RIGOROUS READING

5 Access Points for Comprehending Complex Texts

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Ramping Up for Complex Texts

H elping students read more and better has always been the goal of literacy educators. In our profession, we've tried all kinds of approaches to ensure that students can read and understand the wide range of texts they will be confronted with as they grow and develop. There have been times in our history when students were assigned to read hard texts independently. The thinking at the time was that exposure to great works alone would result in learned citizens. That didn't work because students found summaries that they could use to answer comprehension questions and write essays, although it certainly spawned a whole new publishing category: commercial study guides. Doug remembers being assigned to read *Antigone* and searching everywhere for CliffsNotes so that he could complete the required worksheets and write his essay in response to this prompt:

Identify the tragic hero of one of the plays. Analyze the scenes in which the character displays pride and identify the effects that this pride has on the character's life. How could his/her life have been different if he/she had behaved in a less prideful manner?

Thankfully, the answers to this question were clearly articulated in the yellow- and black-striped book. It wasn't that Doug didn't want to read *Antigone*, but rather that although he was assigned to read it, he wasn't taught how to understand an ancient Greek play such that he could answer this prompt. Unfortunately, his teacher did not know that he hadn't read the play because he earned an A on the essay. Lesson learned: Just giving students complex text doesn't mean they will read and understand it.

At other times, we've scaffolded so much that we removed the need for students to read altogether. That didn't work because students were not applying what they had learned to new texts. Nancy remembers a teacher telling her class so much about each assigned chapter of *The Secret Garden* that Nancy didn't feel the need read the book at all, and spent her time reading Nancy Drew mysteries instead. She was able to complete all of the tasks (and please her teacher) because the teacher did the majority of the work. The fact that Nancy participated eagerly in classroom discussions wasn't an indication that she was a good reader but rather that she was a good listener. Her teacher's recounting of the previous night's chapter was sufficient for Nancy to engage in rich and collaborative discussions.

Neither of these approaches met the intended goal of getting students to read complex texts. Instead, they relied on either too little, or too much, teaching. To ensure that students actually do learn to read complex texts, teachers have to scaffold instruction and know when to transfer the cognitive and metacognitive responsibility to students. They need to rethink the texts they use, expanding the range to include more complex texts accompanied by scaffolds and support. And they need to carefully consider the intentional instruction students need to receive if they are going to apply what they have learned to the wide world of texts available to them.

In this chapter, we focus on two major concepts in literacy instruction: text complexity and close reading. Perhaps you work in a place where Common Core State Standards are the *lingua franca*; perhaps not. In either case, you are concerned with making it possible for students to read increasingly complex texts and to gain exposure to thoughtful reading instruction that

provides access to these texts. Therefore, the first section will address text complexity and the impact of reading anchor standard 10. The second section will examine the call for students to read these texts closely, as described in reading anchor standard 1. These two standards are bookends for the remaining reading standards on our instructional bookshelf. The final portion of the chapter is an introduction to a gradual release of responsibility instructional framework that provides the access points students require to access complex texts.

▶ Reading Complex Texts: Anchor Standard 10

The Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts have had a significant impact on the way educators are discussing reading instruction. This repositioning is having a ripple effect beyond the states currently committed to using these standards, as professional discourse is not contained by geographical boundaries. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the ongoing conversations about the use of complex texts. Anchor standard 10 is deceptively simple in theory: "Read and comprehend literary and informational texts independently and proficiently." It is proving to be much more complicated in practice (National Governors Association [NGA], 2010, p. 10). Expectations by grade level for this anchor standard can be found in Figure 1.1.

Let's parse out the anchor standard further to better understand its implications. *Read and comprehend* serves as a reminder that the ability to make meaning is the ultimate goal, and that carefully crafted instruction on decoding and comprehension strategies are fundamental. *Literary and informational texts* include a wide range of genres and text types, both digital and print. So far, so good—we can't imagine any literacy educator disagreeing with either of these parts of the goal.

