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Text Complexity and "Comparable Literary Merit" in Young Adult Literature

Research shows that reading necessitates increased *independence* and *complexity* in college and in workforce training (Achieve, 2007; Stenner, Koons, & Swartz, in press). Architects of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) understand this and point to the need for sustained exposure to expository texts and scaffolding across K–12 for reading and understanding it. This can help students develop important reading strategies that can be applied across various texts and contexts (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Kintsch, 1998, 2009; Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005; van den Broek, Lorch, Linderholm, & Gustafson, 2001; van den Broek, Risden, & Husebye-Hartmann, 1995). The authors believe that attention to complex choices in reading selection over time in K–12 schooling will help prepare students for the demands they will face in the workforce and in college.

While teachers are making curricular adjustments to meet the challenges presented by the new Standards, they are also assimilating how past practice can still fit. This study takes a close look at how the Common Core English Language Arts Standards, Anchor Standard 10 for Reading (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10), proffers that having a specific type of reading capital can lead students to success in life. Drawing on prior research then (Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Miller, 2013), this study demonstrates how *some* YA lit—which is a high-interest tool that mediates learning (Engels & Kory, 2013; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Miller, 2005a; Stallworth, 2006; Sturm & Michel, 2009), but which is curiously absent from within the 9th–12th-grade Exemplar Texts—can also hone specific requisite knowledge and skills that prepare students with literacy practices for career readiness.

Text Complexity

Rationale

Authors of the Common Core argue that K–12 texts have declined "in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students' ability to read complex texts independently" (Common Core, 2010), a step deemed necessary for college readiness. Most texts required for postsecondary courses fall within a Lexile range of 1200L to 1400L (Williamson, 2008), while most high school textbooks are in the 1050L to 1165L range. This 250L difference between the ranges of reader ability and text complexity can generate a comprehension gap of almost 50% for the incoming college freshman, which can create a backlog of other types of problems for students as they move into upper division courses (e.g., failed expectations, poor grades, negative self-concept leading to possibly dropping out; see Au, 2000; Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012).

Such research makes a strong case for increased Text Complexity. It also reveals that results of first-year college students' ACT scores in the 2006 report *Reading between the Lines* demonstrated that those who achieved or exceeded a benchmark score of 21 out of 36 in the reading section had a 50% chance of earning a grade of "B" or higher in US history or psy-

chology, both of which are reading-intensive courses. The results suggest that the clearest differentiator for students' success in this section is predicated on their ability to answer questions associated with complex texts. These findings remained consistent across gender, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic categories.

Additional research demonstrates that students who enter college with serious gaps in their reading abilities, especially expository materials (which many college professors assign) are not prepared for independent complex reading tasks in college or in the workforce. Although this research does not focus on the career readiness rationale of the Common Core, Greene (2000) asserts that the shortage of basic US literacy skills creates a $16 billion per year deficit in decreased productivity and remedial costs for businesses, universities, and underprepared high school graduates. The Common Core, as a whole, is expected to fill in such gaps and to sufficiently prepare students for college and careers.

Anchor Standard 10 for Reading: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10

When we step back and look at the actual wording for Anchor Standard 10, Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10, it reads, "Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently" (Common Core State Standard), 2010. Explicit in this Standard is that teachers are expected to help readers become more proficient in reading increasingly complex texts through the grades or to read texts with more rigor over time, while they also are expected to help students meet each year's grade-specific Standards and retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in preceding grades. In other words, teachers must help students "catch-up" each year if they're reading below grade level, and somehow advance students into a proficiency status for the next grade.

The suggested text types to help students advance include literature (e.g., stories, dramas, and poetry) and informational texts (see Table 1). When we glance at this table and observe which types of texts are excluded, YAL among others, or review the suggested but not prescriptive list of Exemplar Texts (Connors, 2013) in Appendix B (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), it can be argued that the table and the list have the potential to secure the marginalization of YAL from ever entering the 9–12th-grade language arts classroom or the AP literature classroom (where YAL tends to be attenuated; Miller, 2013). In fact, a quick glance at the list of 9–12th-grade "Exemplar Texts" shows only one YA text, Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2006), which many have agreed is a crossover text for adults (it is sold in both the YA section and adult fiction sections in mainstream bookstores) because it is a multilayered text and is based on compelling real-life historical events about the Holocaust. In noting this pervasive absence of YA, I turn to the authors of the Common Core to try to understand how

