INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
GUIDE TO TEXT COMPLEXITY

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Office of Teaching and Learning

What is Text Complexity?

All text has levels of complexity or readability that affect the way readers interact with it. Novels, articles, poems, short stories, textbooks, and other texts have wide ranges of complexity that are appropriate at different grade levels and for a variety of purposes. An important focus of the Indiana Academic Standards is ensuring students are being exposed to texts with increasing complexity in all subject areas. While determining the appropriate placement of text in accordance with the reading standards for text complexity (Learning Outcome Standards RL.1 and RN.1), it is important to evaluate quantitative measures, qualitative measures, and reader and task considerations.

Quantitative Measurements of Complexity

Quantitative dimensions and factors are aspects of a text (e.g., word length, frequency, and sentence syntax) that are not easily measurable by people and are typically measured by programs. While these tools are helpful, they should not be the only measures for determining text complexity. Poetry, plays, and texts below a second grade reading level cannot typically be measured by quantitative means.

Qualitative Measurements of Complexity

Qualitative dimensions and factors are aspects of text complexity (e.g., levels of meaning, structure, and language conventionality and clarity) only measurable by an attentive reader.

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The Qualitative Considerations for Literature and Qualitative Considerations for Nonfiction within this document can assist in making more accurate distinctions about where a text should fall in the grade-level span. There are three categories: accessible text, moderately-complex text, and highly-complex text. An accessible text should be accessible for students to interact with independently at the lower end of the grade-level span. A moderately-complex text may require scaffolding for students at the lower end of the grade-level span, but should be accessible with no scaffolding once they reach the middle or higher end of the grade-level span. A very-complex text will require scaffolding for students until they reach the higher end of the grade-level span, at which point they should be able to interact with the text independently.

Reader and Task Considerations

- Reader and task considerations can be individual to schools, classrooms, and students. This includes taking factors like cognitive capabilities, reading skills, and motivation into consideration.
- This document includes Suggested Reader and Task Considerations to assist schools as they make key literacy determinations regarding text complexity.

QUALITATIVE CONSIDERATIONS FOR LITERATURE

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Text Title: **Genre:**

Quantitative Measure(s):

Qualitative Considerations:

How much background knowledge is necessary to understand the text?
Consider cultural familiarity and the literary knowledge necessary to understand allusions to other works.

Does the text have a single level of meaning, or are there multiple/hidden levels of meaning?
Consider the clarity of the theme(s).

How is the text structured?
Consider whether the structure is conventional or unconventional, there is a single narrator or multiple narrators, events are related in chronological order, or flashbacks and other manipulations of time occur.

What are the language features of the text?
Consider whether the language used is mostly literal or figurative, clear or abstract, and familiar/contemporary or archaic/jargon.

How are illustrations/graphics (if included) used?
Consider whether they add clarification or add to the complexity.

Holistically, this text should be considered _____ for grade _____.

ACCESSIBLE MODERATELY COMPLEX HIGHLY COMPLEX

QUALITATIVE CONSIDERATIONS FOR NONFICTION

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Text Title: **Genre:**

Quantitative Measure(s):

Qualitative Considerations:

How much background knowledge is necessary to understand the text?
Consider content-specific knowledge and references/allusions to other works.

How clear is the purpose, point of view, and central idea of the text?
Consider whether they are explicitly or implicitly stated.

How is the text structured?
Consider whether it is a familiar structure (e.g., chronological) or a complex structure that may be unfamiliar to students at this level.

What are the language features of the text?
Consider whether the language used is mostly literal or figurative, clear or abstract, and familiar/contemporary or archaic/jargon.

How are illustrations/graphics (if included) used?
Consider whether they add clarification or add to the complexity.

Holistically, this text should be considered _____ for grade _____.

ACCESSIBLE MODERATELY COMPLEX HIGHLY COMPLEX

SUGGESTED READER AND TASK CONSIDERATIONS

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Cognitive Capabilites

Do readers at this grade level possess the necessary...

- Attention to read and comprehend this text?
- Ability to remember and make connections among various details presented in this text?
- Visualization to imagine what is occurring or what is being discussed in the text?

Consider whether this text will help develop the attention, memory, and critical/analytical thinking skills necessary for future reading endeavors.

Reading Skills

Do readers at this grade level possess the necessary...

- Inferencing skills to make connections among elements that may not be explicit in this text?
- Visualization skills to imagine what is occurring or what is being described in this text?
- Questioning skills to challenge the ideas being presented in this text and consider multiple points of view?
- Comprehension strategies to manage this text?

Consider whether this text will help develop inferencing skills, visualization skills, questioning skills, and comprehension strategies necessary for future reading endeavors.

Motivation/Engagement with Task and Text

Will the readers at this grade level be able to...

- Understand the purpose of reading this text, which may shift over the course of the reading experience?
- Be engaged with the topic of this text?
- Be engaged with the style of writing and presentation of ideas within this text?

Consider whether this text might help readers develop an interest in the content.

SUGGESTED READER AND TASK CONSIDERATIONS

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Prior Knowledge and Experience

Do readers at this grade level possess the prior knowledge and/or experience regarding the...

- Topic of this text to manage the material being presented?
- Vocabulary used within this text to manage the material being presented?
- Genre of this text to manage the material being presented?
- Language (e.g., syntax, diction, rhetoric) of this text to manage the material being presented?

Consider whether this text might help readers develop knowledge of topic, vocabulary, genre, or language.

Content/Theme Concerns

Do readers at this grade level possess the...

- Maturity to respond appropriately to any potentially concerning elements of content or theme?

Consider whether there are any potentially-concerning elements of content or theme that might contribute to students, teachers, administrators, and/or parents feeling uncomfortable with the reading of the text.

Complexity of Associated Tasks

Will the complexity of...

- Any tasks associated with this text interfere with the reading experience?
- Any questions asked or discussed concerning this text interfere with the reading experience?

References

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- "Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts." American Diploma Project (December 10, 2004). Achieve, Inc. Accessed April 25, 2014. http://www.achieve.org/ReadyorNot.
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