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Teachers Helping Teachers

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# Skills Focus: Critique and Analysis

## Analysis is Active

**Alicia Hunter, Principal  
Farristown Middle School**

Recently, Madison County’s principals were asked, “How do you know the assessments in your building are standards-based?” Farristown’s teachers have been working collaboratively to make sure their answers to this question are strong vertically within content areas and throughout grade-level teams. Their work is ensuring that the standards drive their instruction, their collaboration is paving the way for common assessments, and they are building community that ensures formative assessments will become the language of the hallways. In short, their professional lives are defined by constant self-reflection and collaborative analysis of their instructional practices. It only makes sense, then, that this attitude toward critical thinking would extend to their students.

I see the results of this when I walk into classrooms, when I

listen to teachers share ideas with each other, and when I see students working hard to solve problems together. I hear students asking each other questions that lead to analysis and problem solving. These questions are not easy, but they work to find answers that require real thought. And they’re learning to be critical, hesitant to accept easy answers, pushing each other to dig in, requiring evidence to support statements and real information to accomplish real work. These students accept initial failure as a necessary step toward accomplishing ultimate targets. They articulate their thinking when I ask them and when I hear them talking to each other and they think no adult is listening at all.

This week the sixth grade hallway has been filled with construction materials and student workers engineering Rube Goldberg machines. I walked up as a science

teacher was admiring one group’s early adventurous step by asking, “Who figured that out and how did they do it?” He expected an answer. But it isn’t often that adults are privy to the workings of the adolescent mind so clearly, and neither of us expected the cross-talk we heard between groups: “I’m not sure exactly what I need here, what do you think?” and “Hmmm, we have a problem. Hey, how did you guys make yours work?” and “I’m not sure how this is going to work, but if it doesn’t we know what to try next.”

The classic definition of analysis is “to break something into parts.” These students show that in practice, analysis sometimes means trying what doesn’t work to get to see all of the parts together. These students had a clear vision of their goal, and they nev

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## The Importance of Text Complexity

### Jennifer Bernhard, Literacy Coach

As we delve into our practices for analysis of text to share with each other, it seems an appropriate time for us to think about text complexity across content areas to help us make good decisions about the texts that we choose for our students to read. The following information is offered to help us untangle a rather complex topic into more simple terms.

*A Beginner's Guide to Text Complexity*, Australian United States Services in Education (AUSSIE), helps us interpret as follows: the Common Core State Standards place an increasing emphasis on getting students to independently read the range and complexity of texts required to be college and career ready.

The importance of both increasing the complexity of texts students read and the need for teachers to understand more about what makes their texts challenging arose out of research that showed nearly half of the students who graduate high school need some kind of remediation to cope with the reading required in college and during their careers. The research also showed that the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are college ready and students who are not is the ability to comprehend *complex* texts. Furthermore, according to a study of skills needed for occupations that do not require a college degree but that provide a living wage, the reading and mathematics skills needed to obtain and hold these jobs are similar to those needed to succeed in college. (ACT 2006b)

As students move through the grades, they are faced with texts that are increasingly longer and more complex in terms of the vocabulary used, sentence structure and text organization. In middle and high schools, the texts will present greater conceptual challenges and may include more detailed graphic representation, while at the same time demanding a much greater ability on the part of the reader to synthesize information.

Central to the Standards is the notion that the teacher is able to match students, texts and tasks to promote student learning. Teachers need to know whether students can independently read the range and complexity of grade level discipline-specific materials and if not, what supports and strategies they need. To do this, teachers need to have information on:

- their students as readers
- the complexity of the texts they are using with the students, i.e. supports and challenges
- the nature of the tasks they set (how students are going to interact with the text) and the level of support they will provide

*Students. . . "must also develop special skills and strategies for reading text in each of the different content areas (such as English, science, mathematics and history) – meaning that a student who "naturally" does well in one area may struggle in another."*

ACT, Inc. (2006) Reading Between the Lines

### Referenced Works:

-A Beginner's Guide to Text Complexity, Australian United States Services in Education (AUSSIE), New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) Secondary Literacy Pilot

-ACT. (2006a). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City: Author. Available [HERE](#)

-ACT. (2006B). *Ready for college and ready for work: Same or Different?* Iowa City: Author. Available [HERE](#)

-Common Core States Standards, Appendix A

-Kapur, M. (2008) Productive failure. *Cognition and Instruction*, 26(3), 379-424.