Table 1. Students in grades 6–12 apply the Reading Standards to the following range of text types, with texts selected from a broad range of cultures and periods (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Literature			Informational Text
Stories	**Dramas**	**Poetry**	**Literary Nonfiction and Historical, Scientific, and Technical Texts**
Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels	Includes one-act and multi-act plays, both in written form and on film	Includes the subgenres of narrative poems, lyrical poems, free verse poems, sonnets, odes, ballads, and epics	Includes the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience

and why particular text types are privileged and how text *quality* is determined:

> While it is possible to have high-complexity texts of low inherent quality, the work group solicited only texts of recognized value. From the pool of submissions gathered from outside contributors, the work group selected classic or historically significant texts as well as contemporary works of *comparable literary merit* (emphasis author), cultural significance, and rich content. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

A Rationale for Connecting YAL to the CCSS

Developing a Rationale

We know from past research that students enjoy YAL (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Miller, 2005a, 2005b, 2008; Stallworth, 2006; Sturm & Michel, 2009), that some YAL is more layered than others (Miller, 2013), and that teachers use it in classrooms for multiple purposes (e.g., book groups, independent reading, whole-class discussions, pairings with the canon, and as a scaffold for building to more complex texts). Because aggregate research does make a strong case for the inclusion and centering of YAL in English classrooms, it is critical to understand how to strengthen a rationale for its textual complexity, especially now that it is almost entirely excluded from the list of 9th–12th-grade "Exemplar Texts" where privileged types of reading are favored.

Building the Rationale for CCSS through an AP Lit Study

Question 3, the open question on the AP English Literature and Composition exam, begins with a prompt. To help students decide on a context for their response, the prompt is accompanied by a list of approximately 36 possible canonical texts from various time periods from which students may select; students are also given the option to select a text from their own memory—one of "comparable literary merit." An interesting phenomenon occurs, however, when students draw from YAL and graphic novels in order to answer the question: they tend to be poorly evaluated by some readers *because of their text selections,* not on the quality of their essays, often receiving a 4 or lower (not a passing score). This evaluation stems, in part, from the phrase "similar (or comparable) literary merit,"[1] which obviously presents ambiguities about what constitutes a text of literary merit.

Taken together, this monopoly, now spanning almost 60 years, wields copious power to impact, shape, and privilege certain type of texts and attitudes about what quality texts are and will continue to be and mean in English language arts classrooms around the country. Based on this follow-up study, what has emerged as the key issue facing current AP English literature teachers and 9th–12th-grade language arts teachers is what I call the *YA Text Complexity and "Comparable Literary Merit"* dualism.

The Problem with "Similar Literary Merit"

Understanding Question 3

This study extends ongoing research (Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Miller, 2013) from my 13 years of attending the AP English Literature and Composition reading—first as a reader and now as a table leader—where I have observed this scoring phenomenon through conversations with well over 200 readers, table leaders, question leaders, and my participants in Advanced Placement Summer Institutes (APSI). Because it's the students who are ultimately impacted by these scores (and the beliefs that impact the scores), it became critical for me to understand the root cause of such widespread injustices. By speaking directly with classroom AP literature teachers and turning to documents from the College Board and the CCSS, I was able to ascertain and make meaning of the risk teachers face in teaching YAL in an AP English Literature and Composition classroom, or in encouraging students to use a YA text to answer the exam question.

During the initial phase of the study, Miller and Slifkin (2010) reflected on 1) how the historical phrasing of "similar literary quality" has impacted teacher beliefs about including YAL in an AP English classroom, and 2) how this phrase was generating ambiguous responses from readers at the exam. We looked at 10 years of the exam—over 216 titles from 1999–2008—and noted that only two YA texts have ever appeared, and those appearances were only on Form B of the exam, which is sometimes given outside the United States or is used if the exam must be delayed. Those texts included *Push* (Sapphire, 1996) in 2007 and *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) in 2008

and 2010. It should be noted that in an unprecedented move this year, Question 3 on the 2013 AP English literature exam included two YA books in its list of possible texts to select from: *Purple Hibiscus*[2] by Adichie (2003) and *House on Mango Street* by Cisneros.

