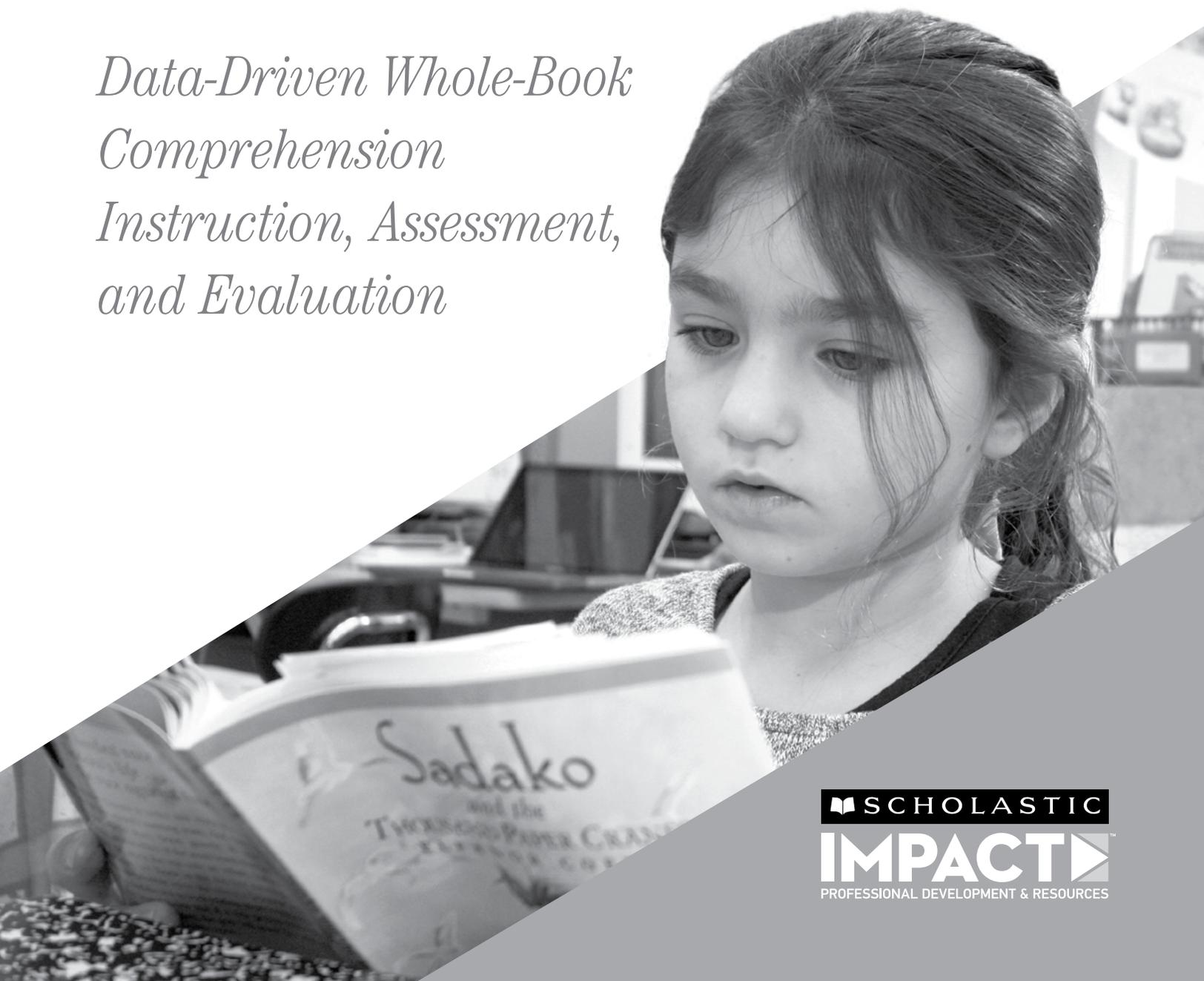


2014

# Beyond the Surface

*Data-Driven Whole-Book  
Comprehension  
Instruction, Assessment,  
and Evaluation*



