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LOVE & LITERACY



A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR GRADES 5-12
TO FINDING THE MAGIC IN LITERATURE

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A Practical Guide for Grades 5–12 to
Finding the Magic in Literature

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo
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Chapter 1

Build a Complexity Curriculum

DEFINING THE DREAM

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.
—Muriel Rukeyser, “*The Speed of Darkness*,” 2006

Steve’s wife, Charell, did not have an easy childhood. She grew up in Harlem in the 1980s, where she bounced around its foster care system and public schools. Each turn brought new uncertainty about herself and her future. But Charell found a lifeline in books. She saw herself as the outsider in *Julie of the Wolves*, the Julie/Miyax who had every right to chart her own course, even and especially when adults made choices that were not in her best interests. In *Matilda* she learned from others, meeting a librarian named Mrs. Phelps who gave her (and Matilda) permission to read difficult things and work toward understanding them.

Charell took this wisdom and fused it with the lessons of her own experience to make something all her own. To this day, she cites both texts as helping her define the person she wanted to become. Isn’t *that* the experience we dream of for each of our students?

Steve often thinks of his wife’s journey when he plans curriculum—how her teachers’ choices shaped the road she walked. Consider, for example, two hypothetical 11th-grade book lists. What is the difference between the pathway each creates for its students?

Two Possible Book Lists—11th Grade

Reading List 1	Reading List 2
<i>Tess of the d’Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented</i> (Thomas Hardy)	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (Zora Neale Hurston)
<i>The Odyssey</i> (Homer)	<i>The Odyssey</i> (Homer)
<i>Of Mice and Men</i> (John Steinbeck)	<i>Interpreter of Maladies</i> (Jhumpa Lahiri)
<i>The Scarlet Letter</i> (Nathaniel Hawthorne)	<i>Deaf Republic</i> (Ilya Kaminsky)
<i>The Rime of the Ancient Mariner</i> (William Wordsworth)	<i>The House of the Spirits</i> (Isabel Allende)
<i>Great Expectations</i> (Charles Dickens)	<i>Another Country</i> (James Baldwin)
<i>Hamlet</i> (William Shakespeare)	<i>Hamlet</i> (William Shakespeare)

Both book lists have rigorous, challenging texts that will stretch students. Each grapples with major life themes that connect to the human condition. But they represent highly different experiences.

Let’s go back and consider Charell’s experience—or that of any of our students. If Charell only got to read the list on the left, she’d be sent a pretty clear message of what she could find in books—and it wouldn’t be herself. People of color aren’t represented. To the degree that women are, their stories are told by men. The list on the right, meanwhile, doesn’t ignore the voices on the left—it simply makes space for others. If literature has the power to shape who we become, the list on the right helps students encounter more paths on that journey.

At its best, literature offers a mirror in which we might more clearly see ourselves and a window through which we might better know others.¹ It affords us a sense of place, somewhere amid the universe, where we might find ourselves a bit less alone. In our dream curriculum, the deep, atomic pull of literature calls students to something larger than themselves.

Creating a curriculum like this is no easy task. For starters, there is the limit of time: in a given year, we might only get to study five or six texts as a whole class. How can we possibly choose? To begin, we propose a single question: Beyond what our students can say or do when they leave our care, what kinds of people do we want them to become?

Core Idea

Our curriculum shapes more than what students can do.
It shapes who they become.

This approach differs from the way that English curricula have been historically designed. The backbone of much of the US English curriculum is a “canon” of American and English literature that was first selected in the late 1800s—from both historic authors and those who were, at the time, contemporary. If you love some of those texts, or some of the others that have since been added to the list, you are not alone. They are some of our favorites, too. But these works are inevitably limited by the worldviews of their time and by the mechanisms that allowed white men to have voice while forcing others to the periphery—or out of the conversation entirely. The canon captures *a* past. Teaching literacy with love means sharing other pasts, connecting narratives to the present, and imagining a future together.

The growing diversity of our classrooms invites us to widen and deepen our curricula beyond those texts we’ve inherited.² This is a moment to think about whose voices get time in the books we choose: not only which characters students meet, but who gets to tell their stories. When students from underrepresented backgrounds engage with storytellers who share similar experiences³—and not solely when they’re writing about trauma—they can more easily see themselves in the humanities. When all students, regardless of background, enjoy an inclusive curriculum, we share with them the strength of stories across cultures and experiences.

