

RENAISSANCE®

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Using Readability Levels to Guide Students to Books



Readability: What it is and why it is useful

For more than 50 years, readability formulas have helped teachers, librarians, and parents match books to students. Readability formulas use objective measurements to analyze text and predict which materials can be comprehended by individual readers. This concept is particularly important in Renaissance Accelerated Reader®, Renaissance's personalized practice and progress monitoring software that makes the essential student practice component of any reading curriculum more effective. When Accelerated Reader is used according to recommended Accelerated Reader Best Practices for classroom implementation, it has been shown to accelerate reading growth for all students, regardless of ability.¹

Research-based Accelerated Reader Best Practices emphasize that students show the most reading improvement if they regularly practice reading within a range of difficulty that is neither too challenging nor too easy. Accelerated Reader uses the ATOS Readability Formula to help teachers guide student reading practice at this optimal level (for more information, see ATOS box, p. 4).

Judging the suitability of books for individual students

Advances in technology and statistical techniques have led to improvements in the science of readability, but there are still some things that readability formulas cannot do—and will never be able to do. All readability formulas produce an estimate of a book's difficulty based on selected variables in the text, but none analyze the suitability of a book's content or literary merit for individual readers. That decision is up to educators and parents, who best know what content is appropriate for each student.

This guide will refer to three different levels to use when matching books to students. The first two levels refer to the book; the third refers to the student.

- **Readability level**, or book level, measures the textual difficulty of a book and is determined by a readability formula, such as ATOS. For example, *Of Mice and Men* has an ATOS readability level of 4.5. This means the text can be understood by readers with an average mid-fourth-grade level of reading achievement.
- **Interest level** refers to the sophistication and maturity level of a book's content, ideas, and themes, and is based on publisher recommendations about the content. *Of Mice and Men* has an upper-grade (UG), or high school, interest level, indicating the content is generally suitable for high school readers.
- **Reading level** is the most difficult level of text a student can comprehend, based on the results from a standardized reading test or Accelerated Reader Reading Practice Quizzes. Technically, *Of Mice and Men* could probably be read by fourth-grade students on grade level (4.5), but the content might not be suitable for them. This is why using all three levels—and considering the maturity level of each student—is so important.

The three levels often differ, which presents both challenges and opportunities in the classroom. Differences between the levels may be used to help students with specific needs. For example, *Of Mice and Men* is not suitable for most fourth graders, but it might be the perfect choice for upper-grade students who are struggling with books

¹ Renaissance Learning. (2012). *Guided independent reading*. Wisconsin Rapids, WI: Author. Retrieved from <http://doc.renlearn.com/KMNet/R005577721AC3667.pdf>

written at their grade level. The table shows possible scenarios that may occur with specific readers, along with practical advice for addressing these situations.

How to use readability in the classroom

Self-selection of books is an essential component of Accelerated Reader because it empowers students to choose books that appeal to their individualized interests. That being said, teachers should set guidelines for students. Readability, interest, and reading levels can be used to guide students to the right books:

1. **Start by explaining the three levels to students.** Take a few minutes in class to explain the difference between readability, interest, and reading levels using books similar to those that most students in the class would encounter. Tell students that a reading level is about them (their tested reading level), while the readability level and interest level are about the book. The readability level is the difficulty level of the text, and the interest level explains whether the content is suitable for a certain age group. Show students how Accelerated Reader books are labeled and what the labels mean.

Table 1: Advice for matching books to students

Student	Book	Example
High-performing third-grade reader	Suggest books with higher readability levels than interest levels. Make sure the student is still reading within his ZPD range (see guideline 2 below).	<i>Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel</i> ATOS readability level = 4.4 Interest level = LG
Struggling fifth-grade reader	Suggest books at low readability levels with interest levels that match the student's age.	<i>Shoeshine Girl</i> ATOS readability level = 2.7 Interest level = MG
High-performing sixth-grade reader	Suggest books with higher readability levels than interest levels. Also suggest books with lower readability levels, but with content or literary devices that may make the text more difficult. Make sure the student is still reading within her ZPD.	<i>Black Beauty</i> ATOS readability level = 7.7 Interest level = MG
Struggling high school reader	Suggest books at low readability levels with upper-grade interest levels. Conduct Status of the Class (see guideline 5 below) to monitor whether the student is struggling with the text and whether the content is appropriate.	<i>Grapes of Wrath</i> ATOS readability level = 4.9 Interest level = UG

Books with Accelerated Reader Reading Practice Quizzes are assigned one of four interest levels: LG = lower grades (K–3), MG = middle grades (4–8), MG+ = middle grades plus (6 and up), or UG = upper grades (9–12).

