

Teaching to Complexity

A Framework to Evaluate Literary and Content-Area Texts



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Evaluating Books for Quality

General Criteria

Once you have decided a book seems good enough or interesting enough to read and evaluate further, what is it that you pay attention to *while you read*? How do you adopt the mindset of a book reviewer? The goal is to use aesthetic criteria about an art form in a very purposeful context. As an educator who is always thinking about his or her students as readers, your lens is threefold. You should be thinking about the following:

- literary and artistic value of the book as an art form
- the utility of the book as a teaching tool
- the appropriateness of the book for the student reader(s) the teacher has in mind

This is one of the key pivot points in the work that we do with teachers in our college classes. We know educators can converse about children’s and young adult literature in the robust way that literary critics and book reviewers do, but then do something entirely different with the conversation: consider the child or teen reader and the many roles the book could play in the classroom.

Over the years, we’ve developed a shorthand for this work, drawn from an article we read in *The Horn Book Magazine* (Stevenson 2006). In the article, Deborah Stevenson argues that critics of children’s literature are “moving away from the notion of a unified, abstract ‘good’ that all books are trying to achieve for all readers. Now we tend to consider ‘good’ short for ‘good *for*,’ to recognize that the word can have a vast range of specific meanings” (2006, 513). Stevenson advocates that reviewers consider the quality of any single book within the context of the genre of literature in which it was written and the purpose that the author had in mind. It is unrealistic to think you can take a stack of very different books in different genres with different purposes and decide that one is better than the others. They are all different.

Instead, Stevenson suggests, you have to “learn reading by reading” (2006, 514) and use the “map of literature” that already exists in your head, based on all the books you have already read. Using knowledge from past reading experiences, evaluation criteria for the literary merits of a book, and your understanding of what the book is trying to do (its purpose, rooted in its genre), you make your best judgment about every new book you read. Stevenson was writing to children’s and young adult librarians focusing on collection development. We have appropriated her phrase “good for” and use it as a lens for making selections for the

Resources for Evaluating Text

Horning, Kathleen. *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children’s Books*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.

Kiefer, Barbara. *Charlotte Huck’s Children’s Literature. 10th Edition*. Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2010.

Lukkens, Rebecca J. *A Critical Handbook of Children’s Literature. 9th edition*. Boston: Pearson, 2012.

The Horn Book
<http://www.hbook.com>

School Library Journal
<http://www.slj.com>

Cooperative Center for Children’s Books
<http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu>

classroom. We ask ourselves, “is this book good?” and “what is it good for?” For the rest of this chapter, we are going to talk about what might make a book “good” for consideration. In chapter three, we’ll talk about what it might be “good for” in the classroom.

When evaluating a text, we consider the following general categories: (Horning 2010; Kiefer 2010; Lukens 2012):

- Genre characteristics
- Content
- Text structure
- Language
- Visuals: Illustrations and book design
- Appeal

Of course, considering these categories is a recursive process. We separate these elements of a text, but recognize that they are also interconnected. The visuals are a part of the text structure in a picture book or graphic book; language helps to shape the sense of genre. When we want to deeply consider how a book operates as a whole, we first have to understand how the separate components operate.

To best introduce these categories, we will describe the criteria we consider generally for any text within each category. Following this overview, we dive into genre-specific iterations of the categories and their evaluation criteria, to ground one in the ways in which each separate element works collectively within the different genres.

Genre Characteristics

Genre is the largest category in which we can classify a work. When we refer to genre, we reference the traditional genres of realistic fiction, fantasy and science fiction, historical fiction, poetry, as well as nonfiction. Each of these genres has their own subgenres as well. These will be discussed in greater detail in each of the genre sections. Helping students develop a sense of genre identification is important. Fine-tuning your own understanding of the characteristics of each genre helps you not only teach students those understandings, but helps you select strong examples of these genres for whole-class, small-group, and individual reading experiences, which reinforces those understandings even further.

- How does it meet established criteria?

