



READING TO LEARN:

Going Beyond the Foundations

Reading to Learn: Going Beyond the Foundations

Introduction

After students have learned the foundational skills necessary to read fluently and comprehend text, they are ready to use reading as a way to learn about a variety of subjects. Reading to learn is critical for success in college and careers where students will encounter a variety of complex informational texts. Thus, students at all levels should engage with text of sufficient complexity, answer text-dependent questions and use evidence from text to support their answers, engage in close reading, and read a larger proportion of informational text (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

I. Text Complexity

While identifying main ideas, deriving the meaning of words from context, and making inferences are important skills, what separates students who score at or above benchmark on the reading portion of the ACT (which predicts successful performance in an introductory college course) is not performance on comprehension questions in general, but instead the ability to answer questions about complex text (ACT, Inc., 2006).

Complex text is text that includes subtle or complex relationships among ideas or characters, a large amount of sophisticated information, elaborate or unconventional text structures and style, context-dependent vocabulary, and an implicit or ambiguous purpose. In response to the need for students to understand complex text and in light of research on the decreasing ability of students to do so (c.f., Adams, 2009), recent educational efforts have introduced a focus on text complexity, understood as an appropriate degree of a given text's complexity relative to the student's grade level.

There are three dimensions that together determine the complexity of a text: quantitative, qualitative, and consideration of the reader and the reading task (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

The quantitative dimension includes those aspects of the text more easily evaluated by computer programs, such as sentence length and word frequency. Measures of readability such as Flesch-Kincaid and Lexile® use formulas based on quantitative factors. Research has shown that several quantitative measures correlate with student performance and grade level, indicating that use of these measures can assist teachers in selecting text at an appropriate level of complexity (Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, & Liben, 2012).

The qualitative dimension includes aspects of the text more easily evaluated by a human reader, such as text structure (e.g., Is the structure conventional or unconventional? Are illustrations simple or complex and are they required to understand the text?), how clear the language is (e.g., Is language clear and conversational? Is figurative language or domain-specific vocabulary used?), knowledge demands (e.g., How much background knowledge is required to understand the text?), and levels of meaning and purpose (e.g., Is there one level of meaning or multiple levels? Is the purpose explicitly stated or implicit?). These aspects of a text are an important supplement to quantitative measures. Sometimes, for example, quantitative measures of a text might show a low reading level, but sophisticated themes or other aspects of the text may make it most appropriate for a much older, more advanced reader (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; 2017; Pearson & Hiebert, 2014).

The consideration of the reading and the reading task (the third dimension of text complexity) refers to the fact that comprehension of a text depends on the reader's ability and background and on the specific task being asked of the reader. A reader who has a strong background in a particular area may find a text in that area much easier to comprehend than a reader without such background. A task requiring the reader to summarize the plot may be much easier than one asking the reader to analyze complex relationships. In addition, while a reader may struggle with a particular text while reading independently, he or she may be able to productively engage with the text given appropriate scaffolding. Only teachers can effectively evaluate these factors when choosing a particular text for their students (Valencia, Wixson, & Pearson, 2014).

Learning A–Z's proprietary Text Leveling System uses both quantitative and qualitative leveling criteria to calculate text complexity. Quantitative measures include total word count, number of different words and ratio of different words to total words, number of high-frequency words and ratio of high-frequency words to total words, number of low-frequency words and ratio of low-frequency words to total words, sentence length, and sentence complexity. Qualitative measures include the predictability of the text, its structure and organization, illustration support, the complexity of and reliance on infographics, and knowledge demands. Learning A–Z's leveling system correlates with other common leveling systems and assists teachers in selecting texts most appropriate for their students and reading tasks.

Learning A–Z Resources for Complex Texts

Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Leveled Books** are available at 29 different levels of difficulty in printable, projectable, and digital formats.
- **Content Area Reading** organizes leveled books into featured groups of common content area topics.

Headsprout

- **Headsprout Reading Comprehension** teaches comprehension skills across increasingly complex text, moving from a mid-second grade reading level when first introducing reading comprehension strategies to a mid-fourth grade level by the end of the 50-episode program. As students demonstrate mastery, the program introduces more complex literary and informational texts, poetry, and visual devices such as Venn diagrams, maps, scales, cross sections, and tables of contents.