 SCHOLASTIC  
**IMPACT**   
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & RESOURCES

# Beyond the Surface

## Data-Driven Whole-Book Comprehension Instruction, Assessment, and Evaluation

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The world is undergoing an information revolution. According to Eric Schmidt of Google, “Every two days now we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003” (2010). Not surprisingly, jobs that require assembly-line level skills are vanishing. Thus, the old assembly-line approach to reading comprehension—read-the-paragraph, answer-the-questions, fill-in-the-blank curriculum—that has represented our instructional approach to comprehension for decades is ineffective and inappropriate (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). The time is past due to abandon the narrow skill and drill of decades past and embrace *thoughtful literacy* (Allington, 2012) and a *thinking curriculum* (Calkins et al., 2012). In the ideal classroom, we support our students as they engage in a close read of whole, complex text. They analyze, synthesize, and capture their new understandings through discussion and in writing—and, in multiple ways, experience the *high-level comprehension* required by the Common Core State Standards. And, in the process, we raise the intellectual discourse of the classroom, which is, as Serravallo notes (2013), the ultimate goal.

## Text Complexity and Matching Readers to Books

Addressing text complexity and high-level comprehension, however, is not simply a matter of assigning increasingly challenging texts to our students. First, we need to understand what makes a text complex. And then, because text complexity and reading skills go hand in hand, we must carefully consider the instructional support our students need to successfully navigate more demanding books. The practical implications are immediate and profound and perhaps best understood as a three-point professional challenge; we must:

- Select text with great care
- Boost our knowledge of nonfiction and fiction
- Understand how both genre and the challenge of the text impacts reading comprehension

In this way, we can match our students with appropriate leveled text that will provide maximum benefits with equal measures of engagement and rigor, helping to guarantee that students will be drawn into the text. And then, too, we can understand “how texts get more complex, . . . have a way to analyze and judge the complexity of a text, [acquire] tools to evaluate how well students are dealing with aspects of the text, and [develop] teaching strategies to support students wherever skills are needed” (Serravallo, 2013).

## Getting at Text Complexity

What is it about each text that makes it easier or harder for our students to comprehend? How do we determine the complexity of each text? The CCSS includes a three-part scale for complexity that educators can use to select texts for instruction and independent reading (see box).

The Common Core State Standards aim to ensure that students are encountering appropriately complex texts at each grade level. Immersion in complex text, defined by literacy researcher Elfrida Hiebert (2011) as text with “complex ideas conveyed with rare and infrequent vocabulary,” is the best way to help students develop mature language skills and the conceptual knowledge they need for success in school and beyond (Common Core State Standards, 2010).

Research has also demonstrated that the textual challenges beyond high school have increased. College textbooks, as measured by Lexile® measures, have increased in difficulty (Stenner, Koons, & Swartz, in press) and so, too, have scientific journals and magazines (Hayes & Ward, 1992). Hiebert (2011) notes what’s needed to rectify the situation:

- Consistent opportunities with texts that support capacity with core vocabulary
- Direct instruction that extends vocabularies in informational and narrative texts
- Opportunities to increase reading stamina
- Support in developing funds of knowledge (the background knowledge necessary to comprehend the textual content)

The Common Core authors note that students’ ability to handle complex text doesn’t necessarily develop in a linear fashion. For example, if students are deeply interested in the Harry Potter series and invested in the characters and their various struggles and triumphs, their interest may sustain them in a series that otherwise would be too challenging. In general, teachers will want to look for ways to stretch their students’ experience across a range of texts, keeping in mind their students’ motivation, knowledge, and prior reading.

## What Is Text Complexity?

The Common Core State Standards provide a backward-mapped staircase of text complexity, working from the expectations of college and the workplace down through the grades. The standards draw on three criteria—quantitative, qualitative, and reader and task—to determine the complexity of each text.

