



# Hallmark 1 of Advanced Literacies Instruction: Engaging, Content-Rich Texts

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## Hallmark 1:

Work with engaging texts that feature big ideas and rich content

## Why is this important?

Grasping the content, language and structures of text is both a gatekeeper and a gateway to academic success for learners at all grade levels. All students need to build their knowledge of the world (background knowledge) and content knowledge for

school success; at the same time, many students in our classrooms struggle to access complex texts that contain this rich information. The paradox, however, is that simply engaging with texts that have been made accessible to developing readers ('leveled' texts) does little to develop struggling readers' and linguistically-diverse learners' academic language and content knowledge. In fact, for many learners a lack of opportunities to access grade-level texts can lead, over time, to a 'cumulative disadvantage.' For these reasons, the texts we choose for instruction matter greatly for student success—they must be content rich but also at different levels of readability<sup>1</sup>. To support linguistically diverse students, we choose a variety of texts—written at different levels (including some at grade-level) and from different perspectives on the same topic. We often start with informational texts because they are filled with the complex, abstract and sophisticated words (i.e., academic language) and the complex ideas that are part of the curriculum—and they often connect to real-world issues, which supports motivation and engagement<sup>2</sup>. Combined with the



## What are Advanced Literacies?

Advanced literacies refers to the skills and competencies that enable communication in increasingly diverse ways and promote the understanding and use of text for a variety of purposes.

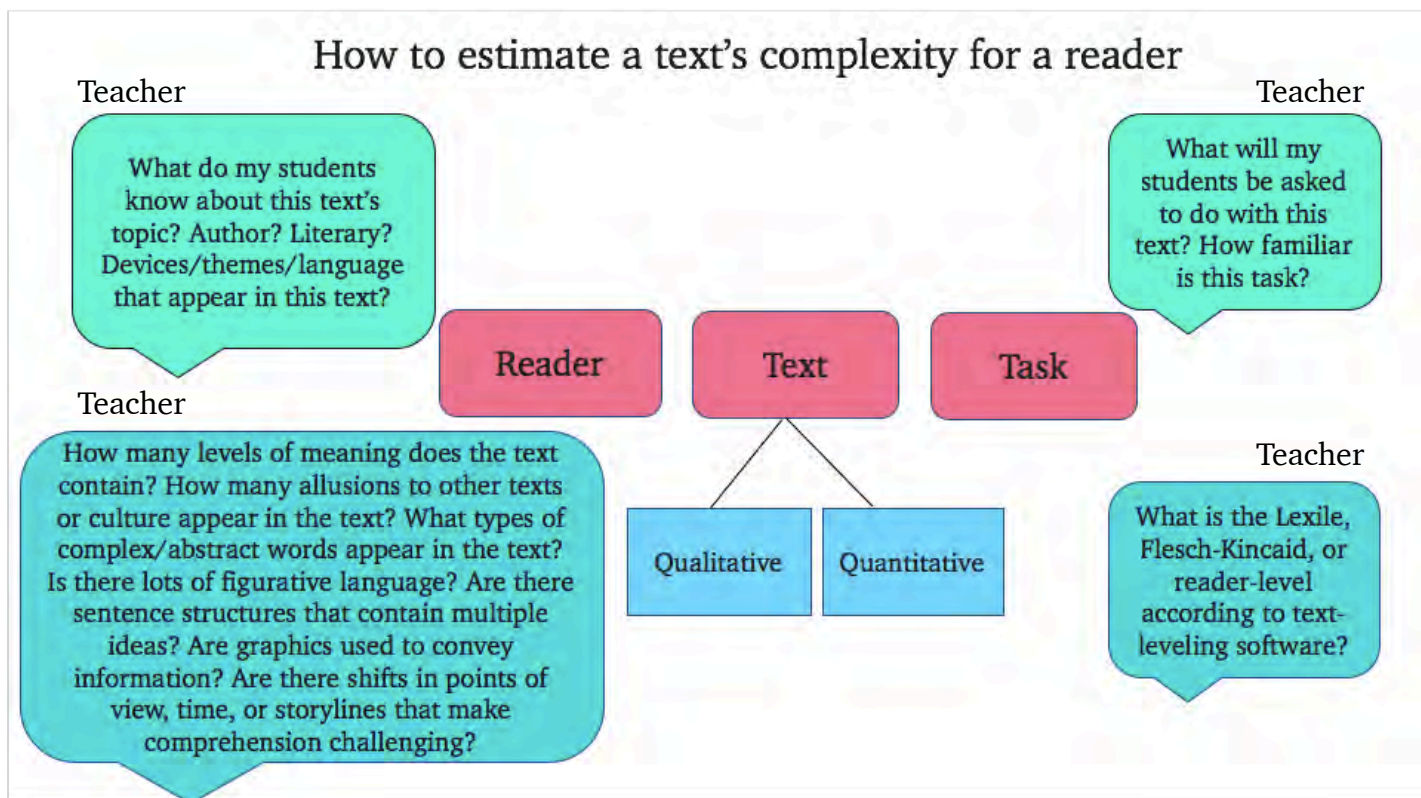
<sup>1</sup>Valencia, Sheila W., Wixson, Karen K., & Pearson, P. David. (2014). Putting Text Complexity in Context: Refocusing on Comprehension of Complex Text. *Elementary School Journal*, 115(2), 270-289.

