

# Text Complexity Is the New Black

There is always something worthy of our attention in reading instruction. It seems that text complexity is now having its day. That's not to say that the previous areas receiving focused attention have been bad or useless. Things are hot for a while, and when they are, new knowledge is generated. At one point, not too long ago, phonics and fluency were hot, but they are less so now (Cassidy & Loveless, 2011). When things are hot, attention is focused, and new insights into readers and the reading process are gained. When things become less hot, it seems that the field has reached some consensus or a new level of understanding for the time being, and therefore attention can be turned to a new area.

Unlike a pendulum, which is often how reading instruction is described, we see this continual research process as a drill, with each subsequent return to a topic resulting in deeper knowledge. In fact, the development of iterative investigations of educational topics was highlighted in a conversation that Diane had with her 80-year-old aunt, a retired teacher. When asked by her aunt what was new in education, Diane replied that she and her colleagues were studying how to support their students in understanding how authors position readers to draw conclusions while reading. Diane's aunt replied, "Well, my heavens, we were teaching that 50 years ago," then paused and added, "But you know, each time some topic in education gets revisited, we learn so much more about how to teach it."

Our renewed attention to text complexity is primarily due to language in the Common Core State Standards. However, like phonics and fluency, this is not the first time that researchers and teachers have paid attention to the materials that students are required to read. We have dipped in and out of the issue of text complexity for years, each time informed by related fields such as linguistics, psychology, and cognition (Graesser, McNamara, & Louwerse, 2011). We used to think about complexity in terms of text difficulty. Now, in revisiting this topic, it's time to go deeper

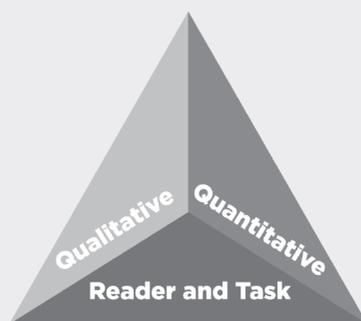
and reconsider text complexity as encompassing both quantitative and qualitative issues as well as the match between readers, texts, and tasks.

## Text Complexity Defined

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010b) define text complexity as three interrelated components (see Figure 1.1):

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.

**Figure 1.1 Dimensions of Text Complexity**



Note. From *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards and Glossary of Key Terms* (p. 4), by National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, Washington, DC: Authors. Copyright 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved.

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 judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject. (p. 4)

Text complexity is based, in part, on the skills of the reader. When students have the literacy skills necessary to read a text, they are likely to understand what they are reading. It is not hard for students who can decode the words to understand the following passage:

Annemarie eased the bedroom door open quietly, only a crack, and peeked out. Behind her, Ellen was sitting up, her eyes wide. (Lowry, 1989, p. 43)

Yet, text complexity is more than an analysis of the current skills of readers. Readability, as we explore further in Chapter 2, has a long history and yet still no consensus. *The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing* (Harris & Hodges, 1995) defines *readability* as “the ease of comprehension because of style of writing” (p. 203). This definition expands the idea of readability from the skills of the reader to include an analysis of the style of the writing. There are some writing styles that are harder for readers to understand than others. For example, most young adults can follow a plot when told in chronological order but have a much harder time with flashbacks and foreshadowing. In other words, the style of writing may interfere with understanding.

The *Greenwood Dictionary of Education* (Collins & O’Brien, 2003) defines *readability* a bit differently: “The quality and clarity of a piece of written work. Writing that can be understood by those for whom it is written” (p. 295). This definition is interesting, in part, because it requires attention to the intended audience of the text. We can ask ourselves questions about the author’s purpose and whether the writing was intended for the audience we have in front of us. Analyzing the intended audience can help readers improve their understanding of a given text. For

example, if students understand why the Gettysburg Address was written, they are more likely to comprehend it.