As #DisruptTexts cofounder Tricia Ebarvia writes, reconsidering our curriculum doesn’t necessarily mean replacing all our books. Instead, it often means complementing them with additional texts that give previously marginalized voices a place at the table.⁴ Teaching *Romeo and Juliet*? Consider interrogating Romeo’s misogyny and teaching texts that portray healthy teen relationships. Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Also teach texts about race written by people of color themselves, and perhaps investigate the text's difficulty portraying civil rights or characters of color (see one example in Chapter 2, and another in this endnote).⁵

The Canon in Schools: A Historical Perspective

Students of history know that the genesis of the US instructional “canon” was the product of a few converging forces: a list of texts used in Harvard’s entrance requirements in the late 1870s, publishers seeking to profit from this list (with study aids and anthologies), and an 1894 report that effectively established “English” as a US discipline in secondary schools.⁶ Then and today still, access to publication itself remains far from egalitarian. Some voices have been routinely excluded.⁷ Outside the United States, the history of English instruction poses further problems. Its study was developed, for example, as a tool of the British colonial project in India.⁸ Knowing this history can be discomfoting, but it also invites us to look at our texts with clearer eyes.

As an adult, Charell is a fearless reader who devours everything from beach reads to biographies. When a coworker recently opined on utopias, Charell realized her educational experience didn’t spend much time on the concept . . . so she picked up Thomas More’s 1516 treatise on the topic and read it herself.

Charell’s story highlights the power of a true complexity curriculum. It didn’t just help her build a sense of empathy and identity; it gave her skill and confidence to tackle any text—even those that brim with sophistication.

A complexity curriculum sets students up to love reading in a meaningful and lasting way. Let’s talk about how to build one.

Stop and Jot—Gut Check

The first step in thinking about our curriculum is evaluating what we use. We’ll talk in a bit about how to consider new texts (if you feel you need to). For now, consider the current text list for the grade(s) you teach or your students’ experience across your department. Ask yourself:

- Whose stories are told? Even if I can’t represent all voices, am I over-representing certain voices at the expense of others?

- Who does the storytelling? Even when characters are diverse, are their stories only told by white authors?
- What are the stories about? For example, do non-white authors only speak about identity-based trauma?
- Where do my stories take place? Is my curriculum limited to just the United States or Western countries?
- When I use canonical texts, do I present counter-narratives?

List out your texts below, along with your takeaways:

(NOTE: Don't be afraid to write in this book. Poet Billy Collins counsels his students to get over their reverence for the texts enough to really interact with them. Not quite sure? Take a break and read his poem "Marginalia" to give you a nudge!)

DEFINING COMPLEXITY

Some might use the word "complex" to describe the Toni Morrison excerpt in the introduction (or Thomas More's *Utopia* for that matter). But what does complexity mean and how much does it really matter when we think about preparing our students for the world? To answer, look at this excerpt of a newspaper article that was printed a few years ago.⁹ As you read, jot some notes. What could make this text challenging for students?

Stop and Jot—Defining Complexity

“Black People Were Denied Vanilla Ice Cream in the Jim Crow South —Except on Independence Day”

by Michael W. Twitty

By custom rather than by law, black folks were best off if they weren’t caught eating vanilla ice cream in public in the Jim Crow South, except—the narrative always stipulates—on the Fourth of July. I heard it from my father growing up myself, and the memory of that all-but-unspoken rule seems to be unique to the generation born between World War I and World War II.

But if Maya Angelou hadn’t said it in her classic autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I doubt anybody would believe it today.

“People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn’t buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth. Other days he had to be satisfied with chocolate.”

Vanilla ice cream—flavored with a Nahuatl spice indigenous to Mexico, the cultivation of which was improved by an enslaved black man named Edmund Albius on the colonized Réunion island in the Indian Ocean, now predominately grown on the largest island of the African continent, Madagascar, and served wrapped in the conical invention of a Middle Eastern immigrant—was the symbol of the American dream. That its pure, white sweetness was then routinely denied to the grandchildren of the enslaved was a dream deferred indeed.

—*Courtesy of Guardian News & Media Ltd*

What makes this article complex? What would give your students difficulty if they encountered it on their own?

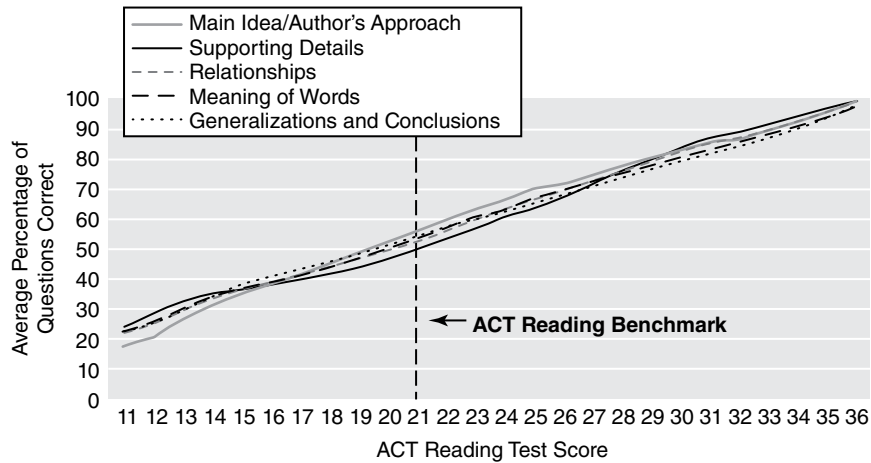
This commentary appeared in *The Guardian*, a newspaper written at a reading level that most adults are supposed to access. Yet consider the demands of the third paragraph. Readers must decipher so many things to truly understand it. Among them:

- **Sophisticated vocabulary** (that often isn't discernable in context)—words like “indigenous” and “deferred.”
- **Geographical knowledge**—knowing where Mexico, the Indian Ocean, or Madagascar is.
- **Historical knowledge**—understanding what colonization is and its implications.
- **Literary knowledge**—catching that the author is playing on the traditional (albeit toxic) association of whiteness with purity.
- **Long, complex sentence structure**—the final paragraph is composed of just two sentences—and the first is 65 words long!
- **Spotting the irony**—that everyone involved in the creation of vanilla ice cream is a person of color. This helps unlock Twitty's ironic tone.
- **Catching the allusion** to Langston Hughes's “A Dream Deferred”—and bringing their understanding of that text to bear on the one at hand.

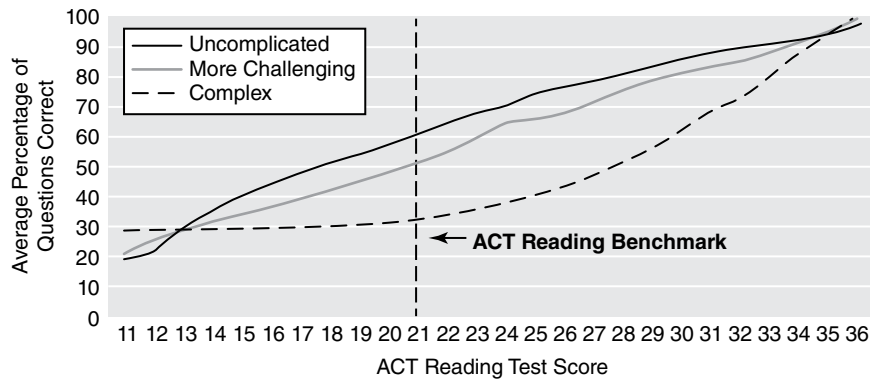
That's no small order for a newspaper article written for the general public! As adult readers, we can see how Twitty supports his takeaway message as we read, a process made automatic by years of wide reading and analysis. While this process may feel effortless to us, we cannot assume the same is true for our students. Without the ability to recognize, connect, and synthesize these features, some students will never get Twitty's point. And if that's true, we can't expect it to matter much to them.

The task of understanding Twitty highlights the challenge our students face. In 2005, the ACT—maker of one of the two major college entrance exams in the country—released a study showing that the biggest obstacle for students on their assessment wasn't a single, isolated reading skill like drawing conclusions or identifying supporting details. It was that all students, even high-performing ones, struggled with reading comprehension when texts became difficult.¹⁰ When the going got tough, our students got it wrong. (See Figure 1.1.)

Figure 1.1 The ACT’s report helped reveal complexity as a major culprit behind student struggle. In the graphs above, it’s the complexity of the text—not isolated reading skills—that distinguish the top scorers from those who are less successful on the assessment.



*Performance on the ACT Reading Test by Textual Element
(Averaged across Seven Forms)*



*Performance on the ACT Reading Test by Degree of Text Complexity
(Averaged across Seven Forms)*

Source: © 2006 ACT Inc. All rights reserved.

Regardless of how you feel about college admissions or standardized tests, there's no measure of educational progress that says things are going well for our students. A 2010 study, for example, found that only half of Texas's 11th graders could read texts with the complexity they would encounter in college.¹¹

What these studies reveal is that before we talk about how we teach literacy, we have to talk about the texts we give students. If they aren't complex enough, they won't push students' development. Education leaders Ross Weiner and Susan Pimentel write:

System leaders who want to foster effective and relevant professional learning. . . should focus in the first instance on making sure the instructional materials reflect the full aspiration of college and career readiness. It's the professional learning equivalent of "you are what you eat."¹²

Core Idea

You are what you eat:
if you want students to grow, nourish them with challenging texts.

For many of us, this advice seems easier said than done. How does it apply to readers in struggle or those who are reading several years below grade level? Is a complexity curriculum even appropriate for them? The answer is yes, if we take care to provide supports. (We'll address this directly and show how in Chapter 2.)