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

### Recommended Reading:

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

-Instructional Leader: *Text Complexity*

## The Importance of Text Complexity

Jennifer Bernhard, Literacy Coach

### What is meant by text complexity?

Text Complexity is “*The inherent difficulty of reading and comprehending a text combined with consideration of reader and task variables; in the Standards, a three-part assessment of text difficulty that pairs qualitative and quantitative measures with reader-task considerations.*” CCSS Appendix A

**There is no exact science for determining the complexity of a text. Nor is there a single source of information that can accurately summarize the complexity of a text**

### Three Part Model

The Common Core Standards introduce a three-part model for measuring text complexity. Teachers need to use their professional judgment as they draw on information from all three sources when determining the complexity of a text.

#### 1 Qualitative Measures

The qualitative measures of text complexity require an informed judgment on the difficulty by considering a range of factors. The Standards use purpose or levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity and the knowledge demands as measures of text difficulty. (CCSS Appendix A, p. 6)

#### 2 Quantitative Measures

Quantitative measures of text complexity use factors such as sentence and word length and frequency of unfamiliar words to calculate the difficulty of the text and assign a single measure (grade level equivalent, number, Lexile, etc). There are many formulas for calculating text difficulty and, while they provide a guide, the readability or difficulty level of a text can vary depending on which formulas or measures are used. (CCSS Appendix A, p. 8)

#### 3 Reader and Task

The third measure looks at what the student brings to the text and the tasks assigned. Teachers need to use their knowledge of their students and the texts to match texts to particular students and tasks. (CCSS Appendix A, p. 9)

The third measure looks at what the student brings to the text and the tasks assigned. Teachers need to use their knowledge of their students and the texts to match texts to particular students and tasks. (CCSS Appendix A, p. 9)

In sum, text complexity includes both qualitative and quantitative measures, as well as an analysis of the task required of readers.

Authors Fisher, Frey and Lapp in their analysis of text complexity in *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading*, note that reading fiction for pleasure requires a different level of engagement than reading fiction to identify character motives across texts.

Reading informational texts to find out about a specific medical condition is different from reading a travel book in preparation for a vacation. The task and purpose of the reading also influence the complexity of the text. They suggest that more difficult texts with scaffolded instruction should become part of the classroom equation. To ensure that students read complex texts, however, teachers need to revisit how they match readers with texts and tasks. (*Text Complexity*, p.5) Furthermore, a critical task for all teachers is to grapple with the concept of supportive struggle, also known as productive failure. (Kapur, 2008)

*“Perhaps one of the mistakes in the past efforts to improve reading achievement has been the removal of struggle. As a profession, we might have made reading tasks too easy. We do not suggest that we should plan students’ failure but rather that students should be provided with opportunities to struggle and to learn about themselves as readers when they struggle, persevere, and eventually succeed.”* (*Text Complexity*, p.11)

## **It's Got a Good Beat and You Can Dance To It** **Sandy Allen, Music**

In my younger days, *American Bandstand* was a Saturday afternoon TV staple. In addition to hearing the latest radio hits and learning the latest dances, one segment of the show asked featured dancers to “Rate-a-Record.” They danced to a new song, gave it a score from 35 to 98, and then were asked to give a rationale for their score. More often than not, the response was, “It’s got a good beat and you can dance to it.”

While that may have been a good enough analysis for *American Bandstand*, it most likely would not go too far in today’s classrooms. If we are going to help students learn to think like writers, historians, artists, and musicians, they will need to dig a little deeper as they examine song lyrics and works of art in relation to history and culture.

Songs, poems, and works of art can be valuable tools in the classroom. They can be examined like historical artifacts and they are a commentary on culture. Students can not only explore the unique artistic characteristics of the pieces, they can also gain a better knowledge and understanding of life in times gone by. So whether you’re a classroom teacher looking for creative ways to incorporate the arts in your history lesson, or an arts specialist trying to incorporate core content into your arts lessons, these analysis tools should help you get beyond the cookie cutter responses.

First of all, decide what song or artwork you are going to use. Do your research and familiarize yourself with the background of the piece. Decide how you will present the piece, i.e. play a CD, copy the lyrics of a song for each student, display the actual painting or an image from the internet.

