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BY DOUGLAS FISHER AND NANCY FREY

Text Complexity and Close Readings

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The advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts is drawing renewed attention to the characteristics and uses of texts, both print and digital, in secondary classrooms. The CCSS, which have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia as of December 2011, are intended to articulate a shared set of standards in order to foster communication, collaboration, and assessment among educators across the nation. The English Language Arts portion of the standards call for a coordinated effort of literacy instruction in English, science, history/social sciences, and technical subjects.

Overall, the CCSS challenge us to think about how we teach students across the disciplines. The developers' intent to formulate standards that are "fewer, clearer, and higher" (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010) is designed to illuminate a pathway to college and career. The ELA standards call for teaching students how to understand the vocabulary of their disciplines, to collaborate with fellow learners, and to communicate through discussion and writing. Much of this learning emanates from the texts used in each discipline, including scientific studies, essays, speeches, technical documents, and narrative forms. Of special note is the topic of text complexity and its implications for curriculum and instruction:

> *Being able to read complex text independently and proficiently is essential for high achievement in college and the workplace and important in numerous life tasks. Moreover, current trends suggest that if students cannot read challenging texts with understanding—if they have not developed the skill, concentration, and stamina to read such texts—they will read less in general. In particular, if students cannot read complex expository text to gain information, they will likely turn to text-free or text-light sources, such as video, podcasts, and tweets. These sources, while not without value, cannot capture the nuance, subtlety, depth, or breadth of ideas developed through complex text. (CCSS, 2010, Appendix A, p. 4)*

It is essential to note here that increasing students' ability to read the complex texts of a discipline should not be misinterpreted as "pass and pray"— in essence, pass out hard books and pray for the best. As Allington (2002) stated, "you can't learn much from books you can't read" (p. 16). In order to steadily build students' capacity for comprehending complex texts, teachers must carefully scaffold these reading experiences. As well, knowing the characteristics of a text, and of the learner, are critical to being able to accurately identify what a complex text is. In this column, we examine the nature of texts and of the learners who read them. In addition, we discuss how scaffolded instruction can increase learners' ability to comprehend the texts deeply.

What Makes a Text Complex?

Observe shoppers at a bookstore or library and you'll get an idea of the array of techniques they use to size up a text to determine if it's right for them. Some will read the back cover or fan the pages to eye the font size. Others will turn the book sideways to see how thick it is. Some will turn to the table of contents or the index to gain a sense of its contents. A smaller proportion will read the introduction in an effort to decide whether it meets their needs. These techniques, however informal, encapsulate the array of tools used to determine the complexity of a text. These include quantitative measures related to the words and sentences, the qualitative factors surrounding the content, and the unique characteristics of

the reader and his or her purpose for reading.

Quantitative Factors. As humans, we gravitate toward numbers. Assign a grade level or other quantitative measure to a text and we're good to go. After all, that number allows us to rapidly determine whether it is right for our students or not. But how did it get there?

Most quantitative readability formulas, including familiar ones such as the Fry (Fry, 2002), the Dale-Chall (Chall & Dale,1995), and the Flesch-Kincaid (Flesch,1948), rely on varying algorithms that factor word length and frequency of use in English, number of syllables, and sentence length. This approach to calculating readability has existed since the mid-twentieth century. Even newer readability formulas, such as those used by Lexile (Smith, Stenner, Horabin, & Smith, 1989) and Degrees of Reading Power (Koslin, Zeno, & Koslin, 1987) rely on these relatively straightforward methods of measuring a text. However, these formulas rely on the surface qualities of a text and do not provide information about the content or the way in which the ideas that are built across the text hang together, a factor called coherence.

Most teachers have learned through experience that quantitative factors, although informative, do not go far enough to provide the kind of guidance needed to select text. "I remember my first year of teaching. I was at the middle school," said seventh grade social studies teacher Mae-Ling Yung. "I had to set up my classroom pretty quick, so I went to the bookroom at the school and just started pulling books that said 'Grade 7' on the spine. But as I started using them," she said, "I realized that some were much too easy for my students, while others were just ridiculously difficult. I learned my lesson that year—I need to read it to figure out whether it's right for us or not."

