



Just the Facts!

Close Reading and Comprehension of Informational Text



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Foreword by
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Foreword

This book is an invaluable tool for teachers to realize a great hope for every student: to become a close reader of text and of the world through the power of knowing, reading, and responding to informational text. Informational text is a powerful genre, surrounding us and illuminating our worlds every day, and yet is also one that can overwhelm and confound our student readers at times, and us as teachers, too. Lori's wise voice guides us through the thicket of the texts that matter, giving us strategies to share with our students that will indeed change their reading lives.

In many cities here in the United States, and in communities around the world, understanding how to read informational text well is a life raft. I have been teaching and innovating in education reform and advocacy for over 15 years and writing about my discoveries. As a literacy educator, I have spent decades working alongside teachers and students and the area of struggle for many is how we address informational reading with our children. The child who has hopes and dreams for her college- and career-ready future must be able to not only comprehend informational text but to master it. And indeed, that is what this one-of-a-kind book does: it provides practical and inspirational strategies for how we can be sure every child has the tool kit for success in an information-based world, and how that child not only manages it, but masters it.

In these times of great change, of transformation for our society through the ever-growing power of communication and speed of how information is shared, more than ever we as educators need to know how to navigate this world with our students. We live in an era of collaboration, communication, and community. But in order to best prepare our students for this kind of world, we have to be the kind of teachers who can boldly, rigorously, and compassionately share with our students the best practices for close reading and how we do that can give them ownership over an ever-changing landscape of text and ideas. What Lori has done here is to create a remarkable combination of research, best practices, and ready-to-use lesson plans that illuminate children's natural curiosity and love of informational text. In an approachable manner, she makes it possible for us to teach strategies for close reading of informational text in a way that our students can both understand and love. But beyond all those very important foundations, she gives us a road map for how we can guide children through the maze of information and help them to become the kinds of lifelong readers who know text, read text critically, and understand it so deeply that they can build their own new ideas from it.

Lori values the child's voice and the teacher's heart. She has created practical lessons, tips, techniques, and recommendations that both seek the highest level of standards for all children, and are also joyful, practical, and user friendly. What a rare and wonderful combination! From ample project-based learning suggestions to kid-tested activities, she has seamlessly given us close-reading procedures and guides that can and should be implemented instantly and tend to all children: from our most reluctant readers to our children already reading beyond grade level. At a time when we all worry about the preciousness of those teaching moments and how to make the most of them, a book comes along, this one, that will make that time matter most.

—Pam Allyn, M.A.
Author and Executive Director of LitLife and LitWorld

Acknowledgments

I am very pleased to present to you *Just the Facts! Close Reading and Comprehension of Informational Text* as a desk top resource that I hope you will return to often for lessons and ideas to reach all of your students and improve literacy and student engagement in your classroom. I feel blessed to have the opportunity to share this exciting collection with you and would like to thank some special folks who made this book possible.

Special thanks to the variety of schools around the country who sign on to become “project schools” with me each year. Our hard work together in classroom demonstration lessons, coaching, and grade level meetings helped shape the lessons in this book. I am especially thankful for the opportunity to work with the teachers and students this past year at Salvador Elementary School in Napa. (They are the stars in the photos!)

The team of special readers who reviewed and gave feedback to drafts of this text range from district administrators, classroom teachers and reading specialists, to university professors. This distinguished group represents a variety of school districts in New York, Florida, Indiana, California, Missouri, and Kansas. A warm and heartfelt thanks goes to reviewers Mary Jo Barker, Mary Charles, Amanda Cleary, Mary Jo Fox, Audrey Fong, Kathy Langham, Tarie Lewis, and Ellen Osmundson.

Thanks to Sara Johnson, Editorial Director, and Lori Nash, Editor, along with all of the the talented staff at Teacher Created Materials and Shell Education for their love of children, close ties to the classroom, knowledge of current research and trends, and ability to listen and create books teachers love!

Love and a thousand thanks to my wonderful husband, Mark, and our young adult and teen children Bryan, Rachael, and Rebecca for their support even when I stuck my head in my lap top a few hours each day last summer to work on this manuscript while on our family mountain and beach vacations!

To the readers of this text, thanks for joining me in sharing informational text strategies that will engage and improve literacy in you classroom and across your school!

