

Bridging the Readiness Gap:

Demystifying Required Reading Levels for Postsecondary Pursuits

by MetaMetrics President and Co-founder Malbert Smith III, Ph.D.

Graduation from high school no longer guarantees that students are prepared for the postsecondary challenges that await them. This reality—combined with disheartening trends in graduation rates and an increasingly global economy—informs and underscores the current national educational reform agenda. In January 2010, President Obama announced an extension of the Race to the Top program, already the most ambitious reform effort in history. And the initiatives and programs comprising this movement continue to gain momentum. The Common Core State Standards, released this past June, have been adopted by nearly all states and the District of Columbia. Two state consortia have formed to develop “next-generation” assessments to measure student achievement against the Standards as part of the \$350M Race to the Top Assessment Program. And more recently, The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Council of Chief State School Officers and the State Higher Education Executive Officers partnered to promote broad implementation of the Standards.

A top priority of these initiatives is the adoption and use of internationally benchmarked standards. Why are consistent, measurable standards important? According to Education Secretary Arne Duncan, the Holy Grail of education is to ensure that all high school students are adequately prepared to meet the challenges of postsecondary endeavors; that they are “college- and career-ready.” For this reason, both Race to the Top requirements and Common Core criteria advocate standards that build toward and ensure readiness. If we do not adequately prepare our secondary students, we set them up for certain frustration and a higher likelihood of future failure.

Unfortunately, several indicators suggest that many high school graduates are ill-equipped to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities that await them. First, an alarmingly

high percentage of high school graduates need to take remedial courses in reading, writing and mathematics upon entering technical schools, community colleges and four-year universities. According to Alliance for Excellent Education, 42 percent of freshmen at community colleges—and 20 percent of freshmen at four-year institutions—enroll in at least one remedial course (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). In addition, surveys of educators across the P–20 landscape reveal a schism between high school and college expectations. ACT recently reported that 91 percent of high school teachers believe that they are adequately preparing their students for college, whereas only 26 percent of college instructors believe that their students have been sufficiently prepared (ACT, 2009). These startlingly divergent perceptions throw into question the very concept or nature of “readiness.”

So how, exactly, should we define “ready?” Numerous elements comprise readiness. However, one of the most important is the ability to read and comprehend complex texts. Whether a student is applying to a community college, attending an elite four-year university, or entering the workplace or military, grappling with high-level texts is likely to be a major component of the experience. And a student’s ability to understand said texts is one of the key predictors of success in these domains.

Clearly, in order for standards to be meaningful—and readiness to be achieved—focused attention must be paid to the text complexity continuum across the P–20 landscape. This imperative is being recognized as a top priority by reform programs and initiatives. The Common Core State Standards, for example, affirm that “by the time they complete the core, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers” (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010).

The Common Core State Standards reveal two alarming trends in terms of text complexity across the P–20 continuum. First, over the last 50 years the text complexity of K–12 texts have trended downward (Chall, Conrad & Harris, 1977; Hayes, Wolfer, 1996; Williamson, 2008). Second, the text complexity of reading demands in college, careers, and citizenship have held steady or increased over this same time period (Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996).

With this in mind, educators must continually assess whether the reading demands placed upon secondary students are rigorous enough to equip them for the texts they will encounter in their postsecondary endeavors. One study in particular already has demystified reading requirements across the P–20 environment by quantifying the difficulty of representative text collections in various domains.

In his investigation of postsecondary text demands, Williamson (2008) analyzed broad samples of texts from the college, military, citizenship and workplace domains. Detailed information about the specific texts included in the study can be found in Williamson’s paper. The median Lexile® measure for military texts is 1105L, while the median Lexile measure for citizenship texts is 1230L. As might be expected, workplace texts—with a median difficulty of 1260L—have the broadest range of difficulty, extending both below and above all of the other text collections. Further, though the median text demand is fairly uniform across the workplace, military and citizenship domains, it is higher for postsecondary education: 1295L for two-year institutions and 1395L for four-year institutions.

Williamson’s examination of K–12 texts reveals a gap of 65L to 230L between the demands placed on high school seniors and the difficulty of postsecondary texts. To put this gap in perspective, a 250L difference between reader ability and text difficulty can cause a drop from 75 percent comprehension to 50 percent comprehension. This means that a successful high school senior confidently reading twelfth grade texts may enter college several months later and encounter texts that result in less than 50 percent comprehension. Fifty percent comprehension causes confusion, frustration and feelings of inadequacy in most readers.