Readability, then, is a balance between the reader's skills and the text itself. How the text acts upon the reader is as important as how the reader acts upon the text. Some texts are more considerate of readers than others. Anderson and Armbruster (1984) identified a number of characteristics of considerate texts, or texts that facilitate comprehension and learning from reading. Their list includes the following:

- *Text structure*: The arrangement system of ideas in the text and the nature of the relationships connecting ideas
- *Coherence*: The extent to which events and concepts are logically and clearly connected and explained
- *Unity*: The extent to which the text retains focus and does not include irrelevant or distracting information
- *Audience appropriateness*: The extent to which the text fits the target readers' probable knowledge base

Readability and considerateness are important aspects of text complexity but are not yet the full picture. It's not as if some pretaught vocabulary, a dab of phonics, and some visualization will help a reader with the assumptions of background knowledge, sophisticated sentence structure, and complex ideas of a text, as in this excerpt:

Anyway, the fascinating thing was that I read in *National Geographic* that there are more people alive now than have died in all of human history. In other words, if everyone wanted to play Hamlet at once, they couldn't, because there aren't enough skulls! (Foer, 2005, p. 3)

The passage is hard for a number of different reasons. From a quantitative perspective, this text is written at the 10.9 grade level, which is above the average eighth-grade reading level of adults (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). From a qualitative perspective, there are assumptions about background knowledge hidden in this text. The reference to *National Geographic* signals most readers that the information is verifiable. Understanding the reference to Hamlet and the prop used in the famous soliloquy is critical to making meaning of the second sentence, but a reader could skip that referent and still get the gist of the text.

The deep meaning comes from understanding nuances and inferences. What really makes this text hard is the big idea in the text. The words themselves are not that difficult, but the mathematical computation is mind-boggling and causes most readers to pause and really consider what the author is saying. We ask ourselves, could that really be true? Did I just read that correctly? Is it hyperbole or fact? In doing so, we slowed down, and our fluency rate decreased, but our comprehension soared. In other words, text complexity includes both qualitative and quantitative measures, as well as an analysis of the task required of readers. Reading fiction for pleasure requires a different level of engagement than reading fiction to identify character motives across texts. Reading informational texts to find out about a specific medical condition is different from reading a travel book in preparation for a vacation. The task and purpose of the reading also influence the complexity of the text.

To address this, teachers try to match readers with appropriate texts. Teachers spend countless hours leveling their libraries so students can easily identify appropriate independent reading materials for themselves. Reading widely is a habit that students must develop, but they also need instruction in reading increasingly complex texts so their reading diet is more balanced. We are not suggesting that teachers prevent students from reading widely. Every reader has a diet that includes texts that are easier and harder to read. Nancy regularly reads what she calls the journal of popular culture, more commonly known as *People* magazine, but she also reads research studies, technical information, novels, and news (mainly on her e-book reader). We suggest that more difficult texts with scaffolded instruction should become part of the classroom equation. To ensure that students read complex texts, teachers have to revisit how they match readers with texts and tasks.

## **Revisiting How We Match Readers and Texts**

For decades, teachers have been told that quality instruction requires a careful matching of materials to students. The goal has been to select materials that are neither too difficult nor too easy for the students—a phenomenon sometimes called the Goldilocks rule (Ohlhausen & Jepsen, 1992). Typically, students are assessed on their ability to orally read and comprehend a text. Then, instructional materials are selected to match the

students' current performance. The goal has been for students to read texts that they can read with minimal instruction, but there are several problems with this approach. First, basing the match on a student's oral-reading performance is problematic because such an assessment tells little about the student's comprehension. As Kelly (1916) noted almost 100 years ago, "It is generally agreed, I think, that the ability to reproduce is quite a separate ability from the ability to get meaning" (p. 64). Second, text difficulty is reduced over time when students only read things that they can. A fifth grader reading at the fourth-grade level who only reads fourth-grade books will not be prepared for sixth grade. There is evidence that the texts that students read have become easier and less complex in grades 4–12 (Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996). Third, this approach limits what students can read with instruction. As Adams (2010) noted, "More significantly, failing to provide instruction or experience with 'grown-up' text levels seems a risky course toward preparing students for the reading demands of college and life" (p. 5). Finally, there is evidence that students learn, and perhaps even learn more, when they are taught with challenging texts (Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000; O'Connor, Swanson, & Geraghty, 2010).

So, where does the idea of matching readers with texts at their independent reading level come from? The most common formula for selecting these texts consists of three levels (e.g., Betts, 1946). The first, independent level, is considered to be a text that is accurately read at a rate of 95% or higher with a comprehension level of 90–100% as measured by questions. Traditionally, these are the texts that students are asked to read on their own, at home or at school. Students who read a text with 89% or less accuracy and less than 75% comprehension are considered to be at their frustration level because the number of errors interferes too greatly with meaning. In most cases, teachers avoid assigning students frustration-level texts. Text read accurately at a rate of 90–94% and a comprehension rate of 75–89% is called instructional level. Teachers use instructional-level texts because they provide students with enough challenges to focus their attention on their problem-solving skills without being so difficult that all meaning is lost. However, these percentages have been challenged. For example, Powell (1970) recommends 85% as a better predictor of student learning, which would result in students reading harder texts. However, the 95% rate persists in most classrooms despite the lack of evidence that it is effective.

