

Should I Teach This Text? Creating Text Complexity Rationales

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During a time when legislation stands in opposition to principles of academic freedom, educators need tools (e.g. text complexity rationales) to make their classroom a place that is inclusive. This article provides guidance on best practices for selecting, teaching, and using controversial, challenged, or banned texts in educational contexts. The authors demonstrate how they have used text rationales to answer, “Should I teach this text?” Using a Q&A approach, each contributor briefly discusses responses to provide rationale on how to support “the right to read” from a variety of perspectives-- professor, (graduate) student, classroom teacher, and parent.



Image: L. Searcy

During a time when legislation stands in opposition to principles of academic freedom, educators need tools (such as text complexity rationales) to make their classroom a place that is “inclusive of race, ethnicity, culture, and all perspectives that reflect the richness of human experience” (Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts, 2021, p. 5). This article provides guidance on best practices for selecting, teaching, and using controversial, challenged, or banned texts in educational contexts. Context, such as the

exigence and *kairos* of recent legislation that has restricted the teaching or presence of certain books

or concepts, is critical to this conversation. As educators, we often use the rhetorical situation to anchor the clarity of one's message—so we offer the same tool for our rhetoric on this topic. We need to be aware of *exigence*—the issues, problems, or situations that are occurring with book bans, and we need to consider the *kairos*—the moment for decision or action that prompts us to write or speak. Therefore, our aim is to help situate educators with *ethos*, or credibility, because educators have academic freedom to “prepare all students for open inquiry, critical thinking, and appreciation for diverse thoughts, values, and modes of expression required within a just democracy” (NCTE, 2019). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) provides position statements, such as the *Statement on Academic Freedom* (2019), and sponsored programs, e.g. *This Story Matters*, with research, curricular, and pedagogical publications to help educators know their responsibilities in regard to “the intellectual, emotional, and social development of all students” (NCTE, 2019). This practitioner piece refers primarily to NCTE resources since it is a professional organization that supports “best practices” needed to answer the question, “Should I Teach This Text?”

In addition to context, the *exigence*, or issue that causes us to write, is that as of the 2021 legislative session, twenty-seven states have proposed or passed legislation that censors K-12 and university educators and stands in opposition to the principals of academic freedom (NCTE, 2022). In addition to NCTE, both the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) provide statements of “firm opposition” to this legislation. NCAC states that “while the bans are purportedly designed to eliminate the threat of political indoctrination in the classroom, they do exactly the opposite: by implementing an absolute ban on even the discussion of certain concepts they impose State indoctrination” (2021). This means that “to ban the tools that enable those discussions is to deprive us all of the tools necessary for citizenship in the 21st century” (AAC&U, 2023).

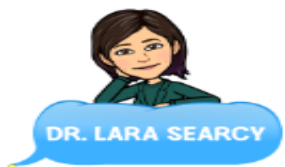
For English language arts educators, our “tools” are books. This aligns with *kairos* in that the timeliness of our message is critical because one way of enacting these bans on “divisive concepts” is not only through the “suppressing or watering down of discussion in educational institutions” (AAC&U, 2023), but through book bans. According to the American Library Association, there has been a “record number of demands to censor library books in 2022” (ALA.org). PENAmerica provides meaningful data with their *Index of Book Bans: From July to December 2022*, they found 1,477 instances of individual books banned which is an increase from the prior six months, and the bans occurred in 37 states (2022).

Of these, “at least forty percent of bans listed in the *Index* (1,109 bans) are connected to either proposed or enacted legislation, or to political pressure exerted by state officials or elected lawmakers to restrict the teaching or presence of certain books or concepts” (PenAmerica, 2022). As the Key Findings in the *Index* states,

This movement to ban books is undemocratic and has harmful impacts: on students who have a right to access a diverse range of stories and perspectives, and especially on those from historically marginalized backgrounds; on educators and librarians who are operating with a chilling effect on teaching and learning; on the authors whose works are being targeted; and on parents who want to raise students in schools that remain open to curiosity, discovery, and the freedom to read. (PEN America, 2022)

Now more than ever, educators need to understand their responsibility to make “pedagogically sound selection practices with a clear written policy for the selection of materials [...] especially to protect the integrity of programs increasingly under pressure from censors, propagandists, and commercial interests” (NCTE, 2014). In light of the current political context, educators need to establish their *ethos* on this topic and take action due to the *exigence* and *kairos* of what is happening with legislation to support “the right to read” because it is “one of the foundations of a democratic society, and teachers need the freedom to support that right so students can make informed decisions and be valuable contributors to our world” (NCTE, 2018).

