



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 analyse text and predict which materials can be comprehended by individual readers. This concept is particularly important in Accelerated Reader™ (AR™), Renaissance Learning's personalised 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 AR Best Practices™ for implementation, it has been shown to accelerate reading growth for all students, regardless of ability.¹

Research-based AR 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™ for Books 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 analyse the suitability of a book's content or literary merit for individual readers. This 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.
- **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-year (UY) interest level, indicating the content is generally suitable for students aged 14+.
- **Reading level** measures the most difficult level of text a student can comprehend, based on the results from a standardised reading test or Accelerated Reader Reading Practice Quizzes. Technically, *Of Mice and Men* could probably be read by year 5 students, 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 students in year 5, but it might be the perfect choice for students in the upper years who are struggling with books written at higher levels. Table 1 (next page) shows some other possible scenarios that might occur with specific readers in your class, 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 individualised 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 your students.** Take a few minutes in class to explain the differences, using sample readability, interest and reading levels as well as sample 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 labelled and what the labels mean.

¹ Paul, T. D. (2003). *Guided independent reading: An examination of the Reading Practice Database and the scientific research supporting guided independent reading as implemented in Reading Renaissance*. Wisconsin Rapids, WI: Renaissance Learning, Inc. Available online from <http://doc.renlearn.com/KMNet/R001541030GD656E.pdf>

Table 1: Advice for Matching Books to Students

Student	Book	Example
High-performing year 4 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 = LY
Struggling year 6 reader	Suggest books at low readability levels with interest levels that match the student's age.	<i>The Upstairs Room</i> ATOS readability level = 2.9 Interest level = MY
High-performing year 7 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 = MY
Struggling upper years reader	Suggest books at low readability levels with upper-year 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 = UY

Books with AR Reading Practice Quizzes are assigned one of three interest levels: LY = ages 5–8, MY = ages 9–13 or UY = age 14+.

- Note students' zones of proximal development (ZPD).** Reading level is a score from a recent standardised 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 individualised 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, see the results of the student's most recent STAR Reading test.
- Guide students to select books with readability levels that fall within their individual ZPD ranges.** The readability level should fall within the ZPD range. Books that are outside of this range may be too challenging or too easy for the student.
- Guide students to select books with appropriate interest levels.** Since interest levels are divided into three categories (LY for lower years, MY for middle years and UY for upper years), direct students to choose from the category that is right for them. For example, teachers in the lower years might want to make a rule that students read only LY interest-level books. Use professional judgment to grant exceptions if individual students can handle the ideas and content of books with higher interest levels.
- Monitor progress daily.** After helping students select books, monitor comprehension daily with an AR 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-Years Readers

Students usually move up to higher