The sizable breach between high school and college text complexity explains the high percentage of students in remedial

courses, as well as the different perceptions of readiness reported by high school teachers and college instructors. Educators in each domain assess student readiness based on the customary texts at their level, unaware that—in order to successfully comprehend postsecondary reading—students must take a giant leap instead of an incremental next step.

The consequences of this gap in reading preparedness are significant. Colleges suffer the economic burden of providing remedial instruction, and training programs have trouble recruiting suitable trainees. Even worse, many struggling students become disillusioned with postsecondary pursuits and fail to reach their potential.

The good news is that this unfortunate situation can be remedied. Progress already has been made in reconsidering the entire scope of the P–20 educational landscape and fostering cooperation between K–12 and postsecondary educators. Further, we have the tools to evaluate, reconsider and re-map desired reading growth trajectories. Education Secretary Duncan believes that educators concerned about the readiness gap will see data as a “boon,” not a burden. Indeed, as the aforementioned studies indicate, we can begin to supplant vague and inconsistent labels like “proficient” with objective, empirical evidence of whether reading standards and goals are being met.

In short, we need to begin with the end in mind. If we adjust the desired endpoint of secondary reading growth, students will no longer blindly follow a path only to find that they are ill-equipped to handle the challenges that await them at their destination. Quantifying the reading demands on high school students and comparing them to the text demands of the postsecondary world is a necessary first step toward better conceptualizing reading requirements over the span of an education.

The next challenge for policymakers and educators is to “bend” the curve of student reading growth by elevating expectations in each grade to better align with future demands. Figure 1 (on the following page) from the Common Core State Standards’ Appendix A provides a text continuum by grade bands so that educators have a reliable road map to make sure students graduate high school with the reading skills they need to succeed in their postsecondary endeavors.

Figure 1: Text Complexity Grade Bands and Associated Lexile Ranges (in Lexile measures)

Text Complexity Grade Bands	Previous Lexile Ranges	Lexile Ranges Aligned to CCR Expectations*
K–1	N/A	N/A
2–3	450L–725L	420L–820L
4–5	645L–845L	740L–1010L
6–8	860L–1010L	925L–1185L
9–10	960L–1115L	1050L–1335L
11–CCR	1070L–1220L	1185L–1385L

*Common Core State Standards for English, Language Arts, Appendix A (Additional Information), NGA and CCSSO, 2012

Measuring student progress in reading empowers parents and educators by allowing them to track whether students are on the proper path toward their goals and quickly address any deviations from the desired rate of growth. Akin to retirement planning tools, reading measures help students project what they have to do to get where they want to be. By forecasting deficiencies in reading comprehension through empirical studies of reading growth, we can demystify the “readiness gap,” raise the bar for reading achievement, and better prepare our students for success in their postsecondary endeavors.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Malbert Smith III, Ph.D., is president of MetaMetrics®, an educational measurement and research organization. Together with co-founder and CEO A. Jackson Stenner, Ph.D., Dr. Smith created The Lexile® Framework for Reading; El Sistema Lexile para Leer, the Spanish-language version of the widely used reading framework; The Lexile Framework for Writing; and The Quantile® Framework for Mathematics. Focused on fostering literacy and mathematics excellence, Dr. Smith strives to make educational measurement actionable in the classroom and at home. His vision of common metrics for reading, writing and mathematics opens the way for differentiated instruction. In each state—and increasingly abroad—educators use Lexile and Quantile measures to blend instruction and assessment in whole-class and intervention settings. Concerned with the relationship between early literacy and college and career readiness, Dr. Smith led research to build a continuum of text complexity that places educational and life goals on the Lexile scale. He has taught graduate seminars in educational research and test development and design at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, from which he received the Distinguished Alumni Award. Dr. Smith serves on the UNC School of Education Foundation Board and is a member of the Critical Friends of Council of Chief State School Officers. He also is a member of The American Association for the Advancement of Science, The American Educational Research Association and The National Council on Measurement in Education. Dr. Smith frequently speaks at events on educational research and measurement.

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