Ms. Yung's frustration with her method of selecting texts highlights the limitations of relying on only one element of a text's characteristics: Ignore content, the reader, and the task at one's own peril. Those who advocate for the use of readability formulas like those mentioned above also provide a similar caution and advise that such quantitative measures should be used to initially screen a text, but only in conjunction with other ways of assessing a text's suitability (Gunning, 2003). The qualitative factors related to content, levels of meaning and purpose, text structure and organization, and even the presence of visual supports, contribute to a text's complexity.

Qualitative Factors. The appeal of quantitative factors is in the ease of calculation, made all the more efficient through the use of computers and digital texts. But qualitative measures need a human being to assess them; they can't be measured in the same way as quantitative methods allow for (CCSS, 2010). Qualitative factors include the following:

- *Content analysis*—Although the readability measure on a text may be relatively low, the content can be quite challenging. One of our favorite examples is Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1998). The author's unique style using short sentences punctuated by longer ones, as well as lots of dialogue and poetry, results in an elementary-level readability, but the science fiction novel's deeply satirical commentary on war, the coming apocalypse, and spies would elude a child, and in fact would challenge older ones as well.

- *Levels of meaning and purpose*—We'll use Vonnegut's novel again to illustrate this factor. On the surface, the *Cat's Cradle* is an entertaining tale about a chase for a valuable substance that can turn water solid at room temperature. But its reputation as one of the most important novels of the 20th century is not due the author's ability to weave a good yarn. Vonnegut likely had more subversive intentions when he wrote the book, especially in offering biting

commentary on the roles of religion and technology in a society. Without an understanding of the time it was published (at the height of the Cold War) and its references to historical events (such as the development of the atomic bomb and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), a reader would not discern the author's more subtle messages.

- *Text structure and organization*—Most texts use text structures that allow the reader to follow a plot (narrative), gain information (informational), or be persuaded (expository). These structures include problem and solution, chronological order, cause and effect, and compare and contrast. In addition, some texts, especially narrative pieces, rely on dramatic structures including exposition, rising and falling action, climax, and denouement. Texts are generally a bit easier to read when they include more signal words that alert the reader to a structure, such as *first, next*, and *finally* in a chronologically ordered text. Organizational features such as headings and subheadings make the reading easier. In addition, texts that provide examples, embedded definitions, and extended descriptions are usually a bit easier to understand than those that assume high levels of prior knowledge on the part of the reader.

- *Visual supports*—It isn't the mere presence or absence of visual supports like photographs, diagrams, and charts that makes a text more or less difficult. If it were, we could simply flip through the pages of a book and be done with it. But visual supports that are closely tied to the main part of the text can be helpful. For example, a science passage on the rock cycle can become easier to understand if accompanied by a clear, accurate illustration that closely matches what is offered in the text. If, however, the same great illustration is only briefly referenced in the passage, it is less helpful. Conversely, an ill-designed chart in a mathematics textbook can make the main part of the text more confusing, not less.

Just as a qualitative examination of a text to determine its appropriateness requires an expert eye, so does inspection of the reader. Each student brings a host of strengths and areas of need to a text, and these variables further influence their understanding of it. These factors specific to the reader include language proficiency, background knowledge and experiences, and level of motivation.

The Reader. Every time we read, we bring a host of experiences, knowledge, and opinions to the text. In turn, the text acts upon us as we read to further evoke and inform those experiences. Rosenblatt (1978) called

How Do Texts Differ Across the Disciplines?

By the time students enter middle school, the texts they use in their core and elective courses differ widely from one another. In elementary school, portions of their science and social studies texts drew on their knowledge of narrative to explain concepts, such as telling about the Oregon Trail from the perspective of a child. But these texts become far more specialized in secondary classrooms. Fang and Schleppegrell (2010) describe features of discipline-specific texts:

- **Science:** Technical vocabulary and dense sentences that require the reader to draw on multiple concepts simultaneously. For example: "Eukaryotic cells also have a variety of subcellular structures called organelles, well-defined, intracellular bodies that perform specific functions for the cell. (*Modern Biology*, 2006, p. 75, cited in Fang & Schleppegrell, 2011, pp. 588–589).
- **History/Social Science:** Nominalizations (nouns derived from adjectives and verbs) that reference abstract ideas, and the presence of evaluative judgments. For example,

  In retrospect, the Volstead Act was hopelessly inadequate, because it grossly underestimated the willingness of the lawbreakers to risk conviction, the degree of human ingenuity displayed to get around its provisions, and the ease with which the lawbreakers would be able to subvert all those whose job was to enforce it. (Behr, 1996, cited in Fang & Schleppegrell, 2011, p. 589)