Introduction

Informational text bombards us every day in our fast-paced world. Now more than ever our students need powerful strategies and skills to help them as they navigate their way through informational texts. In a culture where critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity matter, our classrooms need to grow students who are, college and career ready. The Common Core States Standards call for more rigor, complex materials, and lots of time spent on informational texts. The good news is students actually like reading informational text. Watch eyes light up as you show the cover of *Mummies and Their Mysteries* (Wilcox 1999) to sixth graders, or flip through the pages studying the size of the pyramid at Giza or a python in *How Big Is It?* (Hillman 2007) with a third-grade guided-reading group. Ask first graders gathered on the rug what they know about dinosaurs and watch hands shoot up. Many of our students are already naturally drawn to informational texts and topics. For some of our boys, informational texts are the only texts they willingly read (Gurian, Smith, and Wilhelm 2001).

Teachers in schools around the county, share some of the same concerns about meeting the rigor of the Common Core State Standards, increasing the volume and complexity of informational text, and keeping students motivated.

The following are some common concerns and questions teachers share:

- What does this mean for my students everyday in the classroom?
- Which strategies and lessons are most important to teach?
- What is close reading and how do I teach it?
- How will I meet the needs of my English language learners and struggling readers as they read complex texts?
- How do I teach students to ask and answer text-dependent questions?
- What are some ways to help my students navigate through the unique structures and features of informational text?
- What does instruction with informational text look like in different settings, such as whole class, guided-reading groups, literature circles, and with text sets?
- How can I adjust my comprehension strategy lessons to fit informational text?
- What do lessons for teaching text evidence look like?
- How can I motivate my students to read more challenging texts with improved comprehension?

This book seeks to answer the questions and concerns previously raised and is specifically designed for busy teachers like you! You can choose to read the text in order, soaking it in one chapter at a time or flip around and pick and choose lessons to use on the fly! The professional development guides found in the Digital Resources are loaded with discussion topics and ideas ideal for staff meetings. Whether you read this book by yourself, in a small group, or with your entire school, you'll find interesting questions for reflection, helpful tips and suggestions, and compelling lesson ideas to lead you down the pathway of success!

Chapter Overviews

Throughout every chapter you will find:

- effective lessons that you can use time and time again with different texts;
- ideas that make learning fun for you and your students so everyone will be engaged;
- lessons built on what we know works from solid research in reading;
- ideas that require very little preparation;
- lots of options for meeting the needs of struggling readers and English language learners; and
- practical lessons that are scaffolded with teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent practice with informal assessment suggestions.

Chapter 1—Informational Texts Move to the Front of the Class

Why are informational texts so important now? Many students experience problems reading informational text. The challenges of reading this type of text continue to contribute to the “fourth-grade slump” (Chall 1983)—a researched trend where third-grade students suddenly experience a drop in reading scores when they hit the increase of informational text found in fourth grade. Now, with the Common Core requirements for more informational text, there is an immediate need to focus on strategies that work at all grade levels. This chapter covers everything from dealing with the shifts in the Common Core, to text complexity and critical thinking. The *because* lesson and hand gesture help your students find evidence in the text. We examine everyday text complexity and classroom examples of key ideas and details, craft and structure, and the integration of knowledge and ideas. Ways to sprinkle in peppy think alouds using your informational text reading help students understand the purposes for reading nonfiction texts.

Chapter 2—How Informational Texts Are Different: Text Features, Structures, and Strategies

How do people use informational texts in the “real” world? Through interviews and examples, students learn more about why informational texts are so important to read well. The creative *Pillowcase Lesson* brings into focus text types and purposes for reading. Project based learning puts students’ reading and writing skills to work by doing activities for a purpose or audience such as making dog biscuits for an animal shelter or making recycling posters for a local mall. Interactive lessons for teaching students text features include a *Text Feature Hunt*, *Find the Feature*, *Text Feature Bingo* and more! Teaching text structures is easier and practical with mentor texts and graphic organizers. Did you know readers even look a little different when they are reading informational text? Try modeling how to flip around, reread, and other nonfiction reading behaviors to help students learn to fully engage with texts.