Watering down the texts we give to students doesn't help them grow. Chowling down on comfort food is fine on occasion, but it's no way to raise a healthy eater. Students are nourished when we do the opposite—choose increasingly challenging, complex texts that allow reading skills to develop and flourish.¹³

If you want to push students to love reading—to enjoy it *and* be great at it—take the notion of a complexity curriculum to heart. Let's consider what that might feel like.

Steve has directed literacy curriculum for every grade from 5th to 12th and he likes to think about ways to organize units. Take a look at this sample sequence of novels for 8th grade. While novels aren't the only things students would read in class (students read scores of articles, poems, short stories, speeches, and other texts—and text complexity matters there, too), the list of texts gives a quick cross-section of a curriculum.

What do you notice?

Sample—8th-Grade Sequence of Texts

Texts
<i>Persepolis</i> (Marjane Satrapi)
<i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> (Julia Alvarez)
<i>Animal Farm</i> (George Orwell)
<i>The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i> (Frederick Douglass)
<i>Othello</i> (William Shakespeare)

Steve faced a number of choices when he selected these texts and he spent a good deal of time considering their complexity: curricular, quantitative, and qualitative. We can unpack them one by one.

CURRICULAR COMPLEXITY

A great literacy curriculum is always talking to itself. Books poke at big questions. Authors challenge each other. Students leave class not with answers, but with new questions and new perspectives. In essence, the curriculum as a whole is one large story, and the more cohesive the story, the more compelling it is to read.

Core Idea

Curriculum tells a larger story:
the more cohesive it is, the more compelling it becomes.

To tell the larger story, Steve will need to consider two ideas simultaneously:

- How do these potential texts talk to each other?
- Who gets to do the talking, and who are they talking about?

Let's see how these two questions work together.

Many educators are familiar with the concept of essential questions, popularized by the work of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. An essential question is a broad,

open-ended question that invites deep inquiry during the course of a year or unit.¹⁴ In literacy class, these are the questions that will keep your students up at night (we hope!), the questions that link the books we read to meaningful topics: “What do we owe to each other?” or “What does it mean to really love someone?” or “Are people inherently good?” A good essential question shapes the story your curriculum tells and what you want students to take away from what they read.

Beyond intellectual magnetism, what else does an essential question need? Relevancy. Jump-start your thinking by reviewing your school’s broader course materials. Ask yourself: What have students already discussed? What questions are coming up in other classes right now?

Let’s use Steve’s sample list. Imagine that last year in literacy class, students discussed the question “What is freedom?” and in history class, they studied the US revolution and other contemporaneous uprisings. This year, the social studies curriculum examines the mid-1800s and beyond, particularly domestic and international labor and civil rights movements. How could we complement this focus in English class? Steve proposes the following overarching questions:

- What is power? Does it corrupt people, do corrupt people seek it, or is it something else altogether?
- What should be the relationship between a government and the people it serves?

Steve chose these essential questions because they fit well within the broader school curriculum and because, as a former journalist, they still captivate him. Were he crafting a books list from scratch, these essential questions would guide him. If he were replacing one or more books on an existing list, these questions would help him choose.¹⁵

Steve picked these texts to bring multiple viewpoints to a topic our world still grapples with today.¹⁶ But he also was careful to vary the genres selected. Scholar Peter Rabinowitz argues that exposing students to a wide range of genres helps them develop a stronger sense of how different types of writing work *and* inoculates them against any biases embedded within the traditional English literary canon. He notes that “intensive reading may well be a worthless skill for someone who has not already devoured a large and heterogeneous collection of texts. Deep reading, in other words, can complement wide reading, but it cannot replace it.”¹⁷

Sample—8th-Grade Texts and Curriculum Complexity

Essential Questions:

- What is power? Does power corrupt people, do corrupt people seek power, or is it something else altogether?
- What's the right relationship between a government and the people it serves?

Text	Curriculum-level Complexity
<i>Persepolis</i> (Marjane Satrapi)	Essential questions: examines how a society can shift toward oppressive structure Genre: graphic novel, memoir
<i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> (Julia Alvarez)	Essential questions: examines an oppressive regime and responses to it Genre: historical fiction
<i>Animal Farm</i> (George Orwell)	Essential questions: considers how good political intentions can be corrupted by power Genre: sociopolitical fiction, allegory
<i>The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i> (Frederick Douglass)	Essential questions: demonstrates the consequences of a racist government that does not value its citizens' lives, as well as pathways to challenge it Genre: memoir
<i>Othello</i> (William Shakespeare)	Essential questions: demonstrates the consequences of a racist, misogynist, and xenophobic social structure Genre: drama

Steve hopes to offer experiences that will feel both familiar and new to students. But he's thinking about something else as well. Let's review Steve's list using two other considerations he had in mind, diversity and knowledge building:

Sample—8th-Grade Texts and Curriculum Complexity

DIVERSITY AND KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

Text	Curriculum-Level Complexity
<i>Persepolis</i> (Marjane Satrapi)	French-Iranian author describing childhood experience during the Islamic revolution; late twentieth century
<i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> (Julia Alvarez)	Life during the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, as told by a Dominican-American; mid- to late twentieth century
<i>Animal Farm</i> (George Orwell)	Of-ter-referenced text and author; “Orwellian” is a common term in social discourse and this text is a staple example of allegory; early to mid-twentieth century
<i>The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i> (Frederick Douglass)	African American icon describing a pathway out of slavery; early to mid-nineteenth century
<i>Othello</i> (William Shakespeare)	Play’s themes (and Shakespearean tropes) have been replicated and expanded throughout the world of literature; Renaissance

Steve’s selection expands the perspectives and voices student hear, but it also includes authors who would be considered canonical. Why? Because doing so introduces students to texts that will build on knowledge that other authors will presume they have. Canonical texts are deeply embedded in literary and broader culture. Reading them gives students a grounding to understand contemporary authors who will respond to, build on, and challenge the ideas they pose.¹⁸ (This is in addition to any literary merit these texts have.) They are passports to an ongoing conversation, and to never discuss them deeply disadvantages students.¹⁹

As we mentioned earlier, discussing canonical texts, as with any book, doesn’t mean doing so without challenge. Were Steve’s students to read *Othello*, they’d most

certainly be discussing the racism and misogyny of its characters, as well as investigating the perspectives of characters like Emilia, Desdemona, or Desdemona's nurse, all women who are sidelined by the text.

Curriculum shapes thought and belief, whispering to our students what the world is and what it might become. The books that we choose (or don't) establish the tone and tenor of that conversation, as well as who gets to participate in it. It might seem strange for us to call these decisions a type of complexity, but in our view, that's exactly what they are. A reductive or oversimplified curriculum presents the same ideas, voices, and genres again and again. It doesn't ask our students to challenge the status quo—a deep irony considering that's what many of the authors they read are famous for doing. Teaching a complexity curriculum means problematizing well-trod ideas in the exact same way great authors do. Our kids are all the better for it.

Following is a quick summary of the keys to curriculum complexity that we have discussed so far (you'll find a full list of factors you can use as a checklist in the online appendix's *Reading and Writing Handbook*).

Curriculum-Level Complexity

Factors for Text Selection and Sequence

- **Diversity and Inclusion**—Does this group of texts help us represent the broader diversity of the United States and the world? Does it resonate with our students' experience or offer a new one? Does it help center marginalized voices? Does it run the risk of tokenizing an experience or telling a single story about a particular group?
- **Presumed Knowledge**—Will these texts provide knowledge that is assumed by other texts?
- **Essential Questions**—Do these texts speak to each other in a way that will be fruitful for students?
- **Genre and Time Period**—Are we exposing students to a wide variety of genres and time periods throughout our curriculum?

Stop and Jot—Curricular Complexity

Apply this to your own classroom. Using your own curriculum, assess the strengths and weaknesses in the following areas:

1. Diversity and inclusion
2. Presumed knowledge
3. Essential questions
4. Genre and time period

Are there any key changes you would like to make to the text selection or the essential question?

Texts	Key Takeaways for Curricular Complexity

(If you review this list and have concerns, this is probably the first place you'll want to advocate for change at school. See the FAQ in Chapter 9 "What if I have a mandated curriculum and it is not diverse or complex?" to get started.)

We now have the beginnings of a curriculum that tells a compelling, inclusive story. Yet even if we craft a powerful essential question and link it with inclusive texts, it's still possible to fail—and fail spectacularly—in our goal of preparing students to read any text they choose. How?

If we don't give students practice reading complex text, they'll only be able to access (and love) a very limited subset of books. So the next place to look is the nitty-gritty details of what makes any specific book challenging. As we do, we'll need to do a gut check of our selections to see if they should stay on our list and to decide in what order we might teach them. There are two categories to consider—quantitative and qualitative complexity.²⁰ Let's discuss both.

QUANTITATIVE COMPLEXITY

Below are two versions of a news story. These paragraphs come from Newsela.com, a website that provides reading passages at various difficulty levels. Both passages have the same content—they describe a new Oreo cookie on the market—but there is a noticeable difference in complexity. Complexity in this case is measured by a Lexile score, one of the most well-known quantitative measures of text complexity. Take a moment to read both and jot down the differences between the two.

