CHAPTER 3

Understanding Challenging Texts

What is easy is seldom excellent.
—SAMUEL JOHNSON

When we first started to study the CCSS, we were struck by their rigor. In fact, as former high school teachers all, we viewed that rigor as a move to provide the Advanced Placement curriculum for all students. That type of performance for all students strikes many as unrealistic. As we continued to consider the implications of the standards, though, we realized that that was their intent—if students are college and career ready, they can do college work; the Advanced Placement curriculum *is* college work. We also began to think about the vastly different life choices that students would have, particularly students raised in poverty, if their academic skills and dispositions were geared toward such advanced achievement. That is why we have chosen to embrace the possibilities offered by the standards. In this chapter, we will tackle the question of what makes a text hard to understand to undergird our stance on the instructional strategies that teachers will need to embrace. We will start by describing the approach to text selection required by the standards. Then we will begin to unpack the challenges that those texts will pose and that must be met with instructional actions on the part of teachers if students are to be successful. Finally, we will make some recommendations to guide your text selection.

Seminal Works in the Disciplines

Think about your own college reading. In your first 2 years, taking a broad range of required courses in science, math, English, history, the arts, and language, you purchased expensive textbooks that may have presented the most difficult (and perhaps boring) technical reading you had yet experienced. You accomplished all of this reading on your own, with little, if any, assistance from your professors.

Depending on the class, this reading was more or less connected to the lectures you attended, and more or less required on the midterm and final. Likely, you figured this out as quickly as possible so that you would read only what was actually required. Many of you had both the academic skills to accomplish this and the study skills to strategize. Many of you had learned these skills in high school. However, some of you learned these things in an uncomfortable trial by fire during your college experience. Not all high school graduates are successful at the routine college requirement to read independently from challenging text. As we mentioned in Chapter 1, many entering students have to take remedial reading, writing, and math classes in community college before being admitted to credit-bearing courses. Many more drop out without earning the skills or credentials required for a career. In our own careers as university professors, we have had students in our classes who could not perform at the level we required and could not earn the degrees they wanted.

Whether you agree with it or not, the solution to this problem adopted by the CCSS authors was to demand that students have more experience with more challenging texts across their K–12 experience. They planned backwards, assuming that in order for all students to have the chance to succeed in college, they would have to be ready to read typical college textbooks independently. It is difficult to fault this logic in general, but it remains to be seen whether shifts in text type and text difficulty across time will yield the type of student the standards describe, poised for the literacies required in the modern college and workplace. The CCSS draw attention to the fact that students must be able to read seminal texts across different domains, and that those texts present specific challenges and opportunities.

One of the most controversial aspects of the CCSS is found in the appendices. Appendix A defines attention to text complexity as one of the requirements of the standards. After considering issues of text complexity, quality, and range, the standards work group chose a set of exemplar texts as illustrations and listed and/or excerpted them in Appendix B. These texts were selected from a longer set proposed by education professionals. They are presented in grade-level bands (K–1, 2–3, 4–5, 6–8, 9–10, and 11–12) and categorized by type. A look at the categories (see Figure 3.1) provides a window into the logic of the standards.

In the primary grades, stories, poetry, and informational texts are read by students and also read aloud to them. In the upper elementary grades, those same three types of texts are read by students. Beginning in middle school, though, drama is added to the narratives, and informational texts are included in three more specific lists: ELA, history and social science, and science, math, and technical subjects. The work group made this decision to highlight and specialize its presentation of informational text because most reading done in college is informational in nature and highly specialized. They also referenced the 2008 NAEP reading framework, in which passages are 50% informational in fourth grade, 55% informational in eighth grade, and 70% informational in twelfth grade.

Grade-Level Bands		
K–1, 2–3	**4–5**	**6–8, 9–10, 11–12**
Stories Read-aloud stories	Stories	Stories
Poetry Read-aloud poetry	Poetry	Poetry Drama
Informational texts Read-aloud informational texts	Informational texts	Informational texts: • ELA • History/social science • Science, math, and technical subjects

FIGURE 3.1. Categories for text exemplars in CCSS Appendix B.