Chapter 3—Motivating Students to Read Informational Texts: Practical Classroom Routines

How can you promote informational text reading all day long in your classroom? This chapter is loaded with explanations of routines you can rely on including:

- informational text think-alouds that really work;
- practical close reading strategies and text dependent questions;
- teacher-led guided reading ideas;
- ways to incorporate reciprocal teaching for a comprehension boost; and
- practical ways to build and teach with the magic of text sets.

Chapter 4—Promoting Comprehension with Engaging Text Feature Lessons

Text features are what distinguish informational text from fiction. They are the key road signs along the way that signal the reader to stay on track. Teach students to pay attention to these important reading features with lessons dedicated to the table of contents, headings, visuals (photos, maps, charts, graphs, diagrams), glossary, and index. Students will enjoy anticipating what they will learn with *Guess My Prediction* using the table of contents. Students will stump one another with the lesson *What’s My Heading?* as they summarize the text. Never again will students overlook the glossary or index when you teach the lessons *Thumbs Up*, *Thumbs On* with the *Glossary* or *Index Hunt* to strengthen their index skills. These lessons also build important academic vocabulary!

Chapter 5—Interactive Strategy Lessons for Informational Text

In Chapter 5, we examine what comprehension strategies should look like in today's classroom. This chapter includes an updated set of comprehension strategy lessons designed to meet the Common Core State Standards while at the same time, revisiting the familiar research-based comprehension strategies such as making connections, asking questions, clarifying, and synthesizing across texts.

I hope you enjoy this resource that will hopefully give you student-centered, practical research-based options for engaging your students as you increase the complexity and amount of informational text in your classroom.

Informational Texts Move to the Front of the Class

When asked to define nonfiction or informational texts, students often respond with some variation on the following:

“Nonfiction texts are real.”

—Lupe, 4th grade

“Nonfiction is any piece of real life you want to know about like oil rigs, ships, planes, sports, animals, and trains.”

—Jason, 1st grade

“The more nonfiction you read, the smarter you’ll get.”

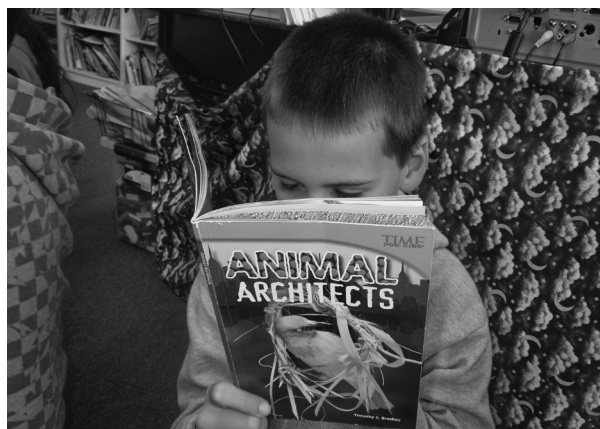
—Bryan, 3rd grade

One of my all-time favorites is the response that Carlyn, a second grader, thoughtfully crafted. She shared, *“Nonfiction books don’t start with ‘Once upon a time.’”*

What Do We Mean by Informational Texts?

Whether you refer to them as nonfiction or informational texts, this genre is here to stay thanks to the new demands of the Common Core State Standards that require informational texts to fill at least 50 percent of the elementary reading curriculum over the course of the day. The Common Core State Standards refer to informational texts as a broad category that includes various types of texts including procedural books, maps, how-to books, history, social studies, primary source documents, and even nonfiction literary works such as biographies and first-hand accounts. For example, an informational text on dolphins could include facts about dolphins or it could outline an individual’s encounter or story involving a dolphin (Shanahan 2012). The good news is that with the Common Core State Standards our students need to know how to read, synthesize, and evaluate information about a wide variety of topics from an array of sources and text types.

Fortunately, elementary students naturally gravitate to informational texts to learn about sports, animals, historical events, or scientific wonders. Many English language learners and struggling readers prefer and enjoy informational texts to fiction because it helps them understand the world around them (Vasquez, Hansen, and Smith 2013). Teachers observe many students consistently choose informational text over fiction as they enjoy



reading about “real” topics (Jobe and Dayton-Sakari 2002). Informational texts appeal to students’ interests in the world around them including animals, gadgets, inventions, nature, famous peoples’ lives, sports, and countless other topics. If we take advantage of children’s natural curiosity in the classrooms and couple that with some important strategy instruction and meaningful learning projects, we will have readers who become college- and career-ready as well as lifelong learners!

