

# Fun with Text Complexity

## What is text complexity?

- Quantitative—Language (Linguistic)

Example: Fry Readability

- Qualitative—Content

Example: SBAC Qualitative Complexity Rubrics

- Playing with Some Examples

## How should we approach text complexity with students?

- An opportunity to become stronger, bolder readers.
- An opportunity to master the language.
- Text complexity and academic language.\*

*“Complex texts are the input for advanced language learning.”—Lily Wong Fillmore\**

\* Fillmore, L.W. & Fillmore, C. J. (2018). What does text complexity mean for English learners and language minority students? Understanding Language Project: Language, Literacy, and Learning in the Content Areas. Stanford University. Website: [ell.stanford.edu](http://ell.stanford.edu).

A slave named Androcles ran away from his master, by whom he had been most cruelly treated, and, in order to avoid capture, betook himself into the forest. As he wandered about in search of food and shelter, he came to a cave, which he entered and found to be unoccupied. Really, however, it was a lion's den, and almost immediately, to the horror of the wretched fugitive, the lion himself appeared.

The man gave himself up for lost. But to his utter astonishment, the lion, instead of springing upon him, came and fawned upon him, at the same time whining and lifting up his paw. Observing it to be much swollen and inflamed, he examined it and found a large thorn embedded in the ball of the foot. He accordingly removed it and dressed the wound as well as he could. And in the course of time it healed up completely.

The lion's gratitude was unbounded. He looked upon the man as his friend, and they shared the cave for some time together.

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## 2 Versions of “Androcles and the Lion”

A slave named Androcles ran away from his master, by whom he had been most cruelly treated, and, in order to avoid capture, betook himself into the forest. As he wandered about in search of food and shelter, he came to a cave, which he entered and found to be unoccupied. Really, however, it was a lion’s den, and almost immediately, to the horror of the wretched fugitive, the lion himself appeared.

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The lion’s gratitude was unbounded. He looked upon the man as his friend, and they shared the cave for some time together.

Source: *The Fables of Aesop* (selected, told anew, and their history terraced by Joseph Jacobs), no. 23, pp. 60-61. London: Macmillan and Company, 1902. First published 1894.

[174 words; 10 sentences]

Long ago, there was a slave in Rome. His name was Androcles. Androcles did not want to be a slave. One day, Androcles ran away. He went into a dark forest. There he heard a loud roar. That sounds like a lion! Androcles thought.

He heard the roar again. Now it sounded like a moan. Then he saw the lion. Androcles was frightened. But the lion did not move. The lion was hurt. He had a large thorn in his paw. Androcles helped the lion. Androcles looked at the lion’s paw. He saw the thorn. He took it out. He beamed at Androcles. Androcles touched the lion’s mane. He said: “You must rest. Your paw will get better.”

The lion gave Androcles some food. Then he ate the food. Then he thanked the lion. Androcles and the lion fell asleep.

Source: *Treasures* (2010), Grade 3 . Macmillan-McGraw-Hill.

[140 words, 27 sentences]

## From Corduroy

The store was always filled with shoppers buying all sorts of things, but no one ever seemed to want a small bear in green overalls. (p. 2)

Late that evening, when all the shoppers had gone and the doors were shut and locked, Corduroy climbed carefully, down from his shelf and began searching everywhere on the floor for his lost button. (pp. 6-7)

He stepped off the escalator as it reached the next floor, and there, before his eyes, was a most amazing sight—tables and chairs and lamps and sofas, and rows and rows of beds. (pp. 10-11)

He yanked and pulled with both paws until POP! Off came the button—and off the mattress Corduroy toppled, *bang* into a tall floor lamp. (pp. 14-15)

The watchman tucked Corduroy under his arm and carried him down the escalator and set him on the shelf in the toy department with the other animals and dolls. (p. 20-21).

Grade 1, Informational Text Example

Timid Tapir

A tapir sticks its head out to survey the river scene. Easily startled, this timid vegetarian is an excellent swimmer and can stay underwater for many minutes if it needs to hide from a hungry jaguar.

Source: *Rainforest*, by Elinor Greenwood, DK Eyewitness.

**Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric—Reading Literary Texts**

(Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, ELA and Literacy Stimulus Specifications, January 2014)

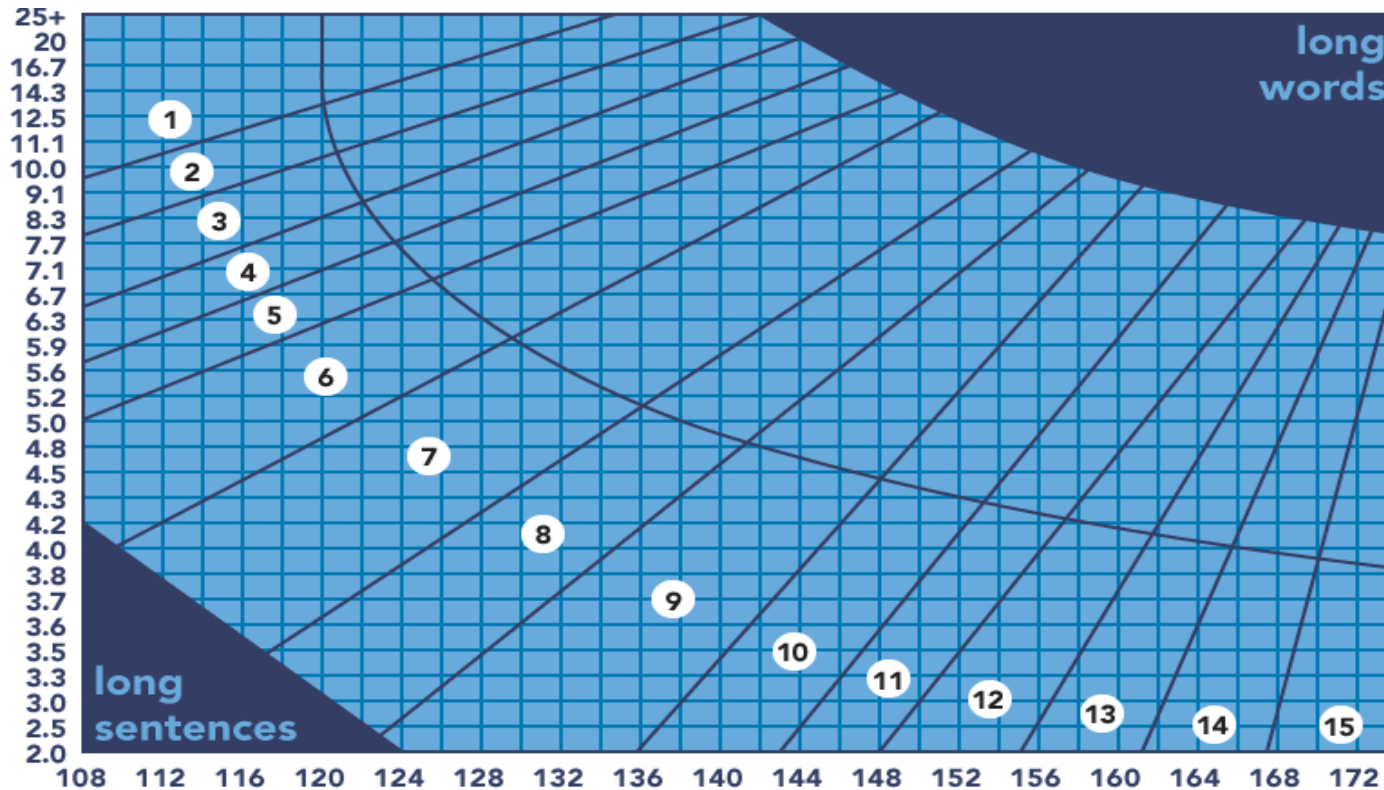
Features	Exceedingly Complex	Very Complex	Moderately Complex	Slightly Complex
<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Meaning:</b> Several levels and competing elements of meaning that are difficult to identify, separate, and interpret; theme is implicit or subtle, often ambiguous and revealed over the entirety of the text	<b>Meaning:</b> Several levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify or separate; theme is implicit or subtle and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	<b>Meaning:</b> More than one level of meaning with levels clearly distinguished from each other; theme is clear but may be conveyed with some subtlety	<b>Meaning:</b> One level of meaning; theme is obvious and revealed early in the text.
<b>Text Structure</b>	<b>Organization:</b> Organization is intricate with regard to elements such as narrative viewpoint, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines, and detail	<b>Organization:</b> Organization may include subplots, time shifts, and more complex characters	<b>Organization:</b> Organization may have two or more storylines and is occasionally difficult to predict	<b>Organization:</b> Organization of text is clear, chronological, or easy to predict
	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, minimal illustrations that support the text	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, a few illustrations that support the text	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, a range of illustrations that support selected parts of the text	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, extensive illustrations that directly support and assist in interpreting the written text
<b>Language Features</b>	<b>Conventionality:</b> Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language	<b>Conventionality:</b> Complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language	<b>Conventionality:</b> Largely explicit and easy to understand, with some occasions for more complex meaning	<b>Conventionality:</b> Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand
	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Somewhat complex language that is sometimes unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Contemporary, familiar, conversational language
	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Mainly complex sentences, often containing multiple concepts	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Simple and compound sentences, with some more complex constructions	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Mainly simple sentences
<b>Knowledge Demands</b>	<b>Life Experiences:</b> Explores complex, sophisticated themes; experiences are distinctly different from the common reader	<b>Life Experiences:</b> Explores themes of varying levels of complexity; experiences portrayed are uncommon to most readers	<b>Life Experiences:</b> Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are common to many readers	<b>Life Experiences:</b> Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are everyday and common to most readers
	<b>Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:</b> Many references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	<b>Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:</b> Some references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	<b>Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:</b> A few references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	<b>Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:</b> No references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements

**Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric—Reading Informational Texts**

(Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, ELA and Literacy Stimulus Specifications, January 2014)

Features	Exceedingly Complex	Very Complex	Moderately Complex	Slightly Complex
<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Purpose:</b> Subtle, implied, difficult to determine; intricate, theoretical elements	<b>Purpose:</b> Implied, but fairly easy to infer; more theoretical than concrete	<b>Purpose:</b> Implied, but easy to identify based upon context or source	<b>Purpose:</b> Explicitly stated; clear, concrete with a narrow focus
<b>Text Structure</b>	<b>Organization of Main Ideas:</b> Connections between an extensive range of ideas or events are deep, intricate, and often implicit or subtle; organization of the text is intricate or specialized for a particular discipline	<b>Organization of Main Ideas:</b> Connections between an expanded range of ideas, processes, or events are deeper and often implicit or subtle; organization may contain multiple pathways and may exhibit traits common to a specific discipline	<b>Organization of Main Ideas:</b> Connections between some ideas or events are implicit or subtle; organization is evident and generally sequential	<b>Organization of Main Ideas:</b> Connections between ideas, processes, or events are explicit and clear; organization of text is clear or chronological or easy to predict
	<b>Text Features:</b> If used, are essential in understanding content	<b>Text Features:</b> If used, greatly enhance the reader’s understanding of content	<b>Text Features:</b> If used, enhance the reader’s understanding of content	<b>Text Features:</b> If used, help the reader navigate and understand content but are not essential
	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, extensive, intricate, essential integrated images, tables, charts, etc., necessary to make meaning of text; also may provide information not otherwise conveyed in the text	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, essential integrated images, tables, charts, etc., may occasionally be essential to understanding the text	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, images mostly supplementary to understanding of the text, such as indexes and glossaries; graphs, pictures, tables, and charts directly support the text	<b>Use of Images:</b> If used, simple images, unnecessary to understanding the text but directly support and assist in interpreting the written text
<b>Language Features</b>	<b>Conventionality:</b> Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language	<b>Conventionality:</b> Complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language	<b>Conventionality:</b> Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning	<b>Conventionality:</b> Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand
	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Somewhat complex language that is sometimes unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic	<b>Vocabulary:</b> Contemporary, familiar, conversational language
	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Mainly complex sentences, often containing multiple concepts	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Simple and compound sentences, with some more complex constructions	<b>Sentence Structure:</b> Mainly simple sentences
<b>Knowledge Demands</b>	<b>Subject Matter Knowledge:</b> Extensive, perhaps specialized or even theoretical discipline-specific content knowledge; range of challenging abstract and theoretical concepts	<b>Subject Matter Knowledge:</b> Moderate levels of discipline-specific content knowledge; some theoretical knowledge may enhance understanding; range of recognizable ideas and challenging abstract concepts	<b>Subject Matter Knowledge:</b> Everyday practical knowledge and some discipline-specific content knowledge; both simple and more complicated, abstract ideas	<b>Subject Matter Knowledge:</b> Everyday, practical knowledge; simple, concrete ideas
	<b>Intertextuality:</b> Many references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc.	<b>Intertextuality:</b> Some references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc.	<b>Intertextuality:</b> A few references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc.	<b>Intertextuality:</b> No references or allusions to other texts, outside ideas, theories, etc.

## Edward Fry Readability Formula



### Directions

- Choose three 100 word passages.
- Count the total number of sentences in each of the three passages.
- Find the average number of sentences for the three passages.
- Count the total number of syllables in each of the three passages.
- Find the average number of syllables for the three passages.
- Plot the two averages on the graph: the intersection of average sentences and average syllables and find the grade level at the left.

Fry, E. (1968). A readability formula that saves time. *Journal of Reading*, 11(7), 513-516 and 575-578.