Content

The content of children’s and young adult books is as wide and expansive as the human experience. It is impossible to cover the range of what’s available in terms of children’s and young adult books, but there are important considerations regarding content. Identifying the content helps teachers make

- What is the book about?

connections between national, state, and local standards and the curriculum they develop; and make connections across standards if they are interested in doing interdisciplinary work. For example, selecting books to use in language arts that provide a content match for a social studies unit, or exploring books in science class that help to model and reinforce what the class is learning about nonfiction in language arts. If a book requires research, it is important to know that the author has done that research in order to best craft a character with a particular ethnic background or physical condition, convey information about cutting-edge research, or bring the past to life through setting. We think it is really important to talk about the research process authors and illustrators use with your students. The research they conduct can potentially serve as some of the most meaningful examples of the purpose and process of research. Those who write in developmentally appropriate ways for children and young adults are best suited to model these practices in ways that students can understand.

Text Structure

There are many ways to organize and structure texts. Narrative texts often provide a clear arc that children are pretty familiar with by the end of their primary grade years. However, as they get older, the books they read become more complex, with flashbacks, alternating character narrations, or chapters that alternate first, second, and/or third person narration. Nonfiction presents a whole other range of possible structures that impact how the reader receives information. It is important to be able to identify the text structures an author uses to organize a book, in order to teach those text structures to students. Once students have an understanding of text structures through a wide range of reading and writing experiences, they are more likely to use a range of structures in their own writing and recognize when certain text structures are more appropriate than others. If they don't read with attention to structure, it becomes more difficult to write with attention to structure.

- How is the text organized?
- What is the overall text structure?

Language

It is easy to relegate a discussion of the language of a book to the college English classroom where one discusses literary elements for the fun of it. In truth, we do think it is great fun to analyze and talk about the language of texts. But in the context of selecting books for children and young adults to read, it is also incredibly purposeful. When reading a book, we consider how the author reaches his or her readers in developmentally appropriate ways, specifically, the vocabulary words used and how they are contextualized for readers. We consider the ways in which similes and metaphors support theme and/or characterization in fiction and poetry, and convey conceptual understanding in nonfiction. Language and dialogue establish a sense of characterization in fiction, while direct quotes in nonfiction also establish the character of a subject. We examine sentence length, the ways in which books for younger readers or beginning readers use consistently short sentences or follow a pattern the reader can recognize and anticipate, and the ways in

- How is the language rich and interesting?
- What kind of sentence variation occurs?

which books for older readers vary sentences for stylistic purposes. Identifying the literary elements of language in a text can support students in accessing the text. As developing writers and speakers, students benefit from immersion in rich language experiences, with language modeled in written text as well as the spoken word.

Visuals: Illustrations and Book Design

More and more, we have come to expect high visual appeal in the texts that we encounter. This visual emphasis can probably be attributed to several factors: new technologies that make the creation and reproduction of images easier and more affordable; expectations set by the highly visual nature of the Internet, the appeal of video games, and the interfaces of our portable electronic devices; and the theory of universal design that recognizes how visual cues and reinforcement support a variety of learners. The role of visuals in text varies across genres, playing the strongest role in meaning-making in the picture book (fiction and nonfiction) and graphic fiction and nonfiction. Small illustrations (called spot art) can also enhance the experience of a novel or a collection of poetry. Longer works of nonfiction may incorporate photographs (archival or created to explicate the content of the book), reproductions of primary source documents, charts, diagrams, maps, and/or infographics (highly visual and/or stylized representations of information). When evaluating the visual aspect of the text, we need to consider the aesthetic appeal of the visuals and how they engage and hold the interest of a student reader as well as the relationship between the content of the text and the visual, or how the visuals serve a clear purpose in the text. Do the visuals enhance the reader's understanding of the text?

- How do the visuals engage the reader?
- How do they enhance the content?
- How does the book design reinforce the content?

We also consider the design of the book. By this, we mean the size, layout, and any special features of the book's construction. For example, the overall design of both Lynn Curlee's nonfiction picture book *Skyscraper* (2007) and Deborah Hopkinson and James Ransome's *Sky Boys* (2006) is tall and thin, like the skyscrapers themselves. Layout refers to the arrangement of text and illustration on the pages of the book. Picture books often incorporate double-page spreads with an image that spans two pages. The text accompanying the illustrations might be found anywhere on either of the two pages, or it, too may span both pages. A work of nonfiction may have visuals, such as photographs, diagrams, or maps carefully placed throughout the text, with consideration to how their placement helps to 'chunk' the text for the reader. Pop-ups, lift-the-flaps, and fold-out pages are all special aspects of a book's construction, designed to increase reader interactivity.

