



# College and Career Readiness Standards-in-Action

Foundational  
Unit

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FACILITATOR GUIDE  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS/LITERACY

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**SELECTING  
TEXTS WORTH  
READING**

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## Background and Purpose

The College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards for Adult Education in English Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy exemplify three key advances in instruction prompted by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This unit provides adult educators with an introduction to *text complexity*—the first of these three advances—and the central role it plays in the CCR Standards. A significant body of research links the ability to read complex text to significant gains in reading proficiency, making exposure to complex text a key component of college and career readiness.

One powerful study was ACT’s 2006 report called *Reading between the lines*.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrated that the chief distinguishing factor of those students who equaled or exceeded the benchmark score (21 out of 36) in the reading section of the ACT college admissions test was their ability to answer questions associated with complex texts. These findings held for male and female students, students from all racial/ethnic groups, and students from homes with widely varying incomes. The most important implication of this study was that pedagogy focused only on “higher-order” or “critical” thinking was insufficient to ensure that students were ready for college and careers. What students could read, in terms of its complexity, was found to be the greatest predictor of postsecondary success.

Yet the research also revealed that since the mid-1960s, the complexity of texts students read has eroded significantly. Today, the average student graduates with reading skills that are roughly four grade levels below what they need to be for success in first-year college courses and in careers. The impact of not being able to read complex

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<sup>1</sup>ACT, Inc. (2006). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City, IA: Author.

text independently has long-term negative effects. Only 30 percent of the high school seniors who enrolled in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 who needed to take remedial reading courses went on to receive a degree.<sup>2</sup> The research illustrated that the reading demands of college, careers, and citizenship require students to be able to navigate an array of complex texts such as college textbooks, scientific journals and magazines, workplace reading, and daily newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

These findings are the impetus behind Key Advance 1 in the CCR Standards for Adult Education. This important instructional advance finds explicit expression in CCR Reading Anchor Standard 10:

*Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. The standards include a staircase of complexity, defining level-specific complexity from Level B through Level E.*

This standard highlights the growing complexity of the texts students must read to be ready for the demands of college and careers.

This unit prepares participants by having them work together to analyze the features of a text excerpt and to understand what makes it complex. It provides experiences

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<sup>2</sup>Wirt, J., Choy, S., Rooney, P., Provasnik, S., Sen, A., & Tobin, R. (2004). The condition of education 2004 (NCES 2004-077). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2004/2004077.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Stenner, A. J., Koons, H., & Swartz, C. W. (in press). *Text complexity and developing expertise in reading*. Chapel Hill, NC: MetaMetrics, Inc.; Hayes, D. P., & Ward, M. (1992, December). *Learning from texts: Effects of similar and dissimilar features of analogies in study guides*. Paper presented at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX; and Hayes, D. P., Wolfer, L. T., & Wolfe, M. F. (1996). Sourcebook simplification and its relation to the decline in SAT-Verbal scores. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33, 489–508.

and tools to help them understand what aspects of the text will pose the most difficulty for their students. While teachers are not expected to perform a text complexity analysis on every text they give to students to read, this unit illustrates how careful consideration of text complexity can yield insights for instruction and deeper understanding of what it takes to comprehend a text worth reading.

## Overview

This unit will allow participants to investigate in depth Key Advance 1 embedded within the standards—the demand for greater complexity in the texts students read. Participants will build a basic understanding of text complexity initially through a brief presentation on its quantitative and qualitative elements. They will learn how to determine levels of text complexity and become acquainted with tools to perform complexity analyses of texts. They also will examine the features of text that are the major sources of complexity and learn why they pose particular challenges to readers.

In the hands-on activity, participants will learn how to use the Quantitative Analysis Chart for Determining Text Complexity to determine in which level a text belongs. They will spend time analyzing the qualitative features of an excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* to determine which elements of the text are slightly, moderately, very, or exceedingly complex. This will help them make a link between text features and the instructional materials that need to be developed to ensure students are able to successfully comprehend a complex text. A supplemental text and a second text evaluation activity, based on a speech by Eleanor Roosevelt, accompany this unit for further practice or when more than 120 minutes can be devoted to training.

## Materials You Need

For Participants (one copy per participant):

- Directions for Participants
- Worksheet: Qualitative Analysis of Text, *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
- Resource: Excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
- Resource: Quantitative Analysis Chart for Determining Text Complexity
- Resource: Qualitative Analysis Rubric for Informational Texts

Supplemental Materials for Additional Practice (one copy per participant):

- Worksheet: Qualitative Analysis of Text, Eleanor Roosevelt’s Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union
- Resource: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union

For Facilitators:

- Unit 2 PowerPoint Presentation: Selecting Texts Worth Reading
- Answer Key: Qualitative Analysis of Text, *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
- Answer Key: Qualitative Analysis of Text, Eleanor Roosevelt’s Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union

## Time Frame to Complete the Unit

Allow **120 minutes** for this unit, using the following guidance to help divide the time:

- 40 minutes – Introduce the unit.

- 60 minutes – Work in pairs or small groups to complete the activity.
- 20 minutes – Discuss reflections.

NOTE: If you are going to add the Eleanor Roosevelt speech for another practice opportunity, allow another 40-45 minutes for that work. In addition, add a 15-minute break for participants.

## Guidelines for Implementation

### Step 1: Preparations

- a) Create small groups of participants, ideally with four to eight at each table.** The maximum size of a group for this session depends on your space, need, and comfort level. A guiding principle is to make sure the group is small enough that you can be in touch with each table of participants to determine whether they understand the concepts and are fully engaged or they are struggling and need more support.
- b) For best results, select table leaders in advance or ask each table of participants during the session to choose one person to be their lead.** The table leader will be responsible for keeping track of time, bringing participants together at the appropriate times, making certain participants are moving along, sharing information at appropriate times, and notifying you when there are questions or the group needs more support. (If table leaders are selected in advance provide them with copies of the PowerPoint Presentation, handouts, and answer key so they can prepare for the session.)
- c) As a general strategy, be prepared to circulate around the room when participants are working individually or in pairs.** Circulating will allow you to

check on their understanding and be readily available to answer questions.

**d) Conduct a full qualitative evaluation of the excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* before introducing it to others.**

This will help you understand the steps you are asking participants to go through.

**e) Prepare the materials for participants.** Copy the excerpt on colored paper so that participants can spot it easily.

**f) Become familiar with the PowerPoint Presentation and materials, including the answer key.** This will allow you to be at ease with the information and flow of the unit. Detailed notes are provided within the PowerPoint Presentation to help you prepare for the session. In particular, notes for each slide include the identification of the Big Idea, Facilitator Talking Points, and Facilitator Notes. These can help you frame your presentation and provide you important detail and context. This information is coupled with the information offered in this Facilitator Guide—including the research base, rationale, advice, and other guidelines—to give you the support and guidance you require.

The answer key is for your edification and is not meant to be handed out to participants. The key includes “right” answers, but not necessarily the only right answers; it includes well-supported judgments that will guide you as you reflect on participant questions and answers. Participants may convince you that it would be best to move a check mark up or down (to “overrule the answer key”), and that is fine.

**Step 2: Implementation** (40 minutes to introduce; 60 additional minutes working in pairs or small groups)

### **Introduce the three key advances in the CCR Standards for ELA/Literacy.**

**Slides 2-3:** Remind participants of the three key advances and how they interact and build up to college and career readiness. While this unit focuses on Key Advance 1 (Text Complexity), it is important to understand that the CCR Standards were developed to reflect and exemplify all three key advances: increasing text complexity, prioritizing evidence when reading and writing, and building knowledge.

In this unit, participants will understand the role of measuring text complexity and the importance of having students grapple with texts at the appropriate level of complexity. In Unit 3, the focus will be on close reading and asking text-dependent questions that require students to draw evidence from those complex texts. Providing students ways to delve into and re-examine a text through good questions affords students the supports they need to comprehend the ideas and information contained within complex texts. Having students collect evidence while they read also contributes to their ability to learn from what they have read.

That leads to the final unit that introduces the concept of building knowledge. To cultivate their knowledge base, students must read and write regularly about complex texts that offer them new vocabulary, new ideas, and new modes of thought. Well-crafted writing assignments tied to content-rich texts can assist students in collecting and expanding their knowledge.

It is the interaction of these key advances within the CCR Standards as students move up the levels that will prepare adult learners for college and careers. When students engage with *complex text* and extract and employ *evidence* from those texts, they gain *knowledge*, enlarge their experience, and broaden their worldviews.