Next, prepare a graphic organizer for the students to use.

### **Your graphic organizer should:**

\*Guide students to look at the “nuts and bolts” of the piece.

If it’s a song, what do you notice about the music (fast, slow, catchy, dull, etc.)?

Does it deal with a particular person, place or event?

\*Ask students to respond to the piece.

What are your personal reactions to the images or lyrics?

What emotions does the piece produce?

\*Have students think about the piece in relation to history or culture.

Why do you think the piece was created (purpose)?

Who is the audience?

Why is the piece important to the event or time period?

What does the piece tell you about what life was like in the time period?

What do you wonder?

Do you have unanswered questions?

What do you think it means?

As we strive to teach across the curriculum, finding creative ways to tie academic subjects together can be challenging. The arts are a fantastic way to engage students on a whole new level. Students gain insight into not only the “facts” of our past but also the humanity of our culture.

**Follow this link to [The Library of Congress](#) for two good tools for using songs and poems as historical artifacts for analysis**

## Analysis in History

### Maggie Brewer, Social Studies

I recently attended a National Writing Project meeting where Diane Giorgi, a teacher consultant for the New York City Writing Project, shared a presentation she was working on called “Making Arguments in History.” As a secondary history teacher, I felt validated by her work and am excited to share it not just with my students and colleagues but with you as well.

Diane began her presentation with a quick write that asked, “How does a historian make sense of a past event or build a case for what actually happened?” Participants then read and responded to a series of selected quotes in a wall-talk.

If you’ve never tried a wall-talk before, here’s how it works: Take the article you want your students to read and cut it into smaller portions or paragraphs. Resize the portions so they fill a piece of paper and then mount them on large butcher paper so there is plenty of space around each quote. Tape the butcher paper pieces to the walls or the board so that the students can walk around the room and move from one to another. When using non-fiction text, it won’t really matter which part of the article they read first or last.

As students read, they should mark up the text by circling, underlining, drawing lines, annotating, asking questions, and making comments. As more students write, they can respond to each other’s questions and comments. They should rotate until they have read and commented on every piece of the article.

For her wall-talk Diane used selected quotes from “What Makes a Good History Essay? Assessing Historical Aspects of Argumentative Writing” by Chauncey Monte-Sano (*Social Education*, Nov./Dec. 2012, 294, 296, 297).

Diane then shared a grid of “Guidelines for Assessing a Historical Argument” adapted from Monte-Sano’s work. The first column of the grid indicates the characteristics of historical argument which include: factual and interpretive accuracy, persuasiveness of evidence, sourcing of evidence, corroboration of evidence, and contextualization of evidence.

The second column contains “Evidence: What to Look For” for each of those characteristics.

### Characteristics of Historical Argument and What to Look For:

#### 1. Factual and Interpretive Accuracy

- Evidence is interpreted accurately
- People, issues, and events are fairly represented
- Factual details and chronology are accurate

#### 2. Persuasiveness of Evidence

- Claim is substantiated with relevant, significant, and specific evidence
- Weight of evidence is sufficient – even compelling

#### 3. Sourcing of Evidence

- Notes authors of documents or other sources of evidence used to make argument

- Use of evidence recognizes perspectives inherent in sources cited
- Evidence is balanced and credible

#### 4. Corroboration of Evidence

- Claims response to and accounts for available evidence
- Synthesizes multiple pieces of evidence that work together to support claim
- Recognizes and addresses conflicting/counter evidence

#### 5. Contextualization of Evidence

- Contextual knowledge is used to situate and evaluate available evidence
- In contextualizing evidence and topic, recognizes historical perspectives
- Demonstrates an understanding of causation
- Uses sources in a manner consistent with contemporary meaning of sources for original audience at time and place of their creation

The third column is labeled, “Evidence: What’s in the text? (Cite examples.) What’s missing?” and is blank so that the reader can respond. At the bottom of the three columns is a row labeled, “Summary and Overall Impressions” with the following directions: “In 1-2 sentences, summarize the author’s argument. Based on evidence you found in the text and the characteristics of historical argument, evaluate the extent to which the author achieves a historical argument.”