Classroom Connection

Primary Example: The Great Snake Debate

“Would a snake make a good pet? Why or why not?” asks Nim, a second grader, as she circulates the playground with her clipboard, surveying students from other classrooms. Each of the 31 students in Mr. Johnson’s second grade are busy interviewing at least two students from another grade level for their input on the great snake debate. The students are reading a variety of texts on snakes and compiling their information into a class book to share facts about snakes. They are also tallying and analyzing the results from their surveys for a “Snakes as Pets” debate to share over the morning announcements on the school’s speaker system at the end of the week. Mr. Johnson began the snake study by reading aloud to the class a page on the cobra from Seymour Simon’s *Animals Nobody Loves* (2001), and asked the students to think about reasons some people do not like snakes. During guided-reading, the class also read *Snakes Up Close* by Christopher Blazeman (2012) to begin gathering facts about snakes.

Students touched and observed snakes when the local wildlife museum curator visited with her traveling snake collection. Swapping book titles during reader's workshop is a popular activity. Mr. Johnson offers 25 different titles of books about snakes from the school and local library and invites students to read several articles on snakes that he downloaded from the Internet. The students dive into their important work as they choose their arguments for or against the idea of housing a pet snake.

Intermediate Example: Colonial America Unit

The fifth graders grimace and shake their heads in disbelief as they listen to their teacher read aloud from *The Dreadful Smelly Colonies: The Disgusting Details About Life in Colonial America* by Elizabeth Raum (2010). The chapter titled, "No Privacy in the Privy," grabs the students' attention as the author describes the outdoor toilet conditions of the early colonies. The students join in a chorus of reactions on the toilet conditions of the colonists that include: "Gross!" "Smelly!" Their teacher, Mrs. Ramos, focuses the students' attention back on the text and more broadly the theme of the unit, by repeatedly asking the central question, "How did the American colonies change during the two centuries following their founding?" When reading about the early cave-like homes of the colonists, students search the text for answers to the questions, "Why did the author describe the bugs skittering onto their beds through the roof?" and "Why did the author choose this word and not another?" lively discussion ensues as students read on, discuss, and explore the bleak living conditions in the colonies. In the afternoon during writer's workshop, the students write first-person diary entries of typical colonists and prepare to dramatize and videotape their entries. The unit on the colonies will continue as the students participate in the close reading of a wide variety of texts including primary sources and a reader's theater about Jamestown.

Why Informational Texts Are So Important Now

Our students live in a fast-paced digital world where they need to develop sophisticated strategies for reading informational texts. David P. Pearson tells us that it is competency with expository reading, not narrative, that matters most to our students' future employers (2004). In our adult lives much of our literacy depends on gleaning information for a variety of purposes from non-narrative texts. Besides reading for work in our everyday lives, we read recipes,



It is competency with expository reading, not narrative, that matters most to our students' future employers.

—David P. Pearson
2004

directions, news articles, maps, charts, product reviews, and promotional materials. It is estimated that 85–90 percent of our adult daily reading material is informational (Smith 2000). Around 95 percent of the sites online contain informational text (Kamil and Lane 1998).

Students must learn to read informational text so they will gain the critical-thinking and reading skills they need to be truly college- and career-ready (CCSS 2010). Reading informational text well *is* the key to success in school (Duke 2000). Informational text builds background knowledge and vocabulary as students learn about the world around them (Duke and Hays 1998; Duke, Bennett-Armistead 2004, and Roberts 2002, 2003).

