



Content Area Literacy Task Force



EKU Writing Project
WRITING TEACHING LEADING

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Complex Text in Simple Terms

Jennifer Bernhard, Literacy Specialist, Clark County Schools

According to literacy leaders Timothy Shanahan, Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, “when teachers understand what makes texts complex, they can better support their students in reading them.” So, let’s first refresh our memories on what makes a text complex.

Text Complexity Defined

1. *Qualitative dimensions of text complexity*; 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.

2. *Quantitative dimensions of text complexity*: 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, which means they are typically **measured by computer software**.

3. *Reader and task considerations*: while the first two elements focus on

the inherent complexity of text, variables specific to particular readers (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to particular tasks (such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed) must also be considered when determining whether a text is appropriate for a given student. Using their professional judgment, experience, knowledge of their students and the subject, **these decisions are best made by teachers**.

The bottom line, then, is that we, as attentive human readers, are the best deciders of what texts our students are reading. And, although we can depend on computer software to give us a quantitative measure, it is up to us to decide whether the quality and content of the text is worthy of investing time and effort into understanding it. Don’t know about you, but the idea of deciding whether a text is worthy, coupled with the belief that students need to build reading stamina by successfully struggling through complex, inconsiderate texts makes me just a little bit uncomfortable. However, I take solace

in the assurance from our nation’s literacy leaders that students should not struggle all the time. Thankfully, engaging students in texts that interest and motivate them remains a best practice.

To explore that idea of balancing successful struggle with interest and motivation, I recommend that you access the following CSSO’s resource, especially the section on text sets: [CCSO Text Complexity](#)

And for those of you who want to check the quantitative value of a text you have chosen to use, I recommend the following websites. You simply copy and paste text into a text box to find its values and, if necessary, you can simplify a text by revising vocabulary and sentence structure without affecting the content. But, you only do that with texts that are not worthy of struggle!

[Readability-Score.com](#)
[Standards-schmandards.com](#)
[Readabilityformulas.com](#)

Next Month: Close Reading

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Coming In Future Editions:

October: Visual Literacy
November: Integrating Subjects
December/January: Digital Literacy
February: Text Complexity
March: On-Demand March Madness
April/May: End of Year Reflective Writing

Vocabulary in Music

Sandy Allen, Music

Understanding how to communicate as a musician or as someone who writes about music is an important part of every child's musical education. It takes that child from being just an observer to becoming a participant in the musical process. This is true across the board; all content areas have a vocabulary and a language that is unique to the subject. As a teacher, my goal is to not only teach my students vocabulary words that they can regurgitate back to me on a quiz, but for them to be able to use these words as they critique, reflect, and talk about music.

On my classroom bulletin board I have a section that I titled, "Words That Make Me Think Like A Musician." As I introduce new vocabulary words, that word is added to the bulletin board. In their writing journals, students write the definition in the vocabulary section. This way they have a ready reference when they need to look up word meanings.

In the back of the writing journals there is a "reflection section." This space is used to write about performances, either their own or others'. As students critique or reflect upon a given performance, they are expected to say more than, "I liked it," or "It was good." They need to use vocabulary appropriate to the task. For example, if they are describing an orchestra performance, they should mention specific instruments and sections in the orchestra. They should be able to describe the mood of the music, tempo, and dynamics with appropriate musical terms. The more opportunities students have to use musical vocabulary, the quicker they are in becoming fluent. They will be thinking like and writing like musicians in no time!

Recommended Reading: Vocabulary in the Content Areas

Collected by Katie McClain, Library Media Specialist

-*Inside Words* by Janet Allen

-*Tools for Content Literacy* by Janet Allen

-*Content Area Reading and Literacy: Succeeding in Today's Diverse Classrooms* by Donna Alvermann, Victoria Gillis, and Stephen Phelps

-*A Handbook of Content Literacy Strategies: 125 Practical Reading and Writing Ideas* by Jean Brown and Elaine Stephens

-*(Re)imagining Content-area Literacy Instruction* edited by Roni Jo Draper
Reading and Writing in Science: Tools to Develop Disciplinary Literacy by Maria C. Grant and Doug Fisher

