A Beginner's Guide to Text Complexity

by Sheena Hervey & Ryan Spencer

How is reading complex text like lifting weights? Just as it's impossible to build muscle without weight or resistance, it's impossible to build robust reading skills without reading challenging text.

– Shanahan, Fisher & Frey

The New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards (2017) outline the importance of teaching a range of texts, including focusing on the complexity of reading the words on the page, as well as the complexity of building language and knowledge.

The importance of increasing the complexity of texts that students read and the need for teachers to better understand what makes the texts challenging arose out of research that showed nearly half of the students graduating high school need some kind of remediation to cope with the reading required in college and during their careers.

As students move through grades, they are faced with texts that are increasingly longer and more complex in terms of the vocabulary used, sentence structure and text organization. In middle and high school, the texts present greater conceptual challenges, and may include more detailed graphic representations, demanding a much greater ability for the reader to synthesize information.

Central to instruction with complex texts is the notion that the teacher is able to match students' texts and tasks to promote student learning. Teachers need to know whether students can independently read the range and complexity of grade level discipline-specific materials, and if not, what supports and strategies they need. To do this, teachers need to have information on:

- Their students as readers
- The complexity of the texts they are using with the students, i.e. supports and challenges
- The nature of the tasks they set (how students are going to interact with the text) and the level of support the teachers will provide

This guide is designed to help teachers to determine the complexity of the texts they use.

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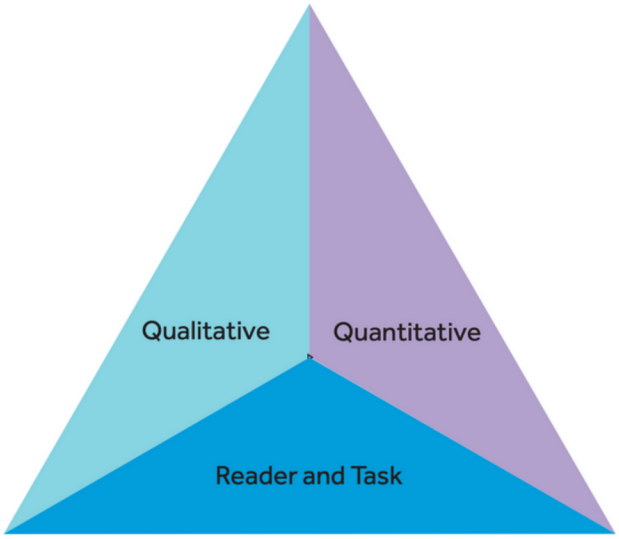
What do we mean by Text Complexity?

There is no exact science for determining the complexity of a text. Nor is there a single source of information that can accurately summarize the complexity of the text. Teachers need to use their professional judgment as they take a range of factors into consideration.

Three Part Model for Text Complexity



1. Qualitative Measures

The qualitative measures of text complexity requires an informed judgment on the difficulty of the text by considering a range of factors. The Standards use purpose or levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, as well as the knowledge demands as measures of text difficulty.

2. Quantitative Measures

Quantitative measures of text complexity use factors such as sentence and word length and the frequency of unfamiliar words to calculate the difficulty of the text, assigning a single measure (grade level equivalent, number, Lexile etc). There are many formulas to calculate text difficulty and, while they provide a guide, the readability or difficulty level of a text can vary depending on which formulas or measures are used.

3. Reader and Task

The third measure looks at what the student brings to the text and the tasks that are assigned. Teachers need to use their knowledge of their students and texts to match texts to particular students and tasks.

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How do we determine the complexity of texts?

The Next Generation ELA Standards includes a clear focus on requiring students to engage with complex texts. This means teachers need to be familiar with the level of complexity expected for their grades and how these compare to the complexity of the texts they use in their classes. Several considerations should guide teachers in selecting these texts.

Quantitative Measures

The qualitative measures provide a very useful guide in determining the complexity of texts. They are, however, not sufficient when used in isolation. Most publishers give grade band equivalents, or Lexile level, for their texts. A book with a Lexile of 1200 will be considerably more complex than one with a 770 Lexile. What the quantitative measure cannot give is the nature of the complexity.