Throughout this study, pre-AP and AP English teachers spend a week at an APSI where I introduce them to theories (reader-response, critical pedagogy, social constructivism, sociocultural theory) and pedagogies as they link to AP curriculum. This is done purposefully in order to prepare teachers to teach *beyond* the test rather than *to* the test. I have a contractual obligation to provide teachers with College Board materials and to help prepare them to teach AP, but I have leeway about how I approach that. For seven summers now, at different APSIs, I have engaged my participants in an in-depth study of Anderson's *Speak* (1999), and we pair it with the AP English literature and composition curriculum. Teachers take pre- and post-introduction surveys about their attitudes toward including YAL in an AP English classroom.

In "AP Gatekeeping: Exploring the Myths of Using YAL in an AP English Classroom" (Miller, 2013), I look more deeply into the myths of using YA in an AP English classroom and discuss why so many teachers have bought into them and how these myths impacts their textual choices and discussions with students. In an effort to ascertain which myths teachers have ascribed to, I sent out the article to current AP English literature teachers, professors in English Education who teach YAL or children's lit, preservice English teachers, former APSI participants, and AP literature readers and table leaders who attend the reading, requesting that they read the manuscript and reflect on any part of it that spoke to their classroom practices. The responses from participants and their obvious concerns about text complexity and the types of literature they were expected to cover contributed to my interest in the emergent issue of the *YA Text Complexity and "Comparable Literary Merit"* dualism. As a result, I built taxonomies to carefully scrutinize the wording of Anchor Standard 10 for Reading and revisited the findings in Miller and Slifkin (2010).

Understanding the YA Text Complexity and "Comparable Literary Merit" Dualism

When I began this study in 2008, I focused on the phrase "similar literary merit" (Miller & Slifkin, 2010) and teachers' predispositions and beliefs about YA's place in an AP English literature classroom or as a selection for the exam. Interestingly, the term "Text Complexity" was never mentioned by participants as a reason for their hesitation to use, or encourage the use of, YA. Instead, their hesitation was most often attributed to their belief that YAL was *not layered*. For participants, *not layered* meant that the plot was sequential, stylistic techniques were attenuated, diction was often informal, and syntax was simplistic. A *layered text* (often a text of prestige), to the contrary, would vary in grammar and writing style, would include multiple stylistic techniques, narratives, and themes, and would inspire various levels of interpretation.

It should be noted that in an unprecedented move this year, Question 3 on the 2013 AP English literature exam included two YA books in its list of possible texts to select from: *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie (2003) and *House on Mango Street* by Cisneros (1991).

Since the vetting of the CCSS in 2010, and due to the emphasis on increased inclusion of informational texts across a student's academic coursework, determining and selecting texts with increased textual complexity has become an issue of even greater salience for classroom AP English literature teachers. In particular, the wording in Reading Standard 10 for the English Language Arts posits similar concerns to those in the phrase "similar literary merit." For those AP English teachers who devalue or won't use YA, Reading Standard 10 bolsters their argument and provides hesitant teachers with new, "acceptable" language to validate their hesitation.

With the adoption of the familiar phrase *comparable literary merit* by the CCCS to describe other quality texts teachers can select, they, along with the College Board, are gatekeepers who *do* influence teachers' predispositions about what types of texts are quality texts. Similar to the College Board's English Literature course description (2008), which suggests that AP English Literature and Composition curriculum is not prescriptive, the authors of the CCCS share that, "The

[text] choices should serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms. They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list."

While each document *does* leave the door open for teachers to select materials not offered in either of their documents, unless teachers are aware that they can select other texts, and unless they understand the highly ambiguous phrase "*similar/comparable literary merit*," they are likely to default to what is described (or what administrators encourage them to do) in these respective documents. As noted by a participant in the study who works to ensure that students exit an English Education program understanding the potential power of YA:

> I introduce preservice English teachers to effective, powerful YA[L], YA[L] that addresses real issues, includes complex and challenging content, and often linguistic and stylistic beauty. I think it is one of my jobs to attempt to dislodge college students from their stereotypical thinking about "classic" versus "YA[L]" literature. I want them to read at least one YA[L] book that challenges their thinking, that they could see teaching in a high school class. I want them to know that there is quality YA[L] out there that can not only count as "complex texts," but that can also encourage reader identification, empathy, and critical self-reflection. One book may not be enough to change preservice teachers' minds, but I hope that it will be enough to urge them to speak out if, in the future, they hear a colleague say that YA[L] is not worthy for inclusion in an AP course. I want them to say, "Oh, I think it is. Let me give you an example . . . ."