**Introduce the concept of text complexity in ELA/  
literacy instruction.**

**Slide 4:** Present the objectives of the unit: 1) to understand the research base that explains the importance of text complexity in students' preparedness; 2) to understand the staircase of complexity and the central role it plays in the CCR Standards for Adult Education; 3) to understand the features that make a text complex; and 4) to understand how careful consideration of texts can yield insights for instruction and deeper understanding of what it takes to comprehend a text.

**Slide 5:** When referencing research, note the findings from the 2006 ACT study show how the ability to read complex text is the greatest predictor of success in college. Other research shows the gap between what high school and college students are currently being asked to read. Fewer than 50 percent of high-school graduates are able to read college- and career-ready complex text.

**Slide 6:** Discuss the implications of Reading Standard 10 for instruction and how it captures the need for an increase in the complexity of texts that are read in classrooms. The standard both explicitly links to Key Advance 1 and serves as the basis for the ability to ask CCR-aligned questions of the text to extract evidence (the next key advance) and to develop reading proficiency. With these abilities, students can continue on a trajectory of reading increasing levels of text complexity.

**Slides 7-9:** Discuss the factors that inform the complexity of texts from the very smallest (vocabulary) to the largest (sentence and paragraph structure). After examining the different factors, ask participants to select from among a subset of factors the two that contribute the most to text complexity (uncommon vocabulary and complex sentences)—and therefore create the greatest difficulty for

students when reading. Those two ingredients are known as academic language.

**Introduce the method for determining text complexity.**

**Slide 10:** The standards articulate a three-part system for measuring text complexity involving quantitative and qualitative measures as well as factoring in reader and task considerations.

**Slide 11:** The quantitative scale uses computers to judge the analysis of syntax and vocabulary. Vocabulary includes factors such as the relative rarity of a word, whereas syntax is the way in which words are put together, such as in phrases, clauses, and sentences. In contrast with the quantitative scale, qualitative measures are used by teachers to make informed judgments about the aspects of complexity that computers cannot assess: the structure, language clarity and conventions, knowledge demands, and purpose of a text as well as the level of difficulty of the reading task. Professional judgment—the third part of the system—is not about the inherent complexity of the text. Rather, it focuses on the instructional moves an instructor needs to make with the text to provide students access to it.

**Slide 12:** This slide shows the staircase of complexity that is built into the CCR Levels of Learning using Lexile, ATOS, Flesch-Kincaid, etc., to analyze the complexity of a text. In discussion, you should point out various features of the chart, such as overlapping levels of complexity between various levels and the span covered by each level. The overlap acknowledges that putting a numerical value on words is still a new and inexact science. It also acknowledges that readers progress and backslide in surges and in a hard-to-predict way.

Make sure participants understand that text complexity is seen as an ever-increasing progression of texts creating

a staircase of complexity—not simply the ability to read high school-level texts. The Quantitative Scale defines the requisite levels of complexity for each educational functioning level by Lexile, ATOS, Flesch-Kincaid, etc.

**Slides 13-14:** Introduce the qualitative measures (structure, language clarity and conventions, knowledge demands, and purpose) and various levels of complexity each can have. These are the features that have been determined to have a strong bearing on how challenging or easy a text is. Explain the criteria for each of the four areas that will be assessed, and how the rubric measures the complexity of the text in each of these four areas. Understanding what makes a text qualitatively complex will help teachers design instruction that will provide students with the supports they need to handle the challenging aspects of a particular text.

Let participants know that while the reader and task are important parts of text complexity, they will be addressed more fully in the next unit, when participants learn how powerful questions can be in supporting students to access complex texts and collect the evidence needed to support their claims and conclusions and become better readers.

**Slide 15:** Introduce the two-step process for determining text complexity. The first step is to assess the quantitative complexity of a text to place it within a band, a level of learning defined by the CCR Standards. The second step is to assess the qualitative complexity of a text to determine if the text is slightly, moderately, very, or exceedingly complex for that level.

**Slide 16:** Complex text contains key elements that can only be learned from complex texts, such as academic vocabulary and mature language skills.