### Quantitative Measure

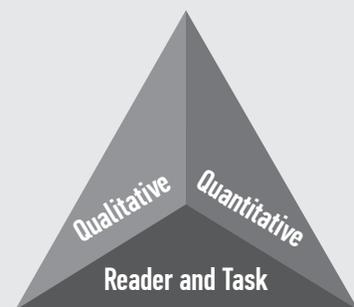
This measure of text difficulty centers on sentence length and text length and cohesion as well as word length, frequency, and difficulty.

### Qualitative Measure

The Common Core State Standards also ask teachers to make informed decisions about the difficulty of each text considering levels of meaning (literary texts) or purpose (informational texts), structure, organization, language conventionality and clarity, and prior-knowledge demands.

### Reader and Task

Additionally, the Common Core calls upon teachers to use their professional judgment to match texts to particular students and tasks, considering such factors as knowledge and experience, purpose for reading, complexity of text-based tasks, and complexity of text-based questions.



The Common Core State Standards’  
Model of Text Complexity

## Strategic Reading

Regardless of what they are reading—fiction or nonfiction—all successful readers are strategic and draw on a series of strategic skills or actions that lead to high-quality comprehension:

- Determining Importance
- Inferring/Interpreting
- Synthesizing/Retelling
- Questioning
- Visualizing
- Activating Prior Knowledge
- Utilizing Fix-Up Strategies (Hammond & Nessel, 2011; Serravallo, 2013)

As Serravallo explains: “. . . the beauty of framing instruction around these skills is that they apply to both narrative and informational texts. The skills are really about the mind work that readers do as they approach a text, and the application changes slightly because the text structure and composition change.” For example, proficient readers engage in continual inferring and interpreting whether they are reading a fantasy thriller or a fan magazine, a mystery or a manual.

Reading Comprehension Skill	How it's applied when reading fiction	How it's applied when reading nonfiction
Inferring and Interpreting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop ideas, thoughts, and insights about characters</li> <li>• Interpret the meaning of a symbol</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Figure out an author's purpose or main idea when it is not explicitly mentioned</li> </ul>

Monitoring and documenting our students' use of these strategic actions give us a way into the reader's mind. We are able to see how readers are processing text and constructing meaning—information that helps us figure out how to shape our instruction. We are able to craft clear goals to direct our students in ways that build their strategic processing of text—a teaching challenge made even more essential with the arrival of the Common Core and its emphasis on close reading of complex text.

## Close Reading

What seems to distinguish students who succeed in school from those who don't is the ability to engage independently in close analysis of demanding text (ACT, 2006):

Performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not. And this is true for both genders, all racial/ethnic groups, and all family income levels (16–17).



To this end—to help students build reading capacity with increasingly complex text—students must engage in a close read of complex literary and informational text every day and aim to accomplish the corresponding dual goals as outlined by CCSS (2010) and explained by literacy researcher Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert (2011):

- Undertake the close, attentive reading that lies at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature
- Perform the critical reading necessary to analyze the staggering amount of information available digitally and in print

Rereading and writing about the text are two indispensable strategies for accessing the information and knowledge each text holds. The Common Core State Standards define reading proficiency as the ability to gain the maximum insight or knowledge possible from each source. Indeed, developing students' prowess at drawing knowledge from the text itself is an essential point of teaching—evidence and knowledge link directly to the text. Thus, rereading and writing in response to guiding questions meant to help students unlock meaning are key.

## Textual Analysis

The Common Core State Standards maintain that the deep work of reading should include textual analysis, a method of criticism that analyzes the details of text in order to reveal its structure and meaning. In fiction, we examine literary elements such as plot, setting, character, theme, and figurative language. In nonfiction, we investigate domain-specific vocabulary and text features such as photographs and illustrations, graphs, maps, sidebars, inset boxes, time lines, and captions. Textual analysis enhances our students' appreciation and enjoyment of reading, but it also promotes the high level, critical comprehension that is essential across all aspects of life and career.