Appeal

Talking about appeal is a slippery slope, isn't it? All of us have our own preferences for particular genres and storylines, topics, and time periods. For example, Erika loves fantasy fiction, while Mary Ann adores historical fiction. No one book will appeal to all of your students in the exact same way. But knowing and understanding one's students and the developmental range that they encompass allows the teacher to gain an understanding of their likes and dislikes each year. It has been said that "[c]hildren's books are books that have the child's eye at the center" (Kiefer 2010, 7). What books represent the worldview and perspectives of the children and young adults with whom the teacher works? What are common developmental milestones that suggest certain characteristics of students that the teacher can look for when selecting books? Ultimately, it's the teacher who works with them every day, and understands the group dynamics that shift and develop over the course of the year, the combination of personalities that exist in each class, and the ways books will appeal to most, some, or few of them. Cultivating a love of reading is dependent on offering enough consistent choices that appeal to the whole class, small group, and individual students. Teaching is always a delicate balancing act between covering what you must cover and fostering a love of learning and reading in individuals. Text selection mirrors that balancing act between coverage and cultivation; we strive to fuse the two as much as possible.

- How will it appeal to the particularities and preferences of the readers in one's class?

Figure 2.3 summarizes the general text evaluation considerations we have described. This document can also be found in Appendix E.

Figure 2.3 General Text Evaluation Considerations for Quality Guide

General Text Evaluation Considerations for Quality	Ask yourself:
Genre Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ How does it meet established criteria?
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ What is it about?
Text Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ How is the text organized?■ What is the overall text structure?
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ How is the language rich and interesting?■ What kind of sentence variation occurs?
Visuals: Illustration and Book Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ How do the visuals engage the reader?■ How do they enhance the content?■ How does the book design reinforce the content?
Appeal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ How will it appeal to the particularities and preferences of the readers in one's class?

Exploring the Possibilities: One Text, Many Contexts

The examples in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate how the same book can be used at different grade levels with readers of varying abilities, when used for different instructional purposes and with different instructional practices. We'll share with you our completed *Quality, Utility, and Complexity Chart* for each featured book and then outline several possible teaching ideas, highlighting the instructional purposes of each teaching idea and considerations for text complexity dependent on the intended grade level.

Those Rebels, John and Tom

We'll begin with the book that we have used across Chapters One through Four to illustrate the thinking process of evaluating for quality, utility, and complexity. By now, you probably feel quite familiar with Barbara Kerley's *Those Rebels, John and Tom*, illustrated by Edwin Fotheringham. We want to ground you with this familiarity so that you can see the ways in which we pivot from thinking about the book one way to thinking about the book in multiple contexts.

Throughout this resource, we have been considering the book for instruction in fifth grade social studies and language arts. In Figure 5.1, you will see an example of our considerations for the complexity of *Those Rebels, John and Tom* (Kerley 2012). This chart outlines the consideration of this book for fifth graders. But even when considering using the book with fifth graders, the complexity of a text is not static (Nesi 2012). The instructional purposes still vary.



If we are using this book in the context of an exploration of the American Revolution, students are going to be gaining background knowledge on that time period and on the specifics of the development of the Declaration of Independence. They will be able to use that information to access this text or this text will serve as a scaffold or introduction to the other texts and conversations that might follow on the contents of the Declaration of Independence. Later in this chapter, we will address more specifically the ways in which other texts work to shape and inform the complexity of any single text in a text set approach. But for now, it is important to consider that other texts on this topic in social studies can and will support students' historical analysis of this particular text, and that will impact how difficult this text is for them.

