Chapter 1

Choosing Worthy Texts

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CREATING TEXT-RICH CLASSROOMS

Imagine classrooms brimming with interesting texts—engaging, worthy texts that are challenging enough to cause most students to have to work hard, but not so challenging that they cannot be understood with a teacher's support. These texts are offered to students in a variety of ways. Sometimes the whole class tackles a complex text together, helping each other understand, analyze, and learn from it. Sometimes students choose their own texts for research or pleasure reading. Sometimes the teacher uses a text as a model to show students something that an author has done particularly well.

Creating these kinds of text-rich classrooms, with a balance of informational and literary texts, is a responsibility for all K–12 teachers and administrators who strive to help their students become college- and career-ready readers. In elementary school, the Common Core State Standards recommend that students read half informational text and half literary text. As students progress through secondary school, the recommended balance shifts to 70 percent informational text and 30 percent literary text. But increasing the amount of informational text that students read or adhering to the ratio suggested by the standards is only the first step in ensuring that students become better or more engaged readers who are building their knowledge of the world. On their own, the suggested ratios of informational and literary texts have no bearing on students' ability to think critically or explore issues from multiple perspectives. The selection of worthy texts and the instructional practices that unlock the power of informational and literary texts are far more important and complex issues, and we will explore them in much more depth throughout this book.

Strike the Right Balance

Attending to the amount of informational and literary text that students read on a daily basis will mean different things for teachers at different grade levels. Currently, students in elementary schools tend to be offered literary texts most often, so the work of bringing the ratio into 50:50 balance may feel like a heavy lift for those teachers. The good news, however, is that those elementary teachers have a great deal of control over what they offer their students because they tend to plan for the same group of students all day long (or a good portion of the day).

The challenge at the secondary level is less about increasing the volume of informational texts that students read—content area teachers, such as biology and history teachers, already engage students with a great deal of informational texts. At the secondary level, the challenge is more about varying the *types* of informational texts students read and, most important teaching them the literacy skills they need to read them well. If students only encounter textbooks, they will never learn to read such things as original research, primary sources, journal articles, field guides, artists' statements, playbills, and government reports—the material that scientists, historians, artists, mathematicians, and other professionals read every day. Common Core success requires that content area teachers work explicitly as literacy teachers as well as teachers of chemistry, economics, music, and history.

What does all this mean for secondary English teachers? They may feel that they're off the hook; after all, can't the English curriculum full of great literature account for the 30 percent of literature students should be reading in the course of a secondary school day? This would be a mistake. Literature can still be the heart of secondary English classes, but English teachers also need to have a greater role in helping students build specific literacy skills with informational text, which will comprise the majority of text they will encounter in college, careers, and life. As the most experienced literacy teachers in the school, English teachers have a key role in supporting readers, especially reluctant readers, to grow confident in a wide range of text styles. Additionally, combining great literature with informational text can help students build context and connections (as the story from Julia St. Martin's classroom illustrates), helping students enjoy and understand literary texts more deeply.

Build Rich Sets of Informational and Literary Texts

The Common Core presents an opportunity to organize texts in a new way, as "sets" organized around a topic or big idea, rather than as stand-alone resources or experiences. At its best, the shift to using more informational text means that informational and literary texts can be grouped and taught together (by one or more teachers) so that students learn to use one text to help them make meaning of others. Engaging students in the study of sets of texts is a strategic move in terms of increasing their reading comprehension. The more a student knows

about any given topic, the more complex text he or she can read on that particular topic. Each text offers students more background knowledge and vocabulary about whatever is being studied. As students become experts on a topic or a big idea, they are able to access increasingly sophisticated material.

Individual teachers can create rich text sets in their classrooms. In an elementary classroom learning about the American Revolution, for example, students may read from their textbook, along with an informational book called *George vs. George,* and conflicting firsthand reports about the Boston Massacre. Or, a secondary English class may compare accounts of modern-day genocides while reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Pairing texts can also be done *across* classrooms. English teachers, for example, could teach a novel with a character who has a genetic disease while students concurrently study genetics in science. Long-term projects or units are perfect interdisciplinary opportunities for teachers to collaborate and offer students a variety of texts about a specific topic.

> "By asking students to read both informational and literary texts with shared topics and themes, we offer many more opportunities to experience big ideas in profound ways. Informational text suddenly becomes personal in the way that we've always understood literature to be. The elegant interplay—the movement from stories and poems that are personal to information that is convincing—gives students tools for taking a personal stand on challenging, real-world topics."
>
> *—Dolly Higgins, fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, Anser Charter School, Boise, Idaho*

In secondary schools, interdisciplinary collaboration can be logistically challenging for teachers, but it is worth the work. At the Springfield Renaissance School, Julia St. Martin's colleagues, the ninth-grade social studies and English teachers, collaborated on a unit of study from the history curriculum: Africa and British Colonialism. In social studies class students read all informational texts, such as first-person accounts, interviews, expository chapters and articles, maps, time lines, and websites, and in English class students read the memoir *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky: The True Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan* by Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak. In both classes students were engaging with coherent texts of various genres, complexities, and text

structures. Adding the literary lens to the topic helped students better understand the historical happenings. Adding the historical information helped students better understand the memoir (literary nonfiction). The payoff was deeper comprehension and greater engagement.