<sup>2</sup>Baker, Scott, Lesaux, Nonie, Jayanthi, Madhavi, Dimino, Joseph, Proctor, C. Patrick, Morris, Joan, . . . Newman-Gonchar, Rebecca. (2014). What Works Clearinghouse, What Works Clearinghouse, 2014.

appropriate instructional supports, texts are an excellent and crucial platform for building language and knowledge<sup>3</sup>.

## What Makes a Text ‘Complex’?

There is no such thing as a ‘complex text.’ That is, a text that may be considered complex in the hands of one reader, but may not be considered complex when placed in the hands of another; after all, each reader brings different levels of language familiarity and background knowledge. It is also the case that a text may be considered more or less complex given the task at hand. For instance, a text may pose greater challenge to readers when they have been asked to identify the author’s stance or bias than if they have been asked to read to simply to get the ‘gist.’ As such, each element— aspects of the text, task or the intended reader—cannot be taken as the sole determiner of text complexity for a grade; instead, determining text complexity requires taking each aspect into account. The figure below offers an organizing framework for thinking about the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of text complexity, as well as the key relationship of reader and task when selecting appropriate texts for students to read and comprehend.



**Quantitative measures** of text complexity (e.g., word frequency and difficulty, sentence length, and text cohesion) are generated by text leveling tools that solely evaluate the text’s language (see for

<sup>3</sup>Kieffer, Michael J., & Lesaux, Nonie K. (2007). Breaking down Words to Build Meaning: Morphology, Vocabulary, and Reading Comprehension in the Urban Classroom. *Reading Teacher*, 61(2), 134-144.

instance, the Lexile framework). These measures can often give an indication of whether a text contains language forms and structures that are unfamiliar to students in a particular grade range, but are not designed to pinpoint whether a text is appropriate for a learner within a particular grade. Once a text has been determined to be suitable for a particular grade range, an educator can turn to **qualitative indicators** of text to determine if a text is appropriate for use with his or her students. For example, the complexity of a text's structure, the accessibility of the language conventionality and clarity, levels of meaning conveyed by the author, and knowledge demands placed on readers must be assessed by educators with their own students in mind. A quantitative analysis can situate a text in a grade 6-8 text complexity band; a qualitative analysis conducted by the teacher then can determine if the text is better suited for grade 6 rather than grade 8 students, and when in the year to introduce such a text.

### Guidelines for Teaching Complex Texts:

- Choose key excerpts or fragments to support deep study of unit concepts
- Teach language that students will need to generate oral and written responses to understand the text
- Use a small selection of protocols for talking about text and use routines to support students through the writing process.

## What does this instruction look like in linguistically-diverse classrooms?

### Traditional Instructional Practices

All texts used with ELLs/MLLs are extremely challenging because they are at or above grade-level OR all texts are below grade-level, offering little engaging content and compromising learning activities.

### 21st-Century Instructional Practices

Multiple texts at different levels are read by ELLs/MLLs in order to support them to develop a rich understanding of a topic and to develop their reading comprehension skills. Sets of texts are a key support for ELLs/MLLs on the path to consistently accessing grade-level texts with ease.

### Indicators in Curriculum:

- The unit's texts feature essential knowledge that students need to answer the 'big' question or idea that guides the unit's assignments and learning tasks.
- Multiple texts are used throughout the unit (e.g., many text types, multiple levels of difficulty), tackling the topic from many perspectives.
- There are questions that guide the reading of each text (i.e., text-focused questions), to help students to identify ideas and information central for comprehension.

The language used in the texts is like that used in the discipline.

## Indicators in Instruction:

- ☑ Texts appear to be of high-interest to readers; students are motivated to read them.  
Instructor connects the purpose for reading the text to the unit's goals.
- ☑ Students understand the role that each text plays in building up their understanding of the unit's topic.
- ☑ Instructor creates space for students to share alternative interpretations of the text.
- ☑ Instructor requires that students use (text-based) evidence to support any claims made about the text.
- ☑ Students have opportunities to answer text-dependent questions to build comprehension, then have opportunities to make inferences from text.