Instructional practice decisions will also impact the consideration of complexity. Sometimes the complexity suggests a certain practice, as we discussed in Chapter Four. But it is the instructional purpose combined with the complexity that truly suggests a particular instructional practice; complexity is considered in the context of both at once. For example, if a fifth grade teacher decides that everyone in the class should experience this book to frontload knowledge or multiple perspectives about the American Revolution, then the book would either be read aloud or treated as a whole-class read. Either way, there will be

much more support for meaning-making than if the instructional purpose is to consider multiple perspectives on these two men and half of the class reads this book and one half reads *Worst of Friends: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and the True Story of An American Feud* (Jurmain 2011). Having different groups read one or the other is a really interesting and engaging instructional possibility. But you have to decide whether or not your students can do that, and if they can do that with the particular texts under consideration. Instructional decisions for this kind of classroom planning will also take into consideration how students make sense of the book they read and consider the content of the *other* book read by their classmates. Yet another consideration of complexity takes place if the instructional purpose is to have students learn about different men and women who played pivotal roles during this period of American history. If each literature circle in class reads one of several picture book biographies, you have to consider how the students take notes and evaluate the information in the book they read, and how the books their classmates read shed light on their own. The texts selected for these literature circles have to meet that format.

Of course, it could be that you're considering using this book in a fifth grade biography genre study, and it is one example among many picture book biographies. The change in instructional purpose will have you looking at the complexity of the text and the other books being read alongside this particular book with a different lens. You will consider the elements of the text that make it complex and the elements of biography you want to showcase through this particular book. Whether or not the biography genre study takes place before, during, or after the study of the American Revolution will continue to influence your consideration of its complexity. If you have already completed the unit, or are conducting both concurrently, the book may be less complex than if students read it before the unit takes place in social studies.

Figure 5.1 Completed Sample *Quality, Utility, and Complexity Chart* for *Those Rebels, John and Tom*

Title: *Those Rebels, John and Tom*

Author: Barbara Kerley

Year of Publication: 2012

Notes from the Book Reviews

Booklist calls it a “double portrait,” (2011) which is a good name to use in teaching with the book. Booklist also gave it a starred review and said, “[it]... is a terrific book to lead the charge in learning about the Revolution, as well as a lesson in how dedicated cooperation can achieve great ends. An obvious choice to pair with *Worst of Friends*.” (Booklist 2011).

All reviews focus on how the book addresses the issue of class differences between them and the issue of slavery, since Jefferson was a slave owner.

All reviews address the focus on the two men and the story of the writing of the Declaration of Independence.

The *School Library Journal* review talks about the content of the author’s note and their presidential years and changing relationship and an “authoritative” but “child-friendly” approach to history (Whitehurst 2012).

Genre Characteristics: Literary and Artistic Value	Genre Characteristics: Complexity and Accessibility
<p><i>How does it meet established criteria?</i></p> <p>As a “double portrait” it is a biography of two people, but a partial biography of each.</p> <p>As a double biography it shows parallel events in each of their lives chronologically, as one would expect.</p> <p>There is no invented dialogue (which would be problematic), but Kerley does use direct quotes from each man’s writings to create a sense of immediacy with the reader. We get to hear each of them through her selective quotes.</p> <p>Research is well documented in the back matter, with citations for different source material and an author’s note that explains the origins of the book and the relationship between the two after the Declaration of Independence was written.</p>	<p><i>How does the book meet and/or differ from genre characteristics? How does this impact accessibility?</i></p> <p>Most students are used to reading a single biography or a collected biography of a lot of people. As a “double portrait” of two historical figures this might be a new concept for most readers. But the comparison and contrast supports the reader in understanding the two men simultaneously and their common goal. If it were not as well written, it would become a challenge. But the format makes this deviation from a typical single biography easier to access. The information provided in the author’s note helps to put the narrative text in context for the reader. For some readers, it might be too much information, but reading the author’s note is not central to understanding the narrative; it simply enhances the narrative.</p>

Content: Literary and Artistic Value	Content: Complexity and Accessibility
<p><i>What is the book about?</i></p> <p>It is a partial picture book biography about Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. It covers their childhood and early years, leading up to the writing and signing of the Declaration of Independence. The book focuses on how different they were and how they worked together as a team to get the Declaration both written and then approved by the Continental Congress.</p>	<p><i>How complex is the content for the intended audience? How does this impact accessibility?</i></p> <p>For much of the book, contrasts are drawn between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. In this case, what makes the book complex is also what makes it accessible and therefore less complex. The comparison and contrast between the two allows the reader to understand how important it was that they shared so many of the same values despite their differences in upbringing, life experiences, and interests.</p>