What follows are two examples of literary texts grouped with informational texts from our Common Core curriculum (http://commoncoresuccess.eleducation.org/).

Sample Sets of Informational and Literary Texts

Journeys and Survival: Perspectives in Southern Sudan—Seventh Grade

Students explore the experiences of the people of southern Sudan during and after the Second Sudanese Civil War. They read *A Long Walk to Water,* analyzing the points of view of the central characters, Salva and Nya. Students focus on one key theme: how individuals survive in challenging environments. The novel is grouped with complex informational texts on Sudan.

Literary Anchor Text

A Long Walk to Water, Linda Sue Park

Informational Texts

"Loss of Culturally Vital Cattle Leaves Dinka Tribe Adrift in Refugee Camps," Stephen Buckley

Water for South Sudan, www.waterforsouthsudan.org

"Sudanese Tribes Confront Modern War," Karl Vick

"Time Trip" excerpt from "Life and Death in Darfur: Sudan's Refugee Crisis Continues," *Current Events*

Stories of Human Rights—Fifth Grade

What are human rights, and how do real people and fictional characters respond when those rights are challenged? Students develop their ability to read and understand complex text as they explore this question. Students read the introduction and selected articles of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" along with several firsthand accounts of people around the world who face human rights challenges. They use their understanding of human rights as one lens through which they can interpret the character and theme in the novel *Esperanza Rising.*

Literary Anchor Text

Esperanza Rising, Pam Muñoz Ryan

Selected Informational Texts

"Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

(*Continued*)

"Readers on Stage," Aaron Shepard

"From Kosovo to the United States," Isau Ajeti and Blanche Gosselin

"Teaching Nepalis to Read, Plant, and Vote," Lesley Reed

View sixth-graders at P.S. 36 in the Bronx engaged with these texts in the accompanying video, "Engaging Students in Collaborative Academic Discussions."

Watch video: "Engaging Students in Collaborative Academic Discussions"

Strategically Organize Text Sets

There are many ways to organize text sets so that students can draw meaningful connections between literary and informational texts. The following are a few examples, but don't limit your thinking to these ideas only:

- **From mystery to understanding.** Start with a text so dense or obscure that students can barely make sense of it. Let them know that the text is indeed a "mystery" that they will have to solve by reading other texts on the same topic as the mystery text. Intentionally build their background knowledge through a variety of additional texts, returning often to the mystery text to see if they can glean more from it. As students learn from the related texts, they will become able to solve the mystery of the initial text. For example, students might read a brief excerpt from the Mayflower Compact at the beginning of a unit about the Pilgrims and wonder what it's about or what it has to do with. The teacher would record their questions on an anchor chart. Then students would read several other texts about the Pilgrims, learning what was important to them. Finally students would return to the Mayflower Compact to see if they could answer the questions they asked in the beginning of the unit.
- **Sprinkle informational texts with literary texts.** For example, students engaged in the study of adaptions through the lens of frogs that have adapted to their environments around the world could also read a variety of poems and stories about frogs.
- **Toggle between literary and informational texts.** Literary text often builds motivation to learn, and the informational text provides the background

students are seeking. For example, eighth-graders might read the first couple chapters of *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai, a novel about a family leaving Vietnam following the fall of Saigon. They will read about a young girl, Ha, and her family, and likely come to care for them and wonder about their plight. Students would then take a short break from the novel to learn more about the Vietnam War, building important background for Ha's story. Then they would read more of the novel, then toggle into additional nonfiction, then back to the novel. Julia St. Martin's students toggled back and forth between literary and informational text in the opening vignette.

- **Personal to universal.** Texts grouped this way help students develop interest in a universal concern or topic. Starting with fiction helps students understand how a particular issue affects people (the personal side of an issue) through the characters in the book. This builds their motivation to read informational texts that help them explore the issue more broadly. For example, students might read the novel *Lyddie* by Katherine Paterson as an introduction into the larger issue of working conditions and the Labor Movement. Later they read historical documents and current text related to working conditions worldwide.
- **Universal to the personal.** Conversely, students could begin their journey through a set of texts by starting with a framing document that provides universal concepts or ideas to think about, followed by reading something else that shows how the ideas or concepts affect people. For example, fifth-grade students read a variety of nonfiction related to natural disasters. Then they read the children's book *Eight Days: A Story of Haiti*, by Edwidge Danticat, perhaps paired with the more emotionally mature novel *Dark Water Rising*, by Marian Hale, to understand the impact of natural disasters on people in the western hemisphere. Finally the issue becomes personal when they consider what role America and Americans—perhaps even they themselves—should take when a natural disaster strikes a neighboring country.

WHAT IS TEXT ANYWAY?

The authors of the Common Core wisely wanted to ensure that students are required, daily and deeply, to gather information from written text in order to build their reading skills. Knowing that students may find ways to avoid reading

if given the opportunity to bypass difficult text with other media, such as video or images, the standards heavily emphasize written text, and often emphasize reading and interpreting multimedia *in relationship to* written text.

