

SELECTING TEXTS AND TASKS FOR CONTENT AREA READING AND LEARNING

Douglas Fisher ■ Nancy Frey

Learning about the physical, social, and biological world is an important aspect of the curriculum in elementary and middle school classrooms. Students are expected to read, write, and think about history and other social sciences, physical and life sciences, and a wide range of technical subjects. From the time they enter school until they transition into high school and college, students should be immersed in the world of information. That's not to say that narrative texts should be neglected, but rather that informational texts are an important aspect of the curriculum. Unfortunately, in the push to increase students' reading proficiency, some schools and districts have cut down, or entirely removed, blocks of time for social studies and science (e.g., Howard, 2003).

We see this as wrongheaded because informational texts, such as those used in history and

science, facilitate students' reading development, help shape their understanding of the world, and build their habits of inquiry (Maloch & Horsey, 2013). Fortunately, helping students learn from informational texts, not just textbooks, has received a great deal of attention in the last decade. These efforts are intended to improve literacy skills by focusing on content area vocabulary knowledge, study skills, and the use of tools such as graphic organizers and note-taking guides (Altieri, 2011). These are valuable and important ways to build students' habits for interacting with, and understanding, informational texts.

Douglas Fisher is a professor at San Diego State University, California, USA; e-mail dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu.

Nancy Frey is a professor at San Diego State University, California, USA; e-mail nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu.

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In recent years, there has been a push to ensure that readers are engaged with significantly more complex informational texts than they were expected to read in the past. In part, this is because of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). But increased expectations for reading performance are not limited to Common Core states. At a meeting Doug (first author) attended in 2014 in the Philippines, there was extended discussion about increasing the complexity of the texts students were reading. The same is true for former and non-Common Core states. Helping students climb the staircase of text complexity is a valued goal worldwide. Reaching that goal starts with text selection. However, informational text selection involves much more than simply scanning a document to determine whether it matches the topic of study, then determining the vocabulary terms to teach and the graphic organizer to pair with it. In Appendix A, the CCSS authors (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) recommend a three-part model for text selection:

1. Qualitative Dimensions of Text Complexity: 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: 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, and are thus typically measured by computer software

3. Reader and Task Considerations: 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 (p. 4)

Without an understanding of what the text has to offer, who will be reading it, and what the task will be, teachers can be left wondering why a lesson didn't work. This reminder is important because each of these parts must be considered in selecting texts worthy of instruction. When teachers analyze texts qualitatively, they can identify teaching points and develop text-dependent questions to guide readers. Figure 1 contains information about various aspects of qualitative text complexity that can be used to identify areas requiring instruction when selecting informational texts for content area reading. Some texts are lower on the quantitative scale but contain important qualitative dimensions that students must be taught. Other texts have higher quantitative text complexity levels but are accessible for students. Once a text has been selected and the teaching points have been identified, teachers have to determine the type of instruction necessary to ensure student success.

We'd like to add one other consideration for selecting an informational text, and that is the extent to which a discipline-specific set of literacies

is needed. There has been increased attention to the role of disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary thinking as students move beyond the primary grades. For instance, informational science texts often contain more nominalizations (the transformation of verbs and adjectives into nouns) that tax readers' comprehension (Fang, 2012). For example, *transformation* is a nominalization of the verb *transform*. Primary source documents such as newspaper articles and editorials require a historian's discipline-specific literacy practice of sourcing and contextualizing (Wineburg, 1991). It may even be that within a discipline, there are differences in thinking. Anthropologists, for example, may have subtle but important differences in their thinking when compared with other social scientists such as economists, sociologists, and geographers.

Importantly, disciplinary approaches to content area learning begin in elementary classrooms as teachers model their own thinking and engage students in collaborative learning. As Shanahan and Shanahan (2014) noted, "We should teach students the way reading in various fields differs rather than only expecting students to apply the same general lens across everything they read" (p. 637). This means that teachers need to guide students' thinking around a history text differently than they do a scientific text.

In this evolving area of research and practice, teachers move beyond general approaches to literacy, such as note-taking or using graphic organizers, and focus on the ways in which knowledge