It is the last phrase that has stirred debate—*independently and proficiently.* While everyone agrees that we shouldn't just hand students hard texts and

To ensure that students actually do learn to read complex texts, teachers have to scaffold instruction and know when to transfer the cognitive and metacognitive responsibility to students.

Figure 1.1 Anchor Standard 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Grade	Expectations for Literature	Expectations for Informational Texts
12	By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.	By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 11–CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.
11	By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
10	By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.	By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.
9	By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
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.	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.
7	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
6	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Grade	Expectations for Literature	Expectations for Informational Texts
5	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 4–5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.	By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, at the high end of the grades 4–5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.
4	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, in the grades 4–5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	By the end of year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 4–5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
3	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 2–3 text complexity band independently and proficiently.	By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, at the high end of the grades 2–3 text complexity band independently and proficiently.
2	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories and poetry, in the grades 2–3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.	By the end of year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 2–3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
1	With prompting and support, read prose and poetry of appropriate complexity for grade 1.	With prompting and support, read informational texts appropriately complex for grade 1.
K	Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.	Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.

wish them well, the practice of scaffolded instruction is receiving renewed attention. How much is too much? When is it not enough? The Common Core State Standards for reading address this briefly with respect to the primary grades, noting that adult support and guidance are a part of the equation. But mention of this type of support disappears after grade 2. This may be due in part to the developers' position that the standards are not meant to dictate how students are taught—that they are, instead, intended to define the outcomes of the instruction.

The waters have been muddied a bit by the release of the publishers' criteria statements, first in 2011 and then again in 2012 with the revision that came out after portions of it were hotly challenged by a variety of professional groups. The revised statement takes into consideration the topic of scaffolding, noting "some students will need more scaffolding . . . Curriculum developers and teachers have the flexibility to build progressions of texts of increasing complexity within grade-level bands that overlap to a limited degree with earlier bands" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 3). There is a deep body of research (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Wood & Wood, 1996) on the importance of scaffolding in instruction; we are pleased to see it more explicitly acknowledged in this statement.

While everyone agrees that we shouldn't just hand students hard texts and wish them well, the practice of scaffolded instruction is receiving renewed attention. How much is too much? When is it not enough?

Scaffolded instruction is vital in reading instruction, and its practice is universal. Scaffolding in reading instruction occurs through the use of texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012), strategically deployed questions, prompts and cues (Frey & Fisher, 2010), and a gradient of instructional arrangements (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Each of these dimensions of curriculum and instruction is essential for teaching students how to read, and for building their capacity to read for meaning. For students to access complex text, their reading experiences must include a thoughtful progression of texts, scaffolds, and instructional arrangements.

A second dimension of the phrase *independently and proficiently* concerns exactly what students should be reading. The easy response is "grade-level texts, of course," but what exactly constitutes "grade level"? Teachers have operated under tacit agreements about grade level, often relying on local context and traditions. Haven't we all worked in schools where a particular title was considered the province of a specific grade level? For example, where we live, *Charlotte's Web* is third grade, and *Romeo and Juliet* is ninth grade. However, in many cases, these traditions seemed to be justified primarily because units and materials had already been developed and shifting the book to another grade was too much trouble. The game-changing nature of the documentation that accompanies this anchor standard is that for the first time, "grade level" is being defined quite clearly. Citing research on the gap between graduating seniors' reading levels and those expected for college freshmen, the developers wrote the standards specifically to close this gap. To do so, they have called for the use of complex texts that continually stretch students' capacity to read and comprehend literary and informational texts. In other words, the expectation

is that students will read and understand more complex texts than they have been expected to in the past. But to what end—and how do we know what makes a text complex?