2. **Note students' reading levels and zones of proximal development (ZPD).** Reading level is usually a student's grade equivalent (GE) score from a recent standardized reading test. Obviously, it is difficult to limit a student's reading to just one level; therefore, Renaissance Learning recommends that each student reads within an individualized ZPD range, the range of levels that is neither too hard nor too easy where the student is challenged but not frustrated. To determine a student's ZPD range, locate the student's GE on the Renaissance Goal-Setting Chart, which can be printed from the Accelerated Reader software.
3. **Guide students to select books with readability levels that fall within their individual ZPD ranges.** For example, a student with a tested reading level of 3.5 would read in the range of readability levels from 2.8–4.0. Books outside of this range may be too challenging or too easy for the student.

4. **Guide students to select books with appropriate interest levels.** Since interest levels are divided into four categories (LG for lower grades, MG for middle grades, MG+ for more mature middle-grade readers, and UG for upper grades), direct students to choose from the category that is right for them. For example, K–3 teachers might want to make a rule that students read only LG interest-level books. Use professional judgment to grant exceptions if individual students can handle the ideas and content of books with higher interest levels.
5. **Monitor progress daily.** After helping students select books, monitor comprehension daily with an Accelerated Reader routine called Status of the Class. This involves having a short conversation with each student about their reading progress. Is the book too easy or too hard for the student? Is the student understanding the book? Is the student enjoying the book?

What to do with proficient upper-grade readers

Students usually begin reading books with higher readability levels as their reading improves, but upper-grade readers pose unique challenges. As they move up, they find there are fewer and fewer books to choose from at higher readability levels. For this reason, do not continue to “up the level” indefinitely for these readers, but instead use the following strategies (and refer back to the table on the previous page):

- **Emphasize the importance of variety in reading.** Rather than focus on a book’s readability level, emphasize how important it is to enjoy many different kinds of literature. Encourage students to explore new subjects, genres, and authors. Recommend that they read nonfiction books or longer books with readability levels within their current ZPD range.
- **Use “Honors Reader” book lists.** Create special lists to direct upper-grade students to challenging literature. Students may find it motivating to read from a teacher-selected list. Acknowledge students who achieve Honors Reader status by posting their names on a bulletin board or applauding them at a rally.
- **Recommend classic books with lower readability levels.** It is OK for students to go back a few levels and read classic books they may have missed in the lower grades. (In some cases students may also benefit from rereading a classic read when they were younger, which now they may appreciate more deeply.) There are some great books written at fifth-grade levels that would be enjoyable and challenging for an 11th grader, such as *Fahrenheit 451* (5.2 ATOS readability level) or *The Yearling* (5.0 ATOS readability level). Because these students already read well, they should now become well read.

About ATOS®

The ATOS Readability Formula is one of the most widely used measures for judging the difficulty level of text. The product of extensive research, the formula employs several unique features:

- Takes into account characteristics that most heavily influence readability (average sentence length, average word length, and word difficulty level)
- Utilizes a graded vocabulary list numbering more than 100,000 words
- Bases analyses on world's largest database of words from actual books (more than 170,000 books comprising nearly 2.5 billion words)

Developed in 2000, ATOS also was one of the very first readability measures to calculate readability from full-text computer scans of all words in a book, rather than just the sample passages used by many other formulas.

The ATOS Readability Formula provides accurate estimates of text difficulty and has received external confirmation of its reliability and validity:

- In 2010, Common Core State Standards Appendix A listed ATOS as quantitative measure of text complexity that "puts students and texts on the same scale" (p. 7).²
- In 2011, a Student Achievement Partners study of six text complexity measures, including ATOS, found "all of the metrics were reliably, and often highly, correlated with grade level and student performance- based measures of text complexity across a variety of text sets, and across a variety of reference measures" (p. 46).³

For more information, see *The Development of ATOS: The Renaissance Readability Formula*, available online from <http://doc.renlearn.com/KMNet/R004250827GJ11C4.pdf> or by request to (800) 338-4204.

² Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts & literacy in history/ social studies, science, and technical subjects. Appendix A: Research supporting the key elements of the standards, Glossary of terms*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved from www.corestandards.org.

³ Nelson, J., Perfetti, C., Liben, D., & Liben, M. (2011). *Measures of text difficulty: Testing their predictive value for grade levels and student performance*. Technical Report to the Gates Foundation (also to be submitted for publication). Retrieved from http://www.achievethecore.org/content/upload/nelson_perfetti_liben_measures_of_text_difficulty_research_ela.pdf