In life we gather information from all kinds of sources. Students need to learn to use sharp analytical skills when analyzing a data table, a historical painting, or a fluorite crystal, and we don't want to limit thinking about sets of "texts" to just things that incorporate words on paper. As long as students are compelled to use written text regularly and deeply, we feel it is essential that other sources of information are also viewed as text, and that students learn to decode them and think critically about them as they do with standard written text. The story that follows is a good illustration of the value of a broader view of text.

When Jean Hurst's third-grade classroom at Genesee Community Charter School in Rochester, New York, was closed for renovation and moved into its temporary quarters in a museum, Hurst seized the moment. "We were studying early woodland peoples," she says, "and we went down in the museum displays almost every day. We had access to the displays before the museum opened in the morning and again in the afternoon after all of the school groups had left."

To support her students' writing of a narrative nonfiction piece, Hurst created a series of lessons that involved not only traditional reading and writing but also frequent visits to the museum exhibits depicting scenes of Native American life. The lessons carefully guided her students toward meeting multiple Common Core literacy standards:

> RI.3.2: *Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.*
>
> W.3.3: *Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.*
>
> W.3.5: *With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1–3 up to and including grade 3 here.)*
>
> W.3.10: *Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.*

SL.3.2: *Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.*

L.3.3a: *Choose words and phrases for effect.*

L.3.5a: *Distinguish the literal and nonliteral meanings of words and phrases in context (e.g., take steps).*

The first several lessons in Hurst's woodland peoples study involved students "reading" the museum exhibits—life-size, realistic scenes depicting Native American life—looking for the main idea and key details in each. When a student suggested that the main idea of one of the exhibits was that the Native Americans were building a longhouse, Hurst asked, "Does the woman grinding corn support that as a main idea?" When the student searched for more supporting details and refined his thinking, he offered that the main idea was that the Native Americans were preparing a meal. Hurst countered, "Is everyone in the scene working with food?" All of the same strategies a teacher might employ to determine main idea and supporting details in a more traditional text were at play here. Students went back to the exhibit to "reread" the scene and find more details. Eventually they arrived at a main idea that was supported by all of the details in the scene: "Everyone in the Native American village had a role in preparing for winter."

For Hurst, a resource such as the museum exhibits is just one more kind of informational text that students can and should learn to read as they build their knowledge of the world. "It's all a form of communication," she says. Eventually the students moved on to reading and studying other kinds of informational text provided by the museum, such as wall displays and signage that surrounded the dioramas. Indeed, it is essential that reading something that is not an actual text (e.g., the museum displays) is complemented by more traditional reading experiences. Back in the classroom, students read additional texts and studied maps and weather data to better understand the scenes depicted in the exhibits. The wide variety of materials appealed to the wide variety of learners in her classroom, and Hurst found that the students were better prepared to tackle the challenging vocabulary they encountered in these texts because of their careful reading of the exhibits. They were also better prepared to write their narrative nonfiction pieces because of the range of texts they read.

Students must learn to decode and think critically about a wide variety of texts.

Make "Outside the Box" Text Choices

Many teachers have little choice about the texts they teach—the honors biology textbook is the same every year or *Romeo and Juliet* is required reading for all ninth-graders. District staff, literacy coaches, and department heads routinely make these choices for teachers, often simply through the adoption of a particular textbook series. Other teachers may have choices, but they find themselves in a rut, using the same text(s) year after year.

The Common Core will require most teachers to critically examine the texts they teach so that students experience a range of reading experiences more similar to what they will experience in college, careers, and life (e.g., journal articles, current news stories, interviews, legal documents), connect their reading to the world and their own lives, and open their minds to new ways of thinking and new ideas. Just as important as increasing the *amount* of informational text that students read is varying the *kinds* of informational text they read. The most important question a teacher can ask is not, "Am I teaching enough informational text?" Instead, it is, "What informational texts are worth reading?"

Textbooks are not sufficient—they do not address the full range of forms that informational text can take—nor do they fully represent the multiple perspectives that are possible on complex subjects, which can engage students and motivate them to keep reading. The greatest benefit for students—in terms of their

development as readers, their engagement with and ownership of their learning, and their ability to think critically—will result from teachers approaching text selection with a "beyond-the-textbook" mentality. For example, why not read and discuss news articles representing different perspectives on the Arab Spring—the revolutions taking place in the Middle East—while students are reading textbook descriptions of the American Revolution? (A curricular unit written by EL Education, "From Revolution to Democracy: The Complex Fight for Freedom," which introduces students to many themes of the American Revolution with these contemporary examples, can be found at www.achievethecore.org.)