Stop and Jot—Lexile Level Comparison

<p>Mondelez International just introduced its latest twist on the Oreo, the best-selling cookie in the world. Oreo Thins are slightly wider and just a little over half as thick as the original wafers. The sleek new cookies are also 7 calories lighter, though they are not meant to be a diet version of the classic.</p> <p><i>Lexile 1180L</i></p>	<p>Oreo is the best-selling cookie in the world. Mondelez International just came out with a new kind, called Oreo Thins. They are only about half as thick as regular Oreos and just a little wider. They have 7 fewer calories. They are not meant to be a diet cookie, though.</p> <p><i>Lexile 640L</i></p>
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What differences do you notice between the two passages?

Two chief features are noticeable in the higher-Lexile text: more complex vocabulary (e.g. “sleek,” “wafers”) and longer sentences. That’s what Lexile is: an algorithm that considers vocabulary and sentence length, assigning a numerical score based on how complex the text appears to be.²¹ This is a reasonable way to get a quick readout, though critics will point out that it is imperfect. If we relied on Lexile alone, we’d call *The Hunger Games* (810L) much more complex than *The Sun Also Rises* (610L). And while we consider ourselves proud members of Katniss’s resistance, we’re not quite

ready to swap Hemingway to 5th grade.²² Similarly, the memoir *Night* (570L) challenges students in some ways that the higher-Lexile *The Giver* (760L) does not.

Lexile gives us objective—albeit incomplete—information about complexity. It’s our initial gut check to the question: Are we exposing our students to increasingly complex texts on their pathway to understanding?

Let’s reconsider Steve’s original list with the Lexile levels included:

Sample—8th-Grade Texts and Curriculum Complexity

Text	Lexile
<i>Persepolis</i> (Marjane Satrapi)	N/A*
<i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> (Julia Alvarez)	910
<i>The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i> (Frederick Douglass)	1080
<i>Animal Farm</i> (George Orwell)	1170
<i>Othello</i> (William Shakespeare)	N/A*

* Lexile measures cannot be used with graphic novels or plays, but at least in terms of quantitative measures, *Persepolis*—a graphic novel—would be one of the least complex texts of this sequence and *Othello*—written in highly dense and archaic language—would be the most complex.

Let’s break down the decisions we see here: overall, students are being stretched with texts of different quantitative measures over the course of one year, beginning with texts whose language will be accessible to most students (*Persepolis* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*) and ending with a few that will stretch all of them (*Othello*).

Stop and Jot—Quantitative Complexity

Using your current curriculum, look up the quantitative complexity of the texts you teach (you can find these listed online by many publishers or at lexile.com). Based on your state’s guidance, how close are you to the range for your grade?* Do your texts increase in challenge over the course of the year?

Text	Lexile (or other quantitative measure)

* If useful, here are the Lexile guidelines provided by the Common Core:

- Grades 4–5 (770–980)
- Grades 6–8 (955–1155)
- Grades 9–10 (1080–1305)
- Grades 11+ (1215–1355).²³

While we use Lexile as our initial complexity gut check, sequencing is not as simple as ordering texts numerically. With any text, there are other dimensions of complexity that we need to factor in. And as in the case of Steve’s list, these qualitative components can encourage us to rearrange the order of texts being offered.

QUALITATIVE COMPLEXITY

A book’s quantitative score can help us place it within the right grade span, but after that, we should take qualitative measures into account. Plenty of AP-level books have low Lexile levels (e.g. *The Grapes of Wrath*—680L) but are rich in qualitative or thematic complexity, meriting their instruction.

Take this case study of two poems. Which is more complex, Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” or Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees”?

Case Study—Two Poems

"In a Station of the Metro"

by Ezra Pound

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

"Trees"

by Joyce Kilmer

I think that I shall never see
A poem as lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing
breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Kilmer's poem is longer, yet it relies on relatively simple structure and imagery and its message feels more straightforward. (Of course, its antiquated language and sentence structure might confuse younger readers.) Pound's text, in contrast, is far shorter, but it also presents the potentially challenging word "apparition," and, more significantly, offers more complex ideas to analyze.

In *Three Genres*, Stephen Minot uses these two poems to make a case that while neither is better than the other, Pound's is the more sophisticated. "In a Station of the Metro" uses language in an unexpected way—juxtaposing commuters with wind-tossed petals—and its message is elusive.²⁴ Minot's assessment sounds accurate; we'd expect far more high school or college students to struggle with Pound's text than with Kilmer's.

Qualitative complexity is easier to categorize than to measure: what *types* of qualitative complexity appear in a given text? We're indebted to the work of Doug Lemov, Erica Woolway, and Colleen Driggs in *Reading Considered*, where the authors describe the array of forms qualitative complexity can take as the "five plagues of the developing reader."²⁵ These create a manageable framework for analyzing texts:

A Few Words on . . . Qualitative Text Complexity

The Five Plagues of the Developing Reader based on *Reading Reconsidered*

- **Archaic Text**—Language pre-1900 worked differently. Sentences were longer, passive voice was more common, and subjects and predicates had more complicated relationships.