Figure 1 Qualitative Factors of Text Complexity for Informational Texts

Component	Aspects	When a Text Is Complex ...
Levels of Meaning and Purpose	• Density and complexity	Many ideas come at the reader, or there are multiple levels of meaning, some of which are not clearly stated.
	• Figurative language	There are many literary devices (e.g., metaphors, personification) or devices that the reader is not familiar with (e.g., symbolism, irony) as well as idioms or clichés.
Structure	• Purpose	The purpose is either not stated or purposefully withheld. The reader has to determine the theme or message.
	• Genre	The genre is unfamiliar, or the author bends the rules of the genre.
Language Conventuality and Clarity	• Organization	It does not follow traditional structures, such as problem/solution, cause/effect, compare/contrast, sequence or chronology, and it has rich descriptions.
	• Narration	The narrator is unreliable, changes during the course of the text, or has a limited perspective for the reader.
	• Text features	It has fewer signposts, such as headings, bold words, margin notes, font changes, or footnotes.
	• Graphics	Visual information is not repeated in the text itself, but the graphics or illustrations are essential to understanding the main ideas.
Knowledge Demands	• Standard English and variations	It includes variations of standard English, such as regional dialects or vernaculars, that the reader is not familiar with.
	• Register	Its language is archaic, formal, scholarly, or fixed in time.
Knowledge Demands	• Background knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her personal life experience.
	• Prior knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond what he or she has been formally taught.
	• Cultural knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her cultural experiences and may include references to archaic or historical cultures.
	• Vocabulary	The words used are representations of complex ideas that are unfamiliar to the reader, or they are domain-specific and not easily understood using context clues or morphological knowledge.

Note. Adapted from Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2012). *Text complexity: Raising rigor in reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

is represented in a given area of study, such as science and history. We see these discipline-specific approaches to literacy as valuable guidelines for teachers as they plan units of study in content area learning. Further, a selected text should guide the type of instruction that students receive as well as the

tasks students are asked to complete as a result of having read the text.

Determining the Worthiness of the Informational Text

Locating appropriate texts for content area reading and learning is hard. The

text has to fit with the content standards being taught, provide accurate information, and be interesting. Texts used in science, social studies, and other disciplines should have central ideas that are developed with appropriate details and discernible organizational structures. These texts should also have a clear point of view or purpose, and if an argument is made within the text, these claims should be supported by evidence. Additionally, the selected texts should be crafted such that they can further serve as a mentor text for the writing students will do. In other words, the texts should meet quality standards for writing and provide relevant and appropriate information in a compelling way.

Avoiding Text Selection Mishaps

Unfortunately, some efforts designed to aid in the selection of appropriate texts are misguided. Perhaps the most common mishap involves limiting the discussion of a text selection to quantitative values without regard for a text's qualitative values or worthiness as a means for fostering disciplinary thinking and writing. We have heard more than one administrator tell a teacher that the selected text was not appropriate because it was not in the correct Lexile range for students in that grade level. To us, this represents a new form of censorship. Preventing students from reading a text that is not in the grade band required by policymakers is just as dangerous as banning books that touch on racial issues, unpopular lifestyles, religious affiliations, witchcraft, political bias, or a host of other reasons that have been used to remove reading choices from students. We're not suggesting that adult themes be portrayed in children's literature or that every child needs access to every text. But limiting students' access to a text because of its

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level seems especially risky and smacks of a new form of paternalism.

Text selection mishaps can also occur when students are restricted from access to a text because it is not at their level. The historical perspective on this is rather like Goldilocks. Texts couldn't be too easy or too hard. As a teacher once commented, “I'm looking for that sweet spot where informational texts are challenging but not frustrating.” Previous efforts to find the sweet spot focused on leveling classroom libraries so that students could read “just right” books, meaning texts that were matched to students' current reading level. We both remember entire staff development days spent on leveling classroom libraries, placing colored dots on books and then teaching students about their reading level. Doug even remembers saying to a student, “That's a green dot book, but you're an orange dot reader. Maybe you should try a different one.”

At the time, educators used a single dimension—quantitative text complexity—to match readers with texts. Further, a student's ability to handle a text was measured according to oral reading accuracy. But teachers should be cautious about using historical percentages to identify frustrational, instructional, and independent texts (e.g., Betts, 1946). We explored problems associated with this practice in a previous column (Fisher & Frey, 2014) and share the concern of many other

researchers that the foundations of this approach are shaky indeed. But asking students to read easy texts while the teacher is standing there ready to scaffold doesn't make any more sense than sending students home with texts they cannot possibly read on their own. What is needed is to match the task and accompanying instruction required.

Aligning Task and Instruction With the Selected Text

The gradual release of responsibility framework provides general guidelines that teachers can use to identify the instructional support necessary for students to be successful (e.g., Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Some instructional moves require extensive support from the teacher while others do not. Our analysis of the CCSS suggests that there are three major categories of instructional arrangements that can be used: teacher-led, peer-led, and independent.

For teacher-led instructional events, such as read-alouds, shared readings, guided reading with older readers, and close readings, the text should be fairly complex, given that there is an adult who can scaffold students' thinking as needed using a range of supports such as think-alouds, text-dependent questions, or visuals. For peer-led instructional events, such as Reciprocal Teaching, jigsaw, and ReQuest, the text should also be fairly complex, given that there is peer support and that students engage in collaborative conversations. In

each of these situations, the groups are intentionally formed and roles are clear. Argumentation and investigation is of major importance as students collaborate to determine what the text means.