The word *text* generally refers to books; however, there are a wide variety of informational text types (see table 1.1), from brochures and manuals to textbooks,

Table 1.1 Kinds of Informational Text

Expository	Argumentative	Instructional	Narrative
Textbooks (science)	Opinion and editorial pieces	Training manuals	(Auto)biographies
Textbooks (humanities)	Speeches	Contracts	Histories
Reports	Advertisements	User guides and manuals	Correspondence
Tourism guides	Political propaganda	Legal documents	Curriculum vitae
Product specifications	Journal articles	Recipes	Memoirs
Product and service descriptions	Government documents	Product and service descriptions	News articles
Magazine articles	Legal documents		Essays
Company profiles	Tourism guides		Interviews
Legal documents	Correspondence		Agendas
Agendas	Essays		
Correspondence	Reviews		
Essays	Memoirs		
Interviews			
Government documents			
News articles			

Source: New York State Education Department (nd).

recipes, and autobiographies. Teachers should make every effort to teach students to read primary source documents (e.g., interview transcripts, scientific research, political propaganda), because these forms of texts invite probing discussions and can generate great inquiry questions. (For more on a special protocol for the close reading of primary source documents first read chapter 7 and then see appendix E).Teachers should look for accuracy of the content, expertise of the author(s), usefulness of the text's features, and appropriateness of the text for their grade level. If the text is a challenging one for students, it is an opportunity to help build their skills in tackling complex texts (see chapters 6 and 7 for more on complex texts).

In addition, teachers must analyze the texts they are offering students for the opportunities they provide to engage students in close reading and critical thinking. For example, what follows are two sample informational text excerpts about life in colonial America. Figure 1.1 is the "Probate Inventory of John Allen (1659–1704)," a primary source document from the probate records of Hampshire County, Massachusetts. John Allen was a farmer in colonial Deerfield.

John Allen's probate record is a list of every possession he owned at the time of his death in 1704, along with the assessed value of each item (in the currency of the time—pounds, shillings, and pence). In three pages, it gives a stark, concrete picture of the Spartan life of a colonial farmer through his meager possessions (e.g., one horse, one glass bottle, four "baggs," two guns). It raises all kinds of questions. How much was a pig worth compared to a shirt, a frying pan, or a bushel of malt? For that matter, what is a bushel of malt and what was it used for? How did the currency of that time work? Why is the spelling of common words so strange? What was life like when you owned almost nothing? Was John Allen considered poor? The opportunities for discussion, research, and projects are plentiful and the opportunities to build literacy skills and historical understanding are rich. This and many other probate records can be found on the Historic Deerfield website at www.historic-deerfield.org.

The second excerpt—figure 1.2—comes from a website for kids (www.socialstudiesforkids.com) and is written much like a textbook in terms of content, syntax, and complexity.

"Food in the 13 American Colonies" certainly provides students with a great deal of information about food in colonial times; however, it won't necessarily invite the rich questions and tasks that John Allen's probate inventory does—it

Figure 1.1 Probate Inventory of John Allen (1659–1704)

INVENTORY OF JOHN ALLEN (1659-1704)
Hampshire Probate Records, Volume III, p. 132
An Inventory of John Allen's Estate Taken June the 5. 1704

	L	Sh	d
To money in Mr. Porter Hands	3	9	3
Cloathes of his own Wareing	1	5	
Beds and Bedding	2	10	
1 horse	2		
1 Heifer	1		
1 Heifer	1		
1 Steer Calfe		17	
1 Heifer	1	15	
1 Steer	2	10	
1 Cow	2	15	
1 Cow	2	1.7	
8 Sheep	2	8	
5 Swine	2	15	
2 Gtms	1	8	
To Halfe a Barrel of Pork	1	15	
To I Hundred &37 pound of Beefe	1	2	10
To 16 Bushels of Indian Corn	1	1	4
To 8 Bushels of Rye		16	
To 10 Bushels of Malt	1		
To 1 Sive		1	6
To 1 wheel		3	
To 1 Pail and Tubb		1	8

(John Allen conti
To Part ofa Cart a
To 1 pr of Plow Ir
To WoodenWale
To 1Iron Pott
To Iron Pon5/
To 1 Iron Kettle
To 1 Pewter Platte
To 2 Pewter Perri
To 1 frying Pan
To 1 Smoothing I
To 2 cans and 3 D
To 2 Old Axes an
To Part of al-lawh
To Books
To 1 Glass Bottle
To Horse Tacklin
To I Uning Wheel
To 4 four baggs
To linne Yarn
To 1 Sieth and Ta
To 1 fork and Hoe
To Iyd and Halfe
To a Plow Chain and Clevy 6 6
To1 bed Cord 1

(John Allen
To 12 poun
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The Lands r
What to Val
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John Allen's
To money i
To Cloaths
Beds and B
1 horse
1 Heifer
1 Heifer
1 Steer Calf
1 Heifer
1 Steer
1 Cow
1 Cow
8 Sheep
5 Swine
2 Guns 1 8
To Halfe a Barrel of Pork 1 15

Source: Historic Deerfield website (nd). (www.historic-deerfield.org/discover-deerfield/museums/memorial-libraries/probate-records-wills-and-related-documents).

leaves little to the imagination. The probate inventory of John Allen, however, demands higher-order thinking in order to understand it—students must make inferences, learn new vocabulary, and apply their minds to piecing together the puzzle of what they think life was like before the American Revolution. It puts readers in the compelling role of thinking like a historian, trying to make sense

Figure 1.2 Food in the 13 American Colonies

The American colonists got their food from several places. The modern supermarket that we know today, where you can get all kinds of food, was not an option back then.

People who lived on the Atlantic coast often caught fish and whales. They sold fish and whale blubber at fish markets, which were usually down by the docks.