SHOULD I TEACH THIS TEXT? (LARA SEARCY)



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“Should I teach this text?” is a question that has shown up in multiple ways for me: in preparation of my own lessons (such as in my Social Justice Literacies course), in trying to answer it with my pre-service teacher candidates as they create content units from a range of texts, and in helping navigate text selection discussions with English teachers in the field. What we know is... the answer is complex. This legislative session is also complex as there are many bills in opposition to the principles of academic freedom. Because of that, I, along with graduate students from my Social Justice Literacies course, will demonstrate how we have used text rationales to answer, “Should I teach this text?” Using a Q&A approach, each contributor will briefly discuss responses to provide rationales on how to support “the right to read” from a variety of perspectives—professor, (graduate) student, classroom teacher, and parent.

*IF A TEXT INCLUDES TOPICS THAT MAY BE “DIVISIVE”— DO I STILL TEACH IT?**Be Informed and Know Your State’s Legislation*

First and foremost, please know that this question does **not** mean we are soliciting *any* intent to break the law— be informed and know your state’s legislation. We understand the context that surrounds this question is different for everyone—based on state, grade-levels, support, etc. But, we also know it is no coincidence that with the increasing diversity represented in YAL (with a projected 40.2% of books in 2020 including diverse characters and/or plots), we have also seen an increase in legislation that prohibits “divisive concepts” in an attempt to severely limit K-12 and university educators’ ability to engage in text selection and critical discussions (Jensen, 2023). Again, be informed, know your state’s legislation and laws, and review the trends in book publication and bans.

According to *The New York Times* Bestseller list, there have been 4,446 young adult lit books represented in ten years (from December 2012-December 2022). Thirty percent of the total titles were listed as diverse, or written by authors of color; and five percent of books on the YA bestseller list have been categorized as Queer (Jensen, 2023). Yet, as we look at the PENAmerica data of *Subject Matter of Banned Content*, it now correlates to more books being banned—with 41% of books being banned due to LGTQ+ Themes and 40% banned if they contain protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color. However, this is not new—many of the “Top Ten Challenged Books” for decades have been identified as having “diverse content” (ALA). Though issues of diversity—race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies—are often not cited as a reason for a book to be challenged, it is an element because people are often apprehensive to read or support books about issues that do not reflect their own identities or experiences (LaRue, 2017).

And yet, often, texts are the only place where adolescents are exposed to race, ethnicity, culture, and all (or different) perspectives that reflect the richness of the human experience. What this means is that the outcome of legislation that stands in opposition to principles of academic freedom is, according to the American Library Association, a “record number of demands to censor library books in 2022” (ALA, 2023). As a recent article shares, “In a culture where these books are on the line, where radical book banners want to eradicate these books and the people behind them and represented in them, we need to do a lot more than simply buy them. We need to show up on the front lines and demand intellectual freedom for ALL” (Jensen, 2023). That is how we align to the “principles underlying the First Amendment, that the government may not prohibit the

expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable” (ALA.org).

Do I Still Teach It? “NO”

One possible answer is “NO” – but that answer probably means you are engaging in censorship. Regardless of setting and cultural context, classroom instruction will require educators to introduce potentially controversial materials into classroom discussion (NCTE, 2018). Therefore, educators need to understand and resist both direct and indirect forms of censorship. There are two forms of censorship: Direct censorship occurs when districts restrict the materials an educator can and cannot use in the classroom. Indirect censorship occurs when educators attempt to avoid controversy by limiting viewpoints and perspectives that may be deemed controversial.

Again, indirect censorship, or the self-censorship to avoid controversy, to me, is one of the biggest and most silent outcomes of these divisive concept bills. In asking myself, “do I still teach it,” I have had to hold that definition closely in my decision-making because I know “indirect censorship is often most frequently tied to the voices of producers from historically marginalized communities such as members of the LGBTQIA+ communities, despite the fact that these voices will mirror the often invisible identities of students in classrooms” (NCTE, 2018). And that does not align with my belief that “the classroom a place that is inclusive” because both types of censorship deprive students of literacy and learning opportunities because “censorship leaves students with an inadequate and distorted picture of the ideals, values, and problems of their culture” (NCTE, 2018).