For independent learning, the text does not have to be as complex as a text that might be used in teacher-led or peer-led tasks. Students should be reading widely to develop their background knowledge and vocabulary about the topic under investigation. Students should also be encouraged to read things that they want to read, some of which may be below their actual reading level and some of which may be beyond their current level. After all, motivation and interest are important factors that can mitigate students' average reading level. All learners should have a range of reading experiences with a range of texts designed to improve their content area understanding and help them climb the staircase of text complexity. As noted in Appendix A of the CCSS, “Students need opportunities to stretch their reading abilities but also to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of easy, fluent reading within them, both of which the Standards allow for” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 9).

Producers of Information

We want students to be inspired by their content area learning such that they produce, rather than simply consume, information. History, science, and other subjects should light a fire for students and make them want to take action based on the texts they read. Our

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analysis of the CCSS as well as several other state and international sets of standards suggest that the answer is already available to us. When students read a text deeply and understand it well, they can become producers of information. A vital aspect of disciplinary learning occurs when students apply content knowledge using formats that are authentic to the field of study. For example, historians engage in debate in order to arrive at new understandings about events in history. In a similar fashion, young social studies students learn about the discipline through debate with their peers about questions that are not easily resolved, such as the practice of celebrating explorers even as we acknowledge the suffering those explorers caused.

Some informational texts can inspire further investigation and research. Middle school life science classes can learn about viruses and chains of infection by studying the Ebola crisis confronted in so many parts of the world in late 2014, which should inspire further investigation about current governmental policies and medical practices to stem the spread of the disease. An investigation can also inspire the presentation of information, such as students sharing what they have learned about how family celebrations like weddings and birthdays are enjoyed across the globe.

Perhaps the obvious choice for informational text inspiration is in writing. The Literacy Design Collaborative has developed a bank of writing task templates for grades K–5 that provides teachers with frames for developing informational writing tasks that require students to write from textual sources. There are so many more options for students to become inspired and to share their understanding with the biological, social, and physical world. Figure 2

Figure 2 What Can the Text Inspire?		
Task	Definition	Example
Presentation	Students use a software program such as Keynote or PowerPoint to share information with others	Having read <i>Animal Disguises</i> (Weber, 2004), a group of fourthgraders developed a Prezi (www.prezi.com) focused on different ways that animals camouflage themselves. They used Screencast-O-Matic (www.screencast-o-matic.com) to record an oral presentation to accompany the visuals and loaded the product into their class Wiki.
Debate	A formal conversation in which some students take the pro side while others take the con side, and they engage in argumentation to determine which side produces a more convincing argument	A group of fifthgraders organized a debate based on a question they had raised during their investigation of enslaved people in the United States: Should schools that were named after slave owners be renamed? Students agreed to draw pro and con cards randomly so that they could have an honest conversation about the topic.
Writing	Responding to a prompt that allows students to explore the topic as they compose	First graders brainstormed a list of topics related to bats that they had learned about: echolocation, baby bats, eating habits of bats, the fact that bats are mammals, and so on. Each student selected a topic on which he or she knew at least three details to include in the paper.
Socratic Seminar	A structured class discussion with specific guidelines, including authentic dialogue around several open-ended questions	After reading several texts about plastic refuse (e.g., Newman, 2014) and specifically the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, including an article from National Geographic (education.nationalgeographic.com/education/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/?ar_a=1), the sixth-grade students organized a Socratic Seminar to focus on their personal responsibility for reducing debris.
Research and Investigation	Conducting individual or group research, including reading widely to answer a question of one's own design	As part of their social studies block, a group of third graders had learned about American heroes who took risks to secure the freedom of the American people. From their textbook, students learned about the major contributions of specific individuals (e.g., Anne Hutchinson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass). When they asked their teacher why these people chose to act, a new investigation was begun. Students worked in groups to identify the background for each person and his or her life situation so that they could hypothesize why each chose to act.

contains a list of possible tasks that students may be inspired to complete as part of their content area reading and learning.

Conclusion

We strongly support the increased reading expectations for students and believe that they can be reached. But

increasing the amount of informational text—without concomitant attention to instruction and disciplinary literacies—will not result in improved learning. Readers need expert instruction in complex texts and opportunities to read widely. Simply assigning students complex texts to read on their own will not work any more than telling them just

to read easy books. Neither will simply having hard books in the classroom change students' achievement. Thus far, we have no evidence that osmosis through the presence of complex texts is an effective approach for improving reading performance. What does work is careful selection of texts and the associated instruction required of those selected texts. As students invest themselves in these informational texts, look for opportunities to encourage ways to inspire further investigation, discussion, and writing. By fully engaging in content area literacies, teachers can bring the world into the classroom.

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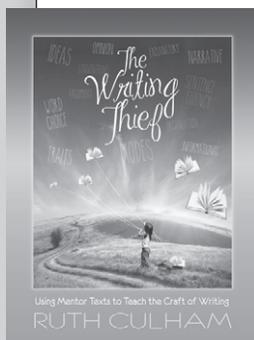
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