

## Ten Characteristics of Written Text

1. **Genre/Form:** *Genre* is the type of text that has a characteristic form or features. It is the system used to classify fiction and nonfiction texts. There are many types of written genres that include fantasy, biographies, memoir, realistic fiction, forms, bills, brochures, maps, magazines articles, etc.
2. **Text Structure:** *Structure* is the way the text is organized and presented. The structure of most fiction and biographical texts is narrative, arranged primarily in chronological order. Factual texts are organized categorically or topically and may have sections with headings. Writers of factual texts use several underlying structural patterns to provide information to readers. The most important are description; chronological sequence; comparison and contrast; cause and effect; and problem and solution. The presence of these structures, especially when combined, can increase the challenge for readers.
3. **Content:** *Content* refers to the subject matter of the text and the concepts that are important to understand. In fiction, content may be related to the setting or to the kinds of problems characters experience. In factual texts, content refers to the topic or focus. Content influences the difficulty of the text based on the prior experience of readers, i.e. the more a reader knows about the topic, the easier it is to comprehend the text.
4. **Themes and Ideas:** *Themes* are big ideas that are communicated by the writer. *Ideas* may be concrete and accessible or complex and abstract. A text may have multiple themes or a main theme and several supporting themes.
5. **Language and Literary Features:** Written *language* is qualitatively different from spoken *language*. Fiction writers use dialogue, figurative language, and literary structures such as character, setting, and plot. Factual writers use description and technical language. In hybrid texts you may find a wide range of literary language.
6. **Sentence Complexity:** Meaning is mapped onto the structure of language. Texts with simpler, more natural sentences are easier to process. Sentences with embedded and conjoined clauses make a text more difficult.
7. **Vocabulary:** *Vocabulary* refers to words and their meanings. The more vocabulary words known and understood in a text, the easier a text is to read.
8. **Words:** This category refers to recognizing and solving the printed *words* in the text. The challenge in a text partly depends on the number and the difficulty of the words that the reader must solve by recognizing them or decoding them. Having a great many of the same high-frequency words makes a text easier to read and understand.

9. **Illustrations:** Drawings, paintings, or photographs accompany the text and add meaning and enjoyment. In factual texts, *illustrations* also include graphics that provide a great deal of information that readers must integrate with the text. *Illustrations* are an integral part of a high quality text. Increasingly, fiction texts include a range of graphics, including labels, heading, subheadings, sidebars, photos and legends, charts and graphs. After grade one, texts may include graphic texts that communicate information or a story in a sequence of pictures and words. As text become more difficult, not all illustrations are referenced or explained in the written text.
10. **Book and Print Features:** *Book* and *print features* are the physical aspects of the text-what readers cope with in terms of length, size, and layout. *Book* and *print features* also include tools like the table of contents, glossary, pronunciation guides, indexes, sidebars, and a variety of graphic features in graphic texts that communicate how the text is read.

*Fountas and Pinnell. 2011. The Continuum of Literacy Learning, Grades PreK-8, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann*