

# Introduction: Your Access Point

Perhaps it was the title that caught your eye: *Rigorous Reading: 5 Access Points for Comprehending Complex Texts*. There are several phrases embedded in the title, any one of which could have resonated with you.

We chose *Rigorous Reading* because the language of the core standards has made it clear that our students are expected to engage regularly with complex texts. A first step toward doing so is in understanding exactly what makes a given text complex. Quantitative and qualitative measures of literary and informational texts are prompting our field to examine more closely the factors that contribute to text complexity. We stand on the shoulders of giants like William S. Gray, Jeanne Chall, Edward Fry, Elfrieda Hiebert, and so many others who have made it their lives' work to help us understand how a text works. In the past, we have been content to leave these determinations up to others. Now, we are ready to assume more responsibility for understanding what the numbers on the book cover mean. We are growing in our ability to perceive the nuances that make some texts more complex than others, especially in divining those qualities that only a knowledgeable human reader can perceive.

But knowing the breadth and depth of a text is not sufficient, and perhaps you picked up this book because the word *Comprehend* captured your attention. That's not surprising—did you know that reading comprehension studies are the oldest in the field of educational research? The earliest use of the term *comprehension* as it relates to reading was by J. Russell Webb in his *Normal Series of School Readers to Teach Correct Reading*, published in 1856. (By the way, the full title also promised to *Improve and Expand the Mind and Purify and Elevate the Character*.) Comprehension is fundamental in reading, and in this book. Without deep understanding, complex texts are inanimate objects. It is only in the reader's mind that a book comes to life. It is truly wondrous that the physical limitations of time and space vanish when a reader engages in silent dialogue with a writer. As teachers of reading, we want to share what Beatrix Potter imagined from her garden in the English countryside. As teachers of literacy in the disciplines, we want to make it possible for Aristotle's formal logic to come to life in the mind of a 21st century adolescent. Maybe J. Russell Webb was right after all.

Chances are good, though, that the phrase *Helping Students* was the clincher. The five access points we discuss in this book form its center. It would be woefully inadequate to simply fill a room with complex texts and believe that was enough. If it were, we could simply park our students for a decade or so in the great libraries in our schools and communities. But communing with Potter and Aristotle, not to mention Junot Diaz, Chinua Achebe, Basho, and Zu Chongzhi, is not possible without granting students access to these ideas. The five access points build a bridge between the reader and the text, and are accomplished through intentional instruction:

1. Establishing purpose for reading a complex text, and modeling how an expert reader (you) makes meaning
2. Providing scaffolded and close reading instruction to guide students through complex texts
3. Creating opportunities for collaborative conversations with peers to refine their understanding
4. Moving them forward through independent reading of increasingly complex texts
5. Using formative assessment opportunities so you and the reader know what is known, and what is not yet known

We wrote this book with access in mind, and our intention is to provide you with a road map for ensuring that all the students you work with, both now and in the future, can come to know what we collectively have known: The world of texts, whether print or digital, represents a history of our past and the promise of our future. Given that imperative, is there anything more important we can do than to open up access for children and adolescents? In a word—WELCOME.