▶ A New Definition of Text Complexity

In the past, text complexity and readability were viewed interchangeably by many practitioners, even as researchers cautioned otherwise (Hiebert, 2009). Readability has been estimated based on the average length of sentences, the number of syllables in sentences, and—in some cases—occurrences of rare words. These measures provided teachers with general information about readability and were used to gauge appropriate materials for students. But many have voiced concern that these measures missed the nuances present in many texts, often reporting readings as being easier than they really were. Works by Ernest Hemingway, for example, have been assigned a difficulty level ranging from grades 4 to 8, yet any teacher who has used his works of literature knows that the concepts, dialogue, and background knowledge needed by the reader make these texts far more complex than can be measured by a readability formula alone.

Drawing on the extensive research on the measurement and characteristics of text, the developers of the Common Core State Standards (NGA, 2010) identified three inter-related aspects of determining text complexity: quantitative evaluation, qualitative evaluation, and consideration of the reader and tasks. The authors define each of these as follows:

- **Quantitative evaluation:** readability measures and other scores of text complexity
- **Qualitative evaluation:** levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands
- **Matching readers with texts and tasks:** reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed) (p. 57)

Text analysis must always keep all three elements in mind.

Quantitative Evaluation

The temptation is to rely on the quantitative measures alone, which are derived from algorithms that yield numerical data; these measures can be

calculated by a computer and do an adequate job of tentatively placing a text within a grade band. But these measures alone are inadequate for understanding why one piece of text is qualitatively more difficult than another with the same quantitative score. It is simply insufficient to use readability data (sentence length, use of rare words, and such) and assume that this is the only information needed for gauging text complexity. Furthermore, you can't derive much guidance in terms of your teaching points from quantitative analysis alone. The art of making meaningful qualitative evaluations is best left to the judgment of a knowledgeable educator who is deeply familiar with the texts in question.

Qualitative Evaluation

Qualitative evaluation requires considering a text across four dimensions: levels of meaning and purpose, structure, language convention and clarity, and knowledge demands (see Figure 1.2). Note that these descriptors mirror the teaching points we rely on during instruction. A given text is going to be variously more or less difficult within each of these areas, and it is unlikely that any text would be uniformly difficult across all four. Structure refers to the genre of the text, its organization and narration, the number of text features, and its use of graphics (if applicable). The *Magic School Bus* series of science stories, for instance, is made more accessible because it uses a narrative structure of a group of children and their teacher on field trips to explain complex topics. On the other hand, *Night* (Wiesel, 1982) uses a difficult structure—flashback—that can confuse readers.

A second dimension of qualitative measures of text complexity concerns levels of meaning. Some texts are straightforward in their presentation of information, while others use figurative language, or present dense and complex ideas. For example, the informational picture book *How Artists See Families* (Carroll, 1997) is less complex in terms of levels of meaning, as it explains each image in concrete and observable terms. While quantitatively easier, the picture book *Frida* (Winter, 2002), with its ambiguous and unexplained images reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's work, requires readers to understand the story on two levels.

The degree to which the language conventions are similar to or different from those commonly understood can also affect complexity. Hesse's use of font size and sentence grammar variants to represent her protagonist's cognitive processes in *Music of the Dolphins* (1996) conveys the story's message

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Video 1.2

Nancy reviews a text for the factors of complexity.
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Figure 1.2 Qualitative Factors of Text Complexity