Qualitative Factors for Describing Complexity

It is the qualitative measures that provide valuable information when making decisions about the complexity of the text and how it can best be used with students. The Next Generation ELA Standards identify a range of factors that interact to contribute to the overall complexity. Rubrics have been developed for both literary and informational texts that include descriptors for:

- Layout
- Purpose and meaning
- Text structure
- Language features
- Knowledge demands

Not all descriptors in each category will necessarily occur together at each level of complexity. A text may have very simple vocabulary and short, simple sentences, but still be complex because of the subtle ideas that are expressed.

What about the reader and the task?

Qualitative and quantitative measures describe the complexity within the text. The third part of the diagram looks at students and how we expect them to interact with the text. In any class, there will be a range in the students' ability to read complex texts. Teachers will need to use their professional judgment when making decisions about what texts to use and how they should be used. This professional judgment is dependent on the teachers:

- Knowing their students as readers
- Understanding the complexity of the texts
- Being able to use a range of instructional approaches flexibly

Tasks, like texts, become more complex as students consider ideas and information in different ways. There is a "gear shift" from locating and evaluating topical information to locating, evaluating, and synthesizing information from several different sources.

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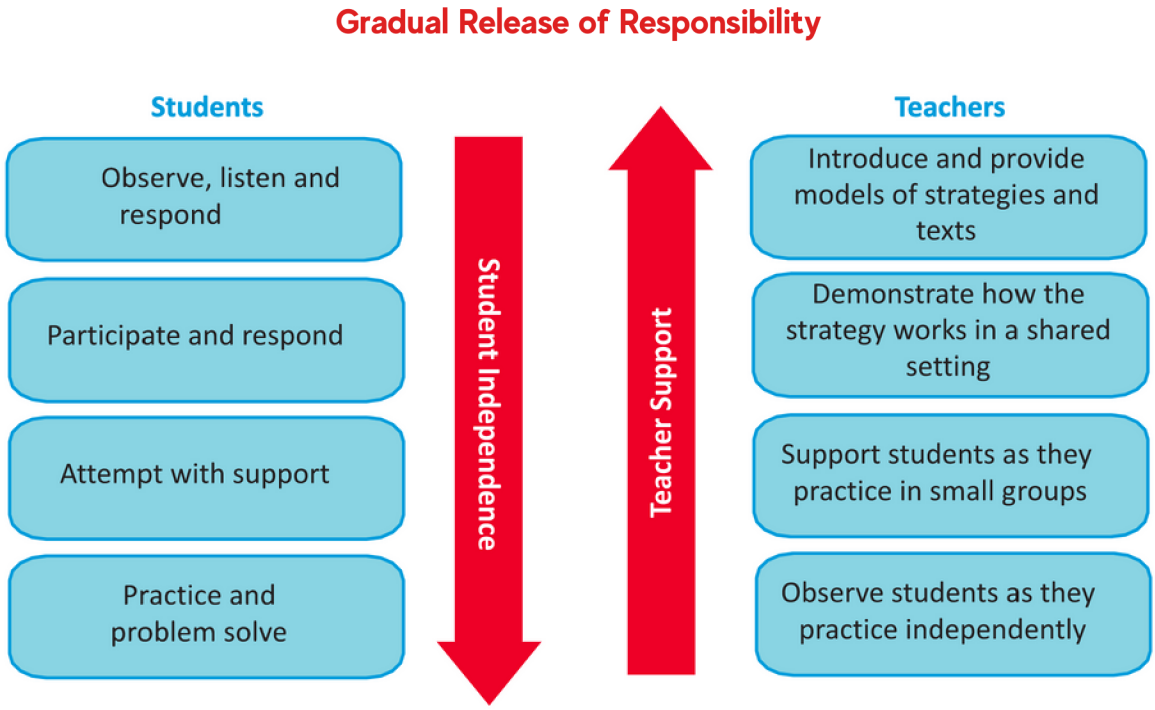
Determining the Supports & Challenges

The more complex the text, the more support students will need. Students are introduced to increasingly complex texts throughout middle and high school. This is done through a gradual release of responsibility where complex texts are introduced in the most supportive context through reading to students and shared reading.



Students must actively engage with complex texts in order to comprehend what they are reading. This requires commitment and risk taking on the part of the reader.

Students will not put this amount of effort into texts that are dull and uninteresting or where they see no value in the tasks assigned.

