Analyzing Text Complexity (Adapted from Professor Bill Foreman, CSU Stanislaus)

Write an analysis of the text complexity of the book you've selected for your book talk. For this analysis, consider both the implicit and explicit complexity of your text under the Common Core Standards.

During class, we have discussed explicit complexity and in Appendix A of the Common Core, you note the Common Core's three-pronged approach to text complexity, based on quantitative, qualitative, and "reader-task" considerations.

To discover the quantitative complexity of a work, you should consult at least two (and possibly three) different sources. Here are a few possibilities:

> Lexile: www.lexile.com
>
> ATOS: http://www.renlearn.com/atos/
>
> Dale-Chall: http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-dale-chall-test.php
>
> Flesch-Kincaid: available in MS Word computer program

Each of these will calculate a grade-band equivalent score. In some cases, the work may have been done for you already. In other cases, you may have to type a few representative paragraphs (just a couple of hundred words) into an on-line complexity calculator. We have talked about what quantitative complexity says (and doesn't say) about a text. Use what you learn from quantitative complexity to comment on the complexity of your book. You'll find even more detailed discussion of quantitative complexity measures in a supplement to Appendix A: http://www.corestandards.org/assets/E0813_Appendix_A_New_Research_on_Text_Complexity.pdf This document provides more detail about various readability indexes, including a comparison chart on page 4.

To discuss qualitative complexity, consider how the language, structure, and knowledge demands of your book add to or reduce its level of complexity. Think about how your book is similar or different from other, representative examples of its genre. You might use the Exeter Qualities as well in determining the qualitative complexity.

To discuss "reader-task" considerations, think about the cultural context of both your chosen text and your likely students/readers. Reader-task considerations include the match between a text and students. How motivated will students be to read the text? How do their life experiences match up to the text? How does their likely native knowledge prepare them to read the text, or not? You can find three short discussions of these considerations in Appendix A, pages 11-16.

Discussing implicit complexity is much more difficult, since there are few specific measures and the elements of learning and cognition involved are almost entirely internal to the reader. We can write about the complexities we see, though, and describe how the text influences readers implicitly.

While the other arts can take our breath away, burn a mood or the thoughts of a moment into our memories, the visual arts like sculpture and painting cannot explore directly the intricacies of human personalities or human interactions. We may marvel at Michelangelo's "David." Its perfection of form and the way it appears to live if you look at it intently for a while are astonishing. We can even learn about David's emotions before engaging Goliath in his face, but we cannot know his inner thoughts. We

are not treated to an exposition of his story, the complications of character, setting, and context of the story's plot. There are no other moments but one. The author is unlimited by time or materials—only by the words that are her medium. Thus, imaginative literature can explore an endless range of human experience; by presenting that experience in artful ways, authors can make us more thoughtful about our lives, our emotions, our self-concepts, and help us to understand and relate to other humans with greater insight.

This aspect of literature is difficult to write about because its effects are so rarely empirically provable. One bit of empirical data that supports the recommendation that we read literature comes comes in a recent *NY Times* blog post: http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/03/i-know-how-youre-feeling-i-read-chekhov/ Researchers Emanuele Castano and David Comer Kidd

> found that after reading literary fiction, as opposed to popular fiction or serious nonfiction, people performed better on tests measuring empathy, social perception and emotional intelligence — skills that come in especially handy when you are trying to read someone's body language or gauge what they might be thinking
>
> The researchers say the reason is that literary fiction often leaves more to the imagination, encouraging readers to make inferences about characters and be sensitive to emotional nuance and complexity.

It is this inference making that should be the center of our teaching of literature. While you are not expected to show how you would promote making inferences, you do have to show that the work you recommend contains opportunities for inference making.

One generally accepted truth about reading and writing literature is that it's better to show rather than tell. Narrators don't tell us the most important and complex elements of fiction. If they did, they'd look more like technical writing. Instead, they show readers human characters interacting with each other. Sometimes they relate character's thoughts directly, sometimes we have only their actions to go by. Authors concentrate our attention on key elements, and they draw relationships between characters and events. They set context and they choose language. An author's choices about how to tell the story bear significantly on its implicit complexity. Books that show rather than tell engage us in cognitive activity that is far more complex than plot-driven stories that aim merely to entertain. Write about how your book shows its message and about the leaps students need to make in order to understand that message.

Another key "truth" about literature is that we learn the general from the specific. When an author writes a story, she is necessarily limited to a finite set of characters, settings, and scenes—but readers are expected to draw inferences from the story's specifics that predict a much broader range of human behavior. Great literature depicts particular instances of general human characteristics and experiences. Consider how the specifics of your book can help students make inferences about the human condition.

Finally, it you are going into teaching, you might access the standards themselves for further justification of your position. Look at the language used by the standards. The theme or main of a work "emerges" and is "shaped and refined" over the course of a text (RL9-10.2). Complex characters have "multiple or conflicting motivations" (RL9-10.3). Words sometimes have "figurative or connotative" meanings with a "cumulative impact" on the reader (RL 9-10.4).   Authors make choices about structure in order to "manipulate time" or "create…mystery, tension, or surprise." Literature often "draws on and transforms source material" from works that came before (what we call "intertextuality").