

TEXT COMPLEXITY of ARTISTIC WORKS

Text complexity refers to a combination of measures that show how challenging a particular text is to read. Research from ACT has indicated that the ability to read and understand complex text is the single greatest predictor of success in college. In CMS “text” has been broadly defined as “anything from which you can gather information.” Students need to read fiction and nonfiction; however, they also need to read charts, plays, graphs, tables, political cartoons, music, performances, financial spreadsheets, art, equations, and much, much more.

For arts education teachers, finding traditional texts related to the students’ artistic area is important; however, researching related artistic works from playwrights, composers, choreographers, and artists is equally as important. If students are able to read complex “texts,” either traditional or artistic works, they will be successful and able to independently read college and career ready texts.

Key components to consider when determining text complexity include **Quantitative, Qualitative, and Reader and Task measures**. Quantitative factors look at the “readability,” such as word length, frequency, text length, and text cohesion. It is reflected in a single number or letter score and are often calculated using computer. In CMS, the two most commonly used quantitative measures are lexile scores or Fountas and Pinnell reading levels. For artistic works, there are no Quantitative measures. Qualitative factors that determine text complexity include Meaning/Purpose, Knowledge Demands, Visual Supports, Language Features and Text Structure. Reader and Task factors impact the difficulty of reading the text and account for the various knowledge levels of the student and subject. These factors include: Complexity of Content, Cognitive Capacities, Comprehension Skills, Reader Motivation, Prior Knowledge, and challenging Tasks and Assessments. Both Qualitative and Reader and Task factors are measured by teachers and can be applied to artistic works.

Qualitative Measures in Artistic Works

The Qualitative measures, apply when we examine text complexity in artistic works. Complexity can be determined by knowledge demands, meaning/purpose, structure, language features, and contextual supports (see “Text Complexity of Artistic Works: Qualitative Analysis”). We ask students to connect with their artistic medium (dance, music, theatre arts, and visual arts) and search for multiple levels of meaning, purpose, and perspective behind artistic works. Most composers, performers, writers, etc. are intentional in creating focus in their work. By helping students extract subtle, intricate, and abstract ideas within artistic works, students grow and are able to read more complex “texts”.

Reader and Task Measures in Artistic Works

The Reader and Task measures are “outside factors” that teachers should consider with regard to a particular “text” or artistic work. Is it a good “match” to the student based on content, ability, interest, and understanding? Are the tasks associated with the artistic work aligned with the purpose behind “reading” it? What skills should be particularly reinforced when “reading” the artistic work to help students when encountering similar artistic works in the future?

Content Complexity

What challenges are posed to students when the content of the artistic work is analyzed? How can teachers anticipate these challenges and help students approach the content respectfully and in a mature manner?

Cognitive Capabilities

What challenges are posed to students who lack the ability to focus their attention? How can teachers anticipate these challenges and help students make the necessary connections among the various details?

Reading/Interpretation Skills

What challenges are posed to students who lack inferential skills? How can teachers anticipate these challenges and help students ask the right questions to improve comprehension?

Motivation and Engagement

What challenges are posed to students who lack motivation? How can teachers anticipate these challenges and help students become interested in the content?

Prior Knowledge

What challenges are posed to students with regards to assumed background knowledge? How can teachers anticipate these challenges and help students address them without frontloading the artistic experience?

Task and Assessment

What challenges are posed to students when the tasks planned for assessment are considered? How can teachers anticipate these challenges and help students complete the task successfully?