-*Building Literacy in the Content Areas* by Thomas Gunning

-*Strategies for Content Area Learning* by Jerry Johns and Roberta Berglund

-*Teaching Content Reading and Writing* by Martha Rapp Ruddell

-*35 Strategies for Developing Content Area Vocabulary* by Brenda H. Spencer and Andrea M. Guillaume

Content–Relationship–Procedure

Lisa Antoniou, Science

It has been my experience that the best practice in teaching science vocabulary is to have students write using the words in context. One strategy that does this very well, and in which I have had great success, is the content-relationship-procedure. Muskingum University in Ohio outlines this procedure on their CAL Learning Strategies Database page as below:

“Despite the time required to prepare this strategy, the concept-relationship approach is effective for teaching vocabulary and concepts from science readings. The goal of the procedure is to write a brief paragraph in which the new term is used three times in slightly different contexts. The first sentence may simply define the term; the second might contrast the new term with one that the students already know, while the third instance could be an example of the concept in a concrete situation. The paragraph is then followed by a single multiple choice item” (Walker, 1989, p. 132). Paragraphs may be displayed on the overhead or on handouts in order to introduce a difficult concept or term.

Below is an example of how I have used content-relationship-procedure in my 6th grade science classroom:

May the Force Be With You!

Directions: May the force be with you as you work to write a paragraph using the following vocabulary words:

force
friction
inertia

You and your partner will write a paragraph for each word listed above using the following format.

- Sentence 1: Uses the word in context.
- Sentence 2: Does not use the word, but further explains it.
- Sentence 3: Uses the word and gives an example.
- Sentence 4: Uses the word and defines it.

At the end of the paragraph, a multiple choice item is created to check meaning.

Example:

Approximately 4600 mammal **species** exist on Earth today. Mammals all have common characteristics, such as fur, which allows them to be grouped together. One specific example of a **species** is *Canis familiaris*, which is a domestic dog. A **species** is a group of similar organisms that reproduce more of their own kind.

Species means:

- A. Groups of families that share characteristics
- B. Phyla that create kingdoms
- C. Group of similar organisms that reproduce more of their own kind

Math Words Amanda Pasley Terry, Mathematics

Writing to express understanding is a skill that can be carried throughout a student's educational career. In assisting my students to express understanding of mathematical concepts using appropriate vocabulary I conference with students after they have started writing and the vocabulary has already been taught.

In my classroom the use of a word wall helps students remember words that are important math terms and new words they are learning.

The conferences with my students start by the student explaining what concept they are working on. As we talk about the concept at hand, I ask questions to promote the student's thinking about the vocabulary we have covered.

For example, when a student writes "put it together" we would talk about what sign is used to show what "put it together" means. When the student says, "plus sign" we then move to talking about what the math term for that sign is and what we are doing with the numbers when that sign is present. If that does not work, I ask the student to look at the word wall and find the term that means, "put together." The word wall is not used right away because I want my students to think about what they are trying to say and their understanding of the vocabulary before relying on resources.

Using Vocabulary to Tell the Story Maggie Brewer, Social Studies

I have two writing activities that seem to really pull my students in during our study of World War I. As a social historian, teaching World War I is not one of my strengths. I'm not great at explaining all the tactical maneuvers and how each battle impacted the outcome of the war, but for many students this is where their true love of history lives. So I let the students' enjoyment of military history carry their writing through this assignment.

Students are given two choices. In the first choice they have a list of approximately twenty vocabulary words that are important to the understanding of World War I battles. These include words such as stalemate, barbed wire, trench, dead man's land, trench foot, mustard gas, and machine gun. Using each of these words, they are to write a letter to a loved one left at home and describe their experiences in the war. I provide several guiding questions to engage their thinking such as, "What does the trench look like?", "What does it feel like to be away from home?", and "What do you see, smell, hear?"

I ask that students' letters be one page in length, but often they are longer. Students have so much they want to relate and describe about the war, what went on in battles, and the experiences of the soldiers in the trenches. I find that the boys do a particularly good job describing the use of new weapons, landscapes, and battles. This assignment is always rewarding for me and for students who are eager to have their pieces read and returned with my comments.

