

Welcome to the English Language Arts Text Complexity module presented by the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC). This module will review how to increase text complexity for students with intellectual disabilities.



This printable PDF version of a NCSC module has been provided for your convenience. The PDF version of the module will be very similar to the online module, with a few revisions to eliminate features that are only necessary in the online learning environment. Because the PDF presentations are the content of the online courses and retain the formatting and some of the features of the modules, we have included the following description. The NCSC professional development courses each consist of one or more modules. To help the learner navigate in the courses, the modules have a uniform design and format. All learning modules follow four themes: plot the course, explore the terrain, check the map, and expand your horizons. In plot the course learners discover what is covered in the module, including their learning objectives and other steps they will follow while viewing the module. In explore the terrain, the learner will engage with the content and learn about the topic covered in the module. In check the map the learner has the opportunity to review and self-assess their understanding. Some of the PDF presentations (printable versions of the modules) will not contain Check the Map sections as there are no self-assessments in the printable PDFs. Finally, expand your horizons offers ways in which the learner can explore the content further, or apply what they have learned. Theme Indicators appear on most slides to tell the user what type of content is contained in the slide.

## MODULE GOALS



Variables to consider regarding student interaction with text

- Qualitative
- Quantitative
- Reader and task considerations

Approach to Text Complexity for our students

- When to reduce complexity
- Guidelines to adapt text



This module will help you understand text complexity and how it relates to reading instruction for students with intellectual disabilities. We will review the text complexity model of the CCSS and review the ways in which we can reduce barriers and/or adapt text so that students have access to grade-level content.

## RELATED CONCEPTS



Here are some concepts that will be discussed in this module. If you would like background on these concepts, [click here](#).

- Text Complexity
  - Qualitative
  - Quantitative
- Adapted text



This module will review the text complexity model in the CCSS document. There are several terms that special education teachers are not familiar with in the context of reading, such as qualitative and quantitative dimensions. We'll also review the ways in which we can reduce complexity and/or adapt text so that students have access to grade level content.



## RELATED CONCEPTS – TEXT COMPLEXITY QUALITATIVE, QUANTITATIVE, READER



3 key components of text complexity:

**Qualitative** - refers to levels of meaning or purpose; structure, language conventionality and clarity

**Quantitative** - refers to those aspects of text complexity

**Reader considerations** - motivation, knowledge and experiences




The Common Core State Standards use a 3-part model to determine text complexity. Each component is equal in importance to the others. The model is a way to measure or examine text in a standardized way by looking at the levels of meaning, or qualitative, the length of words and sentences, or quantitative, and the readers' motivation, background knowledge and experience. Let's define these a little further:

**Qualitative** - refers to levels of meaning or purpose; structure; language conventionality and clarity; and knowledge demands.


**Quantitative** - refers to those aspects of text complexity, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult to evaluate efficiently.

**Reader and task considerations** - variables specific to a particular reader, such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences. This is important to students with disabilities. Although students may be missing experiences, they should not be held back from grade-level content. Background knowledge woven into new content instruction is very much a part of the daily lessons.

## RELATED CONCEPTS – ADAPTED TEXT



- Shorten text
- Rewrite text as a summary
- Reduce lexile level
- Augment with picture, objects, repeated story line



When adapting text: Retain enough of the original text characteristics so students can develop these skills. There are several strategies that can be individualized for students.

**Shortened text** – reducing the amount of text but retaining the essence of the passage. If the student is working on characterization or setting, ensure that the remaining text includes enough details for the student to understand the concepts.

**Rewrite text as a summary** – A summary of text is very different than shortening text. A summary is a brief statement that presents the main points in a concise form. It would not have the details needed for literary skill instruction.

**Reduce lexile level** – The lexile measure represents the student’s level on a developmental scale of reading ability (using the Lexile Scale). Reducing the lexile level of a passage might assist students who are introduced to grade-level content. The lexile level is different than grade equivalence, which represents a student’s ability level in comparison to other students in their age-appropriate grade.

Augment with pictures, objects, or repeated story line to support students as they access grade-level content. The student's communication system would help determine the type of augmentation needed for a passage or text.



Let's look at the components of text complexity and apply this information to reading instruction.

**A Three-Part Model for Measuring Text Complexity**  
 As signaled by the graphic at right, the Standards' model of text complexity consists of three equally important parts.

(1) **Qualitative dimensions of text complexity.** In the Standards, *qualitative dimensions* and *qualitative factors* refer to those aspects of text complexity best measured or only measurable by an attentive human reader, such as levels of meaning or purpose; structure; language conventionality and clarity; and knowledge demands.

(2) **Quantitative dimensions of text complexity.** The terms *quantitative dimensions* and *quantitative factors* refer to those aspects of text complexity, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult if not impossible for a human reader to evaluate efficiently, especially in long texts, and are thus today typically measured by computer software.

(3) **Reader and task considerations.** While the prior two elements of the model focus on the inherent complexity of text, variables specific to particular readers (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to particular tasks (such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed) must also be considered when determining whether a text is appropriate for a given student. Such assessments are best made by teachers employing their professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject.

**Source: Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy**

Figure 1: The Standards' Model of Text Complexity

How do we measure how complex a piece of text is? How do we determine if a student is ready for more complex text, and when do we start to increase text complexity? Teachers ask these questions or their school has policies in place by grade level and not by individual student. Students with intellectual disabilities need these same questions asked about their reading instruction, but special education teachers are new to examining text. There are many ways to measure the dimensions of text complexity. The Common Core State Standards provide 3 key areas to consider: qualitative, quantitative, and reader considerations.

Qualitative refers to levels of meaning or purpose; structure; language conventionality and clarity; and knowledge demands.

Quantitative refers to those aspects of text complexity, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult for a human reader to evaluate efficiently.

Reader considerations are variables specific to a particular reader, such as motivation, knowledge and experiences. Students who are just beginning content instruction may have little to no background knowledge in even the most basic information.

All 3 of these components are important parts.

The slide features a light blue background with a faint image of a landscape. In the top right corner, there is a circular icon containing a magnifying glass over a globe. The title 'QUALITATIVE DIMENSIONS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY' is written in bold blue text. Below the title is a white rectangular box containing a bulleted list of four items. At the bottom left of the slide is the NCSC logo, which consists of three colored shapes (blue, green, orange) forming a stylized 'N' followed by the letters 'ncsc' in blue.

## QUALITATIVE DIMENSIONS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY

- Text structure
- Level of inference, meaning or purpose
- Phrasing and iconicity of the comprehension questions
- Vocabulary sophistication

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**Let's start with defining qualitative dimensions of text complexity by looking at 4 components:**

- 1. Text structure** represents internal organization appropriate for purpose and genre; chronology, question and answer, problem/solution, compare/contrast, cause/effect that would make sense by grade level.
- 2. Level of inference, meaning or purpose** in literary texts - a single level of meaning tends to be easier to read than text with multiple levels of meaning. In informational texts, an explicitly stated purpose is generally easier to comprehend than texts with an implicit, hidden, or obscure purpose.
- 3. Phrasing and iconicity of the comprehension questions** is the extent to which the words/phrasing of the comprehension questions require vocabulary that is phrased exactly as the text.
- 4. Vocabulary sophistication** (such as general academic and domain-specific vocabulary) and repetition.



## OTHER QUALITATIVE FACTORS TO CONSIDER



### Other Factors that Influence Increasing Text Complexity:

- ✓ **Genre and the Characteristic Features of the each type of text**
- ✓ **Background Knowledge and/or Degree of Familiarity with Content needed by the reader**
- ✓ **Level of Reasoning Required** (e.g., sophistication of themes and ideas presented)
- ✓ **Format and Layout**, including how text is organized/layout, size and location of print, graphics, and other book/print features
- ✓ **Length of Text**



There are other factors that influence increasing text complexity. A few of these are:

- ✓ **Genre and the Characteristic Features of the each type of text**
- ✓ **Background Knowledge and/or Degree of Familiarity with Content needed by the reader**
- ✓ **Level of Reasoning Required** (e.g., sophistication of themes and ideas presented)
- ✓ **Format and Layout**, including how text is organized/layout, size and location of print, graphics, and other book/print features
- ✓ **Length of Text**

**QUANTITATIVE DIMENSIONS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY**

- Reading Level
- Text layout

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**Next are the quantitative dimensions of text complexity. This includes reading level and text layout.**

- 1. Reading Level** is the length of passage, word count, word frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, and this can be measured by a variety of computer programs. This information provides a lexile level.
- 2. Text layout** features are text boxes, illustrations, and format (for instance, two columns or continuous text).

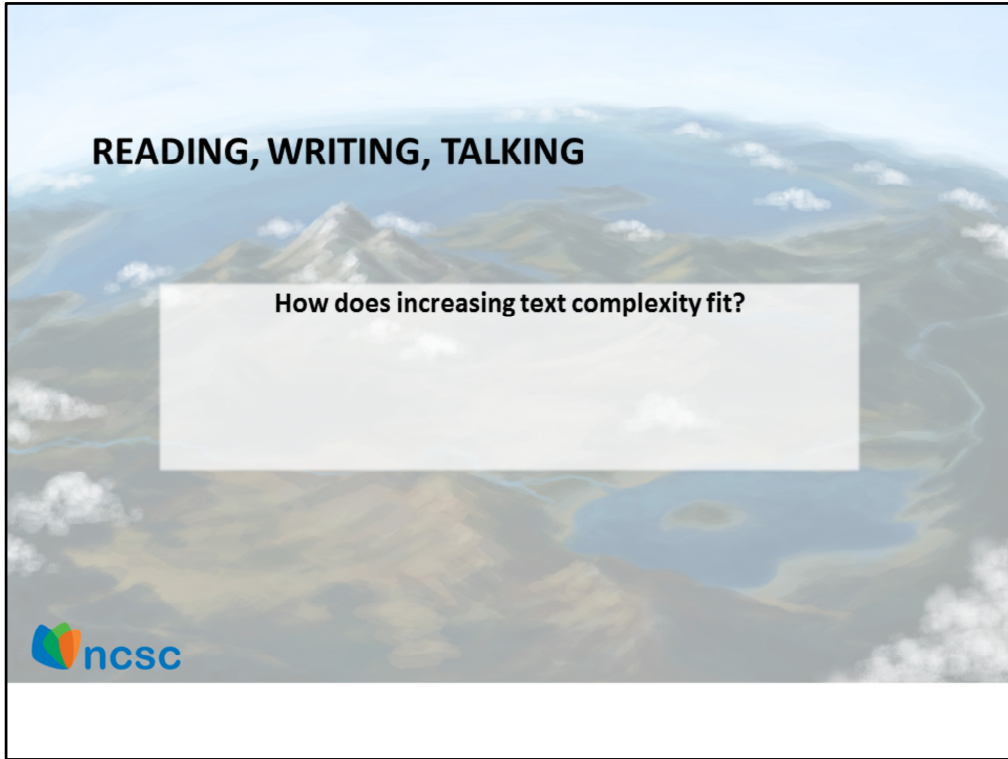
**READER AND TASK CONSIDERATIONS**  
**DIMENSIONS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY**

1. Models and supports
2. Knowledge demands, motivation, experiences

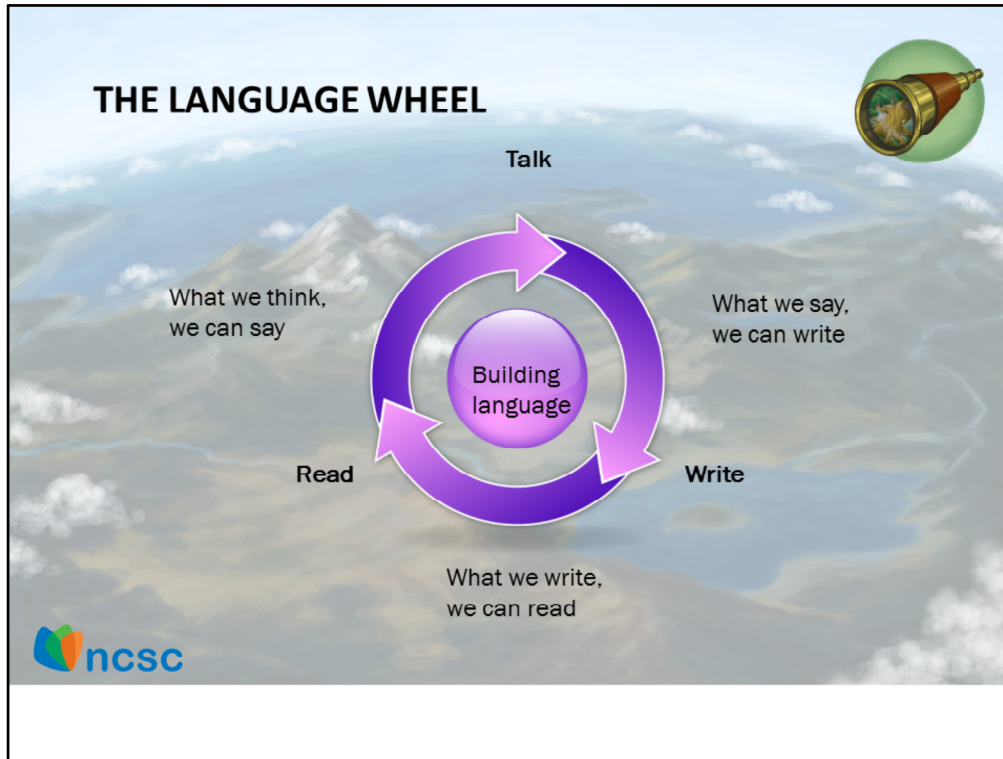


**Finally, and very important for our students, are reader and task considerations. This includes:**

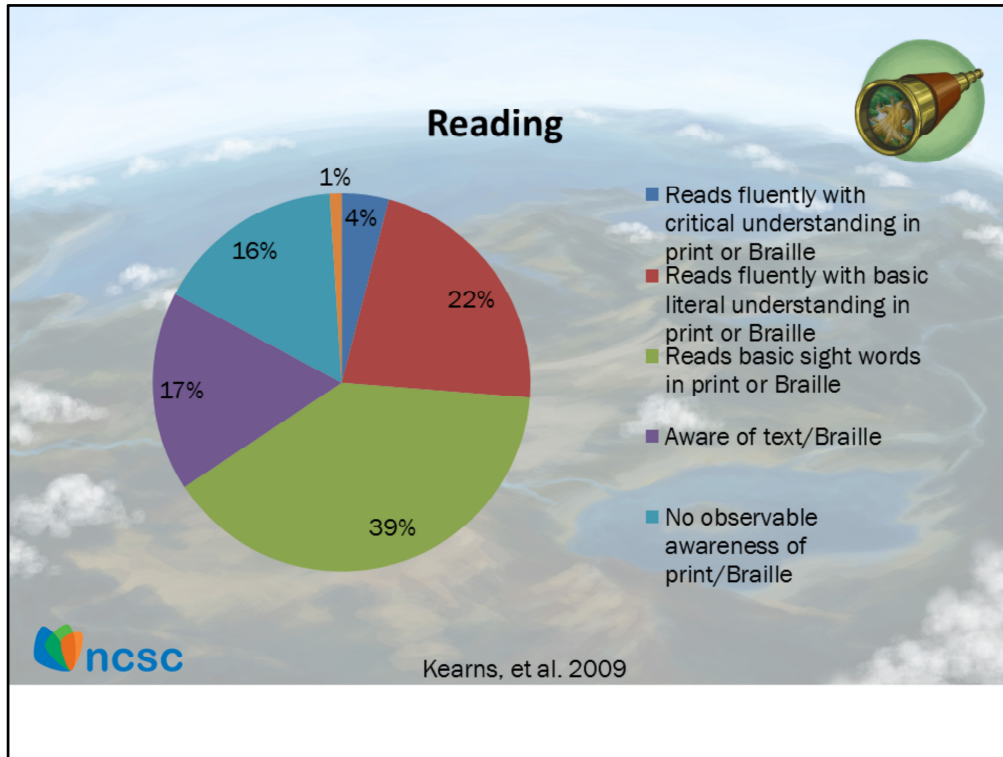
1. **Models and supports** – Note that informational text for young students relies heavily on graphics to convey meaning.
2. **Knowledge demands, motivation, and experiences**, which is the extent of readers' life experiences and the depth of their cultural/literary and content/discipline knowledge, as well as what motivates them to engage in tasks related to text.



How does increasing text complexity fit into daily instruction?



We've used The Language Wheel model, which was included in Susan Kempton's book **Let's Find Out!** in several modules. Although her book is about young children needing to broaden their language, experiences, and background knowledge, the basis of this model holds true for Students With Disabilities. Communication instruction, language development, and reading and writing should all be inherently intertwined in daily instruction. Kempton suggests recording cooperative dialogue and thinking through pictures and words, and constructing meaning of words by looking at pictures and words together. Specifically-selected reading material and a variety of related objects and materials that can be touched and moved around add to the language experience of content. The material used depends on where you start instruction for each student, but it is always based on grade-level content. So, let's begin by understanding our student's current skills and how to increase text complexity.



First, we need to put text complexity within the context of the students we teach. Here's information gathered across many states by Kearns, Thurlow and Towles-Reeves (2009) using the Learner Characteristics Inventory.

The LCI delineates five reading categories for students who participate in the AA-AAS. We found a pattern across all 18 NCSC partner states: approximately 65% of students can read written text or Braille; 39% of students read basic sight words, simple sentences, directions, bullets, and/or lists in print or Braille; 22% of students can read fluently with basic, literal understanding; and 4% of students across all NCSC partner states can read fluently with critical understanding in print or Braille. Sixteen percent of students have no observable awareness of print or Braille. Where would your students fall and where would you start reading, writing and discussion with your students?



## QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS



How do we know what the difficulty level of a particular text should be?

How do we take into consideration how students represent knowledge and develop competency in reading?



Taking the LCI data and personalizing it your students, here are 2 questions to consider:

1. How do we know what the difficulty level of a particular text should be when we use it with grade-specific standards that require increasing sophistication in student's reading comprehension ability? One way is to become familiar with the grade-level text used in your school's general education classrooms. Talk with the teacher to see what she emphasizes in her review. As you adapt text, consider the big ideas that need to come from the text.
2. How do we take into consideration how students represent knowledge and develop competency in reading? With all the changes to curriculum in the last 5 years for our students, there are still large holes in their background knowledge. Many lessons need mini "catch up" lessons embedded within them. For example, you may be reading a text on alligators in science but need to show a map of where you might find them in the United States and pictures of what they look like.

## INCREASING TEXT COMPLEXITY



Teaching literacy K- 1<sup>st</sup> grade

- Greater text complexity is not what the students read but what the teacher reads to them.

Teaching literacy in grades 2 -12

- Instruction should have adequate scaffolding for reading complex text
- Students should be involved in reading complex text






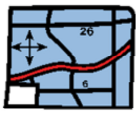
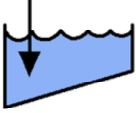
Different grade levels have different considerations:

First when teaching literacy in Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade - greater text complexity is not what the students read but what the teacher reads to them.


When teaching literacy in grades 2 through 12 - Instruction should have adequate scaffolding for reading complex text and students should be involved in reading complex text.

## READ ALOUD TEXT COMPLEXITY



<p>long distance</p> 	<p>built land</p> 
<p>helps travel</p> 	<p>deep</p> 

Short sections from "Life on the Mississippi" by Mark Twain prerecorded on the iPad  
All symbols – with permission from Mayer-Johnson Dynavox



In order to enhance our student's background knowledge of text, we read aloud to them; specific terms may be pulled out for further instruction. This is one example of several words from Tom Sawyer that were put in the student's communication system so that he could refer back to the recorded definition. For an example of an adapted chapter of Tom Sawyer, go to the NCSC Wiki, UDL Unit for Middle school.

## USE OF ADAPTED TEXT TO REDUCE COMPLEXITY



It is important to retain original text characteristics so students can develop these skills.

One guiding principle in adapting text should be to *make no more differences than necessary* for the student to work with the text.