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Using Rubrics to Identify Text Complexity

A common challenge for teachers is determining the complexity of a text and deciding what strategies and supports students will need to successfully read the text. While publishers often give recommended grade levels, or Lexile levels, for texts, these are insufficient when used in isolation. Teachers still need to make decisions about the nature of the complexity of the texts they are using. While many teachers can tell that a text is complex, describing precisely what makes it complex is much more difficult.

The follow rubric was designed to support teachers in:

- Developing a common language to describe and talk about texts
- Identifying the nature of the complexity of texts by using the indicators

There are a range of qualitative factors that can be used in conjunction with a teacher's professional judgment in order to match texts and tasks to readers. The rubric is designed to guide teachers to use these factors, while also considering the layout of the text.

Layout of the text: Is the look and layout of the text that students react to first. Small, closely packed, uninterrupted text will put many readers off. The size of the font, layout of the text, use of illustrations, graphics, glossaries and signposting within the text can provide support or challenges for readers, depending on how they are used.

Purpose of informational texts and meaning in literary texts: Informational texts that have the single purpose of conveying factual information are going to be easier to read than texts that require examining or evaluating theoretical and contested information. In literary text, content that has several levels and competing elements of meaning pose challenges for students to identify, separate and interpret the context, compared to texts with only one level of meaning that is explicitly stated. Many literacy texts have obvious themes, while others have implicit, subtle, often ambiguous themes that are revealed over the entirety of the text.

Text Structure: Text structure takes into account how the ideas are organized. Texts that are chronological tend to be less complex than those that are non linear. Literary texts that provide challenges for readers are often intricately organized in regard to elements such as a narrative viewpoint, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines, and complex detail.

Language Features: Language features include vocabulary used, the sentence structure, and the style used by the writer. Informational texts that have complex sentences, with dense conceptual content, high nominalization, and includes extensive academic vocabulary, will be far more difficult to read than texts with simple sentences, and familiar vocabulary. In literary texts, the extensive use of figurative or literary language such as metaphors, analogies, and connotative language will add to the complexity of a text.

Knowledge Demands: The prior knowledge that a reader brings to the text is a very important consideration when selecting texts. Not all descriptors in each criteria will necessarily occur together at each level of complexity. A text may have very simple vocabulary and short simple sentences, yet still be complex because the ideas expressed are subtle and require sophistication on the part of the reader. Two rubrics have been developed to support teachers: one for literary texts and one for informational texts.

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Text Complexity Rubric				
	Simple Texts	**Somewhat Simple Texts**	**Complex Texts**	**Very Complex Texts**
Layout	Consistent placement of text, regular word and line spacing, often large plain font	May have longer passages of uninterrupted text, often plain font	Longer passages of uninterrupted text may include columns or other variations in layout, often smaller more elaborate font	Very long passages of uninterrupted text that may include columns or other variations in layout, often small densely packed print
	Extensive illustrations that directly support and help interpret the written text	A range of illustrations that support selected parts of the text	A few illustrations that support the text	Minimal illustrations that support the text
	Supportive signposting and enhancements	Reduced signposting and enhancements	Minimal signposting and/or enhancements	Integrated signposting conforming to literary devices. No enhancements
Purpose and Meaning	Purpose usually stated explicitly in the title or in the beginning of the text	Purpose tends to be revealed early in the text, but may be conveyed with some subtlety	Purpose is implicit and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	Purpose implicit or subtle, is sometimes ambiguous and revealed over the entirety of the text
	One level of meaning	More than one level of meaning, with levels clearly distinguished from each other	Several levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify/separate	Several levels and competing elements of meaning that are difficult to identify/ separate and interpret
	Theme is obvious and revealed early in the text	Theme is clear and revealed early in the text, but may be conveyed with some subtlety	Theme may be implicit or subtle, is sometimes ambiguous and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	Theme is implicit or subtle, is often ambiguous, and is revealed over the
Structure	The organization of the text is clear, chronological and/or easy to predict	The organization of the text may have additional characters, two or more storylines and is occasionally difficult to predict	The organization of the text may include, subplots, time shifts and more complex characters	The organization of the text is intricate with regard to elements such as narrative viewpoint, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail
	Connections between events or ideas are explicit and clear	Connections among events or ideas are sometimes implicit or subtle	Connections among events or ideas are often implicit or subtle	Connections among events or ideas are implicit or subtle throughout the text
	One text type is evident	Includes different text types	Includes different text types of varying complexity	Includes sustained complex text types and hybrid or non-linear texts
Language Features	Mainly simple sentences	Simple and compound sentences with some more complex constructions	Many complex sentences with increased subordinate phrases and clauses	Many complex sentences, often containing intricate detail or concepts
	Simple, literal language	Mainly literal, common language	Some figurative or literary language	Much figurative or literary language such as metaphor, analogy and connotative language
	Vocabulary is mostly familiar	Some unfamiliar vocabulary	Includes much new vocabulary and some domain specific (content) vocabulary	Includes extensive unfamiliar vocabulary, and possibly archaic language
Knowledge Demands Fiction	Little assumed personal experience or cultural knowledge	Some assumed personal experience and/ or cultural knowledge	Much assumed personal experience and/ or cultural knowledge	Extensive, demanding, assumed personal experience and/or cultural knowledge
	Simple ideas	Both simple and more complicated ideas	A range of recognizable ideas and challenging concepts	Many new ideas and/or complex, challenging concepts