- **Mathematics:** Math texts switch between both natural language and mathematical language and symbols, requiring readers to make similar shifts in the grammars of both. Consider this word problem: "If a rectangular solid has side, front and bottom faces with areas of 2x, y/2 and xy cm2 respectively, what is the volume of the solid in centimeters cubed?" (problem 33, cited in Fang & Schleppegrell, 2011, p. 590).

this "transaction" and noted that the reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text influences its understanding. Although widely accepted today, it was a revolutionary stance when Rosenblatt first proposed this in the early twentieth century, when the primary role of the reader was limited to correctly interpreting what the author meant. These unique factors, once believed to be unimportant, have taken center stage in the ensuing decades. Today, it would be unthinkable to fail to consider language, knowledge, experiential, and motivational factors when considering a text.

- *Language proficiency factors*—Students identified as English learners do additional cognitive work because they must attend both to the message of the text and to the necessary cognitive resources needed to make sense of a text written in a less familiar language. In similar fashion, students with learning or reading disabilities must use compensatory resources to process text efficiently. We find it helpful to think of all our students as language learners; that is, learners of the language of the discipline. All readers must tackle unfamiliar vocabulary and rhetorical structures that can make a text more difficult.

- *Background knowledge factors*—Formal academic learning acquired by a reader affects his or her ability to understand the text. Formal knowledge includes the academic knowledge needed to correctly interpret the reading. In evaluating a text, it is helpful to consider what background knowledge is core to the reading, and what is incidental. A challenge is that while we want students to have adequate background knowledge, we don't want to frontload this to the point where the reading itself becomes unnecessary. For example, a working knowledge of the racial relations in the American South of the 1930s is core background knowledge for understanding *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee, 1960), while knowledge of the fashions of the time is incidental and not necessary to address in great detail. This is not to say that incidental background knowledge is unimportant; Lee details how characters are dressed as a way of describing their social and economic status, and class conflict is a theme in the novel. However, instruction prior to the reading is not needed, as it can be easily addressed during it.

- *The reader's experiences*—Closely related to the academic knowledge needed to bring to a reading are the collective experiences a student has had. Variance in experiences may include economic, social, familial, and individual factors and are undoubtedly present in every classroom. When it comes to a reading, these experiences should be taken into account. These may involve the whole class, as in U.S. History, where virtually every student lacks the experience of a society without child labor laws and therefore can't draw on this to understand the need for legal changes in the Progressive Era. At other times, it is situational, as with a student whose own life experiences have not adequately prepared her to understand the familial responsibilities felt by Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Joseph Steinbeck, 1939).

- *The reader's motivation*—The intrinsic interest a reader brings to a text can make it accessible in ways that defy conventional measures of ability. We recall a time when one of our students, a survivor of political persecution in an African nation, devoured *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Ishmael Beah, 2008). His motivation to read an autobiographical recounting of forced conscription in Sierra Leone's civil war trumped his nascent skills as an English language learner. It is also

What's Core and What's Incidental Background Knowledge?

It's essential to determine what is core background knowledge—which may need to be taught in advance of a reading—and what is incidental and can therefore be allowed to emerge during and even after the reading. We rely on a series of four questions to allow us to identify each:

1. **Representation:** Is it essential?
2. **Transmission:** Can it be easily explained, or must it be taught?
3. **Transferability:** Will it be used for future understanding?
4. **Endurance:** What will be remembered after the details are forgotten?" (Fisher & Frey, 2009, p. 36).

Identification of core background knowledge necessary for a reading also guides the development of questions we ask during the discussion of the text. By checking for understanding in this way, we can also locate students who may not have the presumed background knowledge needed, allowing us to fill in the gaps through subsequent instruction.