The call for more reading and for more reading of complex nonfiction is certainly not without merit. Reading achievement requires reading practice and instruction, and students may not be getting enough of either. In fact, a seminal study of first-grade classrooms revealed that students spent only 3.6 minutes per day reading informational text (Duke, 2000). Things don't get much better later. A recent analysis of the amount of time that students spend actually reading during ELA in third grade revealed that teachers' editions of core reading programs recommended only 15 minutes per day of actual reading (Brenner & Hiebert, 2010). This is a shockingly small amount of attention given to reading breadth and volume in these early grades! However, as children enter adolescence, the time when common sense would tell us that students should be required to read more, there is even less time for reading. English becomes a content area, and content-area teachers are disinclined to focus in-class time on student reading (e.g., Ivy & Broaddus, 2000). The call for more reading in general and for more reading of informational text should not be surprising, especially if we want more proficient readers.

Who decides what students read is a complicated and politically charged issue traditionally left to states and localities. Therefore, the specificity of the "list" of text exemplars in the CCSS is problematic. States have adopted the Standards before any coherent sets of curriculum resources are available. Because of this, they may view the list as a full curriculum rather than as an illustration, although the Standards document cautions against doing so. The list of narratives includes classics from American and world literature (e.g., Shakespeare, Steinbeck, Kafka) and from classical literature (e.g., Homer, Ovid) and relatively few pieces of adolescent or multicultural literature. When we consider the motivational and identity-forming needs of adolescents that we reviewed in Chapter 2, young adult literature, written specifically for them, becomes even more essential. The informational text exemplars include specific primary source documents in history, as well as books and articles about a variety of topics that could never actually

constitute a full curriculum. Because of our shared commitment to supporting teachers in the real world, we are not inclined to enter this debate. Instead, we will consider any texts as opportunities to build knowledge and skills. Rather than endorsing it, we will provide you with our best advice about how to understand the CCSS approach to text difficulty.

Quantitative Measures of Text Difficulty

One of the key components of any approach to curriculum is vertical articulation. Each successive grade level has to aim for more challenging work. It may be that the shock of the text difficulty requirements contained in the Standards is heightened because previous standards documents from states and from professional organizations were silent on this very important fact (Hiebert, 2012). They may have said that an eighth grader should read eighth-grade text with comprehension, but they failed to define what eighth-grade text is or how it is different from seventh-grade or ninth-grade text. That is not true now.

We will start with the simplest notion of text difficulty from the Standards. We have long had quantitative measures for estimating it. In fact, there are more than 200 available. These are mathematical formulas that use an algorithm to rank-order texts from easier to harder. These scores are then interpreted to define a grade-level range. It is important to know that deciding what constitutes a grade-level range is necessarily arbitrary. And the Standards document has redefined the process.

We recently helped a district choose trade books for reading instruction to meet the requirements of these new standards, and we quickly realized that our own previous shared sense of what level of difficulty is associated with particular grade levels was inconsistent with the rubric for text difficulty presented in the Standards. Our own realization is shared by many; a survey of educational leaders indicated that more than half believe that the new standards are more rigorous than the standards that they have been using, and many are experiencing frustration and confusion about how to implement them (Center on Education Policy, 2011). Prominent reading educators have taken a strong stance against "pushing" increases in text difficulty until after grade 3, instead making sure to build the basic skills and stamina necessary for tackling those texts at later grades while also building knowledge and habits through careful coordination of instruction, support, scaffolding, and practice (Hiebert & Pearson, 2012). We cannot take the call for increased text difficulty lightly. If we are to choose reading materials consistent with the requirements of the Standards, we must understand the definition of text difficulty adopted for the document and apply it thoughtfully.

The easiest place to see the change is in the Lexile table in Appendix A of the CCSS. It is summarized in Figure 3.2. Even without a full understanding of what a Lexile is, inspection of the figure makes it clear that the CCSS have set

Grade-Level Band	Previous Lexile Range	CCSS Lexile Range
4–5	645–845	770–980
6–8	860–1010	955–1155
9–10	960–1155	1080–1305
11–12	1070–1220	1215–1355

FIGURE 3.2. Lexile requirements of CCSS.

new Lexile standards. The previous range for grades 9 and 10 is now the range for grades 6–8. Since Lexiles are featured so prominently in the Standards document, it makes sense to spend some time understanding what they (and other quantitative measures) are.

Part of what makes a text simple or hard to understand is whether you know what the individual words that the author has chosen actually mean. While which words you know is entirely based on your personal experience with language, you are more likely to know the meanings of words that are used more frequently in written text. The sentence structures that the author has used also contribute to text difficulty. Generally, shorter sentences have simpler structures and are easier to understand.