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The organization of the text is intricate with regard to elements such as narrative viewpoint, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail

Connections among events or ideas are implicit or subtle throughout the text

Includes sustained complex text types and hybrid or non-linear texts

By using a rubric, it is easy to see where the complexity of the text lies. If we know what aspects of the text are likely to be challenging for students, decisions can be made about the suitability of a text and what supports students may need to read it successfully.

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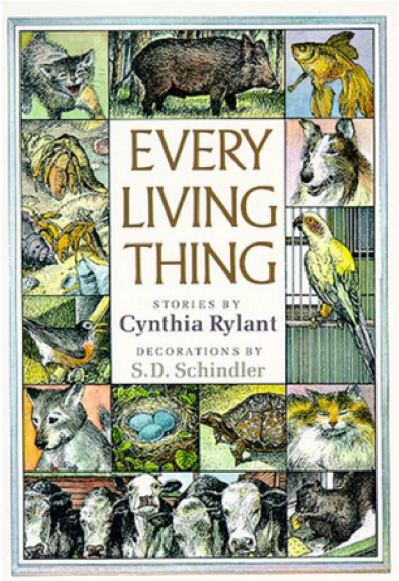
The Nature of the Complexity Matters

A student's ability to read complex text can vary greatly depending on the type of text they are reading. Students who can easily read the text used in ELA may struggle with a science text of a similar level of difficulty. Research shows that students do not automatically transfer strategies introduced in ELA to reading in other areas. More importantly, the way texts are read differs across the discipline areas, and strategies used to help comprehend narrative in ELA may not work in science and social studies. To show the difference, we have used two texts with similar Lexile levels (870-900), both recommended as suitable for grade 6 students.

Text 1: Grade 6

Shells, a short story, by Cynthia Rylant in Every Living Thing



This text would be an easy "read" for most 6th graders since the vocabulary and language are familiar. Dialog is used to help move the story along but it is easy to follow. The challenge comes in the Purpose and Meaning traits of the rubric. The text has several levels of meaning and requires the reader to make inferences as they read. It is not until the end of the text that the significance of the characters' actions becomes clear.

To read this text with understanding, students would need to use the following comprehension strategies in an integrated way:

- Students need to use their background knowledge and information from the text to form tentative theories/inferences about the significance of events
- This is a short story and understanding story structure (problem/solution) is necessary to understand that Michael and his Aunts' relationship changed at the end
- Students need to generate questions as they read, both to delve more deeply into the text and to critically reflect on what they have read

Because the text does not explicitly explain the analogy between the hermit crab finding a better-fitting shell and the positive change in the relationship between Michael and his aunt, students will need to draw their own conclusions.

