

# Because All Books Count

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Various forms of educational reform including Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are hot topics of discussion among educators across the United States. Scholars and teachers struggle with the uncertainty and unfairness of the evolving changes to core curriculum and methods of assessment (i.e., standardized testing). While the conversations about CCSS and standardized testing are loud, and seem to be falling on deaf ears, I want to speak out about something that teachers can control: text complexity and reading levels (Lexile).

Common Sense Media (2014) recently released a report claiming that students are no longer spending as much time reading for pleasure as they did ten years ago. The study reports that only 45% of 17 year olds say they read for pleasure once or twice a year. This may be attributed to Common Core literacy initiatives across the content areas, the inclusion of informational texts, and the ever-changing standardized tests that students must take to move ahead (Gallagher, 2009). Because teachers are including required reading of informational texts and teaching to a test, reading has lost its ability to be fun and has become something that is tedious and obligatory. The vast amount of out-of-school distractions such as reality TV and social media may also be contributing to this trend. While these factors may play a role in the declining numbers, I argue that with the acceptance of the Common Core State Standards in 2012, students have lost interest in reading for pleasure because teachers (English or otherwise) are requiring students to read books (both fiction and non-fiction) from prescribed lists that match text complexity and individual reading levels. Students are not given choice by what interests them in reading, but are required to read books that match or exceed their Lexile scores.

My concern is that not enough teachers, parents, and students understand what the Lexile Reading test measures. Two things are unclear for most: how the test determines complexity and how the student's reading level is measured. When determining the complexity (or Lexile level) of a text, usually only one paragraph of the entire text is used for measurement. The longer the sentence with the most syllables per word, the more complex a text; thus, texts with long sentences receive higher Lexile reading scores. When determining a student's Lexile level, a computer-based reading test is

given. The Scholastic Reading Aptitude (Lexile) test is a series of paragraphs with a multiple-choice question accompanying each passage measuring word familiarity and sentence length. The more questions the student gets correct, the longer the sentences become until the student reaches his/her reading peak at a 75% accuracy rate. Period. The Lexile level is solely based on sentence length both for a text and for a student's reading skill. Content knowledge and critical thought processes are not considered when determining the text's readability or a student's Lexile score.

In the past, there has been an accepted table for where each grade level should be reading based on Lexile scores. Recently, the CCSS has moved those numbers around maintaining increasing rigor in the expectations of students' reading abilities, requiring students to be reading at a higher score than in previous years. For example, in 2009, a 900 Lexile score meant that a student was reading between a sixth to eighth grade level. After the approval of CCSS in 2012, a 900 score can be found in the range from fourth through fifth grades. In 2009, a proficient high school graduate would read in the range of 1150, but today the proficient 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade reader averages around a score of 1250.

Within a short time, thousands of books across the United States were measured for their Lexile level and that score was taped in books by media specialists, educators, or the publishing companies in response to CCSS. As a result, English teachers have started requiring students to read books written specifically on their Lexile levels. Because of the pressure and knowledge of the student's Lexile score and promises from the Department of Education that standardized testing is going to test at more rigorous reading levels, this may sound like a fair expectation. If a student reads at a 900 Lexile level, he/she should be reading books written on this level. Sadly, it is not that simple. While it is appropriate for teachers to expect their students to be challenged with developmentally appropriate texts, students should also have the opportunity for text choices based on maturity and interests. Research has shown that "students should have an array of reading experiences in the same way that a long-distance runner has a varied training schedule that intersperses different distances and speeds" (Shanahan, 2012, p. 15). Students' reading experiences should be varied and include choice and not be solely based on his/her Lexile level.

It should also be noted that authors do not pay attention to Lexile levels

when they are writing best sellers. And, as writing students, many times we are taught that one word is better than two. In theory, writers are taught to get to the point; a 15-word sentence is too long in many cases and can be reduced to a more reader-friendly length. Popular reading titles are often written on 700-800 reading levels: *Ashfall*, *Maniac Magee*, *Divergent*, and *The Fault in our Stars*. Classics such as *A Farewell to Arms* and *Brave New World* are also written at the 700 reading level. According to CCSS, all of these books are at the reading complexity level of elementary school readers. Ellie Wiesel's graphic memoir of the Holocaust, *Night*, is written at a 500 Lexile level, or for an average second grade reader. If only based on a book's Lexile readability, finding a current best selling book written for eleventh and twelfth grade reading proficiency can be very difficult. On the other hand, books that are written at higher Lexile scores may not be considered appropriate for higher level readers. For example, Lemony Snicket often writes at a 1200 Lexile level, but the content of his stories are considered for the maturity of elementary grade students, not high school seniors. As one can see, requiring students to read on reading level is not an easy answer to meet the needs of student readers.

When a teacher requires a student in seventh grade, who scores a 1200 Lexile, to read at that level or higher, the student is forced to read books that he/she may not be interested in because there are so few books written for his/her age or maturity level within the 1200 Lexile level. Parents across the country are looking for books that fit their children's reading score, not necessarily their interests. Best-selling authors are finding that students are not "allowed" to read their books because the reading level is too low, but the themes and content are written to match more mature readers. The mix of Lexile levels, Common Core expectations, and teachers not understanding just what the Lexile actually measures is creating a nightmare for young readers. There is a generation of readers being created who are looking for a number on a book, rather than looking for something that will capture their ideas, imaginations, and feelings. This leads to students reading books that they may not be interested in to meet the requirements of a course

Struggling readers *and* advanced readers need to fall in love with reading before we require students to read books based on a number. I recently read a blog post written by Jen Vincent (April 23, 2014) that stuck with me. Vincent blogs that parents and teachers should accept all books children and young adults are interested in as important to cultivate a love of

reading. “All books are worthy of being read. Just let kids read” (Vincent, 2014) are two powerful mantras that every educator and parent needs to put into practice. Educators, scholars, and politicians who write reforms need to understand that all books count, not just books that match a Lexile score. If we want students to read for pleasure, we have to let them choose books that they want to read without the boundaries of Lexile scores. In order to create life-long readers, students need varied and interesting texts, not just required reading that matches a Lexile score (Gallagher, 2009). There is a strong connection between readers who read for pleasure and their reading achievement. Gallagher (2009) also reminds his readers that reading for pleasure “builds valuable knowledge capital that will help them in the future” (p. 117). Reading for pleasure isn’t just fun. It also has the ability to help students by improving their reading; thus, aiding students in test preparation, and preparing them for college and careers.

If teachers were required to read based on their own Lexile levels, they might have missed out on a lawyer walking out of a courtroom a victor after getting a losing verdict (*To Kill A Mockingbird*, Lexile 870), or a young woman who defeats a corrupt governing body through wit, passion, and talent (*Hunger Games*, Lexile 810), or a boy who gets to see that apples are red (*The Giver*, Lexile 760). As educators who may have little power over prescribed standardized tests and state and federal educational mandates, we do have power in supporting the development of a passionate, life-long reader. Now is the time to start talking about reading for pleasure based on interest levels, and stop requiring reading based on Lexile scores.

## References

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