

PLANNING A COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE LESSON

Selecting Appropriate Text

The success of a lesson using the Comprehension Instructional Sequence (CIS) leans heavily on the text that is selected. The CIS is a complex multi-strategy approach and is dependent upon text to sustain deep discussions on challenging topics and concepts. Unfortunately, many texts are not sufficiently complex to match these demands for critical thinking. A CIS lesson can be set up for success as long as teachers understand the steps for choosing text that is appropriate. This selection process requires a careful look at a text's alignment to state standards, language complexity, tension, and communication approach.

State Standards Alignment

An important initial step in the text selection process is examining a text's topic and content for relevant connections to State Standards and Benchmarks. Topics and standards with the most complexity are usually the most challenging for students to learn. Consequently, these particular standards warrant an instructional approach that is distinct from a typical lesson. Complex topics such as imperialism, force in motion, and literary conflicts require a comprehensive instructional approach such as CIS. A text that aligns with an important complex State Standard is one with instructional value.

Some important questions to ask in examining text include:

- Which State Standards and Benchmarks do students find the most challenging?
- How closely aligned is the topic of the text with this important State Standard/Benchmark?

Tension in Text

A second and vital aspect of text selection is the existence of tension in text. A successful CIS lesson requires text with a source of tension such as:

- a controversial topic or issue from the past, present, or future.
- opposing/multiple perspectives of literary characters or individuals in expository text.
- an author's divergent viewpoint in comparison to those of students in the classroom.
- an event of conflict

From such a text, options emerge from which students can choose, grabbing student interest. These dynamics propel student participation, challenge critical thinking, and sustain class discussion. Students have their position, claim, or viewpoint to confirm or reconsider as they read, reread, think, write, and discuss. Text with a source of tension can carry this much engagement across days.

Some important questions to ask in examining text include:

- Does the text contain a source of tension?
- Does this particular tension source present an adequate set of options for students to choose a position?

Language Complexity

Careful preview of the language in text is a critical part of the text selection process. Text language consists of all the vocabulary and sentence structures in a text. Texts with vocabulary and sentence structures similar to that of typical everyday conversation have a lower level of language complexity.

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As vocabulary and sentence structures advance above the conversational level, text language increases in complexity. Complex text contains vocabulary with a larger proportion of general academic and/or discipline-specific words. Examples of general academic vocabulary include *conventional* and *perspicuity*. *Hydraulic torque* and *parliamentary systems* are examples of discipline-specific words. Complex texts can also contain words that are largely unfamiliar and abstract with ambiguous meanings. Others may be either figurative or archaic in nature – or both. Besides vocabulary, sentences can be complex. They vary in length and use of punctuation. Typically, complex sentences are longer, contain more than one complex phrase, and can include several different types of punctuation marks. Although literary texts can have very complex sentence structures, it is not unusual for vocabulary to boost the overall language complexity of expository texts to exceed that of literary texts. The CIS process challenges students to learn and apply new vocabulary in discussion and writing, increasing both their oral and reading vocabulary. Therefore, it is vital that the text language in a CIS lesson contain challenging words in sentences with complex structures.

To identify such a text for a CIS lesson, teachers need to ask themselves the following questions about language complexity to expand students' oral and reading vocabulary:

- Does the text contain general academic vocabulary words?
- Does the text contain discipline-specific vocabulary words?
- Does the text include words that are unfamiliar, abstract, or figurative (perhaps even ironic)?
- Does the text include complex sentences structures with several different types of:
 - punctuation marks?
(*i.e., commas, colons, semi-colons, ellipses, dashes, parentheses, brackets, footnote superscript, etc.*)
 - structures/patterns?
(*i.e., compound sentences, compound phrases, sentences with a long list of items separated by commas, etc.*)

Communication Approach

The last element to examine in text is its communication approach. The manner in which ideas are presented throughout text encroaches on the reasons students can read, reread, and think about text. Explicit introduction of ideas and their connections can leave little to discuss. For instance, text that explicitly states its main idea suppresses a purpose for reading. Also, text that consistently provides an explicit definition of terminology throughout a passage stifles curiosity. A text that is too explicit restricts student thinking that could launch a discussion. In contrast, text ideas that are implicit can force the reader to grapple with a text's message. The reader must compare and contrast information within the text, clarify the message, and, finally, synthesize the last of the evidence that the reader has gathered to draw a final conclusion. Text with an implicit approach of presenting information can challenge students to read more closely and, therefore, remain more actively engaged in thinking as they read.

Some important questions to ask in examining text include:

- Does the text explicitly define or state text information (*i.e., word meanings, main ideas*)? (If the text is too explicit in one small section only, is it possible to use the remainder of the text for a CIS lesson?)
- Does the text take an implicit approach, placing responsibility for determining word meanings or main ideas on the reader?