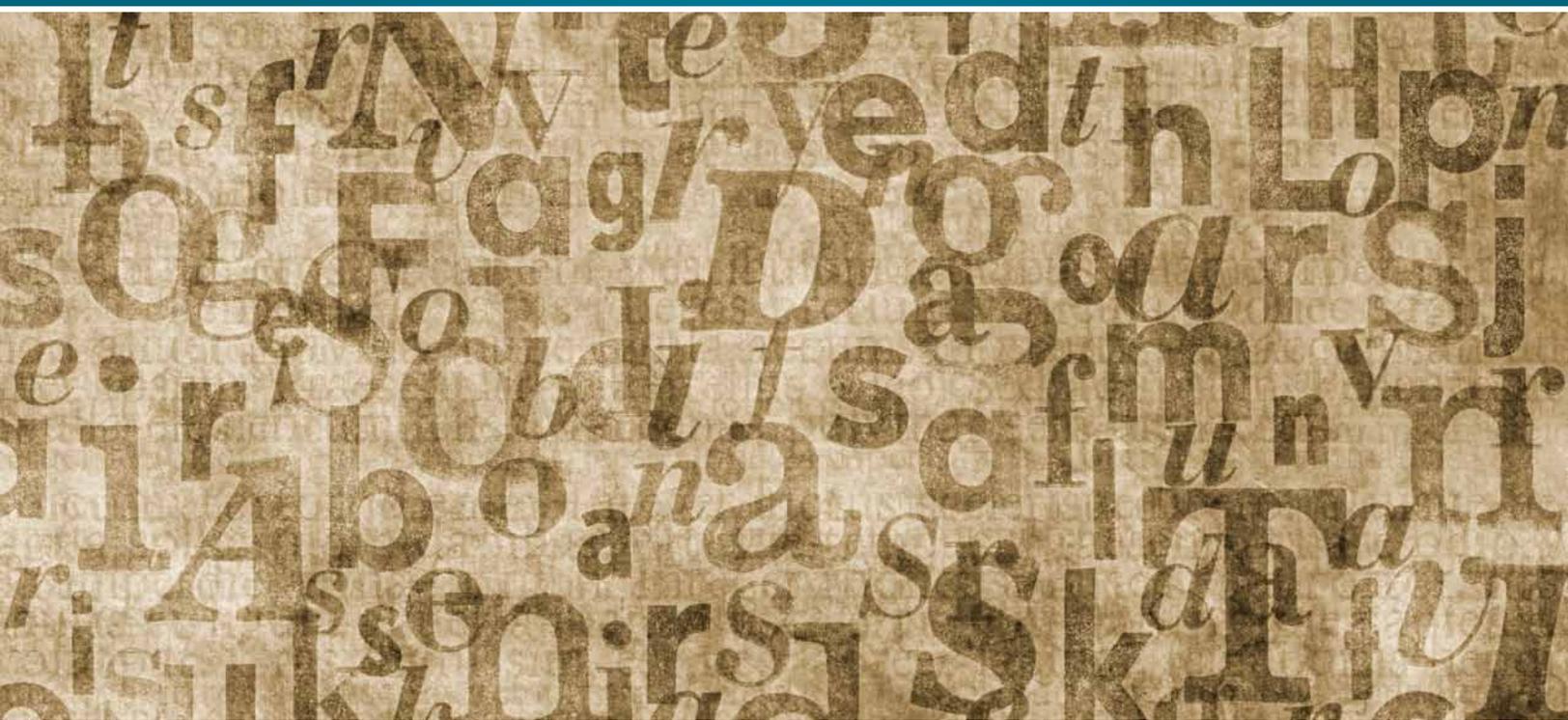


# 5 Easy Strategies for Increasing Text Complexity



by Barbara R. Blackburn



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**A**t the heart of the new Common Core State Standards is a focus on more rigorous expectations for instruction. In particular, the standards emphasize the importance of teaching higher-level texts. Here are five easy strategies for increasing text complexity.

## 1. Consider the Purpose and the Reader

There is a wide range of recommended text materials available, and they are typically labeled with certain levels, such as a grade level or point range. Each is defined by a set of characteristics; therefore, it is important to understand the various considerations when selecting texts before looking at standard text measures.



# 5 Easy Strategies for Increasing Text Complexity

First, think about the student, or reader. Each student brings a variety of important factors to the reading experience, such as his or her current reading ability, prior knowledge and interests, and developmental or age level. These factors can support students while they read, or demotivate them if they are not considered.

Next, there are aspects within the text itself. How difficult is it to comprehend, in terms of readability? Is there specialized vocabulary? Just how complicated is it? Are there supporting features that can help a reader, such as hyperlinks, charts, marginal notes, or pictures? How much white space is on a page? Do headers ask questions to help students look for specific information? And lastly, what is the overall quality of the text? Is it lively, engaging, or relevant?