### Ways to adapt text:

- Shorten text
- Rewrite text as a summary
- Reduce lexile level
- Augment with picture, objects, repeated story line

Hudson, Browder (2012)



There are several types of adaptations suggested. The first is to *shorten the text*. For some printed material, abbreviating the content is the only adaptation needed. For example, a long narrative poem might be taught using selected segments, or a children's picture book might be shortened using key pages or paragraphs. One guiding principle in adapting text should be to make no more differences than necessary for the student to work within the text.

A second potential adaptation is to *rewrite the text as a summary*. This summary may also be developed at a *reduced lexile level*. The summary can vary in complexity depending on the grade band and original text. Chapter books (e.g., novels) can be summarized in chapters or sets of chapters. Some books will not require any changes to the text itself (e.g., some K-1 story books), but may need some augmentations of the text.

Augmentations of the text may include adding pictures, repetition of the main idea, and even objects for building comprehension. *Pictures* may include adding simple illustrations to adaptations of chapter books or even picture symbols over the lines of text. Pictures should be used with caution for students learning to read independently as they may focus on the picture instead of the words. In contrast, for students relying on a partner to read the text aloud, pictures may help the student track the text and build comprehension.

Another way to augment the text is to use *a repeated story line*. Repeated story lines are often used in preschool picture books to help young students build understanding. The same method can be made age appropriate by using the main idea of the story or chapter. For example, in the first chapter of ***Call of the Wild***, the repeated line might be “Buck loved his home.” By reading this line at the end of each page, the student uses the repetition to build understanding.

A final suggestion for augmentation is to use actual objects affixed to the pages of the book. This can be beneficial for some students with visual impairments or who are just learning to interact with text. For example, in a story about a baseball team, a small ball might be affixed to the page where the topic is first introduced. When the story describes getting to first base, a small sandbag base might be used.

For students with the most severe disabilities who have few to no responses to the read aloud, augmentations may include using the student’s name for the main character or adding additional tactile experiences related to the story to scaffold understanding.

## GUIDELINES ACROSS GRADE BANDS



- ✓ Use original grade-level text when possible and adaptations only if needed
- ✓ Use stories and picture books, as appropriate, when recommended for students' grade band.
- ✓ Simplify text by omitting pages and/or sentences.
- ✓ Add actual objects to pages as noun referents for students first learning text has meaning.
- ✓ Add repeated story lines to emphasize main idea/theme of text

Hudson, Browder (2012)



Summarizing text isn't just for stories or literature. This can be done for all types of genres. Summaries can be written to meet the individual needs of students using Lexile levels. Text may need to be summarized for beginning readers who are reading the text themselves and for nonreaders who are listening to the text.

Add definitions and explanations to text to help students understand unfamiliar words and increasingly figurative language.

Use original poems. If poems are long, prioritize stanzas and delete stanzas to shorten.

Maintain the organization of the original text (e.g., chapters, stanzas, scenes from a play). The structure of informational text is important. For example, the main idea is usually stated in the first sentence of the paragraph. Each paragraph in informational text gives more information about the main idea. A graphic organizer can help students organize the information in the text.

Pair keywords with picture symbols when needed.

Make structure of text obvious (e.g., main idea in the first sentence).




Use signal words like first, next, and last.

Use signal words for comparing two or more things (e.g., although, but, either...or, however) in the text.

Use graphic organizers to organize the sequence of events (e.g., first, next, last); identify story elements (e.g., characters, plot, setting, theme); and to compare two or more things (e.g., Venn diagram, T-chart).

## CHECK FOR LEARNING




Variables to consider regarding student interaction with text

- Qualitative
- Quantitative
- Reader and Task Considerations

Approach to Text Complexity

- When to reduce complexity
- Guidelines to adapt text



Remember our goals for this module...We reviewed the text complexity model in the CCSS document and the ways in which we can reduce complexity and/or adapt text so that students have access to grade level content. When providing access to text for students, the following considerations should be made:

Variables to consider regarding student interaction with text

Qualitative

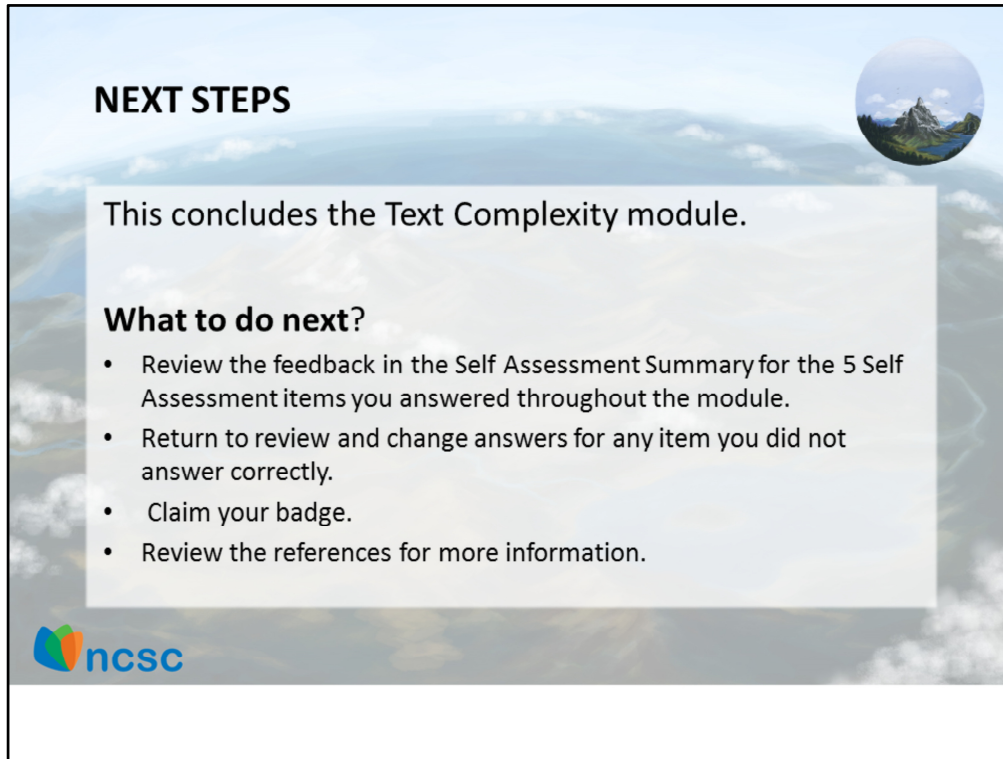
Quantitative

Reader and Task Considerations

Approach to Text Complexity

When to reduce complexity

Guidelines to adapt text




## NEXT STEPS

This concludes the Text Complexity module.

### What to do next?

- Review the feedback in the Self Assessment Summary for the 5 Self Assessment items you answered throughout the module.
- Return to review and change answers for any item you did not answer correctly.
- Claim your badge.
- Review the references for more information.



This concludes the NCSC English Language Arts: Text Complexity module. At this point, you should have answered five self-assessment items. Take time to read the feedback on the Self Assessment Summary slide. If you missed any of the self assessment items throughout the module, return to review the content using the buttons beside the item. You are able then to change your answers to the self assessment items based on the content you reviewed.

When you have achieved 80% or higher you will be able to claim your badge.

Look over the references and if you want further information on any of the concepts you have covered, find the original reference.

Claim your badge using the link under the badge image at the end of the module.

## REFERENCES

Hess, K., & Biggam, S. (2004). A discussion of "increasing text complexity" Grades K-HS. Published by NH, RI, and VT Departments of Education as part of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) Grade Level Expectations. For Reading. (on line). [www.nciea.org](http://www.nciea.org).

Hudson, M. E., & Browder, D. M. (2012). *Guidelines for Adapted Grade Level Text for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities*. University of North Carolina at Charlotte for the NCSC Project which is funded by Department of Education (PR/Award #: H373X100002, Project Officer, Susan.Weigert@Ed.gov)

Kempton, S. P. (2014) *Let's Find Out. Building Content Knowledge with Young Children*. Stenhouse Books, Portland, ME.

Kearns J., Thurlow M., Towles-Reeves, E. (2009, April). [\*Who are the Students in Alternate and Modified Achievement Standards\*](#). Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego. (PDF : 2444 Kb)



Please refer to the resources listed here for further information.