D UNDERSTANDING TEXT COMPLEXITY

The notion of text complexity is central for understanding and implementing the changes called for in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Once the standards are adopted, educators must grasp the importance of students being able to read complex text. For that reason, panelists and stakeholders asked for a full explanation of text complexity. The *Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity* (NGA n.d.) addresses new research and resources supporting text complexity. Much of the information on text complexity found below—what it is, why it is important, and how to determine it—was drawn from this report.

In 2006, ACT, Inc., released research called *Reading Between the Lines* that demonstrated that the greatest predictor of success in college and careers is not a graduate's SAT scores, GPA, or even their critical thinking skills, but rather the ability to read complex text. A growing body of similar research also supports this theory of text complexity as an important indicator of reading success.[27] Yet the alarming fact is that, over the past 50 years, the complexity of texts students read in their classes has eroded significantly—whereas the reading demands of college, careers, and citizenship have not. The average student graduates roughly four grade levels behind where they need to be to succeed in the 21st century knowledge economy, which puts a premium on the ability to read complex text (Williamson 2006).

The standards address this challenge by insisting that students be exposed regularly to appropriately complex literary and informational text, both in the classroom and on assessments. This finds expression in Reading Standard 10, which specifies a staircase of increasing text complexity for students to master from beginning through adult secondary levels. Standard 10 is to be used together with level-specific standards (Reading Standards 1–9) requiring increasing sophistication in students' reading comprehension ability.

Choosing rich text worthy of reading and rereading is an important first step in CCSS-aligned instruction. The process of determining text complexity is illuminating

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[27] Much of the work by the CCSS writers in text complexity was heavily influenced by Marilyn Jager Adams's painstaking review of the relevant literature (Adams 2009).

for instructors, as it replaces intuition with concrete data and a systematic investigation of the text.

The CCSS defines a three-part model—embraced by the panel—for determining how easy or difficult a particular text is to read, as well as specifications for increasing text complexity as students move up the levels:

1. **Quantitative dimensions of text complexity.** The terms *quantitative dimensions* and *quantitative factors* refer to those aspects of text complexity, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult if not impossible for a human reader to evaluate efficiently, especially in long texts, and are thus typically measured by computer software.

2. **Qualitative dimensions of text complexity.** The terms *qualitative dimension*s and *qualitative factors* refer to those aspects of text complexity best measured or only measurable by an attentive human reader, such as levels of meaning or purpose, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands.

3. **Reader and task considerations.** While the quantitative and qualitative measures focus on the inherent complexity of the text, the CCSS model expects educators to use professional judgment to identify texts that are well-matched to specific tasks or students, such as skilled readers or those with high interest in the content of the text.

Each tool described above—quantitative and qualitative—has its limitations, and none is completely accurate. However, in the following instances of selecting texts at specific grade levels, qualitative and quantitative measures can be used together, complementing one another:

1. It is recommended that educators first use *quantitative measures* to locate a text within a band level because they measure dimensions of text complexity that are challenging for individuals to evaluate when reviewing a text.

2. Once a text is located within a band by using quantitative measures, educators should use *qualitative measures* to determine other important aspects of texts and position a text at the high, middle, or low end of a grade band.

Certain measures are less valid or not applicable for specific kinds of texts. Until quantitative tools for capturing the difficulty of poetry and drama are developed, determining whether a poem or play is appropriately complex for a given grade or grade band necessarily will be a matter of professional judgment using only the qualitative characteristics of texts.