According to research, informational text:

- **is the key to success in school** (Duke 2000; Chall 1983). By sixth grade most of what students are expected to read in school is informational text. Success with such text is critical for overall success in school. Students need to be introduced to informational text long before the intermediate grades so that students will become comfortable “reading to learn.” In order to prepare our students to be truly college- and career-ready in today’s world, students must leave our schools armed with tools to read and write and evaluate informational texts proficiently.
- **surrounds us as adult readers** (Venezsky 1982). Literacy tasks in the adult world focus on obtaining information from informational texts. Since 90 to 95 percent of our daily reading material is informational, it makes sense to prepare our students to become strong consumers of informational text (Smith 2000; Kamil and Lane 1998). From work-related articles, memos, and briefs, to following the news, or researching topics for career and home, we are bombarded daily with loads of informational text. With our fast-paced changing world, students need to be prepared to sift through vast amounts of texts for a variety of purposes.
- **is the favorite reading material for some children** (Caswell and Duke 1988). Fortunately, many children gravitate to the real-world topics found in informational texts. Boys especially often prefer reading about topics such as sports, historical events or people, and scientific topics like space travel or animals (Gurian, Smith, and Wilhelm 2001). Research suggests that for some girls and boys in the middle grades and older, informational text is preferred over fiction (Monson and Sebesta 1991). Other researchers have found that for many of our more gifted students, informational text is the genre of choice (Swanton 1984).



- **includes topics and questions of interest for children** (Schiefele, Drapp, and Winteler 1992; Guthrie et al. 1996). Children are naturally curious about the world around them and enjoy wondering about many nonfiction topics. If you've ever spent time with a four-year-old, you know the favorite question is, "Why?" Using informational texts to answer students' questions is a great way to build on their interests and to promote motivation for reading. Through the grades, informational text topics such as animals or the environment bring out our students' inquisitive natures.
- **builds background knowledge about the world and ultimately fosters comprehension** (Anderson and Guthrie 1999; Duke and Hays 1998; Wilson and Anderson 1986). Informational text plays a role in building background about the world around us. Strong readers pick up information about history, science, and a myriad of topics that prove useful as they read other texts including fiction. The knowledge gained from wide reading provides essential background information for our students. For example, when a student enjoys reading about World War II and then reads a novel, such as *Number the Stars* (Lowry 1989) which takes place during that era, the student uses the background information from the nonfiction text to aid his or her understanding of the novel. Primary students reading informational texts about caterpillars will comprehend Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1991) in a deeper way by connecting the nonfiction text information about caterpillars to the picture book. Reading informational text provides students with essential background information they need to comprehend a wide variety of texts.
- **builds vocabulary and literacy** (Dreher 2000). The very nature of informational text requires and prompts discussion of new concepts and challenging vocabulary. Researchers have found that teachers and parents alike pause more often when reading informational text with children. Adults stop to explain and discuss unknown words and challenging ideas, as well as text features unique to informational text (e.g., maps, sidebars, and charts). This means that students benefit from reading informational texts with adults by learning vocabulary as well as learning informational text reading skills such as using text features (Duke, Bennett-Armistead, and Roberts 2002).

Keep Track of Your Informational Reading

Try keeping track of your own informational text reading and the various purposes for your reading. For an entire day, I kept track of my informational text consumption, and documented reading the following variety of informational texts for a myriad of purposes including:

- books and Internet searches on dog training advice, *because* our little dog barks too much in the evenings
- books and Internet searches on Jacksonville, Florida, area hotels and maps *because* I was preparing a visit to an ailing relative and the area
- brochures and Internet searches on the universities and colleges my son is accepted to, *because* he is making a decision based on majors

Key Questions for Evaluating a Text

- Who wrote this? Is this a trusted source?
- What purpose or gain does this author have in writing the information and posting or publishing the work?
- How does the information in this text compare/contrast with other texts on the same topic?
- How would I rate the text? Explain.

Evaluating My Reading of the Text

- How closely did I read each piece of information? Did I reread? Why or why not?
- What is my purpose for reading this? How will I use the information gained?
- Was it too easy, just right, or too difficult for me to understand?
- How helpful was the text in helping me understand the content? Did I enjoy reading it? Why or why not?

- cookbooks, to find a healthy, easy crock-pot recipe, *because* I had no time to cook dinner on a busy work day
- the newspaper, *because* I want to know what is going on in the world and my local area
- the *Daily Beast* online news source, *because* I want to make sure I get all the important news of the day.

Share my list of daily informational text reading with students, and discuss unique and different purposes for reading each text. It is great to see the students perk up and enjoy hearing about the real-world reasons for reading informational text. Also explain the importance of evaluating the sources that one is reading. Students need to be able to read closely for a purpose, synthesize the information, and then evaluate the authenticity and value of the sources read.