Literature expert Dr. Glenna Sloan (2003) explains the central role of fictional literature—and literary criticism—in our lives:

The aim of the study of literature is not to develop professional reviewers, scholars, or researchers. The aim is more fully developed human beings. Genuine criticism is a systematic study that treats literature as an art. It involves talking about literature in a way that will build up a systematic structure of knowledge of literature, taking the student beyond the subjectivity of his experience out into a wider, more comprehensive world.

Knowing how to enter and navigate this wider, more comprehensive world requires skill, discipline, and hard work; it means close reading and rereading, taking notes, and asking questions. It also means understanding the structure of fiction and nonfiction, how the two text types work—plus learning to understand and use the language of textual analysis. While such explicit analysis is demanding work, it's also exhilarating as children learn to dig deep into a text and consider why and how an author has chosen domain-specific words, stretched sentences and syntax just so, presented information in a particular graphic format, and released characters into unique settings and circumstances to create a world on a page that elicits a particular response in each reader.

Students learn how to analyze increasingly complex text across the spectrum of literary and textual elements with thoughtful teacher support and precise instruction delivered at the point of need. As Carol Jago reminds us, if we want our students to have the stamina to read complex texts and achieve the high-level quality comprehension the Common Core State Standards now require, we need to help our students “increase their capacity to concentrate and contemplate” (2011). To that end, having access to the tools of textual analysis—and whole text—is an essential first step.

## Why Whole Text Matters

Why is it imperative to engage students with whole text? Because, quite simply, more text begets deeper, richer comprehension—an understanding that aligns with Walter Kintsch’s (2004) widely cited theoretical model of comprehension, Construction-Integration. Kintsch offers a nifty explanation of reading comprehension: when we read, we draw on our knowledge of the world, together with our perceptions of what we believe the text is about, to construct a mental representation of what we think the text means. Under this model, *learning* is a matter of merging or *integrating* our mental representations with the knowledge we have stored in our minds. Thus, every time we read, we learn more—and complex, nuanced whole texts are the entry point to an entire constellation of knowledge and meaning.

What’s more, as Duke et al. (2011) point out, it is just this kind of reading that is emphasized in the Common Core State Standards, 7–9. To tap deep into a reader’s mind, more text is best. How then does one evaluate silent independent reading and student experiences with entire chapter books—without disrupting the student’s reading? How can teachers not only discern what a student is learning from a whole-text read, but also, the strategic actions the student marshals and orchestrates in . . . “their” journey through the text—the strategic actions that enable high-level comprehension (Serravallo, 2013).

## Writing About Reading

Again, what seems to distinguish students who succeed from those who don’t is the ability to engage independently in a close analysis of demanding text—and there may be no better way to accomplish that goal than through writing (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Two of the most comprehensive reading-writing research studies are meta-analyses: 1) Graham & Perin (2007) and 2) Graham & Hebert (2010). Both reveal that writing has a strong and consistently positive impact on reading comprehension. The authors explain:

Transforming a mental summary of text into writing requires additional thought about the essence of the material, and the permanence of writing creates an external record of this synopsis that can be readily critiqued.

The benefits of writing about text are both abundant and profound—and mirror the kind of thinking we want our students to do when they are reading:

- Engage in deep thinking about ideas
- Draw on their own knowledge and experience
- Consolidate and review information



- Reformulate thinking
- Organize and integrate ideas
- Be explicit about text evidence
- Be reflective
- Note personal involvement
- Capture the reading experience in their own words

Researchers and educators alike note the mutual benefits of pairing reading with writing and vice versa:

- Having students write about a text should enhance reading comprehension because it affords greater opportunities to think about ideas in a text, requires them to organize and integrate those ideas into a coherent whole, fosters explicitness, facilitates reflection, encourages personal involvement with texts, and involves students in transforming ideas into their own words. In short, writing about a text should enhance comprehension because it provides students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing, and manipulating key ideas in text (Graham & Hebert, 2010).
- Writing helps students better understand what they read by engaging them actively in practicing comprehension. Students must understand what they are reading to present their ideas about texts effectively in writing. This requires students to go back to the text, reread, monitor their understanding, and clarify misunderstandings. Again, writing about texts pushes students to practice the habits of effective reading (Hampton & Resnick, 2008).
- “Setting up time for students to talk and write about what they are thinking is one way to move students forward as people who think independently about what they are reading . . . ,” people who “share what they wonder about, what they notice, and what they are thinking in a variety of ways” (Czekanski, 2012).