Science A–Z

- **FOCUS Books** cover high-interest science topics at three different reading levels and are available in printable, projectable, and digital formats.

II. Text-Dependent Questions

In addition to reading complex text, students need to be able to answer text-dependent questions. In contrast to questions that can be answered based on students' personal experiences, opinions or other sources, text-dependent questions can be answered only by referring back to the text (Fisher & Frey, 2012b; Shanahan, 2013).

Good text-dependent questions are those that are central to the text; they are important for understanding the text's key ideas and details and for interpreting the text by analyzing its craft and structure (Shanahan, 2013). Although some questions may ask for information explicitly stated in the text, text-dependent questions may also require that students make inferences and evaluate the text. The distinguishing feature of text-dependent questions is that their answers must be supported by evidence from the text itself (Fisher & Frey, 2012b; Shanahan, 2013).

Learning A–Z Resources for Text-Dependent Questions

Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Comprehension Skill Packs** include short passages with text-dependent questions focused on a particular reading comprehension skill, such as analyzing characters, determining author’s purpose, determining the main idea, or analyzing text structure.
- **Close Reading Packs** include short passages with a key question that students must answer based on evidence from the text.
- **Paired Books** allow students to compare multiple, related texts. Three types of text-dependent questions require students to (1) construct an answer from evidence found in one place within a text, (2) gather evidence from multiple places within a text or across texts, and (3) make inferences based on evidence from the text and their own experience.
- **Leveled Book Common Core Lesson Supplements** provide text-dependent questions for popular books at each level.

Headsprout

- **Headsprout Reading Comprehension** includes multiple text-dependent questions for each passage in the program and several activities in which students must look back in the passage and locate textual evidence that supports their answers.

Science A–Z

- **FOCUS Books** include text-dependent questions that students can answer based on the text.

III. Close Reading

Close reading involves multiple readings of short passages of complex text in order to identify what the text explicitly states and to make sound inferences from the text. It also involves discussion of text-dependent questions where students must cite evidence from the text to support their answers (Brown & Kappes, 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2012a).

The specific practices involved in close reading can vary with different subject matters, text types, and purposes (Fang, 2016). In general, however, when students participate in close reading, they first read to identify main ideas and details, and subsequently reread to gain a deeper understanding of the text, identifying its craft and structure and analyzing the ideas presented. Students systematically move from the literal level of a text to its structural level and lastly to its inferential level: focused on inferences, inter-text connections, opinions, and arguments that can be made from the text (Fisher & Frey, 2015).

Although research on close reading and its components is in its early stages (Fisher & Frey, 2015), initial studies have shown close reading can be effective in improving reading performance. For example, in a study comparing reading interventions involving close reading of complex texts to more typical interventions involving computer-based instruction, small-group instruction and independent reading, Fisher & Frey (2014) found significant differences in favor of the close reading instruction.

Learning A–Z Resources to Support Close Reading

Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Close Reading Packs** include short passages with a key question that students must answer based on evidence from the text.

- **Close Read Passages and Question Guides** guide students through repeated readings of a single passage using strategic discussion and questioning at multiple layers of depth.
- **Reading Graphic Organizers** support reading strategies, comprehension skills, and learning processes including retelling, determining main idea and supporting details, analyzing text structure, and making inferences.

IV. Informational Text

Informational text—a broad category of nonfiction resources including biographies and autobiographies; books about history, social studies, science, and the arts; technical texts (including how-to books and procedural books); and literary nonfiction—makes up the majority of text older students and adults read (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

However, younger students often do not get as much exposure to and instruction related to reading informational text as they do with literary text. For example, in a content analysis of basal reading programs, Braker-Walters (2014) found that, on average, informational text accounted for 31% of text selections and only 16% of pages in fourth-grade basal readers. In a survey of books read aloud by preschool through third-grade teachers, only 8% were informational texts and of those, the majority were about topics in life science (Yopp & Yopp, 2012).

