Content Area Literacy Task Force

What is Text Complexity?
Maggie Brewer, Social Studies

Text complexity has three components – quantitative measure, qualitative measure, and reader and task. In some cases the measures of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of reading can be unreliable assessments of what students are reading and the concepts they are capable of comprehending.

Appendix A of the Common Core uses the example of *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck which falls in the 2nd – 3rd grade level complexity band. Reader and task considerations look at the content and theme of the novel thus placing it at the 9th – 10th grade level. (Common Core Standards Appendix A Available Here)

Teachers need to be careful about keeping reader and task in mind when making choices about the texts that they choose. For example, *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers, is an excellent book about a young man fighting in the Vietnam War. It is a choice I offer my 10th grade Honors students for their literature log assignment. When I preview the book with them, I offer heavy warnings about extreme battle scenes and multiple uses of the f-word. However, it has a Lexile level of 650L which means under the old Lexile scale it was considered to be at the reading level for 5th and 6th graders and under the 2012 scale is considered to be at a reading level for 2nd and 3rd graders.

The reader and task considerations aspect of text complexity really rely on the teacher's knowledge of his or her students, their abilities, maturity level, and background knowledge when choosing appropriate reading material for them.

Writing for Understanding
Jennifer Bernhard, Clark County Schools

I have been delving deeper into the valuable resources available to us from Achieve the Core and would like to share another one related to text sets. Last month I shared that our middle school students were quite successful in writing to an *on demand* prompt because their prior close reading of a 3 piece complex text set related to a historical event gave them the content for their timed writing. Thus *they knew what they were talking about* when they wrote.

Transferring this approach to longer, processed content writing naturally involves careful planning. In an article entitled *Knowing, Thinking, and Writing*, Vermont teacher and author Joey Hawkins describes the *Writing for Understanding* model as "an approach to writing that keeps all students firmly in the game." In an extremely informative article, Ms. Hawkins explains and describes the planning process (*forming an essential focusing question, building working knowledge, processing the knowledge, determining and modeling an appropriate writing structure, and writing process*). To highlight the importance of *building working knowledge*, she describes how the 8th grade *Close Reading Exemplar* "The Long Night of the Little Boats" plays a significant role in the instructional unit described in her article.

As you no doubt have guessed, I heartily recommend this article and while you're at it, this information: Joey Hawkins. I also recommend you read "How to Achieve Deep Understanding of a Complex Text."

Let's Get Students Out of their Comfort Zone
Rhonda Orttenburger, Social Studies

A close reading of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States (one 52 word sentence) would never make it to my classroom if I used quantitative measures or qualitative measures. However, I exercise professional judgment to use it for a specific instructional purpose with my fourth graders.

At the beginning of each year, my students begin to prepare for a Constitution program they present in front of the entire school. According to legislation passed by Congress, educational institutions receiving Federal funding are required to hold an educational program pertaining to the United States Constitution on September 17 of each year.

Although we study the entire U.S. Constitution, we focus on the Preamble for a close reading. Yes, I know it is a difficult text and not one I would normally ask my fourth grade students to read. Still, I want my students to understand who, what, when, where, why, and how this document was created.

Since it is the first of the school year and we have had little opportunities to develop reading and writing habits of fourth graders, in order for students to make meaning from this text the work is completed in groups followed by whole class discussion. By reading and rereading this primary source closely and focusing their reading through a series of questions, vocabulary study, and discussions, students will begin to make inferences and meaning from this passage.

I begin my lesson by reading aloud the Preamble several times due to the difficulty of the words in this passage. This is done for several days because I want my students to be able to pronounce the words correctly. Students also read aloud the text to each other throughout the week so I can listen to the fluency abilities of students.

I want students to frequently interact with this complex text on their own. Students also are assigned the task of memorizing the Preamble. This is done for two reasons. One reason is because each student must say the Preamble to me aloud. I provide a rubric when assigning this task so they know exactly what I expect (look me in the eyes, stand still, hands by side, etc.). I use computer lab time to accomplish this task so I don't interrupt instruction for a day. The other reason is the fourth graders say the Preamble in front of the school during the program.

