We all want our students to grow as readers: to master increasingly more challenging and sophisticated books, stories, articles, poems, essays, and other texts—and not just to read them, but to be able to understand and analyze them as well, and to do so on their own.

This type of literacy expansion has always been the goal of the English teacher; many teachers have been using strategies to help students conquer tough works of literature for many years. Now, though, under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), this goal has been codified using the term “text complexity,” and includes a larger focus on nonfiction, informational texts, and higher-level analysis.

“For some teachers who are already using sophisticated, strategy-based critical thinking embedded in their work, then the Common Core simply allows them to continue doing that good and deep work,” says Linda Denstaedt, a literacy specialist and codirector of the Oakland (Michigan) Writing Project.

For other teachers who may have been teaching with an isolated, skills-based “check-off” method—teach kids this, then that—the more holistic, integrated method of the CCSS, aimed at creating lifelong readers with well-toned critical thinking muscles, presents a new approach, says Denstaedt.

Cynthia Shanahan, associate dean of academic affairs and professor of literacy, language, and culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education, as well as executive director of the Council on Teacher Education, agrees that some teachers have been teaching text complexity all along, but believes this is a new approach for many, including teachers in content areas besides English language arts.

As part of a recent research project, Shanahan observed classrooms for a year; she reports that in many classes, whether science classes or even English, “not much reading was going on. [Teachers] were telling the students what they were about to read before they read it, or they were truncating the reading to get to the questions, but they weren’t having students read.”

Shanahan says she is “cautiously optimistic” that, if properly implemented, CCSS reading standards that stress the mastery of increasingly complex texts will be “a game-changer.”

So how should you approach teaching complex texts in your classroom, especially in light of the new Common Core focus? What strategies can you employ and what type of professional learning might be needed?

**The Complex Meaning of Text Complexity**

The meaning of text complexity is itself complex, layered with multiple factors that determine a text’s complexity level. Even the definition of text needs some explanation,
because this can include not just a novel, short story, or other type of fiction, but also nonfiction writing, such as essays, memoirs, biographies, instruction manuals, scientific articles, advertisements, and song lyrics, as well as visual elements, including charts, graphs, and even videos.

Determining complexity means looking at several elements. While some may assume just knowing a text's Lexile score is all-important, actually such quantitative measures are only one way to rate a text's complexity.

"Lexile is a small fraction of what we should think about when we are choosing complex texts," says Eileen Murphy Buckley, founder and CEO of ThinkCERCA, a Chicago-based educational services provider, and author of 360 Degrees of Text: Using Poetry to Teach Close Reading and Powerful Writing (NCTE 2011).

After all, she points out, by Lexile score alone, a Captain Underpants book is a more challenging text than Of Mice and Men.

Other measures that help determine the complexity of a text, as laid out in the Common Core, are qualitative considerations, such as levels of meaning or purpose, a text's literary structures or devices, the type of language used, and reader background knowledge required to understand it. Beyond this, we need to look at the abilities of our students and the tasks we are asking them to do to determine how much complexity is involved.

Choosing the Texts

One key to making sure the chosen texts are the right ones for classrooms is to make sure the decisionmaking rests with teachers, which is what takes place in the Oak Park School District in Michigan, near Detroit.

In the Oak Park district, teachers are able to select the texts that will be read, says Denstaedt, noting that text selection is geared toward "independent reading of the text that is going to be most difficult at the end of the unit—and teachers have to be part of that selection process."

Denstaedt consults with Oak Park High School, which three years ago tested in the bottom five percent of state schools and was a candidate for take-over. Instead, the district received a grant that helped it hire Denstaedt and buy about 1,000 new texts—both fiction and nonfiction, at varying levels of complexity.

Oak Park High School 11th-grade English teacher Peter Haun recounts spending a day with a colleague in search of novels that would appeal to students who come in with a fifth-grade reading level. Such students will turn off at anything that screams "kiddie." "It has to look 'teenager,' not fifth grade, or they won't read it," he says.