Text	Teacher commentary during the think-aloud	Strategies modeled/ practiced
Going Through Changes (Photo of pancakes)	"As I look over this piece of text, I see a photo of pancakes cooking on a griddle. Some are golden brown and others are still a beige batter color. The title of this reading is *Going Through Changes.* I wonder if the pancakes, some uncooked and others fully done, represent changes at a chemical level. I'll read the first paragraph."	Predicting and using titles and graphics provides focus and motivation to read further.
At a dinner table, a cook is making pancakes. He mixes together an egg, milk, and flour into a batter. When the batter is placed on the griddle, it becomes solid and golden brown. The batter has had a chemical change. All the atoms of the original ingredients are still in the batter. But the griddle's heat has arranged those atoms in a different pattern. Like the pancake batter, many substances go through chemical changes. These changes can break down complex substances into simpler parts. Or they can join simple parts into complex substances.	"So the cooking batter does represent chemical changes. I see from reading these paragraphs that chemical changes involve substances breaking down and substances joining together. I think the next section will tell me about how this process of breaking down and building up occurs. Do you have any ideas?" (Maria listens as the students share a few possibilities.) Janette, a student in Maria's class, responds, "Maybe the next section will talk about molecules being broken down or atoms being joined together." Dave adds, "Yes, I remember when I was in 8th grade we talked about how salt molecules are broken down when salt is added to water." Maria then continues. "OK, let's read on to see if we're correct."	The prediction is confirmed by reading the text. Note that sometimes the prediction is refuted after reading the text. Afterward, the main ideas are identified by summarizing a few lines of the text, which is followed by another prediction based on the text just read.
It usually takes energy to combine substances in a chemical reaction. This kind of reaction is called an endothermic reaction.	"An endothermic reaction. Wow, I'm not sure what that means, but I do know that thermic sounds like a word part from thermometer or thermal and both of those terms relate to heat. Maybe endothermic also relates to heat in some way. I'll continue to read. Maybe I'll gain an understanding of the meaning of this word if I read on."	Segmenting words into word parts brings attention to root words or affixes that might offer clues to meaning. In addition, understanding that clarification might come from context or from continued reading.
For example, heat was needed to turn the batter into a pancake.	"I guess I was right—endothermic does relate to heat."	Again, confirmation of a prediction, in this case of a word's meaning, may be confirmed or refuted by reading upcoming text.
If iron and powdered sulfur were mixed together, nothing would happen. But apply heat to those combined substances and you would form iron sulfide. This is an entirely new substance.	"So heat added to a mixture can cause a new substance to form. Interesting. Maybe endothermic means that heat is added."	Synthesizes and restates—examples offered in the text can help the reader to infer word meaning.

From "'You can read this text—I'll show you how': Interactive comprehension instruction," by D. Lapp, D. Fisher, and M. Grant, 2008, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 51*(5), 372–382. Copyright 2008 by the International Reading Association. Reprinted with permission.
Note: Quotes from TIME and Teacher Created Materials (1993).

FIGURE 1 Sample Teacher Modeling in Physics

likely that his experiences provided him with a deeper understanding of the author's message.

The quantitative and qualitative measures of a text, as well as the characteristics of the reader must be taken into consideration when selecting a complex piece. These factors should further inform the design of the task itself. After all, a text is just ink on a page (or an image on a screen) until a reader interacts with it. These interactions are realized through the tasks we design.

Five Ways to Ensure a Task Will Work or Fail

McRae and Guthrie (2009) summarized the research on the relationship between task design and student motivation to read. These conditions are essential to keep in mind when considering the kinds of tasks students will be engaged in when reading and discussing complex texts. First, the instruction practices that impact motivation positively:

1. Relevance
2. Choice
3. Success
4. Collaboration
5. Thematic units

And the five practices to avoid because they have a negative effect:

1. Non-relevance
2. Excessive control
3. Difficult lessons
4. Frequent individual work
5. Disconnected units

The Task. Reading complex texts is not supposed to be a private affair—readings should be punctuated with teacher modeling and think-alouds, collaborative learning in the company of peers, and discussion propelled through text-based questions.

- *Teacher-led tasks* provide students with insight into how the text is understood by an expert in the discipline: you! This is accomplished through modeling, especially when students, after reading the passage themselves, get to hear how you read the text. Prosodic reading, the smooth, fluent, and expressive oral reading of a text, promotes comprehension for them. They get to hear how you pronounce words, use phrase boundaries, and apply intonation, as an active reader who is making meaning while reading. Of course, this is much more effective when you have read the passage several times in advance. In addition, think-alouds (Davey, 1983) give students insight into how you use your background knowledge, resolve problems when comprehension breaks down, or solve an unfamiliar word or phrase. Figure 1 contains a sample of a physics teacher's think-aloud as she read a passage from a science article (Lapp, Fisher, & Grant, 2008).