Text Structure: Literary and Artistic Value	Text Structure: Complexity and Accessibility
<p><i>How is the book organized? What is the overall text structure?</i></p> <p>It is a chronological narrative. At the start, there is a page about John, then a page about Tom, and then a page about the two together.</p> <p>Sometimes the book talks about each separately on different sides of the two-page spread; when talking about events they were both involved in, it talks about them together.</p>	<p><i>Is the text structure simple or more complex? How does this impact accessibility?</i></p> <p>The text structure is what makes this book accessible to readers. Comparison and contrast is used within the paragraphs about each man. Each is written about in contrast to the other or an event that is unfolding.</p> <p>The narrative itself is straightforward because it follows chronological order moving from childhood to adulthood. However, it goes through their childhood fairly quickly and spends most of the narrative on the writing of the Declaration of Independence, which takes place over a short period of time. But this is clear, and should not confuse students, particularly if they are studying this for the purpose of understanding content about the American Revolution.</p>

Language: Literary and Artistic Value	Language: Complexity and Accessibility
<p><i>How is the language rich and interesting? What kind of sentence variation occurs?</i></p> <p>It starts off with a great hook that frames the whole narrative (“formed a surprising alliance, committed treason, and helped launch a new nation”). The book is filled with rich adjectives and parallel structure within paragraphs and pages. Direct quotes from each, taken from primary source materials, are included in quotation marks throughout. There is a jovial mood to the text in general.</p>	<p><i>How challenging is the language? How does this impact accessibility?</i></p> <p>The direct quotes are not difficult to read and understand because they are written into sentences as phrases, so the context supports the reader in understanding the point of view in the direct quote. It creates a sense of immediacy with Jefferson and Adams without slowing anything down or making the book more difficult. Adjectives and overall mood of the language make it more fun to read and slightly silly, which builds motivation in student readers.</p>

Visuals: Literary and Artistic Value	Visuals: Complexity and Accessibility
<p><i>How do the visuals engage the reader? How do they enhance the content?</i></p> <p><i>How does the book design reinforce the content?</i></p> <p>The book is illustrated with a palette of red, white, and blue, which reinforces the identity of the United States of America. The cover illustration and the final illustration are both allusions to famous images associated with the American Revolution. The cartoon drawings of Adams and Jefferson reinforce the comparisons and contrasts within the text. Background colors of white and navy also set up contrasts just as the book contrasts the two men. John and Tom are always mentioned in capital letters. Some sentences are in a larger bold font to emphasize their importance.</p>	<p><i>How do the visuals and design impact accessibility?</i></p> <p>The visuals make the book more accessible by illustrating with concrete images the differences between the two men. These illustrations can move readers from the concrete to the abstract in their thinking about the two men. The visuals also extend historical information to support students who might not have prior knowledge, making the book more accessible. For example, when discussing the occupation of Boston and the British navy patrol of the Atlantic seaboard, the book’s illustrations bring to life the author’s reference to “racket” in Boston (loud, occupied city controlled by the British army) and the “racket” in Virginia (the British navy’s occupation of the Atlantic coast so that no ships could purchase colonial goods). By using a homonym (racket) the author compares and contrasts a very specific topic. But it is the illustrations that make the different meanings of that homonym clear to the reader who does not know the word, and demonstrates very clearly some of the activities of the British navy of which most students probably do not have prior knowledge.</p>

Readers
<p><i>Overall, in what ways does this book feel appropriate for some or all of the readers in your class?</i></p> <p>Fifth graders will find the personal approach to history interesting. The use of humor in the text and the illustrations, and the humorous subtext and mood despite the serious topic, will engage students and make them want to keep reading. The more students view the illustrations, the more connections they will find between text and illustration, again, making the facts and concepts in the book more accessible and meaningful. The tightly written structure and book format will also help students navigate the text successfully. The personalities of Adams and Jefferson also make the book engaging to students, and therefore, more invested in reading for meaning and understanding.</p>

Utility as a Teaching Tool: Instructional Possibilities (Purpose/Practice)

Instructional Purposes

Understanding Content

The book could be used to explore political relationships in general, and as a lens for looking at how Congress functions today in social studies.