Text Complexity Rubric

	Simple Texts	Somewhat Simple Texts	Complex Texts	Very Complex Texts
Layout	Consistent placement of text, regular word and line spacing, often large plain font	May have longer passages of uninterrupted text, often plain font	Longer passages of uninterrupted text may include columns or other variations in layout, often smaller more elaborate font	Very long passages of uninterrupted text that may include columns or other variations in layout, often small densely packed print
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	Supportive signposting and enhancements	Reduced signposting and enhancements	Minimal signposting and/or enhancements	Integrated signposting conforming to literary devices. No enhancements
Purpose and Meaning	Purpose usually stated explicitly in the title or in the beginning of the text	Purpose tends to be revealed early in the text, but may be conveyed with some subtlety	Purpose is implicit and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	Purpose implicit or subtle, is sometimes ambiguous and revealed over the entirety of the text
	One level of meaning	More than one level of meaning, with levels clearly distinguished from each other	Several levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify/separate	Several levels and competing elements of meaning that are difficult to identify/separate and interpret
	Theme is obvious and revealed early in the text	Theme is clear and revealed early in the text, but may be conveyed with some subtlety	Theme may be implicit or subtle, is sometimes ambiguous and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	Theme is implicit or subtle, is often ambiguous, and is revealed over the entirety of the text
Structure	The organization of the text is clear, chronological and/or easy to predict	The organization of the text may have additional characters, two or more storylines and is occasionally difficult to predict	The organization of the text may include, subplots, time shifts, and more complex characters	The organization of the text is intricate with regard to elements such as narrative viewpoint, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail
	Connections between events or ideas are explicit and clear	Connections among events or ideas are sometimes implicit or subtle	Connections among events or ideas are often implicit or subtle	Connections among events or ideas are implicit or subtle throughout the text
	One text type is evident	Includes different text types	Includes different types of varying complexity	Includes sustained complex text types and hybrid or non-linear texts
Language Features	Mainly simple sentences	Simple and compound sentences with some more complex constructions	Many complex sentences with increased subordinate phrases and clauses	Many complex sentences, often containing intricate detail or concepts
	Simple, literal language	Mainly literal, common language	Some figurative or literary language	Much figurative or literary language such as metaphor, analogy, and connotative language
	Vocabulary is mostly familiar	Some unfamiliar vocabulary	Includes much new vocabulary and some domain specific vocabulary	Includes extensive unfamiliar vocabulary, and possibly archaic language
Knowledge Demands	Little assumed personal experience or cultural knowledge	Some assumed personal experience and/or cultural knowledge	Much assumed personal experience and/or cultural knowledge	Extensive, demanding, assumed personal experience and/or cultural knowledge
	Simple ideas	Both simple and more complicated ideas	A range of recognizable ideas and challenging concepts	Many new ideas and/or complex, challenging concepts

Purpose is implicit and may be revealed over the entirety of the text

Several levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify/separate

Theme may be implicit or subtle, is sometimes ambiguous and may be revealed over the entirety of the text

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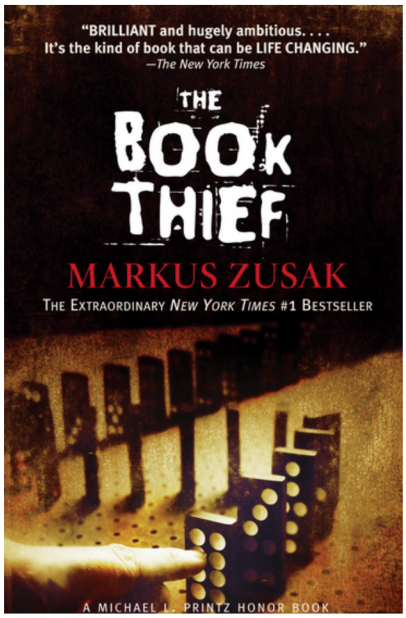
Text 2: Grades 9-10

The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak



—Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A color will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away.

Much of the text is figurative with extensive use of metaphor

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

The personification of death throughout the text

The question is, what color will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally, I like a chocolate-colored sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every color I see—the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax.

Figurative language

• • • A SMALL THEORY • • •

People observe the colors of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single *hour* can consist of thousands of different colors. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses.

In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

Innovative stylistic techniques are used. The most obvious is the narrator's use of boldface text to relay certain information

Excerpt from: The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak, Random House Children's Books, Page 4.

This text highlights the importance of not relying solely on quantitative measures. The Lexile level is 730 L. This would suggest the book is suitable for third and fourth grade students, yet it is an exemplar for grades 9-10. The complexity becomes evident when the qualitative measures are used.