- *Collaboration with peers* offers students the opportunity to further clarify their understanding of complex text. Simple instructional routines such as Think-Pair-Square (Kagan, Kagan, & Kagan, 1997) allow students to discuss the text first with a partner, then with another pair of students as a group of four. Of course, the conversation needs to have parameters so that it is an enriching experience and not merely a chance to socialize for a few minutes. By teaching discussion-based strategies such as accountable talk (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008), students can learn to apply elements of argumentation in order to reach deeper levels of understanding in the company of peers. (More information about fostering discussion in the classroom can be found in the June 2011 issue of this column, *The First 20 Days: Establishing Productive Group Work in the Classroom*.)

- *Text-based questions* are designed to encourage students to return to the reading in order to locate information. An intended outcome of this approach is to cause students to engage in multiple readings of a piece—a necessity when considering a complex text. We use the Question-Answer Relationship framework (Raphael, 1986) to move students from the literal level of meaning to inferential levels, where students can apply critical and creative thinking skills. QAR describes four types of questions.

  1. *Right There questions* ask for information using the question stem itself to locate the answer, usually within a single sentence.

  2. *Think and Search questions* are also at the literal level, but require the reader to compile the answer across several sentences or paragraphs.

  3. *Author and You questions* require students to use their inferential skills as they pair information from the text with their background knowledge.

  4. *On Your Own questions* invite students to formulate opinions based on their experiences as well as what they have learned from the text.

Woven through these experiences are opportunities for discussion and

June 6, 1944

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage and devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good luck! And let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

SIGNED: Dwight D. Eisenhower

From D-day statement to soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force, 6/44, Collection DDE-EPRE: Eisenhower, Dwight D: Papers, Pre-Presidential, 1916-1952; Dwight D. Eisenhower Library; National Archives and Records Administration.

FIGURE 2 General Dwight D. Eisenhower's D-Day Invasion Statement to Troops

composition. In the next section, we will detail how these tasks are organized into a process called close reading.

Building Capacity Through Close Reading

The practice of close reading is not a new one, and in fact has existed for many decades as the practice of reading a text for a level of detail not used in everyday reading. The purpose is to build the habits of readers as they engage with the complex texts of the discipline and to build their stamina and skills for being able to do so independently. However, close reading doesn't mean that you simply distribute a complex reading and then exhort them to read it again and again until they understand it. This is likely to provoke exactly the kind of negative reaction McRae and Guthrie (2009) cautioned against in their examination of tasks that motivate and detract from learning. Instead, close reading should be accompanied by purposeful, scaffolded instruction about the passage.

Select Short, Worthy Passages. Because close readings can be time-consuming, it is often best to select shorter pieces of text for instruction. In Figure 2 and Figure 3, you will find two short pieces from General Dwight D. Eisenhower, both written just before the launch of the D-Day operation in June 1944. (Digital images of these primary source documents can be retrieved at http://ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=75 and www.archives.gov/education/lessons/d-day-message/ respectively).

U.S. History teacher Melissa West selected both of these for a close reading so her students could better understand the uncertainty of success and the risk of failure. "I want them to see that leadership in war is extraordinarily difficult, and

June 5, 1944

Our landings in the Cherbourg have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that Bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone.

From Dwight D. Eisenhower Library Pre-Presidential Papers. Principal File: Butcher Diary, 1942-1945. ARC Identifier: 186470.

FIGURE 3 Eisenhower's Draft Statement in Event of the Operation's Failure

that our historical 'rear-view mirror' glances don't always let us see the contemporary issues of the day," she said. She selected the letter General Eisenhower wrote to the Allied troops as they embarked on this mission. But tellingly, he also drafted a message to be delivered in the event the operation failed.

Design the Lesson so Students Re-read. "These two readings are not very long, and I know their tendency is going to be to read them quickly and move on," Ms. West said. "I want to make sure they stay with these two readings, and take the time to compare the differences in the messages." Therefore she has designed the overall lesson to encourage students to read the texts several times. "I prepare my questions in advance so I can remember to ask them for information they need from the reading," she said. In addition, she has constructed a series of tasks that will require them to read the messages at least three times.