Although it has become a commonly accepted practice to strictly adhere to these levels when matching students to texts for reading instruction, concerns about this reader–text match have proliferated in educational literature for decades (Chall & Conard, 1991; Killgallon, 1942; O’Connor, Bell, et al., 2002; Weber, 1968). Teachers know that when students are asked to read complex texts by themselves, they struggle and often do not succeed because they do not have the appropriate bank of related language, knowledge, skills, or metacognition to be able to comprehend the information. Teachers also realize that when they provide the needed instructional supports, students have greater success with reading materials that could be initially identified as being at their frustrational levels. The text difficulty level is not the real issue. Instruction is. Teachers can scaffold and support students, which will determine the amount of their learning and literacy independence.

## **Text Complexity and the Common Core State Standards**

The Common Core State Standards challenge teachers to provide scaffolded instructional supports for every learner and to do so with complex and difficult texts. When first hearing this, teachers may be concerned because they have always attempted to assess how well each student reads a text to determine appropriate instructional levels, believing that without a text level/student level placement match, a student will have little success. As realized from a careful reading of the history of educational assessment (Johnston, 1984), there is little research supporting this text placement practice, and what research there is seems to be unrealistic because it promotes the narrow idea that students can only read materials at their instructional placement level. As Bruner (1964), Vygotsky (1962), and every classroom teacher knows, with appropriately scaffolded instruction that is indeed based on continuous teacher assessment of the increasing bank of knowledge and language that a student has on a topic being studied, a student can learn to read texts that are beyond his or her instructional level and hopefully learn how to support his or her own reading of difficult text when the teacher is no longer at the reader’s side. As Shanahan (2011) noted,

If the teacher is doing little to support the students' transactions with text then I suspect more learning will accrue with somewhat easier texts. However, if reasonable levels of instructional support are available then students are likely to thrive when working with harder texts. (para. 11)

Selecting appropriate reading materials for students is hard, especially when students should be reading each day in every content area. Grade-level expectations drive some of the selections, but wise teachers also know that students cannot independently learn from texts that they can't read. In fact, there is no evidence that simply assigning fifth-grade reading materials to a student who reads at the second-grade level will help the student grow as a skilled, independent, or motivated reader. Yet, limiting that student to second-grade materials constricts the learning and fails to ensure that the student develops new habits and skills in reading. Making the appropriate match is a dilemma that is gaining a great deal of attention (Gewertz, 2011). The idea is not to either limit a student to a low-level text or allow him or her to struggle without support in a difficult text, but instead to provide texts and couple them with instruction. As students progress, they should be given increasingly challenging materials and taught, encouraged, and supported to use deeper skills of analysis.

With the introduction of the Common Core State Standards in 2010, the spotlight on text complexity renewed attention on reading materials. More than a text gradient, the developers of the Common Core State Standards invite us to foreground the texts themselves as an essential element in reading instruction. Although materials have been important, they have not always been viewed as a way to advance readers. Instead, the focus has been on matching students to the reading. The thinking has been, "If I know the reader thoroughly enough, I can find the reading." Although this is correct, it is insufficient. By adding complex texts to the formula, we recognize that the reading itself can be a scaffold to knowledge and also to one's reading prowess.

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts are organized around 10 anchor standards that extend from kindergarten through 12th grade. Anchor standard 10 in the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading section for all grade levels, which is the focus of this book, covers text complexity. This standard's wording is deceptively simple: "Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently" (NGA & CCSSO,

2010a, p. 10). This anchor standard calls for students to be able to read independently, and the text exemplars cited in Appendix B of the standards are hard. However, these should not be misconstrued as a reading list, with teachers simply ordering lots of hard books and then standing by to watch students be defeated by them. It would set the field back decades if in response to these standards, teachers assigned students hours of independent reading that was devoid of instruction. We cannot help but recall our own experiences in searching used book stores for yellow and black paperbacks that held the answers to the questions that our teachers might ask us about the hard texts that we were assigned but did not read. Table 1.1 is a small sample of the kinds of complex texts identified as exemplars in the Common Core State Standards.