Component	Aspects	When a text is complex . . .
Levels of Meaning and Purpose	• Density and complexity	Many ideas come at the reader, or there are multiple levels of meaning, some of which are not clearly stated.
	• Figurative language	There are many literary devices (e.g., metaphors, personification) or devices that the reader is not familiar with (e.g., symbolism, irony) as well as idioms or clichés.
	• Purpose	Either the purpose is not stated or is purposefully withheld. The reader has to determine the theme or message.
Structure	• Genre	The genre is unfamiliar or the author bends the rules of the genre.
	• Organization	It does not follow traditional structures such as problem/solution, cause/effect, compare/contrast, sequence or chronology, and rich descriptions.
	• Narration	The narrator is unreliable, changes during the course of the text, or has a limited perspective for the reader.
	• Text features	Fewer signposts such as headings, bold words, margin notes, font changes, or footnotes are used.
	• Graphics	Visual information is not repeated in the text itself but the graphics or illustrations are essential to understanding the main ideas.
Language Conventionality and Clarity	• Standard English and variations	Variations of standard English, such as regional dialects or vernaculars that the reader is not familiar with, are included.
	• Register	It is archaic, formal, scholarly, or fixed in time.
Knowledge Demands	• Background knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her personal life experience.
	• Prior knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond what he or she has been formally taught in school.
	• Cultural knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her cultural experiences and may include references to archaic or historical cultures.
	• Vocabulary	The words used are representations of complex ideas that are unfamiliar to the reader or they are domain specific and not easily understood using context clues or morphological knowledge.

of a growing awareness and then rejection of human ways by a girl raised by dolphins. By comparison, *The Grouchy Ladybug* (Carle, 1996) carries the same quantitative measure (a Lexile score of 560) but tells a far simpler story using familiar language conventions.

Finally, the relative knowledge demanded of the reader plays into the level of complexity of a given text. Doug's difficulty with *Antigone* stemmed from the fact that it requires the reader to have a vast amount of cultural knowledge, in this case of ancient Greek mythology, to make sense of the text. By comparison, *Dateline: Troy* (Fleischman, 2006) recounts portions of the *Iliad* by comparing it to modern news and gossip stories. In this way, elements of the Trojan War are made familiar by comparing them to 20th century wars. Both texts feature major archetypes in literature, but whereas the first requires the reader to recognize them, the second assumes that the reader doesn't already know them and instead draws attention to them more overtly.

Matching Readers With Texts and Tasks

Quantitative and qualitative dimensions are solely about the characteristics of the book itself. The third facet in determining text complexity, however, is about the match between reader, text, and task. This last facet is where teaching lies, and in fact is the central theme of this book. We will return to this throughout these chapters, but for now, we want to consider the interaction between the reader and the text. There are myriad books to select from (over 328,000 new titles published in the U.S. in 2010), but only a few will make their way to your classroom or school. Some have worried that the core standards represent a retreat to a rigid approach of text explication and objective analysis that marked secondary English

instruction in the mid-20th century. But the more progressive notion of including the reader when determining text complexity offers a counterpoint to that concern. This idea is drawn from Louise Rosenblatt's (2003) research on reader response theory. Her groundbreaking work has informed many other perspectives, including critical literacy (McLaughlin, & DeVoogd, 2004) and multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2012). In addition to meeting the criteria of complexity, proponents of reader response theory argue that the texts you select should

In the past, text complexity and readability were viewed interchangeably by many practitioners, even as researchers cautioned otherwise.

- provide students with examples of quality writing that mentor them as writers themselves;
- grant students access to excellent illustrations;
- allow students to see themselves–their religion, ethnicity, language, and culture—in the selected texts;
- permit students to interact—through the act of reading—with people who have different experiences and beliefs;
- depict a variety of family structures;
- offer a balanced portrayal of gender identities and roles in terms of the depiction of the characters and what the characters do; and
- interrupt gender, racial, or ability stereotypes.

Another way to find quality books is to review titles that have received national and international recognition. For example, the American Library Association awards the Newbery (for writing) and the Caldecott (for illustration) each year for the best children's books. The same organization presents the Coretta Scott King award to outstanding African-American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults. The University of Texas offers the Tomás Rivera award to for children's books that depict the Mexican-American experience. The Orbus Pictus award is given by the National Council of Teachers of English for outstanding nonfiction written for children. The Hans Christian Andersen medal is presented biennially by the International Board of Books for Young People in recognition of the body of work of an author and of an illustrator. Each state awards a series of young reader medals for books that are particularly popular with students in the state. The state reading association or library association will have a list of these awards by year. In addition, the International Reading Association created the Children's Choice, Teen Choice, and Teachers' Choices awards.