Once students are familiar with this text, we begin to break it into parts. Students work in groups to build background knowledge (introduction to U.S. Constitution, root of government).

Then they study the vocabulary (union, justice, tranquility, etc.) so they can paraphrase the text.

Next, they answer a series of questions (Who created this historical document? What is this historical document? When was this historical document written? Where was this historical document written? Why was this historical document created? How was this historical document created?)

This group work is followed by class discussions to ensure students make meaning from this difficult text.

Although my fourth graders do gain meaning from this historical document, I know that middle school and high school social studies/history teachers will revisit this primary source document.

By building this foundation, the close reading of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution can only lead to future learning success.

Text Complexity in Music
Sandy Allen, Music

How is text complexity addressed in the music classroom? One way is through analyzing song lyrics.

Underground Railroad songs from the Civil War era are good texts to use. Many spiritual songs sung by slaves in the south had a double meaning.

On the surface, the songs illustrated Bible stories about Moses, Ezekiel, and how the children of Israel suffered in slavery themselves.

They sang about their desire to leave this troubled world and go to heaven. But hidden within these songs were warnings and instructions about escaping slavery and going to the Promised Land, the north.

The Kennedy Center ArtsEdge website has a wonderful lesson plan that guides students in researching coded songs of the Underground Railroad and determining their meanings called "What Does this Song Really Say?"

Vietnam War era and Civil Rights era protest songs are also good for middle school and high school students to explore. Consider using Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind," Pete Seeger's "We Shall Overcome," or Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" as an analysis of social justice songs.

Edwin Starr's "War" is an example of a Vietnam War protest song that has a fairly simple structure and level of meaning.

Pete Seeger's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" uses more complex, literary language and requires students to dig a little deeper for its meaning.

Text Complexity
Lisa Antoniou, Science

Last summer, several CALTF members had the opportunity to meet Michael Thompson, a teacher consultant with the Bisti Writing Project in Bisti, New Mexico. Michael presented a session on text complexity using a protocol that he developed using two video segments along with several text selections. The following is an explanation of how Michael shared text complexity with our CALTF group:

Michael's teaching unit is based on the Vietnam War and the book *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brian. He began the presentation by showing two video segments from YouTube. The first video was titled, "Forest Gump in Vietnam" and the second video was titled, "The Beatles – She So Heavy from Across the Universe – I Want You". Following the viewing of the videos, Michael asked for feedback from the group and/or our reactions to what we watched. A rich discussion about the war and the devastation to soldiers and their loved ones ensued.

Next in the protocol, presentation attendees were partnered and the members of each pairing were given a text to read. Each pair at one table was given a different text. The varied texts included: a selection from "The Things They Carried," a comic strip, a political commentary, a poem, letters from Vietnam soldiers, a speech, and an article from Wikipedia.

As a part of the protocol, one member of the partnership was to read the text with the expectation of how to make the text more challenging for students and the other partner was to read the text with the expectation on how to make the text easier for students to comprehend. After partners were given time to read his/her assigned text, and

Text Complexity in Mathematics
Lee Alan H. Roher, Ed.D.

As information increases and becomes more complex, reading textbooks is going to demand greater skill. As educators we can help our students learn to read textbooks by modeling this reading in front of the classroom. We can also teach students to take notes from the textbook and reflect on the knowledge using the review in summary section at the end of the chapter.

Our brains can only process between five to nine items at a time (Clark, 2006). Hopefully, the author of your textbook has designed the text pages with that idea in mind. There are some basic items that you should focus on and as you begin to incorporate reading textbooks into your study habits, you should try to approach each section in the same way. Be methodical and organize information in the same way every time you read a textbook. So what should you glean out of a math textbook? In every section there are mathematical facts, examples, diagrams or graphs, and sometimes tables of information.

