that we have a clear understanding of the complexity of the text, we can use the information we already have about our readers and the task we are asking them to perform to make strategic instructional decisions.

First, let's talk about our readers. Do students have the prior knowledge the experience to make sense of this text? Educators can determine this information about readers from student work samples, portfolios, state and region exam scores, as well as other student assessment systems. Educators must also consider the demands of the task at hand. The suggested sample task from Amusement Park Physics from Appendix B requires students to state how the author clarifies an idea, and provide an objective summary of the author's conclusions. This task is very straightforward, which is appropriate considering the relative complexity of the text.

Now that we know about the three dimensions of text complexity, it's important to consider them in tandem. When educators have a clear understanding of how complex the text is, why its complex, and the knowledge and capabilities readers already have to attempt the assigned task, we can make more strategic choices about instructional supports.