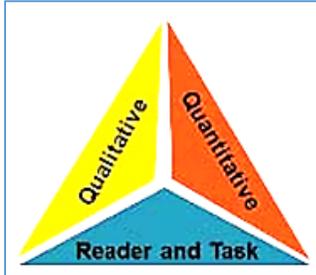


Complex Text – Part 2: Qualitative Considerations

In part 1 of this series, we looked at what is meant by “complex” text and why it matters in student learning. We also recognized that text complexity is comprised of several factors: **quantitative**, **qualitative** and **reader/task** considerations, and looked more closely at quantitative approaches to determining a text’s complexity.



Quantitative measures must not be the sole consideration when selecting grade-appropriate texts, however. **Qualitative** considerations are harder to measure than quantitative ones and require a certain amount of educator judgment, but they must be given at least equal consideration. For example, *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner clocks in with a Lexile of 870, right about mid-year of grade 5. Yet it is unlikely that many fifth graders, however easily they may decode the words, will be able to fully make sense of this novel or any of Faulkner’s work. Because of its qualitative features, this is a text that more appropriately belongs in grades 11 or 12.

Qualitative considerations include: genre, format and layout, cohesion, levels of meaning, reasoning needed, requisite prior knowledge, tone and author’s purpose.

- Physical features such as type size and font, margin width, white space, headings and subheadings, drawings and other graphic devices affect the ease with which we are able to make sense of text.
- In general, a story will offer less complexity than a poem or a work of non-fiction because we are very familiar with the structure of story. However, stories that jump around in time, use multiple narrators or points of view, or leave a great deal to be inferred will represent a greater challenge.
- Writing quality and style also play a role. Where ideas are logically organized, concisely expressed and clearly signposted with the aid of transitions, even complex or abstract thoughts can be accessible. Where those qualities are missing, we need to put forth more cognitive effort.
- The degree of critical thinking and prior knowledge needed to understand a text also contribute to its complexity. Multiple levels of meaning or purpose and use of metaphor, allusion or satire are among the features that can make a text more challenging to understand.

This helpful resource from the Aspen Institute provides a framework for considering text complexity: [Text Complexity Analysis Worksheet](#).

- In Part 3, we will examine the third factor in evaluating text complexity: **reader and task considerations**.