Mathematical facts include definitions, properties, and theorems. Often this information is in bold print or has a separate box around the information. Organize this information in a list and, if possible, re-word definitions and properties into your own language. When taking notes on *examples*, students should make sure to copy the steps and the explanation for each step in a two-column format.

Again, it would be best if you can translate the mathematical reasons into your own words. Draw *diagrams* exactly as they are shown in the textbook. Take personal notes all over the diagram with arrows pointing to important information and markings. It is important to make sure that the notes are not only the information given in the textbook, but also to include a personal narrative regarding the meaning of the content.

As you are taking notes from the textbook and processing this information, you are building knowledge structures called schemas (Clark, 2006). Being systematic in your process of taking notes and examining texts should make your schema stronger through repetition. This will strengthen your long-term memory.

Kentucky Writing Project
presents
A Day on NARRATIVE

Helping 5-12 students meet the new Common Core Standards for Narrative Writing

9:30-3:30, Saturday, February 22, 2014

6 hours PD credit provided—Cost: $100

FREE to those registered for KCTE/LA

In conjunction with the 2014 KCTE/LA Conference in Lexington, KY

Questions or Registration: 502-852-4544 or lksatt02@louisville.edu

Literature Logs
Maggie Brewer, Social Studies

A few years ago I attended a National Writing Project institute called "Expanding Our Offerings" which was geared toward meeting the needs of content area teachers and thus providing a more welcoming environment in NWP. It was after the institute that EKUWP decided to create the Content Area Literacy Task Force. A large part of "Expanding Our Offerings" was the vocabulary that we use to discuss literacy. A panel of social studies, science, math, and technical teachers shared how they use literacy in their classes and we broke into small groups so that they could share specific assignments.

The group I was in worked with Jason Malone, a science teacher at Poudre High School in Colorado. Jason shared an assignment called a literature log which is a new twist on the old book report. Since learning about literature logs from Jason, I have been using them in my Honors World Civilization classes. They can be modified to fit any level or content area. For this assignment, students each choose a book to read. I provide a list of books di-vided into historical time periods. I ask that students pick from this list and not read a book that they have already read or are reading for another class. If there are other books they want to read that are not on the list, I must approve them. Students write three summaries while reading (beginning, middle, and end). In the past I have asked for these summaries to be at least five sentences long. I have at times put a different spin on this because I have found that students struggle with actually summarizing what they read, instead writing way too much of the story. Last year, I asked students to write their summary in the style of a tweet so they could only use 140 characters. This turned out to be an interesting way to force students to include only the most important details of the sections.

The next part of the assignment is where things really get interesting. There are ten "codes" which students must respond to. Students need to reply to each code at least once and then complete ten more codes, in any combination for a total of twenty. These codes include relating the text to their personal life, current events, and what we have learned in class. Others ask students to do re-search based on their novel, write a descriptive passage, reflect on quotes of their choice, to ask a question and answer it, make a judgment, retitle the book or a chapter, and define words they do not know. I ask students to write five to seven sentences in response to each code. Each response must show depth of thought. I grade the summaries and codes by counting sentences in the responses and considering the connection that the student made between their novel and the code. Students can not simply say there was a dog in the book and they have a dog. They need to think more deeply. Maybe that dog truly did help them to make a personal connection to the novel but they need to explain more about that connection and tell me that story.

If you would like copies of my literature log assignment, the book list for my Honors World Civ class or information about contacting Jason Malone regarding how he uses literature logs in science, please email me at margaret.brewer@boyle.kyschools.us

Eastern Kentucky University Writing Project is now accepting applications for the 2014 Summer Institute

EKUWP is part of the [National Writing Project](#)

Are you ready for the best June ever?

Are you ready to think hard about what you teach, how you teach it, and how you can do it better?

Are you ready for the best Professional Development of your life?

Are you ready to join a network of committed, thoughtful educators from across the region, across the state, and across the country?

If so, The EKU Writing Project Summer Institute is for you!