Farmers who grew wheat, barley, corn, tobacco, or rice hauled their crops to a town market, where the crops were sold to people in that town or to traders who would ship the goods to other colonies. (These traders would send the goods by boat, on rivers, or along the ocean coast, or on wagons.)

A great many American colonists also took care of their own food needs. It was not uncommon for a farm family to have crops growing near the ocean while chickens, pigs, and cows were grazing nearby and for that same family to fish for clams and other fish down at the Oceanside. This way, the family wouldn't have to buy food from anyone else. They might have apple trees and rows of corn and wheat. They might turn that corn into cornbread or cornmeal mush. They might turn that wheat into flour themselves and use it to bake bread. They might also hunt wild animals, like deer, rabbits, and turkeys.

The farms of the 13 Colonies took up a much larger amount of the total land available than do farms today. Still, farming is very much a way of life for many people today, just as it was for the American colonists.

Source: Social Studies for Kids (2013). (www.socialstudiesforkids.com).

of mysterious, confusing, and sometimes surprising content. Students can actually discover things in this document—things their teacher may not have noticed. There is value to each kind of text, depending on the purpose of the lesson—many teachers find that combining these two very different kinds of texts is highly engaging and effective for students.

Seek Out Great Informational Texts

A lot goes into finding great texts, and we will explore some of the criteria for making these decisions in the pages that follow. But beyond knowing what you're looking for in texts, how do you know where to find them? Choosing worthy informational texts for students to read requires considerable teacher research. Some teachers consider themselves "text geeks" and relish the quest. Others find it daunting. Regardless, seeking out strong informational texts is

crucial. The list of resources in appendix A at the end of this book serves as a useful starting point, especially for the shorter informational texts that complement longer anchor texts (e.g., the articles about urban literacy rates that Julia St. Martin's students read). Most of the resources in this table come from the following types of organizations (their websites are often a good place to start your search):

- Museums
- Government organizations
- Nonprofit academic, arts, or professional organizations

Photographs and art also serve as powerful texts to engage students and help build their background knowledge about a topic, particularly English language learners. Appendix B at the end of this book provides a list of websites with powerful collections of photographs and images.

No list can or should be comprehensive. What follows are some recommendations and cautions:

- Seek out librarians as key allies. Librarians often have access to specific databases and websites that others do not, and librarians can also coach you on search strategies that you then can apply independently when future text needs arise. Tap the resources of your school, district, public, academic, or state libraries.
- Be wary of open web searches (i.e., "googling it"). Material that can come up as highly ranked in an unrestricted web search may initially look credible. Yet these resources often lack authority and may violate the copyright of the original source.
- Join e-mail lists or networks of teachers who teach the same content or grade level to learn what they've found and to share your treasures. Just

"Draw on your prior knowledge and connections—either another course, colleagues who are scientists, or librarians—they may know of good texts. Or conduct a theme-based search on Amazon. This can be time-consuming, but it can also be fun. If you search multiple topics, you'll feel confident that you haven't missed a great book."

—*Rhonda Berkhower, Conservatory Lab Charter School, Boston, Massachusetts*

as you would ask friends, "Read any good books lately?" begin to ask colleagues, "Used any great texts with students lately? Where did you find them?"

- Be savvy regarding copyright laws. In most cases, materials available to an individual teacher or school librarian on the sites in appendixes A and B can be used in the classroom under what is called "fair use." But if your school, district, or state plans to copy and distribute a text broadly, additional rules often apply. The American Library Association is a good source for resources on copyright and fair use.

In the case study that follows we see one teacher's journey to find the right texts for her fourth-grader's exploration of westward expansion.

Case Study

On a Journey to Find the Right Texts

As a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher at Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning in Denver, Colorado, Ali Morgan planned and taught a historical case study of westward expansion. The guiding questions and big ideas students explored were, Was the journey a success? Whose land is this? and Was the story of westward expansion a story of progress?

For Morgan, an early step in the planning was selecting an anchor text—a text the entire class would read together and which would provide a backbone for the case study. "I look for an anchor text that is 'layered' so that it can be used for multiple entry points and lessons," says Morgan. In this case, she looked for a text that would engage her readers, build their understanding of the content, and serve as a model for what writing would have looked like and sounded like during that time period so that they would be better prepared to do their own writing. Morgan chose a historical fiction book that was written in the style of a journal, *The Journal of Augustus Pelletier: The Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804* by Kathryn Lasky. The novel about the Lewis and Clark expedition gave students an accurate time line of events, included a who's who of real players, and provided a good sense of what everyday life was like using descriptive imagery.

Morgan also had to consider what other texts would complement and supplement this anchor text. Students would read one or two journal entries from the anchor text followed by reading an informational text that would provide more detail about a particular event or person referenced in the anchor text. Students would read initially for the gist

and then reread, annotating or coding the text as they read. As a group they would record important information about the purpose of the text on a class anchor chart. The readability and imagery of the anchor text helped students access and make connections to the informational texts and gave them a reference point when the reading was more challenging.