This book would also be useful as part of a text set of biographies of historical figures from the American Revolution, to better understand the time period.

Developing Disciplinary Literacies

This book could be read in the context of exploring the Declaration of Independence as a document, helping to scaffold student understanding of how the document was written. The document was created as a result of a process that involved more than one person. Who were those people? How did they work together? How is the Declaration of Independence an end product of their collaboration, not simply something set in stone from the very beginning?

Using Mentor Text for Student Writing

As a “double portrait” mentor text in social studies, students can learn about how to write about two figures from any time period, for students to see figures as interconnected. Students could also read *George vs. George* by Rosalyn Schanzer, about George Washington and King George of England, as another mentor text. As part of a composition study of parallel structure in writing comparisons and contrasts in English Language Arts.

Teaching Literary Analysis and Genre Study

As part of a biography genre study in English Language Arts, students can examine the author’s craft while reading this and *Worst of Friends*, another narrative book about the friendship between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

Developing Reading Skills

Reading this book allows students to hear some of the transitional phrases used to compare and contrast the two men, showing students how identifying the text structure supports their understanding of a nonfiction text.

Instructional Practices

It works well as a read aloud for reading for understanding content, developing disciplinary literacy, analyzing mentor texts, and developing reading skills.

As a literature circle book, it could be used as one group’s exploration of founding fathers, while other groups read other perspectives.

For a biography genre study, it would be ideal for a whole class read as a mentor text.

Quantitative Evaluation of Text Complexity

Include one or two quantitative measurements of complexity to compare and contrast with your evaluation of the text.

Lexile® Range = 960L (upper parts of the 4–5 grade band)

ATOS/Accelerated Reader Bookfinder = 6.3 (middle of the 4th–5th band)

But what would it be like to teach this book with students who are not in fifth grade? Let’s explore.

Political Friendships

Instructional Purposes: Understanding Content—Social Studies: Political Friendships

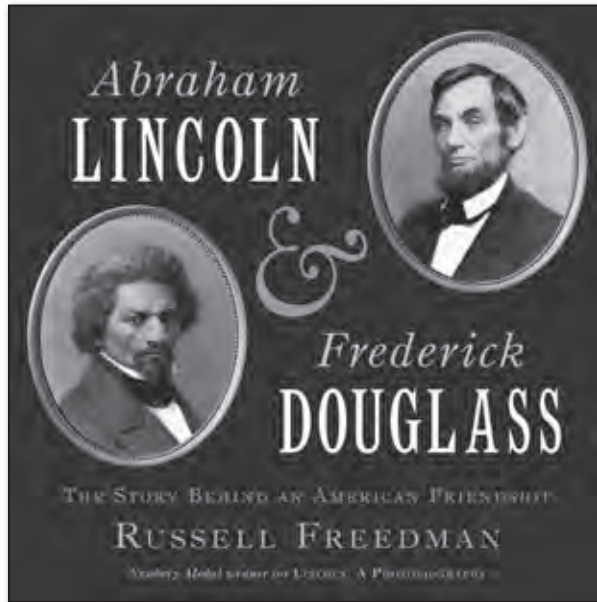
Grade Level: 7

In many states, 7th grade social studies classes explore early United States history, from pre-colonial times through the Civil War. The Civil War is typically studied toward the end of the year. Have students read *Those Rebels, John and Tom* paired with Russell Freedman's chapter-length nonfiction book *Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas: The Story Behind an American Friendship* (2012). Read the picture book aloud or have multiple copies for students to explore in small groups. Ask students to document how the friendship between the two men helped them to craft the Declaration of Independence. Then, have students use

the theme of this book, the potential of friendship, as a lens for reading Freedman's book on Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas. Have students explore what the relationships between Lincoln and Douglas did toward ending the Civil War and slavery in the United States. You may also want to extend this conversation to an exploration of friendships "across the aisle" in Congress today. What members of Congress are friends with one another despite being in different political parties? How have those friendships impacted legislation and policy today? How have they failed to make an impact?

Considerations for Text Complexity: This picture book would not be a challenging read for most 7th graders who have studied the American Revolution earlier in the school year. The book is fairly simple in its comparison and contrast, which provides a stepping stone for the reading of *Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas: The Story Behind an American Friendship*, a longer and more complex book. By introducing students to the concept of political friendships, and what the two accomplished despite their differences, students can use that theme as a strategy for reading the longer nonfiction work that focuses on a different period of time. Reading the nonfiction book in social studies while studying the Civil War allows students to reinforce the other content they are learning about the time period, generally, and the question of slavery as a moral and political matter, specifically.

Russell Freedman has also written *Give Me Liberty! The Story of the Declaration of Independence* (2000). This nonfiction chapter book would work equally well paired with *Those Rebels, John and Tom* (2012) in a focused exploration on the ideas and history behind the Declaration of Independence in seventh grade social studies.



Biography Genre Study

Instructional Purposes: Teaching Literary Analysis/Genre Study—English: Biography

Grade Level: 10

Biography styles have changed a great deal over the past 30 years. Writers of popular literary nonfiction often use the literary device of theme as a way to hook their writers and focus their cradle-to-grave biographies more precisely on a range of themes that can be identified within a subject's life. As an introduction to a student research project that involves researching and writing their own biographies, have students conduct a combined picture book biography and author study of Barbara Kerley's picture book biographies: *Those Rebels, John and Tom* (2012), *The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse Hawkins* (2001), *What to Do About Alice?* (2008), and *A Home for Mr. Emerson* (2014). High school teachers might be surprised to think about using picture book biographies for a lesson in author's craft. But picture books provide a quick pathway to important writing lessons that can be learned in context and carried into longer student works. Have students respond to questions such as what themes are at work in each individual picture book biography? How does the author connect those themes to the time and place in which the subject lived? Use these biographies as mentor texts for students' first approach to writing biographies on subjects of interest to them. You might also want to have students read excerpts from well-written biographies of adults, such as David McCullough's *John Adams* (2001). As they conduct their research, what themes do they see emerging in the figure's life? What themes do they decide to concentrate on in their own writing? Why?



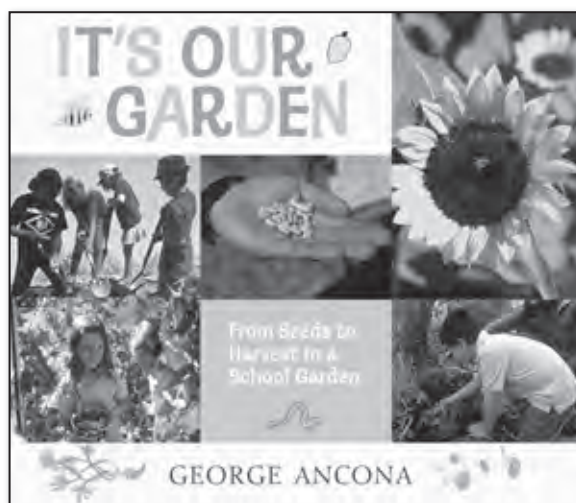
Considerations for Text Complexity: These picture book biographies will be simple reads for most 10th grade students, with the exception of English language learners who may be new to the United States and not have the same grasp of American history that other students might have. Regardless, these picture book biographies will still be able to ground readers in a manageable dose of biographical writing that can inform their own decision-making as they research and write. Picture book biographies will help to make the biographies written for adults more accessible as mentor texts, and less complex. If students can understand how theme works in a picture book, it can then be used as a reading strategy as students read full-length books, articles, and book chapter written for adults.

The teaching ideas for 5th grade included in the *Quality, Utility, and Complexity Chart* and these for 7th grade and 10th grade illustrate the different ways that this picture book biography can be used at different grade levels for different instructional purposes.

Now let's consider a second example.

It's Our Garden

It's Our Garden: From Seeds to Harvest in a School Garden by George Ancona (2013) is a book that invites exploration at first glance. The attractive cover includes the title in varying hues of green, student artwork depicting the flora and fauna of a garden and five photographs depicting multicultural students at work caretaking and harvesting. Photo-essayist George Ancona offers readers the opportunity to experience a year alongside these children, their teachers, parents, and community members as they work, learn, and play together in a vibrant courtyard garden. Ancona's insightful photographs depict the carefully designed space, illustrate the processes of gardening, and capture the intensity and joy of the gardeners. As an added bonus, student artwork provides a wonderful complement to carefully placed photos and generous white space. Clear and engaging text elaborates the images, and readers will gain a sense of the cyclical nature of gardening, the hard work involved, and the many rewards reaped by the gardeners. Throughout the book, Ancona highlights the integration of school curriculum with gardening activities; a teacher seeking a compelling argument for the establishment of a school garden need look no further than this book.



