

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the *Voices from the Middle* editors present:



Text Complexity and the Common Core Standards:

Q&A with Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey

The Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts have been adopted by a majority of states and will be implemented in the next two years. The CCSS are intended to be “fewer, clearer, and higher” and articulate a pathway to prepare college- and career-ready learners. One element of the CCSS is text complexity, requiring students to read and understand demanding literary and informational texts. We had a conversation with Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey recently on the topic of text complexity and its implications for [NCTE](#) members.

Q: First off, what is meant by *text complexity*?



Fisher: It’s a multidimensional measure of the ideas, concepts, language, and structures that together make a text easier or more difficult for a student to read and understand. There are three elements to consider when matching a text to a reader: the *qualitative aspects* such as the language and knowledge demands; the *quantitative aspects* that measure things like word and sentence length; and *reader and text considerations* like the student’s motivation, content knowledge, reading ability, and purpose.

Q: Why has *text complexity* received such attention in the CCSS?



Frey: There’s been a concern in many quarters about whether students are moving through increasingly complex texts throughout their schooling. We all recognize the importance of instructional scaffolds as a tool for increasing a learner’s ability to read, write, and discuss. The CCSS spotlights another kind of scaffold—the text itself—as a further means for extending a learner’s cognitive reach. The CCSS refers to a “staircase effect” that occurs when students read and discuss texts that are more challenging.

Q: But there are concerns about this, too. Can you talk about that?



Fisher: The danger is that there's a possibility that the conversation about text complexity will get reduced to a booklist of required readings without attention to the instruction that needs to accompany them. It's not simply a matter of passing out books and telling students to read the next chapter and be prepared to discuss it tomorrow. Complex texts require that teachers model and think aloud, and use guided instruction to strategically question, prompt, and cue. In addition, students need time to engage collaboratively with one another to clarify their understanding. It's not just moving directly to independent reading. That's a recipe for failure.



Frey: Another concern is a regression to the whole class novel as a means for instruction. The practices we know to be effective, such as differentiating texts and using small discussion groups through book clubs and reciprocal teaching, haven't changed. Text complexity pushes us as educators to think about the ways we can ensure that students are coming into contact with literary and informational texts that challenge their thinking. However, it doesn't mean that we should disregard what we know about good instruction and curriculum development.

Q: That might be the biggest question of all—you can differentiate?



Fisher: Of course! Advanced readers need opportunities to interact with texts that continue to challenge their thinking, and those that struggle with the text need additional supports and scaffolds, such as those offered through guided instruction and collaborative learning.



Frey: For instance, students who struggle may be reading and discussing a short piece of text repeatedly to build their capacity to read closely. They should have informational texts that build their background knowledge for understanding literary texts.



Fisher: And all students need lots of opportunities to participate in text-based discussions that require them to return to the text to provide evidence, support claims, and ask questions of the author. We need to make sure that personal connections are an invitation into a text, but do not represent the end point.



Frey: I think David Coleman, project editor for the CCSS ELA standards said it best: An important goal is to teach them to “read like detectives and write like reporters.” Engaging with complex texts gives students opportunities to flex these mental muscles.

More information about text complexity can be found in Appendix A of the CCSS ELA standards at www.corestandards.org.

Voices from the Middle is a publication of NCTE.

Editors: Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp

For more information about NCTE or *Voices* visit

www.ncte.org or www.ncte.org/journals/vm.

Call 877-369-6283 or e-mail membership@ncte.org.