Problems Students Encounter When Reading Informational Text

Reading informational text presents an enormous challenge for many students. The following are challenges students face when reading informational text:

- text complexity
- challenging content/ideas
- incomplete or limited background information/knowledge
- high academic vocabulary load
- text format, including structures and features
- determining importance/main ideas
- finding text-based evidence/drawing conclusions
- inferring

Informational text is loaded with facts on every page. Students are bombarded with text structures and features that fiction books may not have such as headings, tables, charts, graphs, maps, captions, and more. When asked to share “main ideas,” students are overwhelmed and throw their hands up in frustration as they admit they can’t separate the main ideas from details. “It all looks important!” they say. Students also struggle with reading informational texts due to the lack of background knowledge necessary to understand the text. Additionally, the vocabulary load that permeates informational texts presents serious challenges. According to 2009 NAEP results, American nine-year-olds are still more proficient at reading literary text than they are at reading informational text (Park 2010). Therefore, students need strategies for unlocking the meaning of informational texts that will arm them with the tools necessary to understand what they read.

All Students Need to Read Informational Texts

In the past there was a misconception that primary students were not “ready” for informational texts. Researchers suggest that young children with their natural curiosity about the world around them need exposure to informational text beginning in preschool or even earlier (Duke 2000). Perhaps you’ve seen firsthand how very young children do indeed have an appetite for informational texts. When my husband and I read to our three children (even as babies), they begged for nonfiction books about insects, gardens, stars, and transportation. My son’s books about tractors and trucks became worn and tattered from literally hundreds of rereadings.

When my neighbor’s little boy entered the first-grade classroom on the very first day of school, the teacher invited her students into the classroom library to select books for independent reading. Jason tugged on his teacher’s skirt and pleaded in a worried tone, *Mrs. Sanchez, where are the nonfiction books? Don’t you have any nonfiction books?* Of course

his teacher scrambled to the library and gathered up a variety of nonfiction to offer up the very next day. Today our classroom libraries have improved to include about one third informational texts, but we still need more if students are to reach 50 percent of their classroom reading time spent on such texts (Ness 2011).

In her landmark study, Nell Duke (2000) found that many primary students at that time were only exposed to 3.6 minutes per day of informational text. Since that time, our professional development efforts coupled with a positive response from publishers have helped schools fill their book rooms with inviting informational texts for grades K–6. Still, many schools need even more nonfiction texts, especially with the requirement of the Common Core State Standards to immerse students for 50 percent of their reading day in a variety of informational texts. Our students also need to be armed with strategies they can use to comprehend this wide variety of texts for different purposes. Just think how ready our intermediate students will be for more content-area reading when we begin teaching students from kindergarten to access information from a variety of nonfiction texts.

Three Major Shifts in the Common Core

The Common Core State Standards shifts require teachers to create meaningful opportunities for students to learn content through experiences with informational text.

1. Build knowledge through content-rich nonfiction.

Students need exposure to informational text that is interesting and has depth and strong text features. Informational texts encompass a broad assortment of genres that include biographies, autobiographies, essays, speeches, primary sources, directions, forms, and digital sources. Students will often read more than one text on a topic to gain content knowledge for their grade-level objectives, to be able to ask and answer questions during research, and to complete research necessary for hands-on projects. Therefore, students need explicit instruction in reading material strategies specifically designed for comprehending informational texts.

What this means for your classroom:

- Provide lots of different reading materials on the same topic, not just textbooks.
- Bring in a wide variety of resources including trade books, leveled texts, letters, maps, primary sources, and other rich reading to build content.
- Build text sets or collections of different texts for students to read and research.

2. Create opportunities for communication (reading, writing, speaking) based on evidence from the text.

When reading informational text, students need to first study the text at hand rather than moving too quickly to respond or make connections. By returning to the text first for answers to questions and evidence to support opinions and arguments, students build life-long behaviors that make them stronger readers. Yet our students also need opportunities to do something meaningful in the real-world with the information they've gained from texts. As they research, they will dive in deeper if they know what the end product involves. Students might do research to write a letter, make a brochure or presentation, or share what they've learned with a partner class across town or across the world. Research suggests that students develop their literacy skills more quickly when they need to use them for a purpose (Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Marineau 2007). Gathering evidence and arguments from the reading becomes central to communicating with others.