Censorship has specifically happened in our state, Oklahoma, because with the passage of [HB1775](#), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has reported that “school districts in Oklahoma have instructed teachers to no longer use certain terms, including ‘diversity’ and ‘white privilege’ in their classrooms, and have removed seminal works of literature from its list of ‘anchor texts’” (Oklahoma State Legislature, 2021; ACLU, 2021).

Do I Still Teach It? “YES, But with Pedagogical Considerations”

For me, the best answer is “Yes, with pedagogical considerations.” This means we take on the responsibility of fostering intellectual freedom—saying “yes” by preparing rationales that proactively support a book’s use with research. For me, my “yes” to teach a text is an acknowledgement of professional expertise, a “yes” that I will stand up for intellectual freedom, a “yes” that I will recognize humanity and identity, a “yes” to affirming the truth about history, a “yes” to supporting my students’

right to read, and a “yes” to opposing censorship. I “recognize that the motivation behind [divisive] legislation comes from a desire to silence” (NCTE, 2022), so I am grateful that NCTE as well as other co-signed organizations have provided statements on censorship and guidelines for text selection to help us not be silent and to articulate our “expertise and pedagogical considerations.”

WHY MIGHT I EXPERIENCE “DISCOMFORT” OR HESITANCY IN DISCUSSIONS?

(KARRINE ORTIZ)



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Composition

I cannot speak as an educator, as I am not currently teaching, but I can speak as a student who has been denied opportunities of learning due to teacher discomfort or hesitancy when discussing critical topics. These emotions, which are completely normal to experience when discussing uncomfortable topics, have too long denied opportunities for student learning and growth. By justifying the lack of discussion due to being uncomfortable, one may be engaging in self-censorship, which is similar to indirect censorship. This practice is unfair to students, as it denies them opportunities to grow, and it is unfair to teachers, as it denies valuable opportunities to learn. The classroom is cyclical, where everyone thrives when

learning from and with each other. So, even though the answer to the question “Should I Teach This Text” is subjective, do not let any potential hesitancy hold you back.

There are many reasons why teachers shy away from certain topics, but there are two more common reasons why we often may experience hesitancy. The first is not agreeing with the topic being brought into the discussion. Objectivity is key, so despite personal opinions where you may disagree with the topic, students have the right to speak and to learn—just as they have the right to read. My recommendation is to learn with them about the topic because this provides a great opportunity to practice real-world research and inquiry skills.

The second reason some may experience hesitancy or discomfort in discussion is a feeling of imposter syndrome. Imposter Syndrome is when one does not feel like they belong within a certain area and/or when one thinks they cannot add anything to the discussion. Imposter syndrome can gag a conversation in its infancy. Even the most knowledgeable thinkers experience this issue. By learning to speak while struggling with imposter syndrome, a teacher can overcome their hesitancy within the classroom. Ultimately, the goal of overcoming teacher hesitancy is to include

diverse representation within a pedagogical practice. Representation matters. Including and actively acknowledging diversity helps to provide a well-rounded perspective on almost every idea. This pathway of representation is a long and arduous process, but traveling down this road ensures that all of humanity is truly represented.

In an article published by the University of Illinois, several Professors banded together to teach diverse and embodied rhetoric to their students (Smith, et al., 2017). After gathering data from their students about the benefits of such discussions, they concluded that such topics were vital within the classroom. Like me, they found that most of their students had not been given the opportunity to discuss uncomfortable topics within a safe environment until this course gave them the opportunity. Smith, et al. wrote about their experiences as facilitators of the conversation: “We found that the reality of engaging with so many different students so deeply as they worked through interrogating their own embodied identities was that we, as instructors, felt responsible for making sure they grew in safe, productive ways—which was both rewarding and exhausting and, sometimes, frustrating” (2017, p. 56). The reality is that no one *likes* or *prefers* to discuss uncomfortable topics. But these conversations are extremely important as they allow for us to engage with each other.

The resource, *Learning for Justice: Let’s Talk* shares that “the conversations may not necessarily get easier, but your ability to press toward more meaningful dialogue will expand” (2020, p. 5). By continuing and participating in these conversations, hesitation may not be eradicated, but awareness for the need for these discussions will grow. Discomfort is inevitable; learning to speak out while uncomfortable is vital.