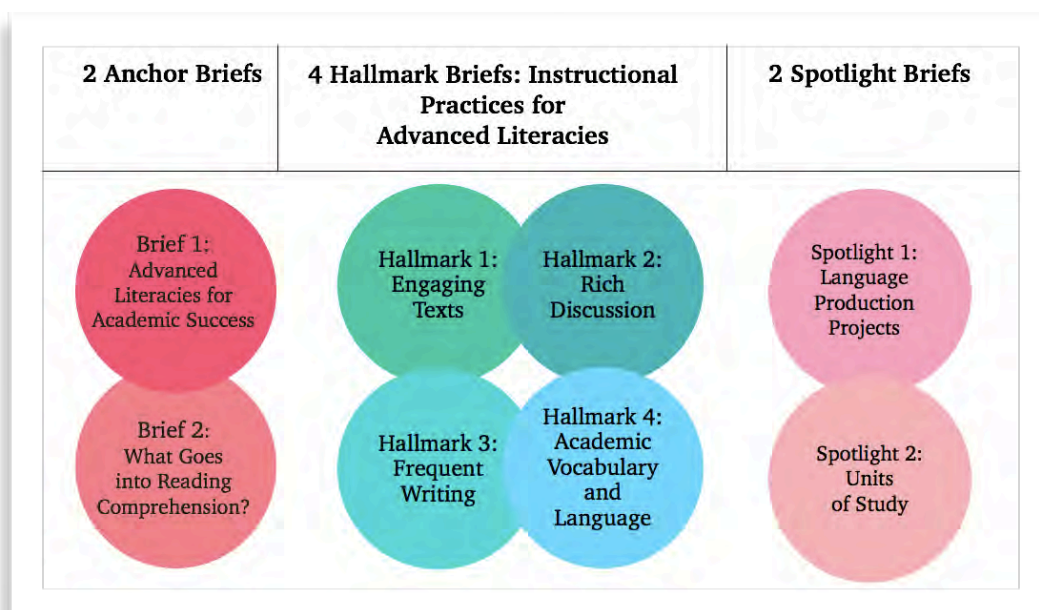
## A Map of this Brief Series

This is Hallmark 1 in a series of briefs designed to aid New York State educators in implementing the revised standards, particularly in settings serving linguistically diverse learners. This series includes:

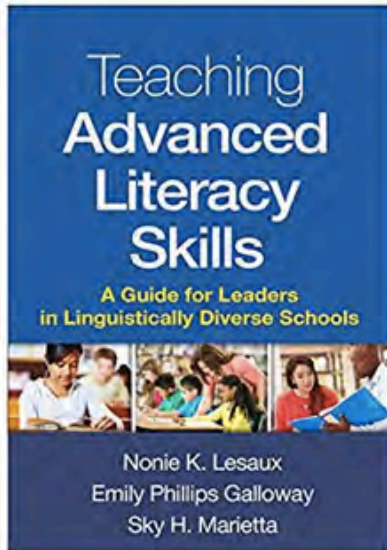
### Using Home Language Resources

English Language Learners and Multilingual Learners bring knowledge of words (and their concepts) acquired in a home language to the classroom. The task for educators is to use instructional strategies and supports to help students establish connections between this knowledge and their developing knowledge in an additional language. In designing learning and teaching to support ELLs/MLLs, it is crucial to consider that word knowledge develops for students as they connect what they know about a word, in any language, with new information being taught.

Quick Tip: Allow students to use home language resources as they are learning an additional language. If educators are not speakers of students' home languages, they can make students the experts by having them share the connections they are establishing across languages.



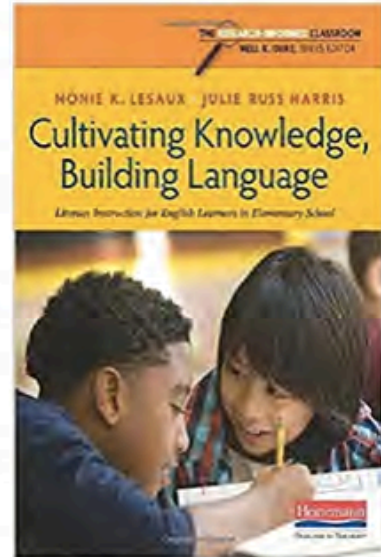
**For more on this, see...**



Language Diversity &  
Literacy Development  
RESEARCH GROUP

The **Lead for Literacy** initiative is a series of one-page memos that revisits assumptions that guide current policies and practices, outlines common pitfalls, and presents feasible solutions to pressing issues.

Access these briefs at <https://langlit.gse.harvard.edu/lead-for-literacy>



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## **NYS Next Generation P-12 Learning Standards:**

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