Because each text had different features, Morgan embedded skill-building mini-lessons when necessary to help students become stronger, more independent readers. They might read the same informational text two or three times, each time reading for new kinds of information or employing different text-coding strategies. Morgan values having students go back to the same text multiple times, digging deeper each time: “I want the students to understand that this is what real researchers, scholars, and historians do,” she says.

“I realized when we were doing our historical case study on westward expansion,” reflects Morgan, “that I needed to put as much time and effort into finding good texts at all levels as I did on planning the literacy and content lessons.” Morgan found texts for the case study in the school and public libraries and worked hard to vary the selection to build student engagement—maps, time lines, and graphs provided a different way for students to access and analyze information. The varied texts also gave students more entry points as writers. They could write in the journal entry style of the anchor text or in the style of other informational texts, such as newspaper articles or historical documents. “When you get good informational texts, they really help expand students’ thinking. I read all the books I gather and, after a while, you can really see the difference in quality. You begin to know what makes a good choice.”

Texts used in the westward expansion case study:

The Journal of Augustus Pelletier, Kathryn Lasky

This Vast Land: A Young Man’s Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Stephen E. Ambrose

Lewis and Clark on the Trail of Discovery, Rod Gragg

York’s Adventures with Lewis and Clark: The African American’s Part in the Great Expedition, Rhoda Blumberg

Buffalo Dance: The Journey of York, Frank X. Walker

Lewis and Clark for Kids: Their Journey of Discovery with 21 Activities for Kids, Janis Herbert

Lewis and Clark journal excerpts

Library of Congress website (www.loc.gov), Jefferson page

www.pbs.org/lewisandclark

www.smithsonianmagazine.com

FINDING TEXTS THAT MEET THE STANDARDS

Creating great sets of texts is an ongoing process that often starts—as it did for Ali Morgan in the preceding case study—with a single excellent text, the central or anchor text of a unit. This may be a text that's been traditionally taught or used at a grade level or a new favorite. Turning that stand-alone text into a set first requires a close look at the grade-level Common Core standards, the topic or theme the text represents, and the quality of the text.

Studying the standards enables teachers to be clear on what, precisely, a student should be able to do or how a student should think about a text or set of texts together. Not every text offers the opportunity to teach every standard. For example, if a standard indicates that students need to be able to compare and contrast the perspectives of multiple characters or narrators, that means they have to work with text that incorporates multiple perspectives. If the text at hand doesn't do that, additional texts could be brought into the set that do.

In addition, teachers need to think about what they want students to learn or discover from the text at hand. What is the reason for reading the text at all? Should students understand that every person has basic human rights that should be protected? If so, build a text set that enables students to see how human rights are protected and also what happens when they are violated. Should students understand that cracking the genetic code has led to myriad advances in health care? If so, texts should help them understand how the code was cracked, as well as the resulting advancements.

Finally, teachers need to consider the quality of each text. It needs to offer students the opportunity to learn new vocabulary and to consider increasingly sophisticated ways of writing. If the text is literature, it should be critically acclaimed literature that holds up as a model of excellent writing. If it's informational text, it should do its job well—explaining new ideas fully or arguing craftily.

The anchor text is the centerpiece of students' reading: the key or central text that all students will have and read in order to build content knowledge and literacy skills. In the universe of all the rich resources students will read in a given unit, the anchor text is like the sun: all the other articles, poems, maps, charts, and other forms of text circle around this one text. Thus, choosing an anchor text is a high-stakes decision. Sometimes a district or school literacy coach will make this

decision. Other times it will be teaching teams or even individual teachers. In any case, gathering many possible texts, then critiquing each against multiple criteria is a good place to start.

> "When choosing a text I search for a relationship among the topic (or the big idea framing our learning), the target (or standard we are targeting), the task (or specific assessment we are using to achieve our target), and finally a compelling and complex text in order to create a transformative learning experience for students."
>
> *—Joseph Longbottom, K–5 media specialist, Delaware Ridge Elementary School, Kansas City, Kansas*

Analyze Anchor Texts

What follows is a list of criteria against which teachers can analyze anchor texts, along with examples from our Common Core curriculum. Keep in mind: no text is perfect. No single text can do everything we need text to do for students: the following criteria should be considered as a system. Yet similar to any major decision—choosing a house, a car, a career—choosing the text that will anchor student learning is one of those times when it is worth "going slow to go fast." As you and your team plan, ask this question: "What are all the things we need this text to do for us?" Keep iterating until you've landed on a text that is worth your time to analyze and plan from, and worth your students' time, effort, and intellect to understand and appreciate. In the snapshot that follows the criteria list, a curriculum designer reflects on this important choice.

Content: Is the text aligned to grade-level content standards? To what extent will this text help students learn something important and enduring about the big ideas of an academic discipline? How can the text help to build students' knowledge about the world? If a literary text, what topics can it still teach students about? To what extent does this text provide sufficient information, so students can successfully respond to an evidence-based writing task?

Example (grade 8): *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai (a fictional account of a Vietnamese girl whose family flees during the Vietnam war) offers an opportunity to teach about the universal refugee experience, aligned with social studies themes such as the role of social, political, and cultural interactions in the development of identity.

Interest: Is the text compelling for students? Will students love digging into this text? Why? Is the text developmentally appropriate—will it sing to students of this age and background? Is it high interest in terms of content or format? Is it particularly beautifully written or illustrated?