What this means for your classroom:

- Create opportunities for students to share what they have learned. Even just presenting the information to a buddy class or younger class gives students a real reason to learn the material. Posting photos and videos of projects online on the school or class website is another way for students to share what they've learned with others.
- Discuss television competition shows or courtroom programs, where judges must offer up evidence for their thinking. Evidence-based arguments permeate competition shows where contestants sing, dance, and cook their way to the top. The plethora of “expert judges” shares reasons and evidence for their scoring. When we relate our evidence-based instruction to these shows, students remember what it means to provide evidence for arguments.
- Post evidence-based language starters on charts to guide student discussions.

Evidence-Based Starters

- Because...
- For example...
- The author stated...
- According to the text...
- From the text I know that... because...
- A reason for... is found on page...
- The text says... on page...

Evidence-Based Instruction with the “Big Because”

In my various project schools around the country we emphasize the word “because.” I ask students to pound their fists on their hands like a judge’s gavel whenever they say “because” and then back it with evidence from the text. Any time students make a statement such as, “*I like this book,*” they need to back it up with a “because” statement. By adding the because statement to opinions and arguments and by featuring the



fist-pound gesture, students remember more often to provide reasons for their ideas and arguments. In Mr. Sim’s first-grade class during their partner discussions, they prompt one another’s thinking with the “because” hand signal. Recently, Juan commented that he thought Gila monsters are just as dangerous as rattlesnakes. His partner, Jenny, fist pounded and prompted him to add a “because.” Juan added proudly, “Because we read about it on page 26.” In Mrs. Purty’s sixth-grade class, the students take sides to an issue in history: “Was Moctezuma a hero or villain?” Students back each claim with a “because” fist and evidence for their opinion drawn from the texts they’ve read.

3. Conduct regular practice with complex text and vocabulary.

The more students read complex text the better they will get at it. Across the day, they need exposure to informational texts during interactive read alouds, reading block, content-area instruction, guided reading, and independent reading times. Explicit instruction in vocabulary as well as strategies for figuring out vocabulary during reading provide foundations for the vocabulary exposure students need to internalize new words and relate it to content (Graves 2006; Graves and Watts-Taffe 2002).

What this means for your classroom:

- Provide opportunities throughout the day, not just during reading or content-area instruction, for students to read informational text. The classroom library should hold 50 percent informational texts to provide ample interesting practice for students.
- Conduct teacher demonstrations on “close reading” strategies such as rereading, marking text, and discussing complex texts and deeper meanings with others.
- Use word walls, instructional games, and activities to provide students with opportunities to practice academic vocabulary.

Classroom Connection

Primary Example

Third graders in a Florida school read and study two different books on desert habitats as well as an article from an Internet site. The class builds a chart comparing the information collected from each of the texts. Then, classes videoconference so that the students in Florida can interview students in Arizona about their local desert habitat. Both groups share photos, reports, and interview questions, and then become pen pals to extend the learning all year long.

Intermediate Example

Sixth graders in California study Rome using a variety of rich informational texts along with their district-adopted history text. They also study travel guides and brochures to compare and contrast how information on Rome is presented to tourists. The students create both paper and online brochures for a local travel agency that puts together trips to Rome for senior citizens. A group of senior citizens communicates with the students from Rome on the class blog.

Everyday Examples of Text Complexity

Competent readers consume a wide variety of informational texts from a range of reading levels (Smith 2000). For our students to be college- and career-ready we need to expose them to increasingly difficult informational texts. To introduce the concept of text complexity, let's consider how good readers use informal text complexity criteria such as concept load, length of the text, ease of readability, amount of unfamiliar vocabulary, number and appeal of visual supports, or size of font to select their own texts. Whether you are reading a voter information ballot, a chapter for a test in your graduate-level educational psychology course, or online articles about a particular medical condition, you are navigating your way through complex text.