Writing makes reading comprehension visible and that, Australian researcher John Hattie (2009) reminds us, is the heart of effective teaching: when we can see what our students know and what they need to know, we can create clear goals for each student and provide the targeted feedback they need to surge forward:

Teachers need to know the learning intentions and success criteria of their lessons, know how well they are attaining these criteria for all students, and know where to go next in light of the gap between students’ current knowledge and understanding and the success criteria of: “Where are you going?,” “How are you going?,” and “Where to next?”

## Balanced Literacy and Gradual Release of Responsibility

What sort of classroom environment best supports an elevated, sophisticated engagement with whole books? Richard Allington and Peter Johnston (2001) know: drawing from their research of exemplary fourth grade teachers, they argue that independent readers thrive when they are supported by skillful teachers who promote thoughtful literacy. In other words, students aren’t just dredging up facts about text—they are engaged in deep thinking about the ideas in the text—summarizing, synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating. Again, the role of the teacher is pivotal. Duke et al. (2011) identify 10 essential actions that successful teachers of reading routinely implement:

- Build disciplinary and world knowledge
- Provide exposure to a volume and range of texts
- Provide motivating texts and contexts for reading
- Teach strategies for comprehending
- Teach text structures
- Engage students in discussion
- Build vocabulary and language knowledge
- Integrate reading and writing
- Observe and assess
- Differentiate instruction

The researchers recommend implementing these practices with a gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983)—and incrementally turning over responsibility for meaning-making from teacher to student, then cycling back through this release with increasingly complex texts. In this way, students have their best shot at succeeding—they are surrounded by a range of engaging books, are provided with ample time to read, and have access to masterful teachers of reading who know how to map their students’ progress and provide the precise instruction that enables students to tackle increasingly complex text.

## Help Students Set Goals for Their Independent Reading

The research on the benefits of independent reading is consistent and unequivocal: silent, independent reading of meaningful, connected text boosts reading achievement (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010). Students in classrooms with in-class independent reading programs and students who regularly read outside of school accrue content knowledge, vocabulary, and develop the stamina and engagement with texts that in turn leads to a lifelong identity as a reader. Miller and Moss (2013) cite multiple studies that demonstrate the potency of independent reading including:

- Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith (2008) showcase the contribution independent reading makes to academic achievement. They found that in-school independent reading led to gains that were better than national averages in reading rates. What’s more, their research revealed a 43% average increase in the proportion of ideas recalled, representing a substantial increase in comprehension over the school year.
- “In a study of 1,285 first and second graders and their 107 teachers, Foorman et al. (2006) identified 20 ways students spend instructional time including oral language, grammar, vocabulary, letter recognition, and word work and text reading. They used these to predict students’ end-of-year reading achievement scores. The only variable that explained gains on the posttest was time spent on actual text reading; time spent on other factors like phonemic awareness, word, or alphabetic instruction failed to predict improved achievement.”
- “In a study of uses of student time in successful reading interventions, two-thirds of student time was spent reading and rereading (Allington, 2011).”

But like everything else that we do in life, this practice becomes more potent, more life changing when students set goals for their independent reading: to press forward into more complex text, to read a wide range of genres, to understand the differences between fiction and nonfiction and how each must be approached.

And, to this end, at the heart of what we do as teachers is to help our students set appropriate goals: What makes sense for them? How can we hit their zone of proximal development, that state of pushing just a bit beyond their comfort levels where they can make the most growth?

For answers to this and more, we need some way of assessing our students' independent reading of whole texts.

