**Activity # 2: Practice Core Action 1, High-Quality Texts**

**Below is an excerpt from *The Great Fire,* an informational book written by Jim Murphy. We will be working closely with this text throughout the day.**

**Excerpt from *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy**

*The Great Fire of Chicago is considered the largest disaster of the 1800s. It is rumored to have started in*

*the barn of Patrick and Catherine O’Leary.*

1. A shed attached to the barn was already engulfed by flames. It contained two tons of coal for the winter and a large supply of kindling wood. Fire ran along the dry grass and leaves, and took hold of a neighbor’s fence. The heat from the burning barn, shed, and fence was so hot that the O’Learys’ house, forty feet away, began to smolder. Neighbors rushed from their homes, many carrying buckets or pots of water. The sound of music and merrymaking stopped abruptly, replaced by the shout of “FIRE!” It would be a warning cry heard thousands of times during the next thirty-one hours.
2. Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn. The city boasted having 59,500 buildings, many of them—such as the Courthouse and the Tribune Building—large and ornately decorated. The trouble was that about two-thirds of all these structures were made entirely of wood. Many of the remaining buildings (even the ones proclaimed to be “fireproof”) looked solid, but were actually jerrybuilt[[1]](#footnote-1) affairs; the stone or brick exteriors hid wooden frames and floors, all topped with highly flammable tar or shingle roofs. It was also a common practice to disguise wood as another kind of building material. The fancy exterior decorations on just about every building were carved from wood, then painted to look like stone or marble. Most churches had steeples that appeared to be solid from the street, but a closer inspection would reveal a wooden framework covered with cleverly painted copper or tin.
3. The situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts. Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses—all made of fast- burning wood, naturally. Because both Patrick and Catherine O’Leary worked, they were able to put a large addition on their cottage despite a lot size of just 25 by 100 feet. Interspersed in these residential areas were a variety of businesses—paint factories, lumberyards, distilleries, gasworks, mills, furniture manufacturers, warehouses, and coal distributors.
4. Wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards. Stately stone and brick homes had wood interiors and stood side by side with smaller wood-frame houses. Wooden stables and other storage buildings were common, and trees lined the streets and filled the yards.
5. The links between richer and poorer sections went beyond the materials used for construction or the way buildings were crammed together. Chicago had been built largely on soggy marshland that flooded every time it rained. As the years passed and the town developed, a quick solution to the water and mud problem was needed. The answer was to make the roads and sidewalks out of wood and elevate them above the waterline, in some places by several feet. On the day the fire started, over 55 miles of pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.
6. Fires were common in all cities back then, and Chicago was no exception. In 1863 there had been 186 reported fires in Chicago; the number had risen to 515 by 1868. Records for 1870 indicate that fire-fighting companies responded to nearly 600 alarms. The next year saw even more fires spring up, mainly because the summer had been unusually dry. Between July and October only a few scattered showers had taken place and these did not produce much water at all. Trees drooped in the unrelenting summer sun; grass and leaves dried out. By October, as many as six fires were breaking out every day. On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control. What made Sunday the eighth different and particularly dangerous was the steady wind blowing in from the southwest.
7. It was this gusting, swirling wind that drove the flames from the O’Learys’ barn into neighboring yards. To the east, a fence and shed of James Dalton’s went up in flames; to the west, a barn smoldered for a few minutes, then flared up into a thousand yellow-orange fingers.

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What Makes This Text Complex?

1. **Quantitative Measure**

Go to <http://www.lexile.com/> and enter the title of your text in the Quick Book Search in the upper right of home page. Most texts will have a Lexile, measure in this database. For more information on other valid quantitative measures, click [here](https://achievethecore.org/page/2725/text-complexity).