But a discussion of school gardens is only the most obvious possible curriculum focus for this title. Let's take a closer look to examine the versatility of this particular title.

Traditional Literature Text Evaluation Considerations for Quality Guide

Text Evaluation Considerations for Quality	Ask Yourself...
Genre Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What type of traditional literature is this? Is it a myth, legend, history, folktale, fairy tale, tall tale, or fable?
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How does this story explain a natural phenomenon, human behavior, or imagined history? ■ How does this book fuse a particular traditional story within the context of our modern world? ■ Does the book say when the story originated orally and/or when it was first written down?
Text Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does this story follow the same narrative arc as other forms of the story? If not, how does it differ? ■ Are there other structures at work that help frame the narrative structure of the story, such as the length of a day, season, month, or year?
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What vocabulary words represent the culture from which this story originates? ■ How does the dialogue represent the culture from which the story originates or is set?
Visuals: Illustration and Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What media is used to illustrate this story? Is there any connection between it and the time or culture in which the story is set? ■ How does the illustration convey the magical elements, if any, of the story?

Evaluating Text for Instructional Purposes Guide

Instructional Purpose	Ask Yourself...
Understanding Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What is the match between my content standards and the text? ■ What is the match between my content standards and this text in relation to other texts on the topic? ■ Is information presented in a way that will hook my students and get them even more interested in the unit topic? ■ Does the information in this text go beyond the standards? How will that impact how my students read it?
Developing Disciplinary Literacies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Is the vocabulary used in the text authentic to the discipline, but contextually defined in a manner that makes it accessible to my students? ■ Does the text model the inquiry and/or critical-thinking processes of the discipline either implicitly (for example in an author's note) or explicitly (through direct description in the text)?
Developing Reading Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does this book appeal to students? Will it be worth working on? ■ How much background knowledge does the book require? Will students be able to comprehend as they decode? ■ What kinds of words does it contain? What is the balance of sight words, monosyllabic, and polysyllabic words? ■ How long are the sentences? Too long? Too short? Just right?

Instructional Purpose	Ask Yourself...
Teaching Literacy Analysis/Genre Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How does this book represent the genre we are studying? ■ How does the book represent the genre on its own and how does it accomplish this understanding in the context of other books of the same genre or of different genres that focus on the same topic? ■ What literary elements are at work in the book? Does the author do anything unique with one or two in particular that stand out as very effective examples to use in instruction? ■ What is the match between the literary elements that are required to teach according to your school's scope and sequence or state and district standards?
Analyzing Mentor Text for Student Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ If students are reading “like a writer,” what do they learn about genre through this text? ■ How does this particular text model a particular quality of good writing, for example, varied sentence length, for targeted practice of that skill? ■ How does this particular text model the ways in which writing can be used to communicate knowledge to the world, by informing readers or informing and persuading readers simultaneously?
Developing Critical Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What are the key ideas and details in this text? ■ What perspectives and points of view are offered within this text? Which are left out? ■ What can a student learn by reading just this text? What does the student learn by reading this text in the context of other texts within a text set?

Instructional Purpose	Ask Yourself...
Engaging in Inquiry and Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does this text represent “the literature of inquiry”? Does it model the inquiry process, the having of questions, and the ways around stumbling blocks and dead ends? ■ Will this text help my students persevere through their own research? ■ Is this text going to help me model how I do research? Or is it one that I will have my students explore? Or both? ■ How does this text compare to other texts on the topic in terms of all of the above questions?
Developing Reading Habits and Love of Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Who is the audience for this text? ■ What about this book reflects my students’ interests, passions, worries, or senses of humor? ■ Who in my class this year, last year, or maybe in future years, might find this of interest? ■ If the book is going to be a challenging read, is there enough interesting content to make students to stick with it?