Check out Summer Institute Fellow Sandy Allen's video of her experience: ["Home"](#)

Visit the [EKUWP Website](#) for application and details

discussed how to make the text more or less challenging, they posted notes from their discussion on chart paper displayed around the room for all participants to view in a gallery walk.

Michael also spoke about the importance of *allowing* students to struggle with complex text. A text that does not seem very complex can be made more challenging by modeling and teaching close reading strategies with students as well as the use of text dependent questioning (using higher order thinking type questions). Both strategies help students become more adept at thinking critically and reading text critically.

Resources and materials referenced in this article may be found on the [EKU Writing Project CALTF Resources Page](#)

This newsletter is a publication of the Eastern Kentucky University Writing Project,
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EKU Writing Project
WRITING TEACHING LEADING

Text Complexity Resources Collected by Katie McClain, Library Media Specialist

-*Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading* by Nancy Frey, Diane Lapp, and Douglas Fisher

-*Reading More, Reading Better* by Elfrieda H. Hiebert

With Rigor for All by Carol Jago

-*The Common Core Lesson Book, K-5: Working with Increasingly Complex Literature, Informational Text, and -Foundational Reading Skills* by Gretchen Owocki

From Phonics to Fluency by Timothy V. Rasinski and Nancy D. Padak

-*Unlocking Complex Texts: A Systematic Framework for Building Adolescents' Comprehension* by Laura Robb

-Common Core State Standards Appendix A

-Kentucky Department of Education Text Complexity Resources

-Text Project

Join us in March for On-Demand March Madness and in April/May as we discuss End of Year Reflective Writing!

We want to hear from you! We are planning our future and the topics we will cover next year.

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions please email margaret.brewer@boyle.kyschools.us or tricia.mckenny@bourbon.kyschools.us

*The Kentucky Writing Project and the
Kentucky Department of Education Present:*

Science Literary through Science Journalism
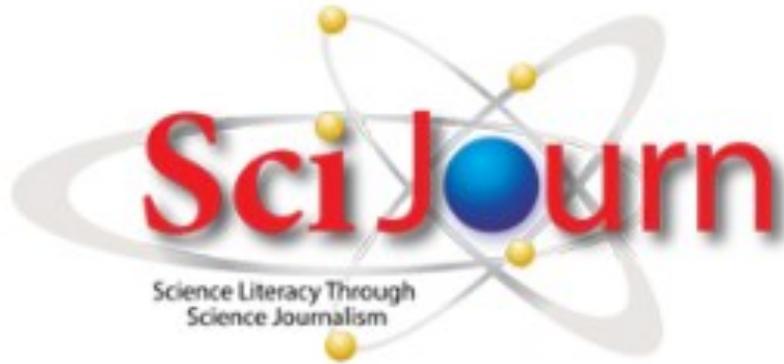
**Eastern Kentucky University (Richmond): March 1, 2014 (8:30 a.m.-3 p.m.)
In the New Science Building**

**What: This day-long workshop will support you in engaging students in
meeting the new Common Core Standards for research through the SciJourn
process (www.scijourn.org). Based on a 4-year NSF-funded research project
demonstrating that teaching science journalism using reliable data sources
and science-specific writing standards improves students' understanding of
and literate engagement in science.** *Participants are invited to join the KWP
SciJourn Network to receive follow-up support and share their students'
experiences with like-minded teachers.*

Cost: $125 per person *(Early Bird price, $100 by Feb. 15).* **Registration includes
lunch and text: Front Page Science: Engaging Teens in Science Literacy
(NSTA Press). 6 hours of professional development credit provided.**

**Who: Middle and High School science teachers and language arts teachers
interested in authentic writing experiences for their students.**

Facilitators: *KWP SciJourn Director Marsha Buerger; KWP SciJourn
Leadership Team Members Lisa Antoniou & Billie Jo Thornsberry*

**Program Questions: Please contact Marsha Buerger, KWP SciJourn Director:
marsha.buerger@jefferson.kyschools.us 502-727-6933**