Given this tool, we read “The Emancipation of Abe Lincoln” by Eric Foner (NY Times, December

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## Critique and Analysis Using the SOAPS Strategy

Rhonda Orttenburger, Social Studies

Four years ago, I was provided a grant opportunity from Teaching American History through the Southeast Education Cooperative. Each year, not only did we deepen our knowledge of American history from 1600 to the Westward Expansion, but also instructional strategies, primary and secondary resources, and amazing educational books were shared with teachers in this outstanding cadre. One instructional strategy shared this year is the strategy I would like to share with you.

When I am planning my teaching, one of my questions is “What visual will help my students understand the objective?” One visual I have found that is helpful for students when critiquing or analyzing texts (primary documents, secondary documents, poetry, prose, or drama), photographs, political cartoons, and paintings is called the SOAPS strategy. As students dissect and interpret documents, critical analysis is combined with factual information to infer and draw conclusions about bias, perspective, and reliability.

Although often used in social studies, this strategy can be utilized in all content areas. After using this strategy, students can write a definitive paragraph to explain what the document is truly measuring and the overall impact of it. The paragraph should include key ideas from the documents with student interpretation.

This strategy uses the acronym SOAPS to provide students with prompts for critique and analysis.

**S** – Speaker

**O** – Occasion

**A** – Audience

**P** – Purpose

**S** – Significance

For detailed descriptions of this strategy, check out the websites below.

Notice on the College Board website, they extend the strategy – SOAPSTone. Analyzing the tone (attitude of the author) enables students to see beyond the literal meaning of the text.

To facilitate your students’ understanding of critical analysis of texts, photographs, and paintings, the SOAPS strategy is just one of many strategies to add to your teaching repertoire.

### On-Line Resources:

Orange County Public Schools

College Board

Judson Independent School District

University of Arizona Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques Center

*Continued from page 1*

er once lost sight of it. But they need the necessary first experience in seeing how all the parts work individually; they then collaborate to make developmental leaps that let the parts come together. This is real-world analysis.

Analysis, in the hands and minds of students, is active.

Analytical activity leads to intense conversations: When a teacher encourages: “Explain to me what you were thinking when you suggested this part because I just don’t get how it fits with the rest of the project,” students have answers. They’ve thought through this. That thinking takes them to a place where they eagerly build on the foundations their teachers lay.

The content of the resulting conversations is always purposeful: one student asks, “How are we going to connect this part to his part?” Another answers, “I have no idea. That’s what we have to figure out.” A third comes to the rescue in specific terms: “I know how to solve that... we worked through that yesterday. What we need here is an L bracket.”

Their progress is measured in similarly precise ways. I turn one way and hear, “Let’s do it and see how it works. I think, after looking at all the parts, this is the best move. We have tried a few other things and they didn’t work, so I think this will.” I turn around and hear the question, “What am I doing wrong, who can help?” answered by “Look at your parts and see which one fits better. I tried this same kind of thing when I built something else so I know it worked, you can trust me.”

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# From the Library Media Specialist: Texts for Summarizing

**Katie McClain**

*-Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading*

by Kyleen Beers and Robert E. Probst

*-Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to*

*Content-Area Reading* by Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman

*-Texts and Lessons for Content-Area Reading:*

*With More Than 75 Articles from The New*

*York Times, Rolling Stone, The Washington*

*Post, Car and Driver, Chicago Tribune, and*

*Many Others* by Harvey Daniels and Nancy Steineke

*-Making the Most of Small Groups:*

*Differentiation for All* by Debbie Diller

*-Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives:*

*Comprehending, Analyzing, and Discussing*

*Text* by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and

Diane Lapp

*-Reading and Analyzing Non-Fiction: Slant,*

*Spin, and Bias* by Douglas Grudzina

*-Reading Stories: Activities and Texts for*

*Critical Readings* by Bronwyn Mellor, Marnie

O'Neill, and Annette Patterson

*-Investigating Texts: Analyzing Fiction and*

*Nonfiction in High School* by The NCTE

Chalkface Series

*-Comprehension Going Forward: Where We*

*Are and What's Next* by Ellin Oliver Keene, et

al.

## Analyzing in Math Amanda Terry, Mathematics

Analyzing in Math at the elementary level is a difficult task, mainly due to the high level of thinking that is required. In elementary math, we most often analyze word problems or extended response questions to find out what the problem is asking. In this context, analyzing requires vocabulary skills to understand the problem.