Example (grade 5): *The Most Beautiful Roof in the World* by Kathryn Lasky (about rain forest researcher Meg Lowman) has rich scientific information about biodiversity and the rainforest, and includes gorgeous photographs of her in the canopy and stories about her son's adventures in the rainforest that will hook kids.

Complexity: Is the text appropriate in terms of qualitative and quantitative measures of complexity? What makes this text challenging? Based on qualitative measures, in what ways will the concepts, structure, language, and so on give students something worth grappling with? Based on quantitative measures, is this text sufficiently demanding in terms of syntax and academic vocabulary? Does this text provide sufficient complexity to ensure that students have to work hard and get to build their literacy muscles as they work through this text? In this unit, how will this text be paired with texts of greater or lesser complexity? (For more on choosing texts at the right level of complexity see chapter 6.)

Example (grade 5): *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan has a Lexile text measure of just 750, somewhat low for fifth grade. Yet it provides quite a challenge for fifth-graders based on qualitative measures—the concepts (identity formation of the main character and human rights violations experienced by migrant farm workers in the 1930s) as well as the metaphorical language and symbolism.

Reading standards: Does the text offer opportunities to teach the grade-level Common Core literacy standards? What opportunities does this text afford you to teach specific Common Core standards at a specific grade level of rigor? If the reading standard requires students to infer, is the text sufficiently rich to require such inferring or are the ideas all right there? If the reading standard requires students to interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively, does the text include the types of diagrams and charts that would make this work possible? Usually, a complex text will provide

opportunities to address all the reading standards. But some texts may provide a particularly elegant fit for addressing a given standard at a given grade level.

Example (grade 7): *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park (fiction set during the Second Sudanese Civil War) traces the perspectives of Salva (from the Dinka tribe) and Nya (from the Nuer tribe). Though the language is simple for seventh-graders, the concepts related to tribal conflict, personal identity, and loss are intense. This novel affords a perfect opportunity to address RL.7.6: *Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text,* because each chapter opens with a section told from Nya's perspective and then provides a longer section told from Salva's perspective. And by pairing this novel with articles about the Second Sudanese Civil War and websites with information about the "lost boys" of Sudan, this historical fiction also provides an opportunity to address RL.7.9: *Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.*

Writing standards: Can this text serve as a mentor text and model of author's craft? To what extent is this text a strong model of written arguments, informative writing, or narrative writing? Can this text—or sections of this text—serve not only as a context for students to build knowledge but also as an example of author's craft that students can emulate in their own writing?

Example (grade 8): *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* by Laura Hillenbrand is literary nonfiction. Through this text, students learn about Japanese-American relations in WWII. But they also see a master storyteller at work. Consider this review from the book's endorsements: "The author's skills are as polished as ever, and like its predecessor [*Seabiscuit*] this book has an impossible-to-put-down quality that one commonly associates with good thrillers" (Roland Green, *Booklist*). Students are sucked in as readers and inspired as writers. Hillenbrand's work serves as a mentor text when students craft their own narratives in order to meet W.8.3: *Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events . . . use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.*

Snapshot: Aligning Texts to the Standards

Sharon Newman, an EL Education staff member who worked on our Common Core curriculum design team, reflects on her struggle to find a text that would cover content and address grade-level Common Core State Standards. "When writing curriculum, you are trying to not only address content but also the Common Core State Standards," Newman says. "When working on a third-grade curriculum module, 'Gathering Evidence and Speaking to Others: The Role of Freshwater around the World,' we needed to teach the standard RI.3.8: *Describe the logical connection between particular sentences and paragraphs in a text (e.g., comparison, cause/effect, first/second/third in a sequence).*"

"We selected inspiring complex texts—one about a nine-year-old boy who had built a well to provide clean water to a village in Africa (Ryan Hreljac, *The Boy Who Built a Well)*; another about the efforts of citizens in Australia to conserve water (Ann Weil, *Dry Days in Australia*); and a third about an inspiring American who started a foundation to keep our rivers clean (Jill Esbaum, *Tackling the Trash*). When we reviewed the texts, we felt good about their potential to meet the standards. They were rich with sequence and cause and effect and included some comparisons. But when we dug in deeply to the standard and became more familiar with it, we realized that although these 'logical connections' were present, they didn't always exist between sentences and paragraphs. At times there were connections, but the structure of these texts did not support students in learning about the logical connections. As our uncertainty grew, we checked released test items aligned to the standard. This was a huge help! It made us realize that the texts we selected were not going to provide rich and appropriate opportunities for mastery of the standard.

"With this in mind, we went back and did a deep analysis of texts about rivers and the water cycle that we had planned to use in the previous unit, including our anchor text, *One Well: The Story of Water on Earth* by Rochelle Strauss. Through these texts, we were able to more tightly meet the intent of the standard—noting comparisons between groundwater and surface water in different paragraphs, sequence as an author follows a river from its headwaters to the sea, and cause and effect within the water cycle.