Finally, consider the purpose or context of the reading experience. In a classroom setting, this is a critical factor, and one that deserves special consideration. Is the student reading and studying independently? What is the expected comprehension level? Students reading fluently should comprehend text at a 90% rate, which allows them to easily move through the text and focus on new information if included. Or, are you using text for instruction, which would require students to learn and apply skills throughout the text? In that case, you may want a comprehension rate closer to 75%.

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## 2. Use Lexiles Only When Appropriate

In the Common Core State Standards, the main tool used for selecting text materials is the Lexile Framework, which defines a reader's ability in relation to the difficulty of text. It allows you to understand a reader's performance, whether on a standardized test or informal assessment through examples of text materials, such as books, newspapers, or magazines the reader can understand, rather than a simple grade range. However, the Lexile Framework is built on a formula that consists of two characteristics: sentence length and word frequency. In other words, texts with longer sentences, which are typically more complex, are more difficult to read and are ranked with a higher Lexile level. Additionally, texts that include words frequently used in our society are easier to read, and are rated with a lower Lexile level. Rather than considering how frequently a word is used within the text, it considers the likelihood a word has been heard or seen before based on its use in the English language.

The main benefit of targeted reading, as defined by Metametrics, is to allow for leveling books along a reading thermometer that allows students to be matched to texts for growth. Since a match expects 75% comprehension, students will experience a level of struggle, and will be required to use strategies to handle the more complex text.

You can find additional information about Lexiles, including a searchable database of texts, at [www.lexile.com](http://www.lexile.com). However, let me caution you that Lexiles should only be a starting point, and should never be the only consideration for text choice. The goal is to choose the right resource for the right reader or readers at that right time. And since Lexiles only consider sentence length and word frequency, text selection choices require professional judgment.

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## 3. Present a Variety of Sources to Show Different Perspectives

A valuable skill for all subject areas and grade levels is to help students see differing perspectives through a variety of sources. As a social studies teacher explained, “Comparing secondary source information to primary source material helps students see what the writer or speaker intended rather than how other writers interpreted him or her.” There are many options for written, audio, and video speeches available on the Internet, such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream,” George W. Bush’s speech just after the events of 9/11, or Susan B. Anthony’s speech on a woman’s right to vote. It’s important to find a speech that suits your subject and the developmental age of your students. Career and technology teachers may wish to use speeches by leaders in specific professions, such as Steve Jobs or Suze Orman. Or if you’ve just read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, use an author interview with Eric Carle about his writing process, and discuss what students learned.

Other options include comparing opinion-based articles with news articles; texts written from different perspectives, such as the “Three Little Pigs” and “The True Story of the Three Little Pigs”; or examples of debates.

## 4. Use Multiple Texts to Add Depth to Your Lessons

In addition to adding perspective, the use of multiple texts allows students to look beyond the surface for more depth of information. For example, after reading the fictional book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, students can read nonfiction online, encyclopedia articles, and/or magazine articles to compare the story to Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights period. You could add another step by reading current newspaper and magazine articles to compare it to Birmingham today, detailing the changes that have occurred.

After reading the classic novel *The Sea Wolf*, by Jack London, students can read articles about schooners and the sealing industry. Instead of simply reading and discussing the story, students are required to use research skills, cite sources, and compare and contrast information from a variety of sources. The new activity requires all students to think at higher levels.

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I often used newspapers in my classrooms. Students would read something that was clearly an opinion (such as an editorial or a letter to the editor) and assume it was factual. Comparing news stories to opinion pieces requires students to analyze and apply information. Similarly, reading a car insurance policy and the state driving laws allows students to see connections between cause (breaking a certain law) and effect (increased insurance rates).

### Suggestions for Multiple Sources of Information

- Books by a particular author to compare style
- Job applications from different companies
- Videos with accompanying news story (local versus national news; station considered “slanted” versus “balanced” station)
- YouTube videos on skateboarding to determine math skills involved

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## 5. Support Students by Layering Meaning

Another simple strategy is to layer the content for students. This is particularly effective with students working below grade level. Students may struggle with the text materials or a standard textbook. Many also do not have the appropriate prior knowledge needed to understand the text they are expected to read. In these cases, finding an easier text on the same topic as a starting point for students is effective.

Reading the easier text first creates a knowledge base of content, and students are exposed to some content-specific vocabulary. The result: students are able to handle the more difficult reading with less frustration. The key to this strategy, however, is for students to move back into more challenging work to ensure growth.

## Conclusion

The CCSS require that teachers pay specific attention to the text complexity of student resources. Considering all aspects of text complexity and providing appropriate instructional support will help students thrive. ■

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## About Barbara R. Blackburn

Dr. Barbara Blackburn has taught early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school students and has served as an educational consultant. She holds a master's degree in school administration and is certified as a school principal in North Carolina. She received her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. In 2006, she received the award for Outstanding Junior Professor at Winthrop University. She recently left her position at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to write and speak full-time. In addition to presenting at state and national conferences, she also leads workshops for teachers and administrators. She can be reached through her website, [www.barbarablackburnonline.com](http://www.barbarablackburnonline.com), or via e-mail at [bcgroup@gmail.com](mailto:bcgroup@gmail.com).

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