HOW DO I PREPARE MY CLASSROOM/COMMUNITY FOR GROWTH, INQUIRY, AND CRITICAL THINKING IN A SAFE WAY? (BROGAN SPEARS)

I come to this conversation as a “heart-on-my-sleeve” secondary English teacher with a neurodivergent brain and a sticker on my car that has an anthropomorphized book crying “don’t ban me!” I share my identity with you because I aim to model who I am and how I create a safe



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space in my classroom. To embrace my students for who they are, I have to be exactly who I am. To create a safe space for authentic growth, we have to share our identities with our students (with appropriate boundaries) and we have to be vulnerable before we can expect them to be vulnerable in our shared spaces. My students know from day one that they come to my classroom as humans first, learners second, and students third. They know this because I tell them, but they also know this because I embed time for them to share their ideas, their triumphs, and their tribulations with the class.

For instance, I recently wrapped a unit on George Orwell's *1984*, which is one of the most frequently banned books. However, to make it relevant and to connect with state standards, I had students give extemporaneous speeches that asked them how the text serves as a warning about current problems in our world (and what it teaches us to do to fix these problems). They were given the question ahead of time and told that they would need to listen to each other and ask follow-up questions, but beyond that they were to speak in a manner that showcased their genuine feelings over words that they wrote because they thought we would want to hear them. This allowed them the opportunity “to speak with voices they choose for themselves in the writing they create” as well as “access multiple strategies and formats to communicate and craft their message, so it resonates with their intended audience” to demonstrate how a “literate citizenry possesses the skills required to analyze, evaluate, act upon, and compose a wide range of communications. A goal of language arts education is the development of informed citizens who can contribute to the common good” (OAS-ELA, 2021, p. 5). In this exercise, students engaged with the text and each other by asking follow-up questions and getting their peers to dig deeper, but this isn't an assignment that I could assign on the first day in the classroom.

This assignment came after students voted on the book that they would read, engaged in discussions about the merits of each of the available texts to choose from, and got to ask *me* questions about the text and *what I thought about it*. Before I could even ask students to engage in discussions about book choice, I had to first “come to know [myself], and how [I] conceive of the ways in which [my] backgrounds will affect [my] teaching” (Boyd, 2017, p. 6). This was a great practice for me to engage in because by recognizing my fears in teaching *1984*—I hadn't read it in many years, it's a

frequently banned book, and, simply, it is a LONG book—I had to create text rationales for them on why they should or should not read it. At the end of the day, though, my introspection was only a segment of what needed to go into the decision to read this text. The decision about my students’ learning had to come from them, and my transparency and introspection helped guide them to their own decisions about which text to choose. This assignment is one of many activities where students’ voices mattered, but it also came after months of building relationships with my students and helping them know that they can trust me to guide them through this kind of text. This assignment hinged on students’ knowledge that we could share our ideas with one another—because they know that our classroom-community is a space where it’s okay to mess up.

Educational author C.A. Tomlinson notes that “students have to know that their teachers see them, value them, and are active supporters of their success” because “*most students need to feel cared about before they will care about academics*” (2017, p. 39). Seeing my students as humans first helps me put this idea into the practice of creating a safe space for growth, but allowing students to see me as a fallible, imperfect human, too, is what helps us foster safety in the space we inhabit together.

Marshall McLuhan’s “City as Classroom” theory highlights the ability to read beyond the page and seek understanding outside of one’s classroom, especially with respect to the discernment of complications that can arise in social justice being made urgent by “the intersectional identity politics that animate both macro and microspheres of human action” (Dowd, 2018, p. 108). When considering this in tandem with the idea that “a medium is simply an extension of our senses,” we have to recognize that our spaces are where we, as educators, can combat the limitations that are being put on our students through the laws put into place by decision makers. At the end of the day, students’ exposure to things they may not know is being limited without their permission; this is a depiction of power and a flagrant stripping of their power (and ours as educators). When faced with this manner of oppression, our students need to know that we have their backs, and our relationship with them can grow in knowing that we share a common goal: “the language arts classroom is a place that is inclusive of the identities that reflect the richness and diversity of the human experience” (OAS-ELA, 2021, p. 5). George Orwell’s *1984* warns us: the “power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing,” and our students need to know that they have as much power in our classrooms as we do (Orwell, 1949/2021, p. 219).