Understanding the quantitative and qualitative properties of texts is essential, as are the considerations regarding the interaction between the reader and the text. While these are helpful categories, they do not provide instructional guidance for teachers hoping to build their students' comprehension of the texts. What do we do with complex texts once we have them? It's important to remember that there is no evidence that students can learn from books they can't read (Allington, 2002). When it comes to reading challenging texts, students must be adequately supported to unlock the meanings hidden within.

▶ Reading Closely: Anchor Standard 1

Quantitative measures alone are inadequate for understanding why one piece of text is qualitatively more difficult than another.

An examination of reading anchor standard 1 further illuminates this question. It requires students to "[r]ead closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text" (NGA, 2010, p. 10). This requires students to stay close to the text to build a solid foundation of textual knowledge. Grade-level expectations for this standard can be found in Figure 1.3. Note that the expectations for narrative and informational texts are the same for this standard, but that they differed for anchor standard 10. Anchor standards 2–9 provide teachers with information about what elements students should be able to leverage when analyzing complex texts:

- Themes and central ideas (standard 2)
- Characters and individuals (standard 3)
- Vocabulary (standard 4)
- Text structure (standard 5)
- Point of view (standard 6)
- Integration of content within and across text formats (standard 7)
- Arguments and reasoning (standard 8)
- Intertextual connections (standard 9)

In other words, anchor standard 10 encourages educators to examine the types of texts used, whereas standard 1 reminds us to fully mine the text for all it has to offer. These serve as bookends for the remaining reading standards, which describe the facets of reading comprehension that are essential for higher-order thinking and critical analysis. The intention is

Figure 1.3 Anchor Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Grade	Expectations for Literature and Informational Texts
11–12	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
9–10	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
8	Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
7	Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
6	Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
5	Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
4	Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
3	Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
2	Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.
1	Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
K	With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

to drive students deeper into the text, and not simply draw on the surface comprehension many have grown accustomed to in classrooms.

Much attention has been given to the process of close reading, which relies on repeated readings of short passages of complex texts. A key purpose of close reading is to encourage students to examine in detail what the text has to say. The first assumption behind the practice of close reading is

that the text is worthy; not everything we read requires this kind of inspection. However, understanding the text itself is necessary for comprehension and is key to making the kind of analytic and evaluative judgments that mark a competent reader. One question we often hear is in regard to the use of close reading practices with students who are not yet fully independent readers. It is helpful to keep in mind that the intent of close reading is to foster critical thinking skills to deepen comprehension. Therefore, the thinking skills needed for close reading should begin in kindergarten. Although the delivery of the lesson is somewhat different when working with emergent readers, the intention is the same. The use of close reading in primary grades will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

We apply the same reasoning when working with students with disabilities. It is essential that they receive access to general curriculum, as stated in both federal law and widely accepted best practices. Our experiences have shown us that close reading is especially useful for these and other students for whom a "one and done" reading of a text is not sufficient. Close reading affords students with the gift of time to linger with a piece of text. While we have known for decades that multiple readings are essential for deep understanding, in practice, we have rarely afforded students with the time to do so. Some of the greatest gains we have witnessed in our own classrooms have been with students who have otherwise struggled as readers.

The art of making meaningful qualitative evaluations is best left to the judgment of a knowledgeable educator who is deeply familiar with the texts in question.