Ask Students to "Read With a Pencil." After introducing the two pieces to her students to set the context, Ms. West asked them to read both over independently. Importantly, she did not draw their attention to the dates, or tell them about how they revealed Eisenhower's internal conflict. "It's important that they see the struggle leaders must confront, especially in having to keep these struggles fairly private," she said. Instead, she asks them to annotate the text, or as she puts it, "to read with a pencil," reminding them to circle words or phrases that are powerful, and to underline those that are confusing (For more information on annotating text, please see the December 2011 Members Only column, *Notetaking and Notemaking For Academic Success*).

For the next several minutes, her students read silently and mark the text. Ms. West also has two students with disabilities that make it difficult for them to read the text independently; they listen to a podcast version of the two readings she made for them as they follow along.

Remind Students to Note Confusions. As she examines her students' notes, she finalizes her decisions about the modeling and thinking-aloud she will do next. "I already have a draft plan of my think aloud prepared, but I find that sometimes their confusions vary from one period to the next." Wanting to be sure she gets a clearer idea of any difficulties they might have, she then leads a short discussion about their impressions, initial observations, and confusions.

Model the Text. "I'd like you to follow along as I read through these two pieces," Ms. West tells them. "I'm going to read it twice. The first time, I'm going to read it straight through, with no interruptions. The second time, I'm going to tell you about what I'm thinking as I read it." She begins by reading Eisenhower's message to the Allied troops, then the draft message written in the event the invasion was a failure.

The second time, she thought aloud. After reaching the fourth sentence of the first text, she remarked, "I'm noticing how he's using inspirational language in the first part of this message. He's got an exclamation mark in the title, which is unusual, and in the first sentence he references the 'Great Crusade.' Right away I'm reminded of what I know about the Crusades of the Middle Ages, and their belief that they were eliminating evil, or at least a Christian version of it, from the Earth." She continues reading aloud, noting the use of exclamation marks throughout the text. "Publicly, he seemed very enthusiastic and confident, and he used that in this message," she concluded.

She then turns her attention to the second piece, reading it all the way through. "It's so much shorter than the first message," she says, "only four sentences long. I'm also seeing that even though it's written by the same man, he's not using any exclamation marks this time. I'm wondering if that same confidence isn't there." She now places both pieces of text side by side on the document camera. "Wow, now

I'm noticing the dates—a day apart." She continues, "I'm really struck by the very different tones of these messages, both written about the same time."

Discuss the Text. Turning her attention to the class, Ms. West invites discussion, but she knows that it is often richer when her students have an opportunity to first talk with peers in small groups. "I'd like for you to talk about your initial impressions of these two readings with your table groups, and listen to theirs," she tells them. As they talk, she visits several groups to listen to conversations, then calls the class back together. "So let's talk about this," she says. After each table shares summaries of their conversations, she transitions to text-dependent questions to cause them to analyze the messages more closely.

Ask Text Dependent Questions. Using a Question-Answer Relationships framework (Raphael, 1986) as a guide, she moves students from text-explicit to text-implicit questions. She prepared both the questions and possible answers in advance so she could steer their attention as needed to evidence in the text. "I've got them understanding that they need to be able to support their assertions with evidence," she said. "But unless I know where that evidence is, it's really difficult for me to be able to teach toward the underlying patterns in the text."

- Right There questions for Reading 1: *Who is Eisenhower addressing?* (Allied troops) *What was the goal of the invasion?* (the destruction of the German War machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny, and security for ourselves)

- Right There questions for Reading 2: *What event does Eisenhower describe?* (withdrawal of the troops) *Who does he fault?* (himself)

- Think and Search questions for Reading 1: *What words and phrases does he use to evoke religious images and ideology?* (Great Crusade, prayers, devotion, beseech the blessing of Almighty God) *What words and phrases does he use to inspire the troops as a righteous mission?* (liberty-loving people, free men of the world, great and noble undertaking)

- Think and Search questions for Reading 2: *Does Eisenhower use similar words and phrases in this message?* (Only one—Bravery and devotion to duty)

- Author and You question for Reading 1: *Ike's message to the troops acknowledges the difficulty of the mission, but assures them that they will be triumphant. In what ways does he accomplish this?* (He describes the fierceness of the enemy, the defeats and setbacks earlier in the war. But he also reminds them that there have been many victories since then. In addition, he reminds them of the support at home and in the collective strength of a multi-national response. He also tells them of their skill, bravery, and training) *Why is it essential that the general of the Allied Forces acknowledges both?* (If he doesn't, the troops might feel that he is not realistic, and does not understand the complexity of the invasion, and result in undermining their confidence in their leader. Their confidence in him and his judgment is essential to completing a successful mission.)