"The book to read is not the one that thinks for you, but the one that makes you think."
—James McCosh (1901)

"How is reading complex text like lifting weights? Just as it's impossible to build muscle without weight or resistance, it's impossible to build robust reading skills without reading challenging text."
—Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey (2012, 68)

Another example where text complexity comes into play is in recreational reading. Have you ever selected the wrong book for a weekend trip or to take on summer vacation? For example, you decide to finally catch up on your classics and read *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy on a beach vacation. Once you arrive to your sandy destination, the lapping waves, balmy air, and sun's luscious warm rays cast a spell, stealing your concentration. You soon realize the heavy text in your beach bag doesn't fit your reading mood after all. Instead, you find yourself craving a juicy romance or best-selling mystery page-turner. You decide to abandon the more challenging complex classic and pick up a quick, easier read. However, the complicated camera text from your photography course that you also tossed in your tote turns out to be handy. This time, your purpose for reading trumps text difficulty and drives your need to plow through the technical manual so you can capture some gorgeous beach sunsets on camera.

When you flip through texts in a bookstore or library, or shop for eBooks online, you most likely size up texts using quantitative measures such as the length of the book or the print font size or number of illustrations. You might also use your qualitative tools by checking out the table of contents, back cover, and introduction, as well as sampling a page of text to sample the author's style and voice. Your own background knowledge, interest in the topic, and reason or purpose for reading the text also drives motivation to select the text. Recently, I read a review in a women's magazine promoting a new cookbook written by Jerry Seinfeld's wife called *The Can't Cookbook: 100+ Recipes for the Absolutely Terrified* (Atria 2013). Since I am not a great cook, this title caught my eye. I hunted around online until I found a few reviews and a way to peek inside at the text at some of the pages. My criteria for a cookbook includes recipes with just a few ingredients, visual supports, and vocabulary I understand or at least an explanation of the specialized cooking words such as "blanch." I decided that the humor infused in this book would help keep me interested. I also read an interview with the author who I thought might also be a timid cook. Instead, I learned that her non-cooking buddies relied on her for constant cooking advice, which prompted writing a text for people like me, the not-so-confident-in-the-kitchen crowd! The book passed muster with my cookbook text complexity criteria and moved onto my holiday wish list.

Text Complexity is Critical to the Common Core State Standards

The idea of text complexity lies at the center of the Common Core State Standards. The standards call for students to "read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging, literary and informational texts" (2010, 10). What exactly do we mean by "complex texts"? The dictionary definition defines the adjective *complex* as "characterized by a very complicated or involved arrangement of parts," and "so complicated or intricate as to be hard to understand or deal with." What exactly makes a text challenging to understand?

Readers may find a text difficult due to challenging vocabulary, or a topic they lack sufficient background to understand, or to complex sentence structure that demands multiple readings to grasp the meaning.

Three tools that the CCSS suggests using together to measure text complexity include (NGA and CCSO 2010):

- **Quantitative measures:** technical measures of word length, word frequency, and text cohesion often measured by software.
- **Qualitative measures:** levels of meaning based on text structure and features, and knowledge demand best measured by a human.
- **Reader and task:** the background of the reader along with his or her interests and motivation and the complexity of the task best measured by professional teacher judgment.

Quantitative Measures

Quantitative measures for determining text complexity can be calculated manually or by computers and include measuring word length, word frequency, and text cohesion. Quantitative measures are useful because they identify which grade-level band or reading level a text falls into. Many textbook publishers today provide the “level” of their texts by indicating the grade-level range and number for one or more of the most commonly used quantitative readability tools.

Quantitative measures are calculated by using readability formulas. These formulas identify how complex a text is by assigning a numerical rating to the text. Readability formulas may be used manually and some may be computer-generated by analyzing all of or a selection of a text.

There are many readability formulas and tools to assist with analyzing quantitative measures of text complexity, including the following:

- Flesch-Kincaid (1975) calculates text difficulty using sentence length and number of syllables in words.
- Dale-Chall Readability Formula (1948) measures sentence length and percentage of difficult words (words that are not found on the familiar word list).
- Lexile® Framework for Reading (2014) calculates sentence and word length as well as word frequency.

Using quantitative information about text levels helps us match students to texts that are appropriate for them to read. When students are placed in the appropriate level, they practice reading and develop decoding, fluency, and vocabulary (Allington and Gabriel 2012). Students also need to stretch their reading ability by reading complex texts with