## Assessing Independent Reading

When it comes to evaluating students' comprehension during this silent reading, educators have had few tools to lean on. Without this hard evidence that high-level comprehension is occurring and students' reading time is in fact advancing them as readers, administrators become concerned about giving over class time to this practice. Furthermore, without data, it's difficult for classroom teachers to "teach into" areas of need with the timeliness and precision necessary to help students make sufficient progress throughout the school year.

These are all legitimate concerns. After all, every minute of instructional time feels precious. How can we justify giving up 15, 20, or more minutes to a silent, mysterious activity that seems to defy our ability to assess it? As educators, it behooves us to find a way to make independent reading more data driven, because silent, independent reading is our end goal. That is, most of the reading that adults, adolescents, and even middle- and upper-elementary-grade students do is silent; the ability to read extended texts on one's own is the foundation of proficient reading (Hiebert, Wilson, & Trainin, 2010). And that's our charge under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS): to help all students become independent, proficient readers in order to do the work involved in becoming college and career ready.

Independent reading programs need to retain their independent spirit; students need the elbow room to choose their books in order for them to cultivate their own sense of agency as readers. Like adults, their appetites for reading, habits, and interests wax and wane and are idiosyncratic. We cannot over-systematize independent reading or have it "smack of school." But we can and must assess, evaluate, and teach alongside it in ways that make readers feel supported and motivated—not tested.

### Common Core State Standards: What's Required of Readers?

The Common Core State Standards for reading maintain that all students must be able to comprehend texts of "steadily increasing complexity" as they progress through school. And by the time they graduate from high school, students must be able to comprehend the kinds of complex text typically found in college and throughout careers. To this end, educators are charged with implementing an independent reading program; immersing students in complex, grade-level text; monitoring and assessing their progress for accurate, fluent, proficient reading; and documenting their ability to analyze both fiction and nonfiction. A quick overview of the phrases and descriptive language that the Common Core uses in describing the reading standards makes clear what's valued and what's

not (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012); the Common Core State Standards require students to:

- Comprehend, evaluate, synthesize
- Understand precisely
- Read independently and closely
- Refer explicitly to the text
- Refer to details and examples in the text
- Quote accurately from the text

In short, the Common Core State Standards move us away from reading as a personal transaction with text and emphasize, instead, engaging in close reading, analyzing text, and citing textual evidence.

## The Role of Text: Nonfiction and Fiction

Nonfiction lets us *learn* more; fiction lets us *be* more.

– Kylee Beers, 2013

Across the grades, the Common Core State Standards call for an increase in nonfiction reading; to this end, elementary school students should be immersed in a 50/50 balance of fiction and nonfiction. Both nonfiction and fiction are essential; both offer benefits that help students develop not only as more proficient readers who can read across genre for a wide-range of purposes, but also, as more knowledgeable, imaginative, and compassionate human beings. Reading, in general, educates us, nourishes us, and helps make us humane.

We can separate what we read into nonfiction and fiction; note, the CCSS tags nonfiction as *informational* and fiction, *literary*. We look to the classic *How to Read a Book* (Adler & Van Doren, 1940) for a cogent distinction between the two:

The most obvious difference . . . relates to the purposes of the two kinds of writing. Nonfiction . . . conveys knowledge—knowledge about experiences that the reader has had or could have. Fiction . . . communicates an experience itself—one that the reader can have or share only by reading—and, if it succeeds, it gives the reader something to be enjoyed. Because of their diverse intentions, [nonfiction and fiction] appeal differently to the intellect and imagination.

Let’s examine both in turn.

### Understanding Nonfiction

Fiction is glorious but, increasingly, we’re realizing—so, too, is nonfiction! The quality of nonfiction in recent years has increased tenfold. Gone are the dry encyclopedic texts of yesteryear—now our students can feast on beautifully written, full-of-voice books replete with stunning illustrations and intriguing graphics. And nonfiction texts—all informational because they impart facts about the natural and social worlds—serve innumerable functions, come in dozens and dozens of genres and formats, and reflect a dazzling array of structural patterns and design features.