Students can feel empowered when we, as educators, listen to their opinions about their learning. Because, at the end of the day, this is *their* education, not ours (and certainly not the people whose aim it is to limit the scope of education). Above all else, to build a safe space, we have to get to know our students, and we must be willing to be vulnerable enough to share ourselves, too.

WHAT IMPLICATIONS DO THE MOTIVATIONS OF CENSORS HAVE FOR STUDENTS' EMPATHY? (EMERSON FOSTER)



Ph.D.
Student in
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Literacy, and
Culture;
Classroom
Teacher

Nagler argues that hatred robs children of their humanity. He believes that “if we lose empathy with our children, we’ve lost our humanity, which is to say we’ve lost everything” (2020, p. 69). Empathy is too valuable of a cultural resource to lose, especially when it comes to children. Seifert and Clayton found that “reading fiction is strongly correlated with higher levels of emotional intelligence, including empathy, understanding of others, and deep thinking” (2021). If we are to support students to become independent readers in a range of disciplines, then they need the ability to interpret literary and informational texts to achieve academic and career success. Boyd echoes this sentiment when she quotes Wallowitz, explaining that “critical literacy interrogates texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs, ideologies, underlying assumptions” because there are “power structures that intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices” (2017, p. 75). Students see these inequality and injustices, but they lack a critical eye to understand what it is that they are seeing in the first place. Only then can students start to understand that there is something worth seeing in the world around them.

This means they need access to literature that “reflects the richness and diversity of the human experience” (OAS-ELA, 2021, p.5), especially since classrooms are not always one dimensional; many voices are represented within the classroom itself. In the curriculum, “content should reflect the subjectivities of our students, illustrating diversity in authors” because “students have a right to read materials that relate to them in these ways” (Boyd, 2017, p. 87). Students might not even know that those who share a space with them are the voices that need to be heard, examined, and lifted up during our current time within the United States, as more and more texts are banned for inclusion and representation. Boyd cites NCTE from 2004, stating that when texts,

especially written and visual descriptions within texts, are censored, teachers “deprive students of valuable learning opportunities and spaces in which to become more literate critical consumers of texts of all forms” (2017, p. 108).

By banning particular fiction titles, individuals who ban books rob students of opportunities to interact with diverse voices, effectively erasing those voices from society. When students cannot learn about diverse voices, those students do not have the chance to build empathy and understanding of others, which stunts critical thinking. This is confirmed in the Harvard Business Review’s article, *The Case for Reading Fiction*, which shows that “reading fiction predicts increased social acuity and a sharper ability to comprehend other people’s motivations” (Seifert & Clayton, 2020). Therefore, those who ban books must understand that “you can condition people to deny their humanity, but you cannot condition them to make it go away” (Nagler, 2020, p. 131). Being a human means seeing the world in its many forms and beauty. Experiencing humanity requires people to explore and interact with the world around them through diverse and culturally rich texts. The breadth of the human experience must be explored, especially through literacy practices, if we are to awaken the human spirit within each one of us and move towards a new story (Nagler, 2020).

WHAT IF A PARENT/STUDENT COMPLAINS ABOUT MY TEXT SELECTION? (KEVIN SHANK)



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Let me first offer the caveat that I am a writing tutor and graduate student, so I have not yet taught in the classroom, but I do bring the perspective of a parent who cares about related issues like rigor and readiness with my daughter’s educational experience. I value parents as key allies for their child’s literacy and learning and I strongly believe that parents have a right to voice concerns, as do students. I see that parents’ concerns stand in balance with teachers’ rights and responsibilities to protect academic freedoms, maintain student privacy and promote literacy for all students (NCTE, “The Student’s Right to Read,” 2018). We should appreciate everyone’s desire to engage with their education.

Now as a tutor who talks with students and as a graduate student preparing to teach, I work with a variety of people of diverse age ranges and backgrounds who often share with me their concerns about the readings professors assign. I see that while parents or college students certainly may request a different book, they do not have the

right to censor what the rest of the class reads. As I learn more about book challenges, I understand indirect censorship interferes with students' right to read. While we can easily pivot for individual learners, we need plans for whole class selections. The Text Complexity Rationale provides a guiding statement for teaching. It serves as a foundation for reading choice because all students have the right to read (The Students' Right to Read, 2018).