There has been debate about the role of activating prior knowledge in a close reading. Reading comprehension is not a skill that exists in a vacuum between the reader and the text immediately in front of her; it also hinges on the accumulation of the many texts and experiences that she has been exposed to throughout her lifetime (e.g., Rosenblatt, 2003). Therefore, a competent reader links her prior knowledge to the new information she is experiencing. We believe that thoughtful reading teachers must encourage students to analyze, make judgments, synthesize across multiple sources of information, formulate opinions, and create new products. To do this, they should be integrating what they have learned from the text with their prior knowledge and experiences. But we share the concern that, in too many cases, the rush to engage students in these critical thinking skills has meant that relatively little time is allocated for eyes on the text. Instead, after extensive pre-teaching of the content of the text by the teacher, the text is all too often given a quick once over. In these cases, true integration doesn't take place; instead, students are mostly drawing on what

they already know. It's hard to make forward progress when you're mostly just treading water.

If students are going to access complex texts, they must been given the time to read and reread, to respond to questions that encourage them to return to the text, and to discuss their ideas in the company of others. A strong textual foundation also makes it possible for them to engage in critical thinking skills. It's analogous to a ladder: It doesn't matter how tall the ladder is if the lower rungs are not solid. In our own classrooms, we are witnessing what is happening with our students who struggle to read. We are finding that spending more time on the textual foundations—the lower rungs of the ladder—is making it possible for them to analyze, evaluate, and create.

Anchor standard 10 calls for regular exposure to complex texts, and anchor standard 1 reminds us that students need to read these texts closely to interpret them. Standards 2–9 are the ways we think about and understand the text we're reading and discussing. But developing readers are apprentices to the kinds of problem-solving strategies that expert readers use when their comprehension breaks down. When it comes to using complex text, expect comprehension to break down regularly, and seize the opportunities these breakdowns present. These are ideal for showing students how these problem-solving comprehension strategies are summoned so that, over time, they become a part of their repertoire as skilled readers (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008).

▶ The Importance of Comprehension Strategies Instruction for Accessing Complex Texts

The lights are out in Ms. Butler's fourth-grade classroom. Every eye is glued to the screen on which she has projected a website explaining the history of chocolate. She knows that the text is complex, as she had analyzed it earlier using the qualitative rubric at the end of this chapter. She identified that the prior knowledge needed, as well as the extensive use of metaphors (a function of figurative language) were especially challenging. She paired this

information about the qualitative elements of the text with her knowledge of her students as readers. She had previously noticed that her students were not creating mental images as they read, which compromised their understanding of the texts they were reading. She decided to model this cognitive strategy for her students using a think-aloud and then asking them to apply their learning in small groups.

Ms. Butler reads the informational text aloud, pausing periodically to share her thinking about the text. At one point, she pauses and says,

> I see huge vats of chocolate melting and some guy standing there stirring the chocolate. I can just smell the sweetness of the chocolate as it melts. I'm picturing this in my mind so that I can create an image that will help me connect the information that the author wants me to remember.

These words are not in the text. Ms. Butler is describing her own mental visualizations so that her students will begin to do so on their own.

As she finishes the shared reading, having focused on the role chocolate has played in civilization and on visualization as a comprehension strategy, one group of students joins her for scaffolded reading instruction. All of the other students are engaged in collaborative conversations and peer learning activities. Ms. Butler knows that the students in this first group have difficulty with visualizing the text. She has selected an excerpt of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl (1964) to read with them. She knows that many of the students in this group have either read this book or will read this book after this lesson. However, that isn't her focus with them. The part of the book she has selected finds the group inside the chocolate factory looking at the chocolate river. She shares the passage with the group and asks each student to visualize as she reads. When she has finished, she asks for students to volunteer to share "the pictures in your minds."

Arturo volunteers to speak first and says, "I was looking down into the river, but I couldn't see anything because the chocolate was too thick." Sarah says, "The smell, ohh, that smell. I just can't stand it! It's too sweet. Who could eat that much chocolate?" Bryan adds, "I can feel it between my toes. It's almost like mud, but thicker. I try to splash the river with my feet, but the chocolate is so thick that it just moves around."

Some have worried that the core standards represent a retreat to a rigid approach of text explication and objective analysis that marked secondary English instruction in the mid-20th century.