Another English Education professor wrote, "I feel [students] have a right to know about the prejudices against YA, but more important, they need to educate themselves about YA, graphic novels, audio texts, nonfiction, and anything else that can engender (or maintain) a love of reading in their students." Notwithstanding, if English teachers are provided concrete tools (see Table 2) to understand how to determine text complexity, they can make a case for inclusion of YAL in their classrooms; however, as findings indicate (Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Miller, 2013), until the College Board defines "*similar/comparable literary merit*," AP English teachers are likely to be trepidatious about using YAL or encouraging students to select a YA novel to respond to question 3.

How to Determine Text Complexity and "Similar Literary Merit"

In order to understand how to determine text complexity, teachers can turn to the Common Core Standards website (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/standard-10-range-quality-complexity/measuring-text-complexity-three-factors). Teachers are offered a triangulation of definitions to help them understand a text's complexity: qualitative evaluation of the text, quantitative evaluation of the text, and matching reader to text and task. Teachers are also encouraged to turn to Appendix A for more specific instructions to determine a text's complexity.

The writers of the Common Core define the *qualitative evaluation of the text* as "levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands"; *the quantitative evaluation of the text* as the "readability measures and other scores of text complexity"; and the *matching reader to text and task* as "reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed)" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Building on these areas, I offer a more in-depth and detailed application for obtaining textual complexity.

Teachers can ascertain a reader's level, determine text complexity, and account for "similar/comparable literary merit" through the exercises I created in Table 2. (Table 3 is a practice in application for Table 2.) The Lexile range (L) is a fairly fixed "measure" of either an individual's reading ability or the difficulty of a text. For the Common Core, the (L) for 9th–10th grades is 1080–1305, and for 11th–12th grades is 1215–1355 (prior ranges for 9th–10th grades were 960–1115 and for 11th–12th grades 1070–1220). These ranges are new and reflect how researchers understand the aggregate impact that the Common Core can and should have on readers over time.

Implications for Classroom Practice

A challenge presented here to teachers is to develop additional assessments for how Lexile ranges, background student knowledge, and experience match up with rubrics and criteria that can measure both

Table 2. As a group, teachers should look at these three areas together and have conversations with students to determine text complexity and "similar literary merit." Many of the tools for determining the quantitative measure for text complexity are still being developed and will be released in the near future.

Text Complexity	What This Means	What Teachers Can Do
Qualitative Evaluation of the Text	**•Levels of Meaning (Layering)—** can vary based on type of text and levels or layering of ideas	•Develop rubrics that account for a continuum of complexity (e.g., meaning, multiple narratives and themes that inspire various levels of interpretation), structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands. Create clear criteria on a continuum of low to high complexity and assess different types of literature. ***Rank*** types of literature against each other and even against the same type. Consider canonical texts, various expository pieces, informational texts, YA, Hip-Hop Lit, graphic novels, and anime.
	•Structure— how a text is organized and the sequencing of how story lines are revealed	For **structure**, consider inclusion of conventional structures, chronology of story line, flashbacks, foreshadowing, types of figurative language allowing for distortions or interruptions in text (allusions, metonymy, apostrophe, allegory), space-time distortions, and inclusion of graphics.
	•Language Conventionality and Clarity— how an author uses or manipulates language to produce an effect	For **language conventionality and clarity,** consider how authors use and vary diction such as: •monosyllabic/polysyllabic •colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang •denotative/connotative •concrete/abstract •euphonious/cacophonous •jargon/dialect •Black English Vernacular And consider how authors use and vary syntax such as: a. sentence length b. sentence pattern •declarative/imperative/exclamatory/interrogative • simple/compound/complex/compound complex • loose/periodic • balanced • order: natural, inverted, split • juxtaposition • parallel structure • repetition • rhetorical questioning c. arrangement of ideas in a sentence d. arrangement of ideas in a paragraph *__For further consideration__: Consider variations of theme, diction, and syntax by time period (Ancient World, Medieval Period, Elizabethan Age, Renaissance, Puritan Age, Pre-Romantics, Victorian Age, 20th and 21st Centuries)
	•*Knowledge Demands* how an author challenges a reader to tap into one's life experience, or must access and recall cultural/literary and content/discipline knowledge in order to unpack meaning in a text.	For **knowledge demands,** consider how much personal background or cultural/literary or content/discipline knowledge is required in order to help students understand a text. Consider how understanding stylistic techniques and time period and historical contexts can support a student's comprehension on the text.