Students are likely to be challenged because of:

- The historical setting
- The text is figurative with extensive use of metaphors, including the personification of death itself
- The text is a very long - 552 pages
- The innovative stylistic techniques that are used. The most obvious is the narrator Death's use of boldface text to relay certain information
- The multiple, intertwining themes

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Text 2: Grades 9–10

The Book Thief, by Markus Zusak

Text Complexity Rubric for *The Book Thief*

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Text 3: Grades 9-10

Thinking about Physics While Scared to Death (on a Falling Roller Coaster)
by Jearl Walker

Roundabout: Readings from the Amateur Scientist in Scientific American. New York: Scientific American (1985).

THE AMATEUR SCIENTIST

Thinking about physics while scared to death (on a falling roller coaster)

by Jearl Walker

The rides in an amusement park not only are fun but also demonstrate principles of physics. Among them are rotational dynamics and energy conversion. I have been exploring the rides at Geauga Lake Amusement Park near Cleveland and have found that nearly every ride offers a memorable lesson.

To me the scariest rides at the park are the roller coasters. The Big Dipper is similar to many of the roller coasters that have thrilled passengers for most of this century. The cars are pulled by chain to the top of the highest hill along the track, Released from the chain as the front of the car begins its descent, the unpowered cars have almost no speed and only a small acceleration. As more cars get onto the downward slope the acceleration increases. It peaks when all the cars are headed downward. The peak value is the product of the acceleration generated by gravity and the sine of the slope of the track. A steeper descent generates a greater acceleration, but packing the coaster with heavier passengers does not.

When the coaster reaches the bottom of the valley and starts up the next hill, there is an instant when the cars are symmetrically distributed in the valley. The acceleration is zero. As more cars ascend the coaster begins to slow, reaching its lowest speed just as it is symmetrically positioned at the top of the hill.

A roller coaster functions by means of transfers of energy. When the chain hauls the cars to the top of the first hill, it does work on the cars, endowing them with gravitational potential energy, the energy of a body in a gravitational field with respect to the distance of the body from some reference level such as the ground. As the cars descend into the first valley, much of the stored energy is transferred into kinetic energy, the energy of motion.

Challenging abstract concepts

Nominalization

Domain-specific vocabulary

Many complex sentences with increased subordinate phrases and clauses or transition words

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Readability Score puts the readability of this text at the 8th grade level.

The language structure of this text is relatively straightforward; however, the complexity lies in the domain-specific vocabulary, complex-embedded sentences and the difficulty of the ideas being explained.

Students are likely to be challenged because of:

- The domain-specific vocabulary
- The knowledge demands of the physics concepts of motion and force
- Small, densely packed print
- The nominalization
- The minimal use of diagrams, e.g. to show directions of forces

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Text 3: Grades 9–10

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Text Complexity Rubric for *Thinking about Physics While Scared to Death*

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Planning for Support

Tasks, like texts, become more complex as students think about ideas and information in different ways. When considering the complexity of the text, teachers need to take into account the tasks they set, as well as their knowledge of their students as readers. When introducing texts, teachers need to consider the challenges in the text and the strategies students need.

Group	10th Grade ELA	10 Grade Physics
Text Title	*The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak	*Flying Circus of Physics* by Jearl Walker
Complexity Level	The Lexile level is 730 L	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level puts the readability at the 8th grade level
Text Supports	Familiar vocabulary	Links to well-known phenomenon
Text Structure and Concepts Challenges	• Figurative language with extensive use of metaphor and analogy • The text is a very long 552 pages • The use of the innovative stylistic techniques. The most obvious is narrator Death's use of boldface text to relay certain information	• The domain-specific vocabulary • The knowledge demands around motion and force • Difficulty of the concepts being explained • Lack of illustrations or diagrams to help visualize the explanations
Planned Teacher Supports	Activate connections to 8th grade work on Holocaust Read first three chapters aloud to familiarize students with language Guide thinking around narrator Provide activities that locate figurative language Character webs to track changes in characters	Make Links to previous learning Use anticipation guides to make predictions Sketch to help visualize concepts being introduced

Professional Practice

The way in which ideas and information are presented to students, and the opportunities and scaffolds provided for them to engage with texts, are critical elements of teacher practice that can shape students' success in navigating complex texts.

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