

Text Complexity Analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Levels of Meaning/Purpose:

The book has multiple levels of meaning. Set in Alabama, the female main character Scout Finch struggles to understand issues of race and prejudice when her lawyer father defends a black man accused of raping a white woman.

Structure:

Although the story has a largely simple structure with a straightforward writing style, several issues complicate the narration and structure. Scout's narration is as an adult reflecting back on a few pivotal years of her childhood; flashback is used throughout. And at several points it seems as though the narration is from the point of view of a less-reliable Scout still in her childhood.

Language Conventinality and Clarity:

The characters speak in easily readable, conversational language. Some slang is indicative of the time period in which the novel is set, and there is some dialect.

Knowledge Demands:

Higher level themes of justice, prejudice, and civil rights are implied. Thinking at deeper levels is required to contemplate the personal, moral, and ethical struggles of the characters as set against the culture and society of the time period.

The ATOS formula (used with the Accelerated Reader program) identifies this title as having a book level of 5.6. A Lexile measure for this novel is 870L. Although the Lexile and ATOS levels fall in the 4th-5th grade text complexity band, the complexity of the book's theme, the issue of rape, and the length of the book would indicate that higher level reading skills are necessary, along with a consideration for the maturity level of the reader regarding the book's subject matter.

These are to be determined locally with reference to such variables as a student's motivation, knowledge, and experiences as well as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the question posed. However, the complexity of the book's theme, the issue of rape, and the length of the book would indicate that higher level reading skills are necessary, along with a consideration for the maturity level of the reader regarding the book's subject matter.

Here in Kansas, educators might want to examine the following elements or issues: social and historical events of the late 50s, early 60s, and issues surrounding racial stereotyping and prejudice in the Deep South at this same time period.



To Kill a Mockingbird is a Pulitzer prize winner. It is a classic, and many teaching resources are available online at various websites. Although the quantitative measures suggest placement in the 4th-5th grade level text complexity band, the qualitative measures and reader and task considerations suggest that the novel is best placed at the **9th-10th grade complexity band**. The Common Core Standards Text Exemplars also places the novel in the 9th-10th grade complexity band.