"The trick is finding the sweet spot. Where in the text does it reach the standard? Some of the Common Core standards are very detailed in what students are asked to do. Texts are layered and don't necessarily fit standards exactly. As a teacher you have to analyze the heck out of it, look closely at the assessment and what it's asking kids to do, and then make sure that your instruction draws them to that standard."

Newman offers these tips for teachers selecting texts aligned to Common Core State Standards:

- Know with clarity what standards you are trying to address—make sure you really understand what is expected of students.
- Gather lots of texts. Pull everything you can on the topic. Work with librarians (our local library will pull dozens of books on a topic), so you have a range of different texts to consider. Anchor texts are one way to teach the standards, but you need others as well. Some anchor texts can be taught over and over and some can't.

- As you review texts that are the right level of complexity, try them out—design note-catchers to help students track and organize their notes, preplan text-dependent questions. Do this with a series of texts to ensure that they will give students ample opportunity to meet standards.

A VOLUME OF READING

In the Common Core era, students are challenged to read complex texts to build content knowledge, literacy skills, and academic vocabulary. Working with complex text is slow, careful work, and it's important, but it's not the only thing students need in their reading diet.

In order to grow as readers, students also need a volume of reading. They need a lot of text and a variety of text, including text beyond the texts central to a unit and in addition to texts they read in school. A rich reading diet helps students build important world knowledge, acquire additional academic vocabulary, gain fluency, and master increasingly challenging syntax, all of which are critical for reading comprehension.

Our approach to a volume of reading is influenced by the following:

- The Common Core vision of what it means to be college and career ready as readers
- The research base on reading instruction
- Recognition that reading is a skill that demands ongoing practice to develop proficiency

Unfortunately, many students in the early years struggle to decode text or fail to discover books on topics they are interested in. Just as children on a meager, monotonous, or strictly junk food diet fail to thrive physically, they often lose their enthusiasm for reading and fail to thrive academically. This in turn can lead to decreased motivation to read for learning or pleasure and ultimately results in a lost opportunity to become proficient readers.

To get enough reading practice students need to read for a variety of purposes and encounter all types of text. Although reading development does not occur in a linear fashion, and students' reading proficiency occurs at different rates (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State

Independent reading time helps students maintain a healthy reading diet.

School Officers, 2010), children who become strong readers often begin by reading the backs of cereal boxes, the road signs outside the bus window, labels on the grocery shelves, or magazines in the doctors' office. In school, teachers can provide a balanced diet of reading even with a single topic of study by adding biographies about chemists to reading in the chemistry textbook, a newspaper article about a local election to the civics reader, even cartoons or jokes added to morning meeting. Independent reading, encouraged by a varied, deep, and accessible classroom library, is another opportunity to develop students' reading muscles.

Build in Plenty of Time to Read for Research

The authors of the Common Core state that "to be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 4). When students

are engaged in "research reading," they typically are reading many texts about the same or related subjects. For example, to design working wind turbines and write proposals about renewable energy, eighth-graders at King Middle School in Portland, Maine, conducted research of articles on the Internet, but they also read public documents from Maine's Land Use Regulatory Committee and gathered information from science videos. In Ali Morgan's classroom, which we visited previously in this chapter, chalk rails, milk crates, and wheeled library carts were full of books about westward expansion. Students were saturated with opportunities to build their knowledge about this topic. Grappling with a variety of text types and sources pushes students to expand their vocabularies and repertoire of text structures, as well as their understanding of a topic. Short research projects, rather than one monumental research project each year, offer multiple opportunities for reading variety and are more likely to appeal to diverse learners. Library media specialists play a critical role in helping students to complete assigned research projects and independent research related to students' personal interests.

Build in Plenty of Time to Read for Pleasure

The Common Core has brought into focus the cognitive benefits of reading: vocabulary building and comprehension of complex texts. It is important for us to keep in mind, however, that even if students can read, it does not mean they will choose to do so.

Reading for pleasure complements reading complex text that is required reading (and a few students do choose to read complex text for pleasure). Reading for pleasure is key for building lifelong readers and enables developing readers to make choices about their own reading likes and dislikes as they construct their own reading identities. As every book club member can attest, conversations about books and authors and ideas found in print stir the pot of what we know about the world, what we believe, and what we can imagine. Teachers, media specialists, and even reading volunteers who encourage students to choose their own books for independent reading and talk to students informally and formally about their choice reading invite children to uncover new knowledge and connect with each other and their world.

Teachers often are concerned about holding students accountable for independent reading. There are endless ways to track independent reading requirements,

but the most successful ways place the responsibility on the student. Launching independent reading routines that include checking out books, goal setting, reading journals or letters, silent time and talk time, and protocols for exchanging books creates a culture of reading in the classroom that builds students' reading stamina and engagement. You can find sample independent reading plans at http://commoncoresuccess.eleducation.org/.

Clearly it will take time, effort, and intention to transform the process of choosing worthwhile texts from simply using what's left over in the bookroom or what was listed on last year's lesson plan into a process that is collaborative, purposeful, and designed to grow lifelong readers. Why bother? Perhaps returning to the opening vignette for part 1 provides the answer. Julia St. Martin had her students grapple with the question "why read?" by engaging with strategically paired literary and informational texts. In so doing, she gave them a glimpse of the answer.