Lexiles are numbers derived from a formula that considers sentence length and word frequency (Schnick & Knickelbine, 2000). They are widely available at *www.lexile.com* for most currently available books. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* measures 1350 Lexiles; Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* measures 1340; Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* registers 810; Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* measures 890. What these numbers mean is that the first two texts contain a greater number of rare words and longer sentences than the last two, and this fact provides us a partial understanding of which two are more difficult to understand.

If you have read the books we have listed above, you can probably generate a reasonable list of other reasons that Shakespeare's and Lincoln's texts are "harder" than Collins's and Bradbury's. There simply is more to it than that. Currently, researchers are trying to improve the number of language variables accounted for in quantitative measures (Benjamin, 2012), but for now, there is relatively little difference among the available measures. If your school already uses a quantitative system as part of its approach to tracking text difficulty, it may not make sense to change over to Lexiles. In Figure 3.3, we present grade-band ranges for additional traditional quantitative systems generated in a recent study (Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, & Liben, 2012). These measures include ATOS, developed by Renaissance Learning and used in the Accelerated Reader program; Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) from Questar Learning; SourceRater (SR), developed by the Educational Testing Service; and Pearson's Reading Maturity Metric (RM). Again, to underscore the differences in the CCSS definitions of grade level, look

Grade-Level Band	ATOS	DRP	SR	RM
4–5	4.97–7.03	52–60	.84–5.75	5.42–7.92
6–8	7.00–9.98	57–67	4.11–10.66	7.04–9.57
9–10	9.67–12.01	62–72	9.02–13.93	8.41–10.81
11–12	11.20–14.10	67–74	12.30–14.50	9.57–12.00

FIGURE 3.3. Grade-level bands for additional quantitative measures.

at the ATOS. What Accelerated Reader previously defined as grade-level text for grades 7–9 now corresponds to grades 6–8.

There is another issue that researchers are exploring with respect to the CCSS mandate for increasing text complexity at all grade levels. The approach resembles a simple, linear progression. It is possible that students' reading and writing development would be best accelerated through different routes to increased complexity—particularly those based on nonlinear growth (Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013). We do expect that a shift in text complexity alone, absent radically different types and amounts of teacher support, is unlikely to produce the outcome we want—knowledgeable citizens with the reading and writing skills to be successful in college and careers.

Qualitative Measures of Text Difficulty

Common sense tells us that computer-generated numbers alone cannot capture text difficulty. Elie Wiesel's *Night*, a classic depiction of the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, at 590 Lexiles does not belong in a third-grade curriculum. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (730 Lexiles) or *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (840 Lexiles) will not be understood by many upper-elementary students regardless of their reading proficiency. There is more to text difficulty than what can be counted electronically.

Quantitative measures may be necessary but are certainly not sufficient for understanding what makes a text challenging or helping us plan instruction using these texts. It will be up to educational leaders and teachers to resist the easy solution of using only simple, quantitative measures. In fact, even the text exemplars in the CCSS document are not assigned to grade-level bands strictly by their Lexiles; there are texts on the list with Lexiles of 660–720 in the 2–3 band, the 4–5 band, and the 6–8 band (Hiebert, 2012). We found a recent call to distinguish between text difficulty (which can be easily measured quantitatively but which fails to account for many variables) and text complexity (which is still an important and poorly understood part of the reading equation) to be very useful (Mesmer, Cunningham, & Hiebert, 2012). This is similar to the distinction

that the late Edward Fry, himself an author of a widely used readability formula, made between using readability systems and leveling systems to organize text; leveling takes more into account than just the words and sentences (Fry, 2002). In addition, we are mindful that what makes a text difficult for nonnative speakers of English might be different than what makes it difficult for native speakers (Crossley, Greenfield, & McNamara, 2008).

Qualitative analysis of text difficulty is specifically described in the CCSS (see Appendix A) as a process that can be accomplished only by a mature and informed reader—not by a computer. As we move to selection of more complex texts and to planning the instruction that will be essential to scaffold student understanding, we must also become more skilled in qualitative analysis. Luckily, though, skilled qualitative analysis of what makes a particular text potentially difficult has immediate implications for instruction. If we are to use more text, a wider variety of text, and more complex text, we must orient ourselves to conducting qualitative analyses as a regular part of instructional planning.

