



# Blog

## Slaying Some Mythical Common Core Claims: Complex Text

January 08, 2015 by **Timothy Shanahan**

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In the past few weeks, I've spoken to legislators, parents, teachers, and newspaper and radio reporters and they have asked lots of questions and vented a lot of frustration about the Common Core State Standards. Unfortunately, so many myths have sprung up around Common Core that the comments I hear are often based on false premises. Misinformation is rife in the land. In this series I'll try to slay some of these myths, both to reassure educators about the standards' value and to focus the arguments so those who oppose the Common Core will have to explain which of the standards we shouldn't teach.

### **Myth: CCSS requires teachers to frustrate kids.**

As with most myths, this one has grown around a grain of truth. The new education standards are definitely more rigorous than those of the past, and they will challenge many students. Nevertheless, everyone knows it's not nice to frustrate children, and the Common Core isn't aimed at frustrating kids. Really it's not.

I'm not talking about the kind of mild anxiety or tension that's often found to facilitate learning (e.g., Yerkes-Dodson law), but genuine frustration here. Look at the synonyms for frustration: aggravation, irritation, exasperation, disturbance, annoyance, vexation, bother. That can't be good for learning, and anything that would intentionally cause those feelings in a child just sounds mean. No teachers or parents in their right minds would buy into that.

The confusion here has more to do with the impenetrability of educational jargon rather than any mean-spiritedness on the part of the Common Core devotees. In the field of reading education, we have long used the word "frustration" in reference to students' struggle to read texts in which they recognized fewer than 92% (or thereabouts) of the words and had poor comprehension.

The term was used because fourth-grade students in one study seemed to exhibit signs of psychological tension when reading texts that challenging. Though the study didn't measure learning, it was assumed that students frustrated to that degree probably wouldn't learn much.

Later studies, including some that directly measured stress responses during reading via polygraph, came to very different conclusions. It appears that texts have to be markedly harder than previously to generate frustration, and kids can learn quite well from what we have been calling "frustration" texts.

Despite this new evidence about children's ability to learn from challenging text, the not-so-accurate terminology has hung in there. More problematically, so have those instructional practices aimed at protecting kids from harder text.

Now the Common Core is still asking us to teach students to read texts written at grade level, but the determination of the levels has changed a bit. Measures like Lexiles used to be used to try to identify texts students

would be able to read on their own, such as in a testing situation, with about 75% comprehension. Under CCSS, the texts will be somewhat harder—in traditional terms, harder here would mean “frustration” level rather than instructional level. But, as you can see, that doesn’t mean the teaching will be frustrating.

### Teacher Takeaways

Hopefully, this helps improve teachers’ clarity on the issue and understanding of the terms as they’re being used, but are there any teacher “to dos” or “take-aways” in this area? I think there are several:

1. No one is asking teachers of beginning readers to teach from more challenging texts than in the past. The issue isn’t whether doing so would discourage or frustrate these beginners, however. Beginning-reader texts need to be transparent enough for kids to develop a clear understanding of the alphabetic system.
2. If you teach readers who are beyond grade 1 level, you are being asked to ramp up the text difficulty. Again, this is not to frustrate children, but to give them real opportunities to learn. Research suggests that what we labeled as “instructional level” in the past was just not challenging enough to kids to offer them any chance of learning very much.
3. Teachers need to offer students enough guidance and support so they can work productively and learn from “frustration level” *as if* they were instructional level. With proper support, students can proficiently read texts in which they otherwise would have only recognized 80% of the words and had low comprehension. Such support might include multiple readings (including aloud), preteaching vocabulary, helping them break down and understand complex and extended sentences, guiding them to connect subjects with pronouns and synonyms, and providing key background necessary for interpretation.
4. As important as it is for students to engage with more challenging texts, they should also have broader daily reading experiences. Students should be expected to read several texts of various difficulty levels each day—from those they can read easily with no outside assistance, to those that require concerted effort and guidance.

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*Tim’s entertaining blog, [www.shanahanonliteracy.com](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com), provides cutting-edge information on literacy teaching.*

*For more from Tim, read his [other posts](#) or view his [video](#) on research-based practices for K-3 reading comprehension, based on the [Practice Guide](#) on reading comprehension he chaired.*



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