Example from *Barnaby Rudge*, by Charles Dickens:

In the year 1775, there stood upon the borders of Epping Forest, at a distance of about twelve miles from London—measuring from the Standard in Cornhill or rather from the spot on or near to which the Standard used to be in days of yore—a house of public entertainment called the Maypole; which fact was demonstrated to all such travellers as could neither read nor write (and at that time a vast number both of travellers and stay-at-homes were in this condition) by the emblem reared on the roadside over against the house, which, if not of those goodly proportions that Maypoles were wont to present in olden times, was a fair young ash, thirty feet in height, and straight as any arrow that ever English yeoman drew.

- **Non-Linear Time Sequence**—Texts can skip from past to present to future without warning and some texts make use of this frequently.

Example: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is a series of nested stories, moving forward, then backward in time. *Time's Arrow*, by Martin Amis, uses a reverse chronology.

- **Complexity of Narrator**—Texts can have unreliable narrators, multiple narrators, non-human narrators, and these perspectives add complexity.

Example: Patricia Smith's excellent poetry collection, *Blood Dazzler*, describes Hurricane Katrina from multiple perspectives, including that of the storm. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* jumps between characters multiple times in the novel, as does George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*.

- **Complexity of Story**—Some stories make extensive use of symbolism, extended metaphor, or allegory. In other cases, they have particularly labyrinthine plot structures.

Example: *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, takes on substantially more complexity when considered as an allegory. Stephen Graham Jones's *Mapping the Interior* is both horror story and social commentary on the Native American experience.

- **Intentionally Resistant Text**—Some texts (especially poems) have structures that intentionally resist easy meaning-making. That is, part of the meaning is created from deliberate gaps in clarity.

Example: Claudia Rankine’s “Citizen” is a book-length poem that experiments with form and defies easy categorization. Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* makes ample use of paradox:

Right here, now, as I invent myself, I’m thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. *But listen. Even that story is made up.*

Texts vary in the type and amount of qualitative complexity they offer. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Telltale Heart” includes multiple challenges: archaic language, complexity of story, and complexity of narrator, while Tommy Orange’s *There There* relies on non-linear time sequence and a complex set of narrators.

Keeping the qualitative complexity of text in mind, let’s revisit Steve’s sample text choices:

Sample—8th-Grade Texts & Qualitative Complexity

Text	Selected Factors of Qualitative Complexity
<i>Persepolis</i>	Complexity of story (a graphic novel, pairing images and text)
<i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> (910)	Complexity of narrator (multiple narrators) Non-linear time sequence Complexity of story (symbolism)
<i>Animal Farm</i> (1170)	Complexity of story (symbolism, allegory)
<i>The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass</i> (1080)	Archaic language Complexity of story (irony)
<i>Othello</i>	Archaic language (Shakespearean!) Complexity of story (figurative language)

When we look at these texts from this perspective, we see that Steve gives students multiple at-bats with increasingly complex symbolism at the beginning of the sequence. We also see that he reordered the texts despite Lexile—shifting *Animal Farm* before Frederick Douglass’s narrative—so that students could stick with symbolism and then spend the latter half of the year working with archaic language. With this additional insight, the care behind Steve’s sequencing choices becomes clearer.

Stop and Jot—Qualitative Complexity

Analyze the qualitative complexity of your texts in the same way Steve did. What are your takeaways?

Text	Factors of Qualitative Complexity

When put together, curricular, quantitative, and qualitative complexity create a rich journey for students to deepen their understanding of literature and the world. The final aspect of a quality curriculum is what we ask students to do with the texts they read.

TASK COMPLEXITY

If the complexity of the text matters, so does the task that accompanies it. Take a moment to review these four possible essay assignments for Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. As you read, consider: How does each assignment determine the complexity of students’ experience with the text during the unit?

Stop and Jot—Defining Task Complexity

Task 1: Connect the lessons of *Night* to another event in history: How are they similar or different?

Task 2: What is a theme of *Night*? Cite examples from the text.

Task 3: How does Wiesel use the idea of night, both literally and figuratively, to recount his experience in the Holocaust? Consider this concept throughout the book and in relation to his trilogy (*Night, Dawn, Day*).

Task 4: Elie Wiesel's original draft of *Night* was 865 pages long. Choose three sections and their revisions and explain: How do Wiesel's changes in structure and language affect the meaning of the passage? Which version do you believe is stronger, and why?

* * *

How does each assignment determine the complexity of students' experience with the text during the unit?