A close reading of the standards reveals a clear call for teacher support in teaching students to read complex texts. Under the heading “A focus on results rather than means,” the document goes on to say,

By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed. Thus, the

**Table 1.1 Sample of Complex Texts at Various Grade Levels**

Grades	Narrative Text Example	Informational Text Example
K and 1	<i>Green Eggs and Ham</i> by Dr. Seuss	<i>My Five Senses</i> by Aliki
2 and 3	<i>The Raft</i> by Jim LaMarche	<i>Where Do Polar Bears Live?</i> by Sarah L. Thomson
4 and 5	<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i> by Christopher Paul Curtis	<i>Toys! Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions</i> by Don Wulffson
6–8	<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i> by Madeleine L’Engle	<i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself</i> by Frederick Douglass
9 and 10	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> by Ray Bradbury	“Hope, Despair and Memory” by Elie Wiesel
11+	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> by Zora Neale Hurston	“Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan

Note. List extracted from *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks* (pp. 4–12), by National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, Washington, DC: Authors. Copyright 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved.

Standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning. *Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards* [italics added]. (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 4)

In other words, the Common Core State Standards acknowledge that teachers have to figure out how to help their students access complex texts and that teachers should use their professional judgments to accomplish this task. In the past, teachers were held captive to the script (R.J. Meyer, 2002) and were required to read verbatim from a teacher’s manual. Teachers felt like zombies going through the motions of teaching (Demko, 2010), but the standards change that and place the responsibility on the teacher. What is not negotiable is student achievement; what is negotiable is how teachers get their students to read worthy and complex texts. Teaching students to read grade-level and more complex texts requires first and foremost an understanding of what makes a text complex.

## The Case for Struggle

When reading gets hard, readers slow down and consciously use strategies to try to make sense of the text. That’s what happened when we read the passage that included referents to *National Geographic* and Hamlet. It’s not that the reader slows down so much that he or she gets lost but that the reader slows down enough to become strategic. Yet, being strategic is not the goal of reading. Deep comprehension is the primary goal. Reading requires automaticity—the systematic and automatic deployment of cognitive behaviors to make meaning of the text. When readers deploy cognitive strategies automatically, they are considered skilled readers. As Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) point out, “reading skills operate without the reader’s deliberate control or conscious awareness ... [t]his has important, positive consequences for each reader’s limited working memory” (p. 368). Strategies, on the contrary, are “effortful and deliberate” and occur during initial learning, when the text is more difficult for the reader to understand (p. 369). Table 1.2 summarizes the differences between skills and strategies. Strategies become skills with instruction and practice. The challenge is to apply these skills to increasingly complex and

**Table 1.2 Comparing Skills and Strategies**

Strategy	Skills
A conscious plan under the control of the reader.	An automatic procedure that readers use unconsciously.
Requires thought about which plan to use and when to use them.	Do not require thought, interpretation, or choice.
Are process-oriented, cognitive procedures the reader uses, generally unobservable in nature.	Are observable behaviors, found on taxonomies, skills tests, or answers to questions.
Instruction focuses on the reasoning process readers use as they interact with text.	Instruction focuses on repeated use until it becomes habitual.

Note. From *Good Habits, Great Readers: Building the Literacy Community* (p. 9), by N. Frey, D. Fisher, and A. Berkin, 2009, Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Copyright 2009 by Pearson. Reprinted with permission.

diverse texts. In doing so, readers will generalize their skills and become proficient readers who can read widely. This requires readers to struggle a bit as they apply their skills in new situations.

Perhaps one of the mistakes in the past efforts to improve reading achievement has been the removal of struggle. As a profession, we may have made reading tasks too easy. We do not suggest that we should plan students' failure but rather that students should be provided with opportunities to struggle and to learn about themselves as readers when they struggle, persevere, and eventually succeed.

