

A Quick Look at Reading Levels

As an educator for over forty years, I have watched the evolution of reading levels—systems designed to identify the complexity of texts. This can be confusing territory. You may have many questions about reading levels: Why are there so many systems? How do they correlate with each other? Which one should I use?

I've included a quick look at several leveling systems rather than a correlation between all of them. As you read a bit about each, use this information to compare how these leveling systems work. You can find specific information on each company's website with charts related to grade-level expectations.

LEVELING SYSTEM	MY THOUGHTS
<p>Lexile levels were developed in 1989 with grant funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development by A. Jackson Stenner and Malbert Smith who wanted to connect reading instruction to test scores. Students take a reading comprehension test (e.g., a standardized state test) and then are assigned a Lexile range to help them find books at the appropriate reading level. Lexile levels are based on a computer algorithm that considers word frequency and sentence complexity. Lexile levels are numbered in increments of 10, followed by the letter <i>L</i>.</p> <p>To learn how Lexile measures are determined, go to https://www.renaissance.com/edwords/lexile-measure.</p>	<p>I've used Lexile levels with students in third grade and up because those are the grade levels where kids take state tests. There is a range of levels, which is helpful when choosing text for instruction.</p>
<p>Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) was created in 1998 by Joetta Beaver and updated to DRA2 in 2004-05. It was developed as a standardized reading test. Teachers listened to individual students read from a set of increasingly complex texts with numbered scores from A-1 through 70. Then teachers or parents found books with that same DRA score.</p> <p>To learn why DRA2 does not correlate to Lexile levels, read this: https://support.pearson.com/usclinical/s/article/DRA2-Levels-and-Lexile-Levels.</p>	<p>This is the leveling system I first used as a teacher. Listening to each child read was valuable in assessing comprehension, fluency, and decoding to determine a level.</p>

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LEVELING SYSTEM

Fountas & Pinnell (F&P) reading levels range from Level pre-A through Z and have been used since 1996. This system, designed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, uses a text gradient that considers ten text factors, including genre/form, text structure, content, theme and ideas, language and literary focus, sentence complexity, vocabulary, words, illustrations, and book and print features. The levels were assigned according to detailed criteria for each level found in books by these authors. F&P does not use a computer algorithm to assign levels to text.

For information about how reading levels are determined, click on “What does the term ‘level’ mean, and how are the levels in the F&P Text Level Gradient™ determined?” at <https://www.fountasandpinnell.com/faqs/assessment>.

Reading A-Z is part of a company created in 2013 to provide leveled reading materials in both printable and digital form. Their text leveling system follows the guidelines for determining text complexity as outlined in Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This system uses a combination of measures to determine text level: computer algorithms including word count, sentence complexity, and ratio of high-frequency words *plus* factors evaluated by human readers.

For more information, see <https://www.readinga-z.com/learninga-z-levels/text-leveling-system>.

MY THOUGHTS

I’ve used F&P levels, as do many schools. I find it most useful for children reading at emergent and early stages because of the detailed criterion that is difficult for an algorithm to include. I’ve used it at transitional stages as well.

This system is easy to use and is very adaptable for online small groups. It is a good starting point, especially when combined with books from other publishers to round out kids’ reading experience.