TEXT COMPLEXITY RATIONALE (SEARCY & SHANK)

To provide an actionable tool to guide this process, please visit the link: bit.ly/TextComplexityRationale to “make a copy” of a Text Complexity Rationale Google Doc template. We adapted a resource from NCTE’s “This Story Matters” and used our template in the Social Justice Literacies course to practice how to center the expertise and pedagogical considerations of teachers in determining what instructional materials to bring into classrooms. Our Text Complexity Rationale includes:

- State Standards and NCTE Position Statements brought together to give teachers evidence-based guidelines that underlie their unit lesson;
- Quantitative and qualitative measures, like Lexiles, ratings, and reviews, so teachers have empirical evidence to use in forming rationales to teach;
- A roadmap to connected texts in the unit, so one text is not isolated but positioned within a larger conversation driven by essential questions and themes;
- Alternative texts at the ready that match the unit theme and learning activities, should a student or parent request this alternative;
- Suggested teaching approaches that guide daily learning;
- Deliberate reflection on important questions like what features in the text might be challenged, and, most importantly, what features make this text valuable for teaching.

We strive to become better informed and more intentional in responding to the question, *Why this story matters* (NCTE, “This Story Matters”).

Text Complexity Rationales provide a critical component of lesson planning—especially in tough legislative environments. In learning to create text rationales, educators can engage critically with texts for themselves and connect to allies and support systems they will need as emerging educators (David & Covino, 2022), especially since the larger world is already a diverse and modern age, and all students, including those in predominantly white rural districts, deserve access to a wide range of literature and media literacy.

The Text Complexity Rationale also gives teachers a proactive resource should they field complaints from parents or students. For instance, if a parent or student is insistent (and even angry), we can use the rationale to proactively explain text selection or easily pivot to another alternative text so their child has something to read that aligns with the theme, standards, and essential questions of the unit. The Rationale organizes these features so teachers have them at the ready in case they need to lower the temperature of conversation in a meeting or phone call. In case of challenges to a teacher's choice of readings, the Rationale puts a key resource in the teachers' toolkit, a place to document research, reasoning, and reflection, so teachers feel prepared and gain confidence about the texts they choose. This demonstrates intentional preparation behind text selection choices. Rationales help educators document their careful planning process, so that one's reason for choosing a book isn't because "I happen to like this book or want to promote ideological viewpoints," but rather, because this text is selected based on standards, professional guidelines, and research-based teaching practices in place for decades. Grounded in these professional foundations, the Text Complexity Rationale helps lower teachers' stress levels so they feel better prepared to answer the question *"Should I Teach This Text?"*

Text Complexity Rationale

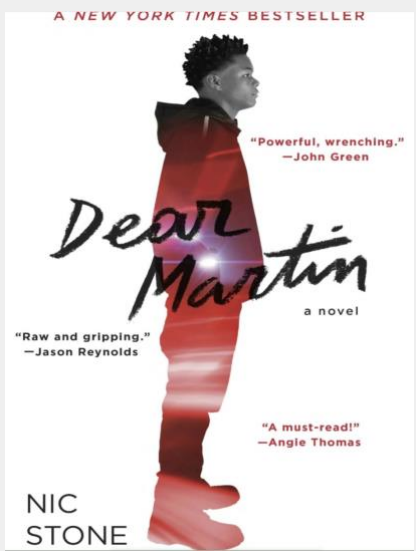
NCTE Position Statements on Text Selection:

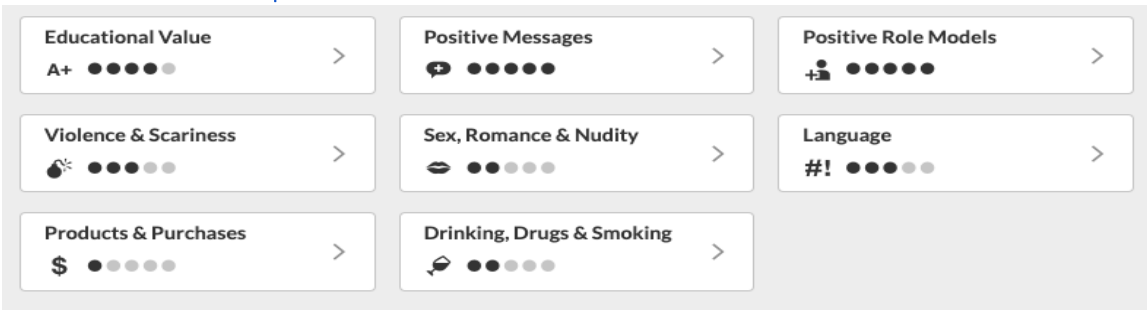
1. [The Students Right to Read](#)
2. [Statement on Censorship](#)
 - [Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Instructional Materials](#)
3. [Rating or “Red-Flagging” Books](#)
 - [Leading the Conversation against Book Ratings and “Red Flags”: A Call to Action for English Teachers](#)
4. [Preparing Teachers with Knowledge of Children’s and Young Adult Literature](#)
5. [Critiquing and Constructing Canons in Middle Grade English Language Arts Classrooms](#)
6. [Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs](#)
7. [Selecting Texts for Your Students and Your Course](#)

*adapted from: [NCTE How to Write a Rationale Template](#) (NCTE Standing Committee Against Censorship, 2022)

The right to read is one of the foundations of a democratic society, and teachers need the freedom to support that right so their students can make informed decisions and be valuable contributors to our world. A story can encourage diversity of thought, broaden global perspectives, celebrate unique cultures, and motivate the reader to achieve their dreams. **This right matters. This Story Matters.**

Book rationales are some of the strongest tools for educators to show why This Story Matters in their schools and classrooms. Rationales are created by educators who use their expertise in literacy and teaching, grounded in the standards students need to meet to achieve their educational goals. A rationale should include a summary, grade-level suggestions, teaching tools, alternative book titles, and more (NCTE, 2022, [This Story Matters](#)).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Title: <i>Dear Martin</i> ● Author: Nic Stone ● Publication Year: 2017 ● Genre: Young Adult Literature ● Text Ranges (NCTE I.1; III.1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ print text ○ non-print text ○ media text ○ classic text ○ contemporary text ○ young adult ○ world literatures ○ historical traditions ○ experiences of different genders ○ experiences of different ethnicities ○ experiences of different social classes
<p>Target Grade-Level and Audience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lexile: HL720L ● Target Grade-Level: High School ● Audience: Young Adult
<p>Plot Summary, Theme(s), Award(s), and Reviews)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Plot Summary: Justyce McCallister is an honor student at an mostly white private school. One night while trying to do a good thing he is racially profiled by police who rough him up and accuse him of trying to steal a car. The experience shakes him so he writes letters to Martin Luther King Jr., to sort out his conflicted thoughts and feelings. He wants to be like Martin, but struggles while navigating a world of police brutality, racial discrimination and stereotyping, even the complex world of romance and family loyalty. Justyce and his classmates discuss issues related to race, privilege, and profiling, exchanges that Stone relates through mixed narratives forms and points of view. These conflicts explored in the story reach a climax when Justyce and his best friend encounter a racist ex-cop who fatally shoots his friend, causing deep turmoil within Justyce, who seeks answers in his “Dear Martin” letters. ● Themes: Identity and privilege, love, loyalty, discrimination, violence and trauma, Black history and experiences, anti-racism. ● Awards: NYT Bestseller; ALA: Dear Martin Awards & Grants