Ms. Butler reads other passages about chocolate that she has identified from the book. Again, students share their visualizations. After about 20 minutes, she is satisfied with their progress and excuses the members of this group to the collaborative learning activities and invites another group of students to the table.

The Common Core State Standards do not explicitly call for comprehension strategy instruction. That does not mean that this type of instruction should be discontinued. The standards represent the desired outcomes against which progress can be measured at the end of the year to determine if students can read and understand complex texts. As such, they are not concerned with the approaches teachers use to prepare students. Of course teachers should model and guide students such that they develop a habit of automatically using these cognitive strategies. The problem in the past has been that the development of comprehension strategies has been seen as an outcome in and of itself. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, comprehension strategies are viewed as a path toward understanding and accessing complex texts.

Comprehension strategies are taught to students of all developmental levels so that they may use them as tools to support their own understanding of a given text (e.g., Fisher, Lapp, & Frey, 2011). As with tools in a toolbox, the key to the usefulness of these strategies lies in how thoughtfully they are applied to suit a particular purpose. These strategies include the following:

What do we do with complex texts once we have them? When it comes to reading challenging texts, students must be adequately supported to unlock the meanings hidden within.

- **Questioning strategies** to predict and anticipate what might occur next in the text, to solve problems, and to clarify textual understanding
- **Summarizing strategies** to identify important information and accurately recount a text
- **Inferencing strategies** to "read between the lines" to identify clues in the text
- **Self-monitoring strategies** to determine when readers understand what they have read and notice when they have not
- **Connection strategies** to integrate what a reader has experienced and has learned with the information being read

Video 1.4

Teacher modeling comprehension strategies.
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- **Analysis strategies** to identify literary devices, determine the author's purpose, and evaluate texts

We believe there is a danger in teaching comprehension strategies in isolation of one another, which was a mistake commonly made in the past. Pinnell and Fountas (2003) remind us that

> [t]hese strategies are not linear in that first you engage one then another. In fact, reducing complex systems to a list . . . probably oversimplifies reading. *Teaching* strategies one at a time and telling students to consciously employ them, *one at a time,* may actually interfere with deep comprehension and make reading a meaningless exercise. (pp. 7–8)

Complex text instruction is an ideal opportunity to consolidate the many skills and strategies students are learning throughout their reading day. They locate information in the text, integrate it with their prior knowledge, and get to use comprehension strategies in real time to get themselves unstuck when understanding breaks down. The ability to coordinate all of these cognitive and metacognitive processes is not easy and requires a framework for instruction that doesn't leave students floundering alone.

## ▶ Accessing Complex Texts Through a Gradual Release of Responsibility

For students to access complex texts, they need intentional instruction that provides them with *access* to deep comprehension. In this book, we've identified five "access points," that is, five ways to intentionally guide students' comprehension of complex text. The framework that allows for the implementation of this type of intentional instruction is known as *gradual release of responsibility* (e.g., Fisher & Frey, 2008; Pearson & Fielding, 1991). In the remainder of this book, we describe in detail each access point, always through the lens of complex texts. The chapters are as follows:

- Chapter 2, "Access Point One: Purpose and Modeling," describes the first access point—establishing the purpose of the lesson, or the learning target—and explains the ways that teachers can model their critical

thinking for students as they read. In this chapter, we discuss the use of think-alouds and interactive shared readings, with special attention on the modeling of annotation skills.

- Chapter 3, "Access Point Two: Close and Scaffolded Reading Instruction," describes the second access point: close reading and scaffolded reading instruction. The practice of close reading, which emphasizes repeated readings, discussion, and critical thinking, requires scaffolded instruction. Text-dependent questions, prompts, and cues form the basis of these scaffolds and provide students with the teacher-supported experiences they need to read increasingly complex texts.