This concept of supportive struggle is known as productive failure (Kapur, 2008). Productive failure provides students an opportunity to struggle with something and learn from the mistakes they make along the way. Again, it's not planned failure but rather an opportunity to struggle with something and learn along the way. Consider the worthy struggle for a group of sixth-grade students reading the following from *Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War* by Yukio Tsuchiya (1951/1988), which recounts the bombing of Tokyo in the final months of World War II:

"What would happen if bombs hit the zoo? If the cages were broken and dangerous animals escaped to run wild through the city, it would be terrible! Therefore, by command of the Army, all of the lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and big snakes were poisoned to death." (p. 9)

Again, the individual words are not that hard (seventh-grade level), but the ideas are complex and tragic. Given that the text is a picture book, some teachers and students initially believe that it is too easy. However, the content is tough, and the ideas are complex. More than one adult has burst into tears while reading this book.

As students talked about what the character in the book says and considered the time at which this was written, they struggled to figure out why the animals were killed. The students struggled with the moral and ethical dilemmas that the text poses. Using evidence from the text to justify his response, Justin said, “This is a memory from the guy at the memorial. He’s remembering this. I think so because of how sad he was at the end and how he was taking care of the marker at the beginning.” Marla, also using evidence from the text, responded, “I agree with you. The title says that it’s true, and I think that this was a time when they were worried about war and tried to protect people.” The students’ conversation continued, and they struggled to understand a text written at a different time for a different audience. Yet, through that struggle, they came to an understanding. As one member of the group said, “Sometimes wars are necessary, but there are always bystanders hurt along the way. I never thought about the animals, but I guess that they are innocent bystanders of human wars, too.”

All readers should be given opportunities to analyze complex texts. In a first-grade classroom, students read *The Sun* by Justin McCory Martin (2007) to become familiar with the Sun’s structure and role in our solar system. However, this is only the first step in deeply comprehending concepts about the Sun. Mr. Connolly realizes that students must next be exposed to other source materials on the same topic so they can compare and contrast information and texts as they build their knowledge, language, and text investigation skills. With additional articles, books, websites, and photographs about the Sun, he and his students can take a close look at several topically similar informational texts and make comparisons about the texts.

Mr. Connolly is addressing the grade 1 reading standard for informational text: “Identify basic similarities in and differences between the two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures)” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 13). For students to master this expectation, he realizes that they must be taught to attend to details in the

text to make a contrastive analysis. Even young students can be taught to take notes about what they are learning. A chart such as Figure 1.2 enables students to compile information for a closer understanding of a topic as understood through analysis of several texts.

By analyzing these texts with their teacher, Mr. Connolly, the students were able to understand the topical knowledge and language because he provided instruction that involved modeling, guiding, and observing recursively through continual assessment of the students' performance as related to the lesson purpose. He considers the task, as well as the readers and the text, to develop sound instruction. As this example briefly illustrates, to fully comprehend and analyze texts, students need their teacher to guide their reading and discussion as they scrutinize these texts.

This level of analysis applies to both narrative and informational texts. The Langston Hughes (1958/1996) short story "Thank You, M'am," often

**Figure 1.2 Learning About a Topic**

<b>Text 1: Important Ideas</b>	<b>Text 2: Important Ideas</b>	<b>Text 3: Important Ideas</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>What I Learned From Text 1</b>	<b>What I Learned From Text 2</b>	<b>What I Learned From Text 3</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<b>What I Learned From Reading the Texts</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>		

included in anthologies, can be revisited for a deeper level of analysis of character development. Ms. Chin and her fifth-grade students returned to a text several times to accomplish the lesson purpose. In the following discussion, notice how she scaffolded the instruction to ensure that they gained the identified insights.

Ms. Chin began this lesson sequence by telling students that the purpose was to discover how characters' lives could be changed by chance encounters or fate. She shared that while reading, the students would investigate how the author shows them that the characters' lives can change from the beginning of a story to the end. She told the students that the author offers clues to help them identify the development of characters and that by closely investigating those text clues and language, they would be able to see the changes unfolding in the characters' development.

Next, Ms. Chin asked the students to independently read the text so they could familiarize themselves with the characters, the story, the language, and how the characters change over the course of the story. She invited the students to annotate the text and create notes by paying attention to the words, phrases, and dialogue that the author used to help readers understand the development of the characters.

After the initial reading, she asked the students to talk with their partners about the story, describe the characters by using evidence from the text, and note how the characters changed from the beginning of the story to the end. When she heard a student say, "The woman is large. It says so right here. And she is mean because it says that she kicked him right square in the blue jean sitter," Ms. Chin knew that the students must be supported in reading more deeply to understand why the character acted as she had.