- Author and You questions for Reading 2: *Eisenhower's tone is very different in the second message. What is the tone?* (His tone is terse and gets to the point. He doesn't blame anyone and places all fault on himself, even though many others were involved). *Why is this an appropriate tone for a defeat?* (As a military general, it is important for him to demonstrate his leadership in defeat as well as in victory. Anyone can be triumphant; fewer are able to face defeat publicly in order to maintain his respect for his troops, demonstrate courage, and accept blame.)

The previous questions require students to shift their focus from one reading to the other. With these last questions,

Ms. West wants them to compare and contrast both documents in order to draw conclusions about the man who wrote them, and the circumstances that prompted both.

- On Your Own questions for both readings: *General Eisenhower wrote both of these messages within hours of one another. What conclusions can you draw about a man who must entertain two very different beliefs simultaneously?* (His leadership abilities were extraordinary in being able to exhort his troops before battle, while at the same time understanding the very real possibility that it might result in an awful defeat. It is likely that his pragmatic assessment of both possible outcomes is reflective of the care he had for his troops, as well as the great responsibility he carried on his shoulders. At the same time, it was necessary for him to be tough-minded and decisive. These traits are essential for military command.)

After this close reading of the two documents and discussion of these questions, Ms. West's students are ready to write. In the remaining time in the period, her American History students use evidence from both of these documents to address the following question:

> *The US Army lists twelve responsibilities of every military leader. Among them are the following:*
>
> - *"Ensure the physical, moral, personal, and professional wellbeing of subordinates.*
> - *Effectively communicate vision, purpose, and direction.*
> - *Build discipline while inspiring motivation, confidence, enthusiasm, and trust in subordinates.*
> - *Anticipate and manage change and be able to act quickly and decisively under pressure.*
> - *Treat subordinates with dignity, respect, fairness, and consistency."*
>
> *(US Army, 2007, p. 6).*
>
> *In what ways do these two messages demonstrate General Eisenhower's commitment to his responsibilities? Be sure to use evidence from both texts to support your claims.*

"As a US History teacher, it's important that I use primary source documents so that students can witness history unfolding. Sometimes they view this only as being about events in the past, without fully appreciating the complexities of the moment," she said. "I hope that these experiences with close readings of text allow them to place themselves in the context of the times to more fully appreciate the uncertainty of the moment."

Conclusion

The factors that make a text complex include quantitative and qualitative measures, including content, cohesion, and organization. In turn, both the reader and the task must be considered in making these determinations. Importantly, text differs across disciplines, and many students are not equipped to engage in deep understanding of the readings that define a content area. The practice of close reading invites students to read repeatedly and is guided by discussion of text-dependent questions. When practices such as close reading are consistently implemented across content areas, students become better equipped to handle more difficult texts.

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Douglas Fisher and **Nancy Frey** are professors in the College of Education at San Diego State University and teacher leaders at Health Sciences High and Middle College. They are interested in quality instruction for diverse learners and are coauthors with Diane Lapp of *In a Reading State of Mind: Brain Research, Teacher Modeling, and Comprehension Instruction* (International Reading Association, 2009). You may contact Doug at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu and Nancy at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu.

Additional Resources From IRA

International Reading Association. (n.d.). *Common Core Standards: Overview.* Retrieved January 10, 2012, from www.reading.org/Resources/ResourcesByTopic/CommonCore-resourcetype/CommonCore-rt-overview.aspx

Use this portal to access the latest information and resources about the Common Core State Standards, including archived webinars, Reading Today articles, and links to IRA's online social network, Engage. The Common Core Collaborative Community on Engage is actively discussing issues related to text complexity, close reading, and informational texts.

Buehl, D. (2011). *Developing Readers in the Academic Disciplines.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Buehl's book, published this year, discusses the importance of building literacy within the academic disciplines and places texts at the center of instruction. Chapters are devoted to such topics as matching readers with text, using inquiry and essential questions, and considering instructional strategies that work well in content classrooms.

Blatteau, L.H. (2008). *In the Style of Ernie Pyle: Reporting on World War II.* Retrieved January 10, 2012, from www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/style-ernie-pyle-reporting-1107.html

This U.S. History lesson plan designed for high school students includes a close reading of a war report issued by legendary journalist Ernie Pyle. Using multimedia resources, students read, discuss, and write about Pyle's use of language to convey both the factual and emotional aspects of war. Even if you are not a history teacher, the lesson resources provide a good guide for developing a close reading in your content area.