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Table 2. Continued

Quantitative Evaluation of the Text	Texts have a Lexile range (L) that suggests the level of complexity and readability of a text by grade level. These scores are subjective and must be looked at in relation to other factors of student growth. A score must be crystallized with other student artifacts.	Speak with district reading specialists or literacy coaches for support in determining how to obtain one of these tests: •Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test; •Dale-Chall Readability Formula; •MetaMetrics; •Coh-Metrix*
Matching Reader to Text and Task	Teachers should consider student knowledge, motivation, and experiences and determine how they align to the assigned task (e.g., purpose, task complexity, and questions posed).	Can create questionnaires and reading surveys as well as interview students to ascertain possible interest or engagement with a text.

*Each of these tests measures different types of information. It is important that a school district determine a measurement that would fit the needs of a particular student body.

"similar literary merit" and text complexity (Table 3). From there, as we develop from our own practice our knowledge of how developing readers who have strong comprehension tools can demonstrate their learning, we can actually assess text against text and bolster a rationale for moving YAL from periphery into center.

Consider what it would be like to make a case that YA texts can hold their own against canonical texts. Consider how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* stands with Oates's *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* (2003), how Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1987) stands with Crowe's *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (2003), or how Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) stands with Danticat's *Behind the Mountains* (2004) (see Table 4). What could a crystallization of measurements look like? I think we might just find some answers as we decenter the research as privileged and instead account for the voices of teachers and students in the process of rubric and criteria development. It is possible that YAL leads to increased reading comprehension with complex texts, perhaps even more effectively than some classic texts.

Cautions about Standard-Driven Teaching

We can challenge our current culpability as researchers and classroom teachers who adopt research or past practices around colonizing language that absent or sideline textual choices like YA. We have agency to dislodge ourselves from those who believe that "venerated" institutions are the *preferred*, superior, and normative legislator for values and morals because of their power to grant and reproduce intellectual, academic, ableist, gendered, classed, religious, environmental, ethnic, linguistic, and heteronormative capital within dominant culture. A person in the study noted: "I worry that people who know very little about teaching, reading, learning, motivation, engagement, and writing are 'reforming' classrooms that were much better before they stuck their nose into them." While research can certainly inform practice, we must consider who is benefiting and profiting from it. We must support our teachers by calling into question, as in this case, literary gatekeeping monopolies that continue to have great social power institutionally to reinforce and sustain hierarchies of literary textual choices.

Evidence suggests that this Millennial generation greatly benefits from reading YAL in and outside of the classroom and infers that we can't afford to blindly adopt or accept the lack of definition of "similar literary merit" or accept the research that has informed text complexity for the Common Core. Rather, we have to go beyond Text Complexity (Frey, Lapp, & Fisher, 2012) and teach beyond the Common Core (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2012). We must continue to pay attention to the needs of the Millennial generation. We have to know our students, understand their interests, scaffold instruction to help them develop,

Table 3. Evaluating YAL to determine text complexity and "comparable literary merit"

Criteria for Qualitative Evaluation of a Text	Low	Medium	High
Levels of Meaning (Layering)—how ideas or meaning are embedded in characters, diction, syntax, figurative language, themes, archetypes, point of view, tone, plot, and context	Text has a couple of narratives and themes, and levels of interpretation are limited	Text has a few narratives and themes, and levels of interpretation are somewhat predictable	Text has multiple narratives and themes that inspire various levels of interpretation
Structure—how a text is organized and the sequencing of how story lines are revealed	The story line chronology is mostly linear but may include some flashbacks, foreshadowing, or different types of figurative language. Graphics or pics may be used to further the plot.	The story line chronology includes some uses of flashbacks, foreshadowing, different types of figurative language that allows for some distortions or interruptions in text (e.g., allusions, metonymy, apostrophe, allegory), and may include space-time distortions.	The story line chronology can include but is not limited to multiple uses of flashbacks, foreshadowing, multiple types of figurative language allowing for distortions or interruptions in text (e.g., allusions, metonymy, apostrophe, allegory), and space-time distortions.
	Low	**Medium**	**High**
Language Conventionality and Clarity—how an author uses or manipulates language to produce an effect			
Diction—how an author uses words to convey meaning. Diction can contextualize a time period, a region, or a culture.	The author may vary diction but limits it to two or three characters: •monosyllabic/polysyllabic •colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang •denotative/connotative	The author varies types of diction and may use contrasting language to convey characterization: •monosyllabic/polysyllabic •colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang •denotative/connotative •concrete/abstract •euphonious/cacophonous •jargon/dialect •Black English Vernacular	The author varies multiple types of diction and uses contrasting language to convey characterization: •monosyllabic/polysyllabic •colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang •denotative/connotative •concrete/abstract •euphonious/cacophonous •jargon/dialect •Black English Vernacular
Syntax—how an author uses sentences to convey meaning	The author limits variations in syntax and may only vary it for two–three characters or settings. The text does not rely on syntactical conventions to deepen the storyline.	The author somewhat varies syntax in order to develop plot and characterization, but does not overwhelm the text with usage variations. Sentences and structure can include variations in: a. sentence length b. sentence pattern •declarative/imperative/exclamatory/interrogative •simple/compound/complex/compound complex • loose/periodic • balanced • order: natural, inverted, split • juxtaposition • parallel structure • repetition • rhetorical questioning c. arrangement d. arrangement of ideas in a paragraph	The author purposefully varies syntax in order to develop plot and characterization. Sentences and structure can include variations in: a. sentence length b. sentence pattern •declarative/imperative/exclamatory/interrogative •simple/compound/complex/compound complex • loose/periodic • balanced • order: natural, inverted, split • juxtaposition • parallel structure • repetition • rhetorical questioning c. arrangement d. arrangement of ideas in a paragraph

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Table 3. Continued

Time period—different time periods a story can take place include: Ancient World, Medieval Period, Elizabethan Age, Renaissance, Puritan Age, Pre-Romantics, Victorian Age, 20th and 21st Centuries	The time period does not impact comprehension because context clues are surface and provide thorough description of historical/political/cultural/economic/gendered issues. Time period may impact authors' choices of diction and syntax, but context clues offer readers thorough comprehension support.	The time period impacts comprehension but context clues give way to historical/political/cultural/economic/gendered themes presented in the text. Time period does impact authors' choices of diction and syntax, but context clues offer readers comprehension support.	The time period must be considered in order to fully comprehend historical/political/cultural/economic/gendered themes presented in the text. Time period impacts authors' choices of diction and syntax.
	Low	**Medium**	**High**
Knowledge Demands—how an author challenges a reader to tap into one's life experience, or reader must access and recall cultural/literary and content/discipline knowledge in order to unpack meaning in a text			
	Reader needs limited background knowledge, or awareness of cultural/literary and content/discipline events or understandings of how and why authors use stylistic techniques, and time period and historical contexts to unpack textual meaning.	Reader must have some background knowledge, comprehension of cultural/literary and content/discipline events, and some understandings of how and why authors use stylistic techniques, and time period and historical contexts to unpack textual meaning.	Reader must have extensive background knowledge, comprehension of cultural/literary and content/discipline events, and complex understandings of how and why authors use stylistic techniques, and time period and historical contexts to unpack textual meaning.

Table 4. Examples of textual complexity

Text	What Speaks to Its Textual Complexity	Notes
Big Mouth and Ugly Girl	Levels of Meaning	Adult and student perspectives
	Structure	Written through multiple voices, includes various subplots, quick pacing, multigenre
	Language Conventionality and Clarity	Unpacks the power of sarcasm and its impact on others; filled with irony; cacophonous diction
	Knowledge Demands	Deals with bullying; media's contribution to stereotyping; self-loathing body size, marginalization, post-Columbine and school violence; can be used to segue into modern day bullying
Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case	Levels of Meaning	Inferences and connections can be made across multiple contexts of injustices
	Structure	Reveals true accounts (nonfiction), uses primary documents, includes photographs, flashbacks, multiple narratives
	Language Conventionality and Clarity	Formal and informal, concrete and cacophonous diction
	Knowledge Demands	Deals with post-civil rights issues, injustice, racism, kidnapping, torture, segregation; can be used as a stepping off into modern civil rights issues around Trayvon Martin
Behind the Mountains	Levels of Meaning	Inferences and connections can be made across multiple social and historical contexts
	Structure	First person, innocent eye, point of view, multiple contexts (New York and Haiti), written as diary entries
	Language Conventionality and Clarity	Rich in metaphor, connotative diction, visual imagery, uses some Haitian creole
	Knowledge Demands	Deals with immigrant experience, violence, students whose first language isn't English, learning difficulties; can be used as a jumping off point to struggles for ELL students or immigrants to find their place in American society

and then apply learning and reading strategies across a range of texts and styles so that the strategies we teach become the skills they automatically apply to new situations. As noted by Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008), "[R]eading skills operate without the reader's deliberate control or conscious awareness . . . . This has important, positive consequences for each reader's limited working memory" (p. 369). In other words, teaching reading well need not necessitate the exclusion of texts that adolescent readers can relate to and care about, nor should their reading capital be limited or gate-kept by what test preparers or the Standards deem as worthy of merit.

In order to demonstrate how YAL might qualify as text understood to have high text complexity and "comparable literary merit," Table 3 has been assembled. A teacher might consider these steps in order to make an assessment:

- Select a YA text (might also consider asking students to do this as an exercise);
- Based on the categories and definitions in the left column, compare the text against the headers of "low," "medium," and "high";
- If a measurement falls on the cusp between any two areas, it can have a +/- factor;
- Assemble a score of high, medium, or low (if a text is high- or medium +, review with student);
- Determine the Lexile Band for the text;
- Have candid conversations with students about background knowledge, motivation, and experiences, and how they align to the assigned task; then match reader to text and crystallize artifacts;
- If a text has high text complexity, it also has "comparable literary merit."

In following the steps above, if a text qualifies as having high or medium-high text complexity, it can also be considered of "comparable literary merit." Ultimately, by taking into consideration the Lexile Band for the text; having candid conversations with students about background knowledge, motivation, and experiences, and how these align to the assigned task; and matching reader to text, the decision about the quality of the text will reveal itself.

Concerns about Sidelining YA

The Anchor Standard 10 for Reading has the potential to operate as a tool that reinforces particular perspectives about what constitutes quality texts and that can continue to shape and privilege certain beliefs around reading. This perspective, if not carefully challenged, has the potential to reinforce a colonizing ideology in which students exit school with a type of reading canon that is situated in an "official knowledge[-type]" ideology (Apple, 2002). The underlying premise is that such a canon will help them meet the academic and financial challenges they'll face in life. This colonizing ideology operates as a means to lock students into a type of citizenship that reifies a highly competitive global marketplace of goods, services, and ideas. Bhahba (1995) calls this a form of *splitting,* where relationships of the "colonized" to institutions and apparatuses of power emphasize the inadequacies of the "colonized" as dependent on institutions for political and economic success.

Unless teachers interrogate standards, how they are written, and by whom they are written, they "vulnerabilize" The Millennial Generation into embodying specific types of cultural capital without their knowledge or consent (unless made transparent by educators or those in the know). This ideology instills within them a compliance and dependency complex (Lesko, 2012) in relation to those who operate in more powerful spaces. Because they have acquired a particular reading capital, or a type of reading norm, they sustain and maintain a type of Democratic citizenry. Our take-away from the CCSS is that teachers must be mindful about how what is and isn't named by the Standards has widespread potential to shape future generations. As literacy researchers, it seems feasible that we can rupture a splitting and dependency complex so youth can become lifelong lovers of all types of reading and not automatons whose sole purpose for reading is to become laborers.

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Notes

1. The phrase also shows up as "similar literary merit" and "similar literary quality" (Miller & Slifkin, 2010). I vary its usage based on its use in different contexts, although they mean the same thing.
2. *Purple Hibiscus*, like *The Book Thief*, is considered a crossover text and is found in adult fiction in the several book stores I surveyed.

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