Think again of your own college reading. What made your survey-level biology textbook hard? How is that different from what made specific poems you read in literature classes hard? You will find some overlap, but you will also find areas of difficulty that are discipline specific. That is, interpreting diagrams and other visual information is much more a part of literacy in the sciences than in the humanities; understanding figurative or archaic language is much more essential in the humanities than the sciences. In both cases, though, specific readers (including yourself) had the knowledge and skills to read both widely and deeply across disciplines. Creating more readers with those skills is the overarching mandate of the standards. Teachers of English, with their specialized knowledge of literature, are in the best position to conduct qualitative analyses of literary texts. Teachers in other subject areas will also have to become expert at analyzing the texts that they use. Not every middle and high school teacher must be a literary critic, but every teacher must become a text critic for the texts in his or her discipline.

Figure 3.4 presents our interpretation of the areas of qualitative analysis that are included in Appendix A of the CCSS. As we improve our skills in defining what makes a particular text difficult, we will know better how to make it more accessible. As an added benefit, we will have a better understanding of what it will take to teach students how to write well about what they read.

We recognize that qualitative analysis of text difficulty is a time-consuming business. It requires that we view what we read through a specific lens. As we have begun to plan CCSS lessons, we have had to engage in multiple readings of the same text for different purposes. For example, we read to consider the levels of meaning or purpose. Then we read to consider the structure. Then we read to consider the language and knowledge demands. We also recognize that individual teachers are likely to vary widely in the extent to which they are skilled in this type of text analysis. However, there will be no substitute for committing to

Domain	Considerations
Level of meaning	Mature readers must be able to understand what a text says and what it means. Some texts, like allegories, are specifically designed to contrast the two. More than one level of meaning is more difficult to understand.
Purpose	Texts that are designed to provide information have a clear purpose. Other texts, like political speeches, are designed to make biased arguments. The author's intent, when not explicit, may make a text more difficult to understand.
Text structure	Texts that are structured as a sequence of events, in order, are easier to understand than those structured more ambiguously or those including multiple structures.
Visual representations	Interpretation and integration of the multiple visual representations of meaning with the verbal information may make a particular text difficult.
Language demands	Complex texts by great writers use language that is original and very different from conversational English. The primary source documents so essential in the humanities may use language that is no longer familiar. Texts in all disciplines may be challenging because they contain sophisticated grammatical structures.
Knowledge demands	All texts make knowledge demands. Knowledge takes many forms. It can be cultural, linguistic, or textual. Understanding the knowledge demands of text requires that a mature reader recognize what is *not* in the text—the knowledge that the author believed the reader to have.

FIGURE 3.4. Considerations in the qualitative evaluation of text.

it if you are to plan instruction aligned with the standards. You will see below that we recommend you not do this alone.

Readers and Texts

Quantitative and qualitative analyses make no sense without knowledge of what particular students know and can do. This notion is an old one. In fact, Zakaluk and Samuels (1988) proposed that any measure of text difficulty should include a measure of reader skill. Put another way, it doesn't make sense to know how difficult a text is in the abstract; we have to know how difficult it is for a specific reader. That is part of the rationale for the Lexile framework that we described above. Lexiles can be produced for individual students, either through the *Scholastic Reading Inventory* (Scholastic & MetaMetrics, 1999) or through correlations with other standardized tests. A student-level Lexile predicts that a student can read a text with that same Lexile independently with 75% comprehension. The same thing is true of ATOS. Alternatively, these measures can provide a teacher with an estimate of how much teaching and support might be necessary to bridge the gap between a reader and a text.

This reader–text consideration provides a foundation for understanding comprehension in general. The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) advanced a widely cited heuristic for understanding comprehension as a product influenced by characteristics of the reader, the text, and the activity within a sociocultural context. Similarly, Appendix A of the CCSS recommends that text selection be guided by quantitative, qualitative, and reader and task considerations. Reader considerations go beyond knowledge and skill levels to include social and emotional development. As we change our thinking about what constitutes grade-level text, particularly narratives, we will have to realize that some texts that are "hard enough" for a particular grade level when evaluated quantitatively are, in realistic terms, socially or thematically inappropriate at those grade levels.

A Possible Process for Choosing and Using Texts

Now that we have unpacked the text complexity requirement of the CCSS for you, what do we actually think you should do? Because of our intense work in real schools, we think about such issues very pragmatically. In Chapter 4, in fact, we present an approach to the problem that involves selection of multiple texts, and subsequent chapters recommend very specific instructional routines. But you really do have to start by establishing instructional objectives and deciding what texts you will actually use to achieve them.