In my classroom we first read the problem completely, then we look for key words that will assist in completing the answering of the question, which requires both the mathematical component as well as a written explanation.

The writing component, for my students, was lacking, which led me to have them critique their work. In my intervention classroom, I give my students a simple problem and ask them to complete it with their explanation in writing.

A few days later, I have typed out the written explanations and number them before handing them to my students. What they do not know is they each have their own. I have the students complete the problem with only the information written, telling them that someone in the class wrote the explanation and not letting them know they all have their own.

The students will complain about the lack of information needed to do the problem. When they have gone as far as they can with information given, I ask what other information they would need in order to know how the writer completed the problem. Then we discuss as a class and I have the students make a list of what is missing. Once they have finished the list, I inform the students that they are looking at their own work. Next, I have the students look at the problem again to correct their writing to match their critique. This allows the students to critique their own work and improve their mathematical writing.

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Analysis, in the hands and minds  
of students, is active.

When they figure things out they  
celebrate in terms that are sophisti-  
cated – “Okay, that worked almost  
all the way...we need a little more  
force to make it work” “I think  
we just fixed all of our problems.”  
– and some that are refreshingly  
age-appropriate – “It worked! We  
are scientists!”

Students embrace the hands-  
on learning required by the Rube  
Goldberg machines. From intro-  
ductory physics lessons to wildly  
imaginative brainstorming sessions  
to careful drawings on paper to  
enormous, complicated, impres-  
sively inefficient machines using  
marbles, dominoes, pulleys, race

*Continued from page 5*  
31, 2012) and analyzed the  
author’s historical argument and  
use of evidence.

What a powerful tool to put in  
the hands of our students! What  
a gift to be able to show them  
how historians use evidence as

cars, and golf balls, they analyze  
at every step. They ask questions,  
test theories, fail and learn and then  
do it all over again until what was  
inside their heads actually works.  
They watch other groups try then  
pull them over to their machines  
to problem-solve together. They  
return to the initial information  
provided by their teacher, they go  
back to the drawing board, they  
tear down and reconstruct.

As I checked in on them again  
and again throughout the week,  
they never quit. Instead, they kept  
learning, kept persevering, kept  
striving.

They used their hands. They used  
their minds.

This is analysis.

their writing and to teach them to  
analyze that use of evidence.

Further, what an excellent instru-  
ment to allow students to evaluate  
their own work and the work of  
their classmates as they practice the  
task of writing history.

### Article Analysis Lisa Antoniou, Science

In order for my students to stay abreast of current science hap-  
penings in our everyday world, they are required to read one article  
every two weeks that is science worthy and write an article analysis  
of the article he/she read.

I have magazines in my classroom such as *Super Science*, *Science  
World*, and *Science News* and they may borrow from me or go to  
the library. They are not limited to only those science magazines,  
but they are something that is at their fingertips.

To write the article analysis, they complete the following analysis  
outline. This organizer allows them to think closely as they read  
the article, which supports Common Core Reading Standard 1, and  
write a brief summary that supports Common Core Reading Stan-  
dard 2. By fulfilling these standards, students are reading more  
carefully, and really thinking about why this article is important.

The analysis outline is included on the next page.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Number: \_\_\_\_\_

### Article Analysis

**Title of Article:** \_\_\_\_\_ (1 point)  
**Author:** \_\_\_\_\_ (1 point)  
**Source (Name of Magazine):** \_\_\_\_\_ (1 point)  
**Date of Article:** \_\_\_\_\_ (1 point)

**Body:** Answer in complete sentences. (2 points each)

What information is the article about?

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What are the main ideas and supporting details? (A brief summary)

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Where did the event in the article take place? If it doesn't say, make a prediction.

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When did the event take place? If it doesn't say, make a prediction.

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Why do you think the author wrote this article? Who will benefit by reading it and why?

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What do you notice about how the idea development in this article is structured, e.g., cause/effect, compare/contrast, sequence, etc?

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**New Vocabulary Words:** Choose 3 words that you did not know before reading this article; write them down and give a definition in your own words based on your reading. (2 points each)

1.

2.

3.

**Opinion:** Why did you choose this article to read? Explain if and how your thinking about information in the article has changed?

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