**Begin the hands-on activity of Selecting Texts Worth Reading.**

**Slides 17-18:** *Distribute the participants' materials for *Selecting Texts Worth Reading*. This includes directions for participants, the Qualitative Analysis of Text worksheet, the excerpt from Linda R. Monk's *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* that you have printed on separate paper for ease of access, the Quantitative Analysis Chart for Determining Text Complexity, and the Qualitative Analysis Rubric for Informational Texts.*

**Slides 19-22:** *Provide directions to participants on how to determine the complexity of the text. This work is the foundation for success in the units that follow. Investing the time participants need to study the excerpt carefully will be repaid with richer understanding for everything that follows. Deep insights develop when participants compare notes on what they saw and the reasoning others have applied. For this reason, working with a partner is most successful when each participant takes some time with the text alone first and then compares notes with his or her partner. Here are the directions to give participants:*

*TIP: People improve their ability to rate text by comparing their insights with those of others, since everyone will see different things. This learning accelerates when groups at each table come together to compare notes.*

1. Read the excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*. Decide whether to read the text aloud at your table while others follow along, or to read silently.
2. Look at the quantitative measures listed at the top of the Qualitative Analysis of Text worksheet for *The Words We Live By*. Consult the Quantitative Analysis Chart for Determining Text Complexity to determine in what level of learning the text belongs. When different measures indicate adjacent levels, look at the overlap in ranges between levels to decide in which level to place the text.
3. Review the Qualitative Analysis Rubric for Informational Texts. For each category or text feature (structure, language clarity and conventions, knowledge

demands, and purpose), provide evidence in the blank space for why you think the text is or is not especially challenging in that category. Share your insights with a partner.

4. Share your evidence with other participants at your table and discuss any points of agreement or disagreement. Rather than discussing the rating itself, focus on the evidence from the text that supports your rating on the qualitative rubric:
  - What did you read in the text that made you think about it in this way?
  - Can you point to a specific example?
  - Why does [refer to the specific example] seem to be more moderately complex rather than very complex?
5. At your table, assign placement ratings in each category, and finally an overall placement of how complex the text is when you consider all of its features. Remember, you are thinking about this text for a certain level of adult education students, so consider how challenging it is for students at that level.
6. Explain your overall placement for how complex the text is in the bottom row of the chart.

If time permits, or if you want to provide more practice at a later date, repeat the steps above using Eleanor Roosevelt's Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union.

### **Reflections: Thinking Back and Looking Forward** (20 minutes)

**Slide 23:** Review the three-part system for measuring text: quantitative scale, qualitative measures, and professional judgment of reader and task. (Refer to Slide 10.)

Let participants know that for many titles a Lexile is readily available. They need only log in to <https://lexile.com/book/details> and type in the name of the text. Also, tell them they should insist that publishers provide them with quantitative measures of complexity of the texts contained in their textbooks and resources.

Ask participants to share any thoughts they have about how they might address the text features they saw as particularly challenging for students through instructional design. Here are some questions to pose:

- Did analyzing the text in this careful way help you notice what would be difficult for students at this level?
- How would you help students navigate the challenges this text presents?
- What type of supports might be needed?

Determining the complexity of texts is a new kind of work that is challenging for everybody, but it provides many benefits. Point out that one of the many benefits to learning how to analyze texts for complexity is how it will help instructors prepare to teach students. Instructors can design instruction to target what elements make a text complex and provide students with the supports they need to handle the challenging aspects of a particular text.

Underscore why text complexity is so essential for students' preparation for college and careers. Finish by reviewing with participants the general rule for determining complexity: Use the quantitative measures to place a text within a level, and qualitative measures to determine if the text is slightly, moderately, very, or exceedingly complex for that level.

**Slide 24:** After participants complete the hands-on activity, ask them to reflect on and then discuss what they

have learned. Ask them how they plan to use what they have learned. Below are some questions for participants' reflections about their next steps:

- How has participating in this activity changed your thinking about the CCR Standards?
- How will you use the information and understanding you have acquired to improve your teaching practice and student learning?
- What additional training and tools would strengthen your ability to do so?

Once participants have a firm understanding of text complexity, the next priority is to make sure instructors know how to support students in accessing and understanding the meaning of those texts. This understanding is accomplished by developing questions to activate students' ability to comprehend a text. Developing substantive text-based questions is addressed in Unit 3, *Identifying Questions Worth Answering*.