Use this chart for quick reference:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 2–3 band | 420–820L |
| 4–5 band | 740–1010L |
| 6–8 band | 925–1185L |
| 9–10 band | 1050–1335L |
| 11–CCR band | 1185–1385L |

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1. **Qualitative Features**

Consider the four dimensions of text complexity below. For each dimension, note some examples from the text that make it more or less complex. For more information on these four dimensions, click [here](https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Companion_to_Qualitative_Scale_Features_Explained.pdf).

**Meaning/Purpose**

**Text Structure**

**Language Features**

**Knowledge Demands**

1. **Reader and Task Considerations**

What will challenge my students most in this text? What supports can I provide?

How will this text help my students build knowledge about the world?

**STEP 2: Text Complexity - Qualitative Measures Rubric**

**INFORMATIONAL TEXTS**

Text Title\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Text Author\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Exceedingly Complex** | **Very Complex** | **Moderately Complex** | **Slightly Complex** |
| **PURPOSE** | * **Purpose:** Subtle, implied, difficult to determine; intricate, theoretical elements | * **Purpose:** Implied, but fairly easy to infer; more theoretical than concrete | * **Purpose:** Implied, but easy to identify based upon context or source | * **Purpose:** Explicitly stated; clear, concrete with a narrow focus |
| **TEXT STRUCTURE** | * **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between an extensive range of ideas or events are deep, intricate and often implicit or subtle; organization of the text is intricate or specialized for a particular discipline * **Text Features**: If used, are essential in understanding content * **Use of Graphics:** If used, extensive, intricate, essential integrated graphics, tables, charts, etc., necessary to make meaning of text; also may provide information not otherwise conveyed in the text | * **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between an expanded range ideas, processes or events are deeper and often implicit or subtle; organization may contain multiple pathways and may exhibit traits common to a specific discipline * **Text Features**: If used, greatly enhance the reader’s understanding of content * **Use of Graphics:** If used, essential integrated graphics, tables, charts, etc.; may occasionally be essential to understanding the text | * **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between some ideas or events are implicit or subtle; organization is evident and generally sequential * **Text Features**: If used, enhance the reader’s understanding of content * **Use of Graphics:** If used, graphics mostly supplementary to understanding of the text, such as indexes, glossaries; graphs, pictures, tables, and charts directly support the text | * **Organization of Main Ideas:** Connections between ideas, processes or events are explicit and clear; organization of text is clear or chronological or easy to predict * **Text Features**: If used, help the reader navigate and understand content but are not essential * **Use of Graphics:** If used, simple graphics, unnecessary to understanding the text but directly support and assist in interpreting the written text |
| **LANGUAGE FEATURES** | * **Conventionality**: Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language * **Vocabulary:** Generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading * **Sentence Structure:** Mainly complex sentences often containing multiple concepts | * **Conventionality**: Complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language * **Vocabulary:** Somewhat complex language that is sometimes unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic * **Sentence Structure:** Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words | * **Conventionality**: Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning * **Vocabulary:** Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic * **Sentence Structure:** Simple and compound sentences, with some more complex constructions | * **Conventionality**: Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand * **Vocabulary:** Contemporary, familiar, conversational language * **Sentence Structure:** Mainly simple sentences |
| **KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS** | * **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Extensive, perhaps specialized or even theoretical discipline-specific content knowledge; range of challenging abstract and theoretical concepts * **Intertextuality:** Many references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc. | * **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Moderate levels of discipline-specific content knowledge; some theoretical knowledge may enhance understanding; range of recognizable ideas and challenging abstract concepts * **Intertextuality:** Some references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc. | * **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Everyday practical knowledge and some discipline-specific content knowledge; both simple and more complicated, abstract ideas * **Intertextuality:** A few references or allusions to other texts or outside ideas, theories, etc. | * **Subject Matter Knowledge:** Everyday, practical knowledge; simple, concrete ideas * **Intertextuality:** No references or allusions to other texts, or outside ideas, theories, etc. |

1. Built cheaply or poorly constructed [↑](#footnote-ref-1)