<p>State Standards: (OAS-ELA 2021)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3.R- Students will analyze, interpret, and evaluate increasingly <u>complex literary and informational texts</u> that include a <u>wide range of historical, cultural, ethnic, and global perspectives from a variety of genres.</u> ● 3.W- Students will thoughtfully and intentionally write, addressing a range of modes, purposes, and audiences. ● 6-12.3.R.1- Students will analyze works written on the <u>same topic</u> from a <u>variety of historical, cultural, ethnic, and global perspectives</u> and analyze the methods the authors use to achieve their purposes.
<p>Alternative Texts for Families Who Want Options (<i>List two texts with one sentence each as to why it is an alternative based on similar themes/topics. Include Quantitative/Qualitative pairing</i>)</p>	<p>Alternative Text #1: <i>Frankenstein</i> - explores similar themes of identity through nature versus nurture, what makes someone a monster; also explores themes about choices and their effects.</p> <p>Alternative Text #2: <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> - Canonical text about identity and one's place in society (profanity has been a complaint).</p>
<p>Potential for Challenge: Include a brief explanation of what topics, characters, themes/topics, or other elements are included in this book that could lead to a challenge</p>	<p>Dear Martin Book Review Common Sense Media</p>  <p>(Common Sense Media)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Positive Messages: Marked high for positive messages, particularly about friendship, loyalty, honesty, anti-racism. ● Positive Role Models: Martin Luther King Jr. is seen as a role model, for whom Justyce writes letters to process turmoil in his life and look for guidance; Jus is a role model of reflection and action; SJ is a role model as the anti-racist character who speaks up against injustice and her classmate's assimilationist viewpoints. ● Diverse Representations: This book addresses both White and Black experiences, and the close intersections of these identities, since the main characters are minority students in a mostly white private school; privilege and class distinctions factor prominently. ● Violence and Scariness: Police brutality; gun depictions; fighting. ● Sex, Romance, & Nudity: Love and romance are depicted in complexity, sexual references. ● Language: Some profanity (dashed out letters)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Products & Purchases: Class-related products (Range Rovers) • Drinking, Drugs, & Smoking: Drinking portrayed • Challenges: Missouri high school removes 'Dear Martin'
<p>Having read and thought about this book as a teacher, briefly describe the unique ways in which this book is valuable for the curriculum and/or for a classroom library</p>	<p>Students are just like many of the characters in the book <i>Dear Martin</i>, and therefore this book presents relevant critical issues for diverse audiences. School, like society and the workforce, is increasingly diverse and our aim as educators is to prepare students for life ahead. Studying the literature of diverse perspectives is part of real-world preparation. I feel a responsibility to present this text for students of all identities; removing it to avoid discomfort for one student can discriminate against the rest who want to study it. Books by Nic Stone respond to the needs of all students to encounter stories about anti-racism, how the lives of Black people are rich and complex, and how trauma affects not only individuals who are directly harmed, but an entire community. These are issues and problems that unfortunately persist today (racial stereotypes and profiling, gun violence, privilege and oppression, and criminal justice reform). The author gives us new ways to consider foundational teachings about civil rights by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and new ways to study text forms. In writing letters to Martin, for example, we hear Justyce anguished struggle to apply the relevant teachings in the here-and-now – difficult questions we all should consider. This book gives us an engaging way to talk about race, racism, and violence through reading and writing about literature.</p>
<p>How will you teach your texts in a way that “fosters inclusive learning environments that support coherent, relevant, standards-aligned, differentiated, and antiracist/antibias instruction to engage learners in ELA” (NCTE, 2021, Standards 1-5).</p>	<p>This book is an accessible primary text by a Black female author who tells stories of life, based in the Black experience, so students read, reflect, and write about diverse voices and experiences. This book is a great literary model because of the variety of text forms and narrative elements for students to read and discuss, and emulate in their own writing. Characters, scenes, and dialogue offer viewpoints that help us learn about antibias and antiracism. Through one critical lens, for example, SJ could be studied as the anti-racist character and foil to the assimilationist Jared or the segregationist gang leader Martel.</p>
<p>Additional References (include at least 2 relevant links to support teachers)-- see NCTE Position Statements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators’ Right and Responsibilities to Engage in Antiracist Teaching - National Council of Teachers of English • Statement on White Language Supremacy - National Council of Teachers of English • This Ain’t Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice! • Teaching Storytelling Position Statement - National Council of Teachers of English • Position Statement on Indigenous Peoples and People of Color (IPOC) in English and Language Arts Materials - National Council of Teachers of English

CONCLUSION

We hope we have provided insight and guidance on best practices for selecting, teaching, and using controversial, challenged, or banned texts in educational contexts. Whether the answer to “Should I Teach This Text?” is “Yes, No, or Maybe”—always consider the pedagogical underpinnings of what you teach and why. Despite legislation that tries to erase “concepts” or history, educators have a responsibility “to help students address facts in an honest and open environment capable of nourishing intellectual exploration” (AAC&U, 2021). Remember, “the life-giving power of literature,” as Maya Angelou states, and how our young adolescent readers benefit when they see themselves “reflected” in the often fictionalized but lived-experiences of characters: “If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.”

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