Complex Text – Part 1: What it is and Why it Matters

ELA Anchor Standard 10 for reading requires students to:

> Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

So what is complex text?

Text complexity may be thought of as the relative challenge a student is presented in accessing the full meaning and implications of a text.

Why focus on text complexity?

Text that is created specifically for content learning, such as that often found in text books, is generally calibrated to allow students to easily gain information, avoiding undue struggle with levels of meaning or complex constructions. While simplified text may benefit content learning in the short term, it is not especially conducive to the student's intellectual and academic growth over all.

In order for students to become better learners and thinkers, at least some of their texts (written, audio and visual) must demand a certain amount of struggle and stretch. Students must learn not only to comprehend the text, but also to analyze and interpret it, and to connect its ideas to those of other texts or situations.

The task for educators is to recognize the kinds of complexity a given text represents, and what level of complexity will provide students with that "productive struggle" that leads to growth.

What should we look for in determining text complexity?
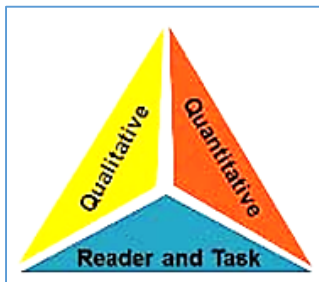
There are three major aspects when we consider the complexity of a text: **quantitative, qualitative** and **reader/task** considerations.

Quantitative considerations are those we can measure: word count; word, sentence and paragraph length; frequency of unfamiliar or sophisticated vocabulary or other language features. Several methods exist to measure the quantitative complexity of text. A number of online tools are available for this purpose:

- ATOS Analyzer – Renaissance Learning
  http://www.renlearn.com/ar/overview/atos/
- Degrees of Reading Power® – Questar   http://www.questarai.com (Contact Questar with requests for text analysis.)
- ETS TextEvaluator   https://texteval-pilot.ets.org/TextEvaluator/
- The Lexile Framework® – MetaMetrix   http://www.lexile.com/analyzer/

- Coh-Metrix Easability Tool – University of Memphis (For Flesch-Kincaid measure)
  http://141.225.42.101/cohmetrixgates/Home.aspx?Login=1 (Beta site)
- Reading Maturity – Pearson Knowledge Technologies
  http://www.readingmaturity.com (Beta site)
- TextEvaluator – Educators Testing Service https://texteval-pilot.ets.org/TextEvaluator/

Caveat: Quantitative measures must not be the sole consideration when selecting grade-appropriate texts. The **qualitative** and **reader and task** aspects of the text must be given at least equal consideration.

In Part 2 of this series, we will examine how qualitative considerations impact text complexity.