- Chapter 4, "Access Point Three: Collaborative Conversations," describes the third access point: collaborative conversations. These peer-led learning experiences require tasks that encourage students to interact and to apply what they have learned through close reading to develop deeper understandings of complex texts. In this chapter, we discuss a number of ways that teachers can facilitate student-to-student collaboration, including literature circles, discussion roundtables, reciprocal teaching, and collaborative strategic reading.

- Chapter 5, "Access Point Four: An Independent Reading Staircase," focuses on students' ability to access a figurative reading staircase as they apply what they have learned and read increasingly complex texts independently. While they may be reading individually, they are not reading alone, and well-designed instruction is essential in this phase. This chapter explains how to craft this instruction through the use of texts that build background knowledge and through peer-conferencing strategies that foster metacognitive awareness.

- Chapter 6, "Access Point Five: Demonstrating Understanding and Assessing Performance," concerns itself with demonstrating understanding

It is helpful to keep in mind that the intent of close reading is to foster critical thinking skills to deepen comprehension.
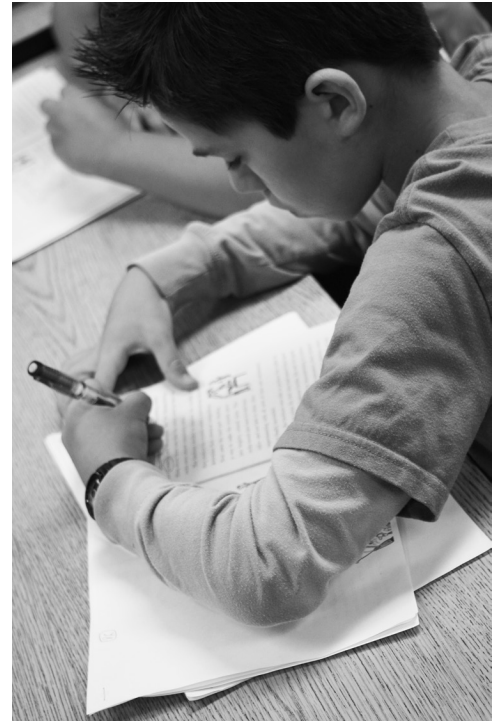
and assessing performance. These practices are not only for the teacher to use when measuring mastery but also for students to use to propel future learning. This chapter focuses on what occurs after reading, including feedback and assessment.

Doug's and Nancy's teachers, however well meaning, didn't know how to use these access points. Doug's teacher released cognitive responsibility much too suddenly, and he was left to try to find an outside source of information because he didn't know how to locate it within the text. Nancy's teacher never released any of the responsibility and did too much of the cognitive heavy lifting for her students. The teacher's assessments focused on the wrong measures, and she never did figure out that Nancy hadn't read the book. In using a range of access points, teachers can avoid these all-too-common pitfalls and balance support with challenge.

▶ Summary

The Common Core State Standards spotlight complex texts as a chief means for elevating student learning. One method for measuring text complexity is quantitative and relies on the number and types of words in the text; this measure is useful for situating a text within a grade band. However, this method of measurement does not uncover the qualitative values that render a text more or less complex. These include levels of meaning and purpose, structure, language conventions and clarity, and knowledge demands. These values give us insight into *what* to teach. The third facet of complexity concerns the reader characteristics and task demands, which inform *how* we teach complex texts. As students read these texts closely, they need support and instruction on how to identify textual elements and mine texts for understanding, as well as on how to use comprehension strategies to repair meaning when it becomes muddled. The intention behind effective instruction is for students to expand their capacity to deeply understand these kinds of complex texts outside the company of their teachers. It is this understanding that lies at the heart of college and career readiness. By equipping students to take on an ever-widening range of texts, we afford them their independence and extend their understanding of and influence on the biological, social, and physical world around them.

Students should be integrating what they have learned from the text with their prior knowledge and experiences. But we share the concern that, in too many cases, the rush to engage students in these critical thinking skills has meant that relatively little time is allocated for eyes on the text.