Fang, Z., & Schleppegrell, M.J. (2010). Disciplinary literacies across content areas: Supporting secondary reading through functional language analysis. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 53*(7), 587–597.

The authors examine the discipline-specific characteristic of texts in core content areas and detail a process for helping students closely examine these language structures to better comprehend complex texts.

FIGURE 1. Sample Teacher Modeling in Physics

Text	Teacher commentary during the think-aloud	Strategies modeled/ practiced
Going Through Changes (Photo of pancakes)	"As I look over this piece of text, I see a photo of pancakes cooking on a griddle. Some are golden brown and others are still a beige batter color. The title of this reading is *Going Through Changes*. I wonder if the pancakes, some uncooked and others fully done, represent changes at a chemical level. I'll read the first paragraph."	Predicting and using titles and graphics provides focus and motivation to read further.
At a dinner table, a cook is making pancakes. He mixes together an egg, milk, and flour into a batter. When the batter is placed on the griddle, it becomes solid and golden brown. The batter has had a chemical change. All the atoms of the original ingredients are still in the batter. But the griddle's heat has arranged those atoms in a different pattern. Like the pancake batter, many substances go through chemical changes. These changes can break down complex substances into simpler parts. Or they can join simple parts into complex substances.	"So the cooking batter does represent chemical changes. I see from reading these paragraphs that chemical changes involve substances breaking down and substances joining together. I think the next section will tell me about how this process of breaking down and building up occurs. Do you have any ideas?" (Maria listens as the students share a few possibilities.) Janette, a student in Maria's class, responds, "Maybe the next section will talk about molecules being broken down or atoms being joined together." Dave adds, "Yes, I remember when I was in 8th grade we talked about how salt molecules are broken down when salt is added to water." Maria then continues. "OK, let's read on to see if we're correct."	The prediction is confirmed by reading the text. Note that sometimes the prediction is refuted after reading the text. Afterward, the main ideas are identified by summarizing a few lines of the text, which is followed by another prediction based on the text just read.
It usually takes energy to combine substances in a chemical reaction. This kind of reaction is called an endothermic reaction.	"An endothermic reaction. Wow, I'm not sure what that means, but I do know that thermic sounds like a word part from thermometer or thermal and both of those terms relate to heat. Maybe endothermic also relates to heat in some way. I'll continue to read. Maybe I'll gain an understanding of the meaning of this word if I read on."	Segmenting words into word parts brings attention to root words or affixes that might offer clues to meaning. In addition, understanding that clarification might come from context or from continued reading.
For example, heat was needed to turn the batter into a pancake.	"I guess I was right—endothermic does relate to heat."	Again, confirmation of a prediction, in this case of a word's meaning, may be confirmed or refuted by reading upcoming text.
If iron and powdered sulfur were mixed together, nothing would happen. But apply heat to those combined substances and you would form iron sulfide. This is an entirely new substance.	"So heat added to a mixture can cause a new substance to form. Interesting. Maybe endothermic means that heat is added."	Synthesizes and restates—examples offered in the text can help the reader to infer word meaning.

From "'You can read this text—I'll show you how': Interactive comprehension instruction," by D. Lapp, D. Fisher, and M. Grant, 2008, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 51*(5), 372–382. Copyright 2008 by the International Reading Association. Reprinted with permission.
Note: Quotes from TIME and Teacher Created Materials (1993).

FIGURE 2. General Dwight D. Eisenhower's D-Day Invasion Statement to Troops

June 6, 1944

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage and devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good luck! And let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

SIGNED: Dwight D. Eisenhower

From D-day statement to soldiers, sailors, and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force, 6/44, Collection DDE-EPRE: Eisenhower, Dwight D: Papers, Pre-Presidential, 1916-1952; Dwight D. Eisenhower Library; National Archives and Records Administration.

FIGURE 3. Eisenhower's Draft Statement in Event of the Operation's Failure

June 5, 1944

Our landings in the Cherbourg have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that Bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone.

From Dwight D. Eisenhower Library Pre-Presidential Papers. Principal File: Butcher Diary, 1942-1945. ARC Identifier: 186470.