First, work schoolwide. To truly enact the CCSS in middle schools and high schools will require the full participation of every teacher in every discipline. We know that some states and districts are simply requiring that English departments move to the use of 70% informational texts. This simply does not make sense. We cannot teach literary analysis without literature. While informational texts have an important role to play in ELA classrooms, the important lesson here is that we will not be able to go on avoiding actual student reading in science, math, social studies, arts, and career classrooms. Given our recent work in middle schools and high schools, current practices are totally inconsistent with the CCSS call to use extensive connected reading and writing as the major tool for learning—in ELA or in the other content areas.

Second, read Appendix B of the CCSS in full and ensure that at least one of the exemplars listed there is used in each discipline at each grade level. While we know that these specific texts are not required, they do provide a variety of choices that may be very different from the texts currently used. They will also help you make the case that CCSS is not an "English thing." It's for everyone. While only the English teachers can use the canonical texts suggested, social studies teachers can use the literary nonfiction and the informational texts.

Third, use the text recommendations as an estimate of the distance between the CCSS and current practice. When specific selections are already in use at the grade level recommended, discuss student work with those texts. To what extent

can students read them independently? What reading and writing tasks are currently associated with them? How have past students performed on those tasks? What instructional changes should be made? When specific texts are currently used at a higher grade level than recommended, should they be moved?

Fourth, do not ignore the quantitative measures of text difficulty. In our experience, they represent a sea change; they move specific texts up at least 1 year in a student's educational career. This means that assessments designed to measure the CCSS will assume students have extensive experience with texts identified for use in their current grade level. But don't be too strict. Use your current grading period structure as a guide. As you choose texts, make sure that during each grading period students read at least one full-length text in each discipline within the quantitative band for that grade level.

Fifth, do not forgo traditional textbooks and informational articles, especially in science and social studies. They are important text types, and they can be analyzed in the very same way as trade books. Publishers can provide quantitative measures and you will find that Lexiles are now routinely available for nearly all textbooks.

Finally, use qualitative analysis of text difficulty as the foundation of instructional planning. Teaching with text requires this. Enacting the CCSS requires this. We must collectively move from instructional planning that is based on scheduling and then covering core content through lecture and structured note taking to engaging students in reading and writing to learn. Since this will be very new for many, many teachers, Figure 3.5 outlines a possible process.

Three reads is a lot to ask, but it will be necessary as you start to rethink the role of text in instruction. If you work with colleagues, you can divide the responsibilities, each taking on one specific text or unit. When you read for structure, create a graphic representation of the author's organization. Making the structure visible will go a long way toward deepening your understanding, and

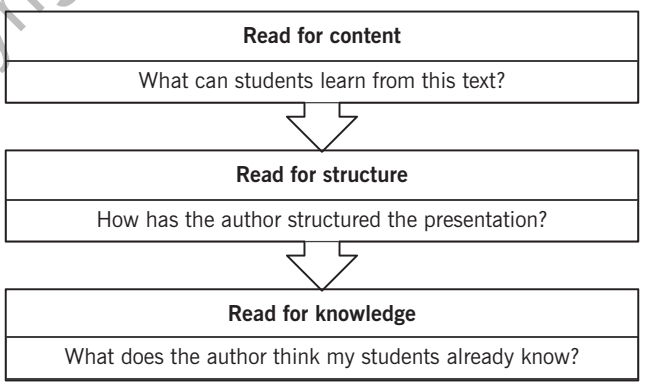

FIGURE 3.5. Procedure for qualitative analysis of text.

we hope you will learn to make that structure visible to your students. It may be that over time your skills will improve, and you will learn to read for content and knowledge at the same time. But even if you don't, this procedure will get you ready to teach.

Final Thoughts

We have heard states' and districts' messages to teachers that the CCSS are very similar to what they are already doing. We could not disagree more strenuously. Along with the truly bold focus on writing, the issue of text complexity stands out to us as the clearest indication that these standards are different. If you are lucky enough to work in college towns, as we three do, it may be helpful to you to go to the bookstore and browse the textbook section. There you can see what freshmen are expected to be able to read—totally on their own—to learn. The CCSS are an attempt to plan backwards from this somewhat harsh reality. As you will see in subsequent chapters, though, we believe that there is much we can do together to improve their chances.

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