The second option, for students who are more artistic, involves creating a journal for a World War I soldier. For this assignment, students have a set of questions for which they need to answer and create drawings on each page. For example, on page one: Draw a tank. Describe how you felt the first time you saw a tank. Describe what it was like to drive a tank. On page two: draw the trench you lived in. Describe the trench. What did it smell like? What sounds did you hear? On page three: draw your two best friends. How did you meet them? What happened to them during the war? Again the student conveys the vocabulary of the time period; they simply do so in a way that is more conducive to their learning style.

Both assignments allow students to learn the vocabulary of the time period in a way that helps them retain the information. Through retention, first by choosing their assignment, then by telling a story or drawing a picture, the students are creating connections and making memories that are deep and long lasting.

Maggie will host
this month's
Twitter Chat!

Join our Twitter Chat! #CALTF
First Tuesday of the Month
6-7 pm EDT

Ideas for Using Content Words in Writing

Rhonda Ortenburger, Social Studies

Teachers collect many tools to build their toolbox of instructional strategies. This month, I have a list of ideas for using writing as a means to build content vocabulary. According to research, students need many interactions with words before they internalize their meaning. Robert J. Marzano, PhD, is cofounder and CEO of Marzano Research Laboratory in Englewood, Colorado. He states, "*Knowledge is stored in two forms: linguistic and nonlinguistically. Research proves that the more we use both systems of representation the better we are able to think and recall knowledge.*" Although these examples are for using content words in **writing**, remember students need exposure to vocabulary through visual and non-linguistic ways as well.

1. Use a term in a 2-3 sentence note/text to a friend.
2. Create a dialogue between two content-area experts using at least three vocabulary words.
3. Write a sentence including a simile or metaphor about a vocabulary term.
4. In 2-3 sentences, explain how three terms are connected or related.
5. Use one of the vocabulary words in a question with another term as an answer.
6. Students write a sentence using the term in context.
7. Students write a 10-word sentence using the term in context.
8. Students create an oral sentence leaving a blank for the term and the class guesses the missing vocabulary word.
9. Students write a sentence using the term as the third or fourth word in the sentence.
10. Students say/write a single sentence using two vocabulary terms in context (to show relationship to one another).

Sample of #5: Question: Why was the Battle of Richmond so important to the Confederacy? **Answer:** The Battle of Richmond was very important to the Confederacy because winning it would force the Union to retreat out of middle Tennessee and other Confederate states.

Links For More Information:

[Smekens Education Idea Library](#)

[NCRESA Six-Step Vocabulary Instruction](#)

[Marzano Research Laboratory](#)

For samples of student work, visit my website **after** September 15th. My website address can be found at: <http://www.madison.kyschools.us/olc/teacher.aspx?s=1359>

This newsletter is a publication of the Eastern Kentucky University Writing Project, Dr. Sally Martin, Director
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- Rhonda Orttenger, Kit Carson Elementary School
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Content Area Vocabulary through Writing in Mathematics
Lee Alan H. Roher, Ed.D., Mathematics

Mathematics students can show understanding through writing. Students' use of appropriate vocabulary can show mastery of mathematical content. I assign a paper for students to compare and contrast concepts regarding arithmetic and geometric sequences and series. With verbal and mathematical representations, students demonstrate knowledge regarding the similarity and the differences of the following topics in regards to Sequences and Series: Sequences vs. Series, Recursive Formula vs. Explicit Formula, Arithmetic vs. Geometric, and Divergent vs. Convergent. In the past, I have given this paper as a culminating assignment.

In the future I will break this assignment into five smaller assignments with the fifth assignment being the combination of the four compare and contrast paragraphs with the addition of an introductory paragraph and a conclusion. In changing this paper to five smaller assignments I can look at each topic paragraph as a formative assessment of the students' knowledge and give the students feedback so that they can edit their work making the final product a better paper.

In this particular assignment, I try to get the students to use some sort of pre-write in the form of a graphic organizer. There are many different organizers available but I try to get my students to use the Top Hat to organize the differences and similarities. The Top Hat organizer uses the top portion of the hat to a list of differ-

Differences	
Similarities	

The pre-write can be handwritten or it can be set up using the table function of a word processor. I require the students to include the organizers in the final product as an appendix.

Students who have difficulty with writing and composing thoughts or typing and composing thoughts can use a speech-to-text program to create their paper.