

THE 5 PLAGUES OF THE DEVELOPING READER

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important aspects of reading instruction is text selection, the process by which teachers choose what their students will read. What they choose can have a far-reaching impact on how students' reading and analytical abilities evolve. Therefore, educators should be alert to a variety of factors when considering a text for inclusion. For example, what can a teacher choose for their fifth grade class to ensure later success with *Oliver Twist*? The goal is to make choices as rigorous as possible—in a balanced way that still allows for stories that students and teachers love, like *Tuck Everlasting*—and to think about how the texts students read *now* can contribute to their success in and love for reading later on.

Many of the books that educators choose early on will become the backbone of how students will read and understand later, harder texts. The rigorous texts students will be asked to read in college require a strong foundation of varied and methodical reading. Without this foundation, many student readers will find the texts too complex and will often give up on them before they're able to glean any insights from their pages.

One tricky part of reading harder texts, though, is identifying them. Lexiles and Reading Levels, two of the most commonly used tools, can often be highly inaccurate. However, teachers should not despair because there are still ways to identify and teach the challenges presented by complex texts. Five particular challenges (which in a tongue in cheek manner we call “plagues”) are especially important.

THE 5 PLAGUES

PLAGUE

1

Archaic Texts

Archaic texts are older texts, those written when authors used different words, in different sequences, within different syntactical structures. With each passing year, archaic texts become a little less familiar and a little more distant from the way we write and talk today.

The Declaration of Independence is an archaic text, as is *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and anything to have dropped from Shakespeare's pen. Accessing these texts is integral to becoming an engaged citizen of the world.

Teachers can help prepare their students for archaic texts by encouraging them to read **pre-complex texts**, like the ones listed below for elementary school, which provide simpler and more manageable versions of archaic structures.

Recommended Reading List

Elementary
<i>The Tale of Peter Rabbit</i> by Beatrix Potter <i>The Wind in the Willows</i> by Kenneth Grahame
Middle School
<i>The Magician's Nephew</i> by C.S. Lewis <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> by L. Frank Baum <i>The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood</i> by Howard Pyle
High School
<i>Oliver Twist</i> by Charles Dickens

PLAGUE

2

Nonlinear Time

Nonlinear texts challenge a reader's expectation that time elapses in a linear and even manner. These texts force readers to contend with confusing moments when time, or the rate at which it appears to be passing, shifts suddenly and without explanation.

Storytelling, in short, doesn't obey any rules in terms of how time elapses. The manipulation of time is one of the primary tools authors use to shape a reader's perception of events—and can be a primary source of confusion for students.

Teachers can help prepare students for nonlinear narratives by training them to spot and analyze sequence, unclear timing, shifts in fixity and rate of time, layered memories, and recurring events.

Recommended Reading List

Elementary
<i>Farm Boy</i> by Michael Morpurgo <i>The Barn</i> by Avi
Middle School
<i>The Chocolate War</i> by Robert Cormier <i>Walk Two Moons</i> by Sharon Creech
High School
<i>Catch-22</i> by Joseph Heller

PLAGUE

3

Complexity of Narrator

A text's narrative voice can add to its complexity. It can have multiple narrators, nonhuman narrators, or even unreliable and deceitful narrators. It can have narrators whose role or identity is unclear—is the narrator the author? The challenge that such a book poses should not be underestimated: these texts are tricky and can result in failed comprehension regardless of the degree of a student's skills.

Complex narration is often used when writers attempt to tell a story for which they find traditional narration insufficient. They present—to the reader who is able to come to terms with them—distinctive perspectives that stretch the range of storytelling.

Encouraging new readers to familiarize themselves with all different kinds of narrators early on keeps them from getting disoriented and discouraged when they encounter unreliable or multiple narrators as their reading becomes more complex.

Recommended Reading List

Elementary

And the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon by Janet Stevens
Wonder by R.J. Palacio

Middle School

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

High School

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison
As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner

PLAGUE

4

Complexity of Story (Plot and Symbolism)

Complex stories are disorienting for even advanced readers, as they force the reader to hold a story together even as different plotlines swerve off in different, seemingly unrelated directions. To point out the obvious, following multiple plots and multiple, interwoven plots is harder than following a single plot.

To prepare students to read successfully, teachers must also expose them to texts with multifarious and complex plot structures. Making sense of a flurry of contradicting plot points requires deep analysis of a text, a powerful tool for readers to leverage throughout their reading career.

Teachers should be very clear and rigorous about untangling plot. Thorough examination of specific elements in a text as a class proves incredibly helpful to students when they head off to write analytic essays on their own.

Recommended Reading List

Elementary
<i>Where the Mountain Meets the Moon</i> by Grace Lin
Middle School
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> by William Shakespeare
High School
<i>Lord of the Flies</i> by William Golding
<i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell

PLAGUE

5

Resistant Text

When authors write resistant texts, they mean for the material to be difficult to understand. To cause a reader to struggle to make sense of a story is to communicate the struggle of making sense of it as a writer. Oftentimes with these texts, gaps in meaning are part of the meaning-making.

Reading resistant texts can be a huge challenge—but an important one. College is full of the most boundary-pushing texts, often precisely because they push boundaries.

Three key actions can prepare students to read resistant text successfully: exposure to extremely dense (plague-ridden) texts, reading poetry to get a grip on non-logical prose, and closely reading short examples to give students frequent manageable exposure.

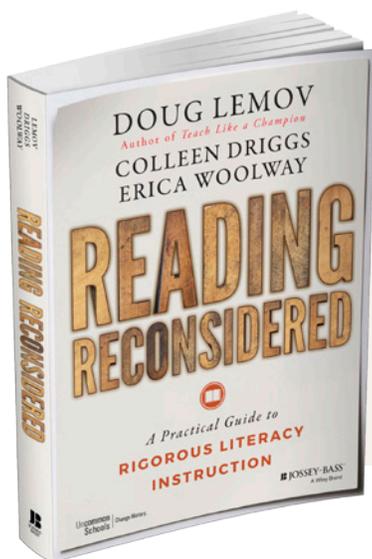
Recommended Reading List

Middle School
<i>Jabberwocky</i> by Lewis Carroll
High School
<i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i> by Kurt Vonnegut
<i>The Sound and the Fury</i> by William Faulkner
<i>The Things They Carried</i> by Tim O'Brien

CONCLUSION

Not every text you read with your students needs to specifically address these plagues. A world in which students did nothing but slog through hundreds of pages of Dickens would be a pretty dark and Dickensian one. It is better to address the plagues with balance, judiciousness, and a strategy in mind. **Lots of exposure spread out over the year in small bursts is likely to help quite a bit.** Just make sure that when you do the work of reading harder texts, you do so in a way that prepares students for success. Above all, just holding an awareness of the plagues and how they can affect readers' confidence and abilities will put your students ahead of the curve when it comes to complex texts.

The *Reading Reconsidered* author team has put together a helpful Text Selection Tool to help you further. Use it now!



To learn more about the techniques behind expert reading instruction and to order your copy of *Reading Reconsidered*, visit teachlikeachampion.com/championeducators

ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF *READING RECONSIDERED*



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