

Overview

Text complexity can be defined as the level of difficulty in reading and understanding a text based a series of factors: the readability of the text, the levels of meaning or purpose in the text, the structure of the text, the conventionality and clarity of the language, and the knowledge demands of the text.

When planning instruction for English language arts, it is important to select texts that provide students with opportunities to meet [grade-level standards](#).

Process

To determine text complexity, there are three steps.

- Step One:** Identify a grade-level band based on the text’s readability. Use a quantitative measure¹ for determining readability and the [grade-level text complexity range](#).
- Step Two:** Identify an appropriate grade for the text based on how hard it is to understand the text. Use the [informational](#) or [literary](#) rubric with colleagues.²
- Step Three:** Determine how the text should be used in the classroom. Use the [Questions for Reader and Task Considerations](#).

There are few exceptions to this process:

- The readability of narrative fiction in grades 6-12 is not always reliably measured through Step One. For these texts, preference should sometimes be given to the results from Step Two. This type of exception should rarely be exercised with informational text. It is critical that students have extensive practice with texts whose readability falls in the appropriate grade-level band.
- The readability of poetry and drama is also not reliably measured; therefore, teachers should start the process at Step Two for these types of texts.
- Texts written for students learning to read should be written to correlate to students’ independent reading and word knowledge level. As such, complex texts determined through this process should be used as read-aloud texts in grades K and 1.

¹ To ensure that text increases in complexity adequately, a single quantitative measure (such as Lexile™ (www.lexile.com/fab) or ATOS™ (www.arbookfind.com)) should be used districtwide.

² The final results are used to justify the placement of a text in a specific grade; however, there is no exact result. As such, Step Two is best done in collaboration with colleagues, in the hopes of reaching consensus about which texts will be taught in which grades.

An Example of Text Complexity throughout the Standards

The following chart illustrates the different levels of text that meet the expectations of the English language arts standards.

Grade Level	English Language Arts Standard	Complexity Level of Text	Use of Text
Kindergarten	Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding. (RL.K.10)	Texts with readability in grades 2 or higher	Read Aloud by teacher during whole-class instruction
Kindergarten	Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding. (RF.K.4)	Texts written to match student's independent reading ability	Read Along with teacher or Read Alone by student during small-group instruction or independent reading
First Grade	With prompting and support, read informational texts appropriately complex for grade 1. (RI.1.10)	Texts with readability at the end of grade 1 or grades 2 or higher	Read Aloud, Read Along, or Read Alone during whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, or independent reading
Grade 4	Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension. (RF.4.4a-c) a. Read on-level text with purpose and understanding. b. Read on-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings. c. Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.	Texts with readability in grades 4-5	Read Along or Read Alone during whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, or independent reading
Grade 8	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently. (RL.8.10)	Texts with readability in grades 6-8 or higher	Read Aloud, Read Along, or Read Alone during whole-class instruction, small-group instruction, or independent reading

Before selecting a text to use in a classroom, consider the following:

1. Will my students be **interested** in this text?
2. Is the content of this text **appropriate** for the age of my students?

If you answer No, the text should not be used with your students.

After selecting a text for a grade, use the information gathered from Steps One and Two of the process to plan for instruction. Consider the following:

What knowledge and skills should students demonstrate after reading this text?

Use the answer to this question to identify the grade-level English language arts standards to focus on with that text.

How can this text be used with other texts? How will students read this text (e.g., Listen to teacher reading aloud? Read along with a group? Read alone?)

Use the answers to these questions to determine when to teach this text in a unit (e.g., Is it easier to read, so it goes well at the beginning? Does it require knowledge from other texts first, so it needs to go later in the unit?)

What aspects of the text will likely pose the most challenge for your students?

Use the answer to this question to design your instructional supports so that all students (even those who struggle) are able to access the text independently and proficiently through multiple and purposeful rereadings of the text.