

DIGGING DEEPER

At its core, close reading is strategic reading

By **Stephanie Harvey**



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ou can't swing open a car door without bumping into a close reading post these days. For years, we heard almost nothing about close reading, or its first cousin, text complexity, but then suddenly they emerged as the reigning buzzwords. So let's take a closer look.

When do we need to read text closely? Best answer: When it's important. For instance, if we live with someone who has a heart condition, we read medical information slowly and carefully, often rereading to understand and remember in order to avoid the serious consequences of misunderstanding.

We also read closely when text is hard. I don't need to read my daily dose of *The Onion* closely. I cry from laughter and sail through. But hand me Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (Bantam) and I can't simply reread the incomprehensible words; I need strategies to hurdle the background knowledge gap.



To comprehend complex text, readers need to slow down, consider what they know, ask questions, annotate, synthesize, think inferentially, and reread for clarification. If this sounds familiar, these are the comprehension strategies that P. David Pearson, his colleagues, and others have researched and reported on over the past 30 years.

What really makes a text complex

It's not merely the Lexile level. Complexity is borne from ideas, not words. Most software leveling programs consider two aspects: the number of words in a sentence and the number of syllables in a word. An unintended consequence can raise the level—the repeated use of unfamiliar words. Think made-up words, strange names, and so on. This leads a text such as *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Scholastic) to garner the same Lexile level as Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (Scribner).

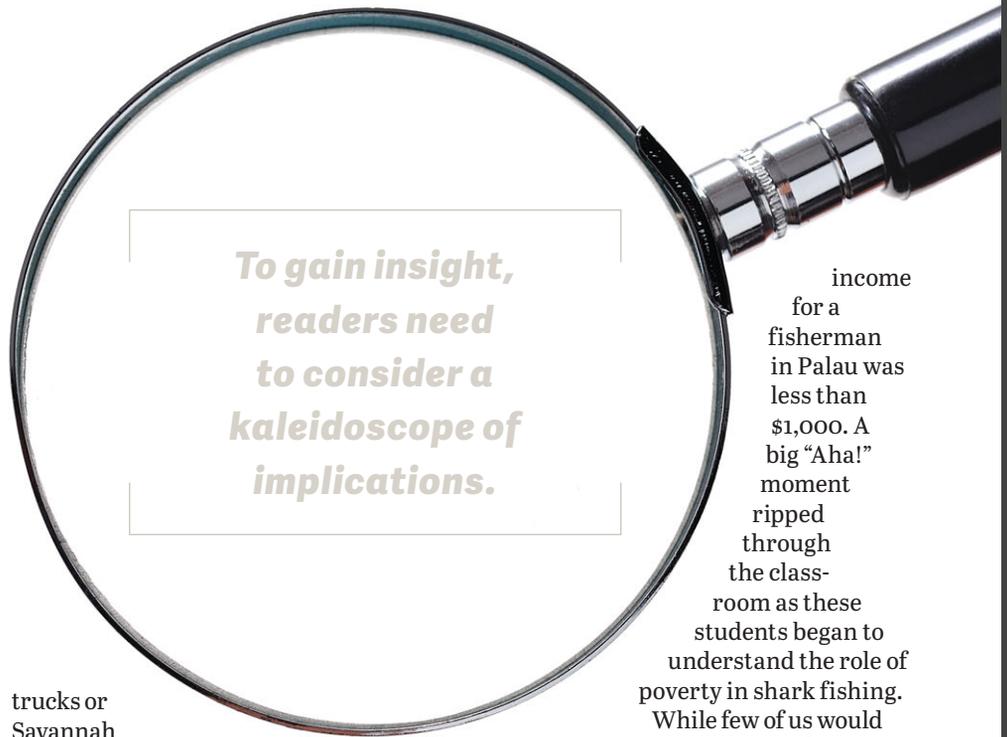
We know which one is more complex; we read *The Old Man and the Sea* about five grades beyond when we read *Harry Potter*. But J.K. Rowling's long sentences, multisyllabic words, and made-up names stoke the Lexile engine.

Hemingway is a renowned minimalist. In fact, one could argue what makes Hemingway complex is what is *not* written. We need to stop, think, and infer when reading his sparse words, the very stuff of strategic reading.

It doesn't stop there. *Henry and Mudge* (Simon & Schuster), adored by first and second graders, Lexiles at 460 compared to *Sarah Plain and Tall's* (HarperCollins) 430 because of the repeated use of the word "Mudge." The highest Lexile level I have seen assigned to a simple text is a whopping 1090 to *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (Square Fish).

Lexiles and other programs offer a reasonable indication of difficulty, but we can't become slaves to them. When we ask a student what they are reading and they answer "I am an S," we know we're in trouble.

Thoughtful teachers understand their kids better than any machine could. A software leveling program cannot know Jeremy is crazy for pickup



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trucks or Savannah dreams of being an astronaut. Understanding the role interest plays in reading is at the core of a teacher's ability to improve students' reading achievement. Bottom line: Interest matters—big time.

Reading between the lines

Complexity goes way beyond text level. One of the most complex sentences in the English language has one of the lowest Lexile levels: *To be or not to be, that is the question*. Complexity resides in complicated concepts and problems fused with multiple perspectives. Complex text demands the reader's thoughtful consideration of a multifaceted issue or problem. To gain insight, readers need to consider a kaleidoscope of implications.

We might come across an infographic, sparse in words and long on images, that looks simple. But the ideas contained within it can be highly complex. For example, an infographic appearing in *United Hemispheres Magazine*, titled "Fin-Win Situation," shows shark sanctuaries around the world and shares that humans kill approximately 73 million sharks annually. It explains a shark left to live freely in a sanctuary brings in nearly \$2 million to the tourist economy in Palau over its lifetime, and merely \$108 to the individual who catches it.

Sound simple? Not so fast. Upon further research, a group of sixth graders found the average annual

income for a fisherman in Palau was less than \$1,000. A big "Aha!" moment ripped through the classroom as these students began to understand the role of poverty in shark fishing.

While few of us would advocate killing sharks for expensive soup, it's not that simple. Complex problems never are. Economics are often at the root, as are other factors such as culture, religion, and politics.

Complexity isn't difficulty

In this pressure cooker of standards, 21st-century skills, and college and career readiness, we might be tempted to raise the Lexile level and have kids "close read" text that's too hard. But if that doesn't reduce complexity to its simplest form, I don't know what does.

That's not a solution. If we want kids to be prepared for college, careers, and life, we need to engage them with true complexity. We need to help them distinguish between complex problems and simple ones, to look at the multifaceted nature of an issue and view it through different lenses.

So let's resist the urge to dumb down complexity to a Lexile level. Let's excite kids with significant ideas and issues that permeate today's world—and then give them the strategies they need to dig in and figure it out. ■

Catch Stephanie Harvey at ILA 2015

Harvey will provide methods for helping students understand complex text during her Featured Speaker session on Saturday, July 18.