Initiating a second reading, Ms. Chin reminded the students that authors often write stories about characters who transform, or change, from the beginning of the text to the end. She explained that she was going to think aloud while reading, with the intent of finding out more about the characters. She asked them to follow along as she read:

"The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirtfront, and shook him until his teeth rattled.' While reading, I was picturing a big woman but not a weak woman. I know this because she is able to kick this boy and pick him up by his shirt. This sounds like a strong

woman. I bet the boy wished he hadn't messed with her. He sounds scared since his teeth rattled.

"The woman asked the boy if she was bothering him, and the boy said no. It also says that 'you put yourself in contact with me...[and] if you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming.' This tells me that their encounter, their meeting, will have a big impact on this boy's life. Perhaps he will be changed forever. I wonder if there are more clues about how this boy's life is changing.

"Yes, I know he is changing because it says that after he looked at her, 'there was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next.' Later, it says, 'The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.' I think he is very touched that this woman is helping him, and maybe nobody has ever helped him before, so he doesn't know what to do or say.

Here at the end, it says that 'the boy wanted to say something other than, 'Thank you, m'am,'...but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that.'" I'm imagining his lips opening, but the words of gratitude couldn't come out. I really think no one had treated the boy like this, and he was used to being mistreated or neglected, so I think his life had been changed by this woman's kindness."

After thinking aloud, Ms. Chin and the students engaged in a discussion using a series of text-dependent questions to help them uncover more evidence regarding the main character's transformation. The following are some of the questions discussed:

- How does the woman feel about the boy? Is she angry at him? Does she like him? How do you know?
- At what point in the story does the woman show that she cares for the boy? How do you know?
- Describe the boy. What does his physical appearance and behavior tell you?
- What examples can you find that show that the woman understands the boy very well?
- How do you think Roger's encounter with the woman altered his life?

After the discussion, Ms. Chin asked the students to write about the characters. Now that her students understood how the characters had changed, she asked how a second encounter might go. She asked them

to write, assuming that the characters would meet again. The students each wrote a dialogue between the boy and the woman, describing their second encounter—a week, a month, or a year later.

By analyzing these dialogues, Ms. Chin was able to assess whether her students had gained an understanding of the developing characters and also an understanding that characters change over time as a result of their experiences. Based on this information, she was able to plan subsequent instruction. As this example illustrates, to fully comprehend and analyze a text, and regardless of their instructional reading levels, students can read, discuss, and scrutinize a text multiple times to conduct a deep analysis and comprehension, with their teacher acting as a guide. Each revisit strengthens the readers' base of knowledge, language, concrete reasoning, evaluative judgment, and text analysis skills.

## **Conclusion**

It's difficult to create a simple lesson to teach students to understand a complex text. It takes time to develop the thinking skills necessary to read complex texts. It also takes really good instruction. We think it is possible to teach students to read complex texts, but that teaching requires more than assigning students hard books and hoping that they get better at reading. Teaching starts with a deep understanding about what makes text complex. In the chapters that follow, we explore quantitative and qualitative factors of text complexity, as well as tasks that increase or decrease that complexity. We also focus on instruction and assessment of complex texts through close readings and extensive discussions. With this understanding, lessons can be developed that ensure that students are prepared for the wide range of reading and writing that they will do throughout their lives.

As we discuss and illustrate with examples shared throughout this book, close reading requires a revisiting of how texts are both read and taught. With appropriate instructional supports, texts can be reread and analyzed to unearth complex structures, themes, and insights. Revisiting a text offers the possibility that all readers will be challenged to think more deeply about texts that they are already able to comfortably and fluently decode and understand at a surface level. The emphasis can then be on close reading even after automaticity has been achieved. This analysis can

be related to the specific content, such as events, chronology, motives, time sequence (Warren, Nicholas, & Trabasso, 1977), propositional hierarchies (Kintsch, 1974), story grammar (Rumelhart, 1975), and logical structures (B.J.F. Meyer, 1975).

As discussed in subsequent chapters, determining a reader's success during close reading involves an analysis of many factors. By considering a three-part model of (1) quantitative measures of the text; (2) qualitative considerations about content, structure, and cohesion; and (3) the reader and the tasks, teachers can make instructional decisions from a broader base. It is essential to revisit the reader–text match to maximize instruction with complex texts so learning can occur for every student all day long. As a reviewer of this book wrote, “*readability* is not the same as *learnability*.”

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