Not surprisingly, many students prefer to read informational text. This may be more true than ever, given its abundance, particularly in a digital format, and may be especially true for boys (Allyn 2011). Vulnerable readers or new-to-English readers are often challenged by their developing English vocabularies, which then, in turn, make processing complex fictional narratives difficult. An infusion of informational text—particularly about topics that stoke students’ interest—may be the easiest way to build their conceptual knowledge and vocabulary base, essential for comprehension in general (Duke & Carlisle, 2011). What’s more, informational text features such as headers, labels, sidebars, and diagrams scaffold readers, enabling them to more easily navigate the text and access the content.

Enter the Common Core: one of the greatest shifts is the new emphasis on nonfiction; approximately half the texts an elementary school student should encounter should be nonfiction, increasing to 70% by the time students are in high school. This shift represents a real correction as nonfiction has been slow to arrive in the public school classroom:

- “Children in preschool through grade 3 seldom hear info texts read aloud at school or at home” (Yopp & Yopp, 2006).
- “In a study of 2nd-4th grade experiences w info texts, 2nd graders experienced 1 min per day . . . 3rd and 4th averaged 16 min/day” (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010).

- “Only 1/3 of books in classroom libraries were info texts” (Ness, 2011).
- One study found that in primary classrooms an average of as little as 3.6 minutes a day was devoted to reading informational texts (Duke, 2000).

In general, for all students, reading lots and lots of nonfiction, learning to navigate different informational text types and formats, is the best way to learn how to access, use, and apply nonfiction genres. Indeed, as Fountas and Pinnell (2012) explain, all readers need the reading workout nonfiction offers:

As students process nonfiction texts, they “learn to adjust their reading according to the purpose, style, and type of text. This flexibility expands their reading ability. Complex nonfiction texts present a challenge to students partly because of their great variety and also because of the many ways writers can craft texts to provide information. It takes many years for readers to become skilled in reading the various genres and types of nonfiction texts.”

## Understanding Fiction

Fiction is typically understood as narrative text created from the author’s imagination. Mystery thrillers, science fiction, fantasy, and realistic and historical fiction are all fictional, literary genres; all tell a story and all typically include literary elements such as setting, characters, and a conflict that must be solved—over the course of a storyline or plot—with multiple events that eventually lead to a resolution of the conflict. Generally, when we read a work of fiction, we are thinking about the simple pleasure we expect to derive from it. But there’s nothing simple about the transformative power of fiction. Author Neil Gaiman (2013) explains:

Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you, . . . using your imagination, create a world and people it and look out through other eyes. You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a *me*, as well. You’re being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you’re going to be slightly changed. . . . You’re also finding out something as you read vitally important for making your way in the world. And it’s this: the world doesn’t have to be like this. Things can be different.

Most importantly, *we* can be different; hence, the transformative power of fiction, a phenomenon recently proved by the research of Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu (2013). They found that their research participants, who were frequent readers of fiction, had higher scores on a measure of empathy—a transformation reflected in their brain scans as well. Apparently, fiction moves us to *change*—not just to have a more expansive understanding of the world and our place in it—but literally to alter our personal reality. That’s because our brains are, in a sense, fooled—they aren’t able to differentiate between the fictional experience and the real-life event. So the social experiences we encounter through a character’s point of view help ready us for social interactions with the real people in our lives.



## The Case for Independent Reading

The adage “a rising tide lifts all boats” is apt when we consider independent reading. When we read independently, many other literacy skills rise, too. We have decades of research that prove avid readers are almost always skillful readers and strong writers: they know more about the conventions of language, such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar (that’s because every time we open the pages of a book, we simultaneously get a lesson on effective writing); they have robust vocabularies; and they know about the world. Reading makes us smart (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Krashen, 2004). Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston have been researching a high-needs middle school in Virginia that implemented independent reading without any other instruction. The students were mostly reading novels, and they were soon hooked, wanting to spend all their time deep inside their books. Even though their state focuses mostly on nonfiction, and students were reading fiction, their test scores soared. What made the difference? “The kids hadn’t been reading, and now they were” (cited in Calkins et al., 2012).