Some authors (e.g., Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009) believe this lack of exposure to and instruction in informational text may be responsible for declines in reading comprehension seen when students reach fourth grade, when informational text begins to make up a greater proportion of text read and students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Therefore, it is important to ensure even young students are exposed to and receive instruction in reading and comprehending informational text.

Learning A–Z Resources for Informational Text

Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Leveled Books** and their accompanying lesson plans, worksheets, comprehension quizzes, and discussion cards help teach students skills and strategies to successfully read and comprehend informational text. Over 1,000 leveled nonfiction books are available across a variety of subjects.
- **Content Area Reading** includes leveled book collections spanning art, music, math, science, and social studies.
- **Visual Devices** with accompanying lesson plans and worksheets help students read and interpret the visual devices that often accompany informational text such as diagrams, flowcharts, bar graphs, and pie charts.

Headsprout

- **Headsprout Reading Comprehension** includes informational passages throughout the program. Students read and answer questions about each passage, finding evidence in the text to support their answers. Interpreting visual devices such as maps and cross-section diagrams is also explicitly taught in the program. Once students have learned how to interpret a visual device, it is incorporated into later passages and students answer questions requiring its interpretation.

Science A–Z

- **Unit Nonfiction Books** provide informational text at multiple reading levels across science content areas.

- **FOCUS Books** are additional science books on high-interest topics for each Science A–Z instructional unit. FOCUS books are provided at multiple reading levels for each grade span and include reading comprehension assessments, inquiry-based science activities, and instructional support for teachers.
- **Quick Reads** are single-page resources that address specific science topics.
- **Science in the News** provides news articles about current events in multiple areas of science, including technology and engineering. Each issue includes versions written for early elementary, middle elementary, and upper elementary students.
- **Graphic Organizers** support content area learning and reading comprehension by helping students sort ideas, analyze relationships, review concepts, and demonstrate new understanding.

References

- ACT, Inc. (2006). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City, IA: Author.
- Adams, M. J. (2009). The challenge of advanced texts: The interdependence of reading and learning. In E. H. Hiebert (Ed.), *Reading more, reading better: Are American students reading enough of the right stuff?* New York: Guilford Publications.
- Braker-Walters, B. A. (2014). Informational text and the Common Core: A content analysis of three basal reading programs. *SAGE Open*, 4(4), 1-8. doi:10.1177/2158244014555119
- Brown, S., & Kappes, L. (2012). *Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A primer on "close reading of text"*. Washington, DC: Aspen Institute
- Fang, Z. (2016). Teaching close reading with complex texts across content areas. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51(1), 106-116.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2012a). *Engaging the adolescent learner: Text complexity and close readings*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2012b). Text-dependent questions. *Principal Leadership*, 13(1), 70-73.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2014). Close reading as an intervention for struggling middle school readers. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 57(5), 367-376.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2015). Improving reading with complex texts. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(5), 56-61.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts*. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2017). *Supplemental information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New research on text complexity*. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/assets/E0813_Appendix_A_New_Research_on_Text_Complexity.pdf
- Nelson, J., Perfetti, C., Liben, D., & Liben, M. (2012). *Measures of text difficulty: Testing their predictive value for grade levels and student performance*. Report submitted to the Gates Foundation. Retrieved from https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/nelson_perfetti_liben_measures_of_text_difficulty_research_ela.pdf
- Pearson, P. D., & Hiebert, E. H. (2014). The state of the field: Qualitative analyses of text complexity. *The Elementary School Journal*, 115(2), 161-183.
- Sanacore, J., & Palumbo, A. (2009). Understanding the fourth-grade slump: Our point of view. *The Educational Forum*, 73, 67-74.
- Shanahan, T. (2013). Letting the text take center stage: How the Common Core State Standards will transform English Language Arts instruction. *American Educator*, 37(3), 4-11.
- Valencia, S. W., Wixson, K. K., & Pearson, P. D. (2014). Putting text complexity in context: Refocusing on comprehension of complex text. *The Elementary School Journal*, 115(2), 270-289.
- Yopp, R. H., & Yopp, H. K. (2012). Young children's limited and narrow exposure to informational text. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(7), 480-490.