As you read through each task, one takeaway is certain: the work a student must do for each one is strikingly different. Each successive task asks students to get closer and closer to the text. In the first, a student could write about *Night* without having read it. Listening to class discussions or using a cheat sheet summary of the text would be enough to get by. The second task requires reading, but the amount of analysis required depends on how specific and precise the cited examples are. The third task asks students to read closely for a single idea woven throughout the text and two additional texts. The final task demands the most: a comparative close rereading of specific passages alongside their original counterparts.

Depending on which task you chose as the culminating assessment, you'd get very different measures for what students are able to do by the end. What's more, your unit would probably look a lot different depending on this final task. As Paul notes in

Driven by Data and *Leverage Leadership*, standards are meaningless until you define how to assess them. So, too, in curriculum planning. The journey to understanding a text is not clear until you determine the destination task(s) and how you will evaluate them. The destination defines the path.

Core Idea

The destination defines the path.
Assessment tasks are the starting point for instruction, not the end.

The tasks we assign can greatly enhance or decrease what students will need to do with the text, and thus the depth of their reading. So it's crucial that we create the task before—not after—we teach the text. For example, if you were to choose the fourth task, the one Steve and his planners decided on, you'd pay particular attention to opportunities for close reading of language and structure, and you'd develop lessons and rubrics aligned to your expectations.

Generating a quality task takes time, but it's well worth the effort. The questions below will help you begin.

- What do I want students to be able to say about this text?
- What task will require them to closely read the text to be able to answer it?

Let's imagine we were planning a destination assessment for John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*. A straightforward prompt might simply ask students to explain the symbolism of one object in the text (e.g. the pearl). It's important for the text, and it requires pulling evidence from multiple sections. But we might decide that this will lead to too superficial of a unit.

Instead, we might decide we want students to be able to explain the critique of capitalism embedded in Steinbeck's text. We could say: "*The Pearl* takes place in Mexico, but many argue it is really about the United States. Agree or Disagree, citing the text and two additional articles/essays." This prompt would ask students to explain Steinbeck's critique and whether they agree or disagree with it. It would pair well with a unit on argumentative writing and give students an authentic opportunity to workshop their new writing skills.

Or perhaps we've already worked on argumentative writing and want to focus on text structures. One of the challenging aspects of this text is hidden in its resolution. A character dies (no spoilers, we promise), and a close reading of the text reveals that the murderer is never actually named—the reader needs to decide who it is. This is a pretty provocative omission, and analyzing it requires really thinking about Steinbeck's messages. Were we working on text structure, we might ask: "In your opinion, who killed X? Why wouldn't Steinbeck make this clear, and why does the answer to this question matter for his themes?" We could imagine kicking this task off with an energetic class debate.

Not every destination needs to be an essay, and students often benefit from the ability to choose between multiple options.²⁶ If your expectations are clear, students can do the same level of analysis and thinking in creative writing (e.g., adding and performing a scene for *Othello*), performance tasks (e.g., holding "character court" and writing "legal briefs" defending or attacking a character's motives), or interdisciplinary study (e.g., explaining how characters would respond to moments being studied in history, or how historical figures would have interacted with characters). In addition to more traditional essays, students can write reviews, blogs, letters, articles, or direct short films.

While we are not limited in the types of tasks we create, the key to making them a true reading task (versus something they can do by simply listening to class discussion) is to answer these two questions effectively:

- **What do I want students to be able to say about this text?**
 - Does my task require students to understand this text in its fullness?
 - What aspects of this text do I want students to analyze? What task will push them beyond their comfort zone and into a place of intellectual risk?
 - What concepts have we already studied this year, and what haven't we discussed yet?
- **What task will require students to closely read the text to be able to answer it?**
 - Do they need to marshal evidence, or could they get by on just a summary?
 - What types of tasks have my students already completed this year?
 - Is there an opportunity to be creative or allow my students some choice?

At first, it can be difficult to generate a “perfect” task, so lean on your fellow teachers to build one together. This will take time. But combined with quantitative, qualitative, and curricular complexity, your work with task complexity will take you a long way toward developing a curriculum of real elegance and depth.

Stop and Jot—Task Complexity

Use these questions to evaluate the tasks for one of the texts you teach.
What do you want students to say about the text?

What task will require them to closely read the text to be able to answer it?
Would you keep your original task or modify it?

CONCLUSION

By now, you may already have some thoughts on where you might push your curriculum in the coming year. At the end of Part 1, we’ll share some resources to help you start doing this. (And in Part 4, we’ll help you put together everything you learn reading this book.) For now, take a moment to jot down the ideas you want to explore further.

Stop and Jot—My Takeaways

What are your top takeaways for your classroom so far?

A complexity curriculum defines the dream. But by its nature, an ambitious dream will bring in its wake more students in struggle. As we've mentioned before, students can't fall for a book if they don't know what it's saying. So what does understanding look like, especially with a challenging text?