## The Link to Volume

Look at the research; if we did nothing in school but invite our students to read and expand their volume of reading they would come out ahead. Volume is defined as a combination of the time students spend reading plus the numbers of words they actually consume as they read (Allington, 2012; Guthrie, 2004).

- A potent relationship exists between volume of reading and reading achievement. Dramatic increases in reading volume are critically important in developing thoughtful literacy proficiencies. In addition, a variety of studies provide reliable, replicated evidence that children whose reading development lags behind their peers engage in far less reading than their high-achieving peers (Guthrie, 2004, reported in Allington, 2012).
- Students who read a lot score better on every imaginable test—the NAEP, the SAT, the ACT. Any standards-based reading instruction needs to build in the expectation that students will do a huge volume of reading, and they will spend a good portion of ELA time reading and getting feedback. The reading program in a school must support all students, and one of the best ways to do this is by allowing students to read habitually and in ways that literate people the world over read. Watch your strong readers. What is one factor they all have in common? They read a lot (Calkins et al., 2012).
- Nagy and Anderson (1984) estimated that some middle-grade students read as few as 100,000 words per year, the average student read about 1,000,000 words per year, and avid middle-grade readers consumed more than 10,000,000 words per year—which accounted for the noteworthy differences in their achievement. The avid readers were far better readers, writers, and spellers—and had better control of grammar—than their peers who didn’t read as much.
- Reading volume significantly affects general knowledge of the world, overall verbal ability, and academic achievement (Shefelbine, 2000).

# Expecting More of Our Students and Ourselves

Thoughtful assessment is a social interaction. Peter Johnston (1997) makes the astute point that assessment practices must be based on trust, respect, and advocacy. Our goal is to work side by side with our students celebrating their strengths, helping them understand their challenges, and identifying in explicit terms what their next steps should be (Serravallo, 2013).

Nell Duke et al. (2011) sums up the teacher's role:

If learning to read effectively is a journey toward ever-increasing ability to comprehend texts, then teachers are the tour guides, ensuring that students stay on course, pausing to make sure they appreciate the landscape of understanding, and encouraging the occasional diversion down an inviting and interesting cul-de-sac or byway.

Jennifer Serravallo, literacy consultant, researcher, and author of the *Independent Reading Assessment* (Scholastic, 2013; 2012), uses student writing in response to sophisticated Common Core-aligned prompts to assess students' silent independent reading of whole books. She maintains that by "knowing our students to a greater degree," we can make independent reading even more "game-changing" in our students' literacy lives. Independent reading coupled with student writing and highly personalized, informed instruction is truly the ultimate solution. It takes both teachers and students beyond surface interpretations. No other educational experience packs as many academic and personal benefits.

As the saying goes, "knowledge is power." From the deep, extensive and specific information we gain from our students' writing about their reading—written on their own time in class or at home and guided by prompts Serravallo provides—we access the knowledge we need to deliver the powerful, precise instruction that enables our students to develop as proficient readers. No more hit-or-miss instruction. We identify the comprehension challenges in our students' writing, and Serravallo directs us to the instructional support that fosters the sustained comprehension and sophisticated thinking and reflection that is the hallmark of high-level reading.

Our students gain the most when they are processing extended texts of growing complexity; therefore, our assessment and instructional goals should center on more—more text to process, more explicit understanding of our students' instructional needs, more focused and higher expectations, more precise instruction, and more confidence. When we feel confident as professionals that we know exactly what we're doing as competent, capable reading teachers, everyone benefits: our students, their families, and our school community.

## Closing Thoughts

Of independent reading, children's literature expert Maria Salvatore once wrote:

Readers are able to control a part of their world for as long as it takes to read (or reread) a book. Even though the world will spin in its own, unfathomable direction, readers—for a time—control at least a part of their universe.

Independent Reading Assessment opens wide the window on student reading comprehension so you can enter this world with your students, help them extend and refine their quest for meaning, develop their analytical skills, and "open up their worlds as readers" (Serravallo, 2012).

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