Despite the difficulty of finding leveled reading for high schoolers, Haun eventually came upon a low-level reading series set in fictional Blufield High School. His students like the books, but he uses them only as appetizers—to whet their taste for reading—rather than as a steady diet. "I don’t like the kids to read too many of them, because I’m hoping they are moving up the skill level."

Haun has a basis for believing he can raise that level, too: with the help of Denstaedt, in the 2012–13 school year he saw the reading level of 70 percent of regularly attending students in his class rise by at least one grade level, with 37 percent increasing two or more years.

In addition to books, Haun and other teachers in the Oak Park district seek out current events articles, videos, and other informational texts about issues that will engage students and buttress the handful of canonical texts the district requires them to teach.

Morgan Dunton, ELA specialist for the Maine Department of Education, favors creating such text sets, perhaps organized around a canonical text or a key theme.

"In teaching a unit, we know we are going to be teaching strategies for students to access the more complex texts later in the unit," says Denstaedt. Oak Park teachers often start with videos, which are more accessible for students, before moving into easier, then more complex texts.

They gradually increase the complexity of text across the unit, so that “by the time students reach the most complex text,
Tools for Attacking Complex Texts

A host of classroom strategies exist to help students comprehend complex texts. A quick overview of some of those used by the teachers in the Oak Park School District includes:

Multiple levels of text, as illustrated in earlier examples, is an approach in which a text set includes texts of varying complexity. For example, students might read a government document, listen to and read together a key speech (such as Roosevelt’s famous “Four Freedoms” address), read an argumentative essay from The New York Times, and also watch videos, such as TED talks, or listen to and read song lyrics with a similar theme, but at a lower Lexile.

Modeling how a successful reader reads. Teachers can reveal the hidden practices of a proficient reader by explaining the thoughts and actions and strategies they use to tackle text.

“Every day I am modeling,” says Leah Doster Barnett, high school English teacher at Royal Oak High School in Michigan. She “thinks aloud” with her students over passages they read in class, over notes she makes, or about trouble she is having with a particular book she is reading.

Annotating text “is really big for me,” says Barnett. She uses color-coding as she underlines or circles words and phrases she doesn’t understand or which appear to be key points—explaining as she goes, so students can emulate the practice.

Providing background information and scaffolding. A student who doesn’t understand the context or information about a particular subject will have more difficulty with a text, so teachers need to make sure students have the background knowledge first.

Multi-draft reading has students read the same piece of text several times but look for different things each time. So, for example, the first read-through of a text might look at the gist of what’s being said—the basic information, story, or claim; a second draft might look for important details or elements of genre or structure; and a third-draft read might involve elements of craft that an author uses. A teacher may model the first read-through or have the whole class read along, with the second read done with a student partner and a third read done independently.

Close reading may involve students reading together to find the answer to a teacher’s question, or it could have students independently examining text to find patterns and elements.

Reading non-ELA content is something that Barnett works to help her students master. She has them bring in their textbooks from other content areas (with that teacher’s permission) and comes up with strategies for decoding the text, charts, graphs, and other elements the books may contain.

Mini-conferences occur daily in Peter Haun’s classes, where he checks in with the small groups in his classroom (about three to four students in each) to see how they are faring with that day’s lesson. Similarly, Barnett does a “turn and talk,” allowing students to discuss a question with a neighbor. This formative assessment lets the teachers quickly reteach if needed and also keep connections with their students.

They are able to read it independently or at least have the strategies to work with it.”

Students can be given different texts at different levels that fit together in some way—not just easier versions of the same text, but others that offer differing facets of an argument or new perspectives, says Buckley, who calls this approach “a spiral staircase of complexity.”

With this approach, even though students may be reading at different levels, they can contribute different points of view to the classroom discussion by reading related texts.

One tool to help teachers determine the text complexity of a piece and the best ways to teach it has been developed by state English language arts coordinators in about a dozen states (Dunton was part of this effort). The resulting “roadmap” tool is a two-page graphic organizer that lets teachers first review a text for elements of complexity and then figure out teaching strategies to help make the text accessible for students.

Dunton says teachers may have difficulty at first analyzing texts in this way, but once they get the hang of it, may only need to do it a handful of times before its lessons about text complexity become ingrained. (View the roadmap at http://www.ccsso.org/Navigating_Text_Complexity/Showroom_Models.html)

Teaching Students with Differing Abilities

“One of the difficulties teachers have is looking at their classes and seeing that they are at multiple levels and trying to determine what students are going to be reading,” says Shanahan.

Independent reading at each student’s reading level is one way to differentiate in a classroom. Giving different supplemental texts or assigning different tasks are other methods.

Teachers shouldn’t automatically assume students can’t handle texts that have higher Lexiles or seem more complex. A motivating topic can transcend Lexile, notes Buckley, pointing to essays about things like Facebook regulations or junk-food laws—issues which touch teens where they live, and which they can often follow if given the chance.

Professional Learning—What’s Needed?

Dunton noticed in workshops with teachers in Maine (both ELA and non-ELA) that many weren’t equipped with the “language of analy-
“sis” to analyze text passages for complexity and “be able to talk about these qualitative measures of text.”

For her part, Buckley recommends greater collaboration in schools around a common language so that teachers across disciplines can approach reading and writing in the same way.

Additionally, Buckley says teachers should work together to select text, create assessments, and practice things like close reading and text analysis. “We have to do real-life practice of what we are asking the kids to do.”

Shanahan adds that colleges of education need to better prepare graduates in how to approach text within their own and other disciplines.

**Ultimate Goals—Why Text Complexity Is Important**

“The most important thing we need to know about text complexity is that what was done in the past didn’t work very well,” says Shanahan. “That is, taking away the text because it was too complex or keeping the text very, very easy and very, very short throughout. Those two approaches, those two strategies for dealing with students who can’t read haven’t worked very well. We have to change those practices.”

What Shanahan wants to see instead is students being encouraged to build their capacity to read the types of long texts they will be expected to master in college, and to do so independently. “We have to always move toward that target.”

Denstaedt and Barnett at Oak Park also hope for an emphasis on helping students become lifelong consumers of words.

Three years ago, when Denstaedt started at Oak Park, she says many children had never read a book cover to cover. Now, some students read a book a day.

“It’s not just about reading hard texts,” she says. “If we can teach students to access complex ideas and complex texts, and at the same time understand how less complex texts have the same ideas and thinking in them, then it’s not just about complex texts. It’s about critical thinking across a world of texts that students will encounter in their lives, and maybe encouraging them to reach to these harder texts—even though at first they might seem beyond their understanding.”

Barnett says her teaching methods and philosophy have changed in the 15 years she has been teaching. “When I first started, I thought of my job as teaching particular texts. Now I think of myself as a teacher of reading and offering kids strategies to help them be able to own the text they are approaching.”

Even before the Common Core, her focus on teaching students to be independent readers had taken root.

“When I started, I’d say, ‘Do you comprehend?’ and if they didn’t, I might go slower, but I didn’t really have the tools to show them how I approach difficult texts.” Now, she has those strategies and hopes to help pass them along to students, so that reading can become “a lifelong skill that gives them success in their careers, as well as personal happiness.”

**Lorna Collier** is an author and writer based in northern Illinois.

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**Follow the Learning**

Morgan Dunton is a facilitator for The Maine Literacy group, one of the collaborative teams making use of online space on NCLE’s Literacy in Learning Exchange (http://www.literacyinlearning.exchange). She invites anyone interested in following their learning to visit the group and “Follow” it. The Maine Literacy group describes their group as “content teachers PreK-12+, literacy coaches, and anyone with an interest in advancing literacy learning in Maine,” and says they formed to “share resources and explore the questions that drive our professional learning in Maine,” with CCSS as a particular area of focus.

http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/group/maine-literacy

Visit http://www.literacyinlearning.org to learn more about NCLE, or visit http://www.literacyinlearningexchange.org/groups to view groups and add your own collaborative learning team to the growing NCLE network.