Text Complexity: Why All Three Measures Matter

With each day and each school year that passes, children improve their reading proficiency by engaging with increasingly difficult texts. For educators, selecting age- and grade-appropriate texts can be challenging due to differences in students’ reading abilities, motivation and prior knowledge (Fountas and Pinnell).

To assist with this task, EBSCO offers quantitative text complexity measures in several of its school products, including Core Collections™ and NoveList®. However, this measurement is just one of three that must be considered when choosing reading materials for your students.

**Quantitative Measures**

Scientific, computerized methods of matching readers with texts based on level of difficulty (e.g., word frequency and sentence length) include The Lexile® Framework, Accelerated Reader™, The Fountas & Pinnell Text Level Gradient™ and others.

**Qualitative Measures**

The characteristics of a text (structure, language clarity and conventions, levels of meaning and prior knowledge demands) help educators to determine text complexity.

**Reader and Task**

Reader variables (background knowledge, experience, motivation and interest) and task variables (purpose and difficulty of the task assigned and questions posed) are best measured by educators.

These variables have the greatest impact in measuring text complexity. For example, a text with a low Lexile level can be challenging for a student whose prior knowledge of the topic is limited. A text becomes even more complex when the teacher asks the student to read the text, draw a conclusion and write a critical essay to support that conclusion using evidence from the text (Nesi).

Sources:


Below we have compiled text complexity measures for three popular books. These examples show how all three aspects come together to give a full understanding of a book’s complexity.

**Finding Winnie**

- **Target audience:** Lower grades (K-3)
- **Number of pages:** 56
- **Genre:** Nonfiction

**Quantitative Measures**
- Lexile = AD590L
- Accelerated Reader: IL = LG, BL = 3.4, AR Points = 0.5
- Fountas & Pinnell = I-P

**Qualitative Measures**
- Prior knowledge of Winnie the Pooh character
- Understanding/recognition of “story within a story”
- Sentence structure

**Reader and Task**
- **Reader:** Young elementary students who have heard *A House at Pooh Corner* (read aloud)
- **Task:** Identify the touchpoints between the bear in *Finding Winnie* and the fictional Winnie the Pooh (compare and contrast)

**Brown Girl Dreaming**

- **Target audience:** Middle grades (4-8)
- **Number of pages:** 240
- **Genre:** Memoir

**Quantitative Measures**
- Lexile = 990L
- Accelerated Reader: IL = MG, BL = 5.3, AR Points = 5.0
- Fountas & Pinnell = O-V, U-Z

**Qualitative Measures**
- Book is written in free verse poetry versus traditional prose
- Use of figurative language (e.g., simile, metaphor and alliteration)
- Themes (poverty, racism, family and friendship, coming of age, identity, finding voice through writing, power of dreams)

**Reader and Task**
- **Reader:** Older elementary students (independent readers)
- **Task:** Consider the setting (World War I) and identify examples of how the book reflects life during that time period.

**Of Mice and Men**

- **Target audience:** Upper grades (9-12)
- **Number of pages:** 118
- **Genre:** Fiction

**Quantitative Measures**
- Lexile = 580L
- Accelerated Reader: IL = UG, BL = 4.5, AR Points = 4.0
- Fountas & Pinnell = I-P

**Qualitative Measures**
- Prior knowledge of setting (California’s Salinas Valley during the Great Depression) and the experience of migrant workers in the 1930s
- Literary devices used (foreshadowing, irony, symbolism)
- Themes (friendship, responsibility to others, loneliness, belonging, respect for old age, right vs. wrong, the effects of oppression and abuse, the American Dream)

**Reader and Task**
- **Reader:** Middle or high school students
- **Task:** Create a plot diagram or storyboard of events in the novel, including the exposition (and conflict), rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

- **Reader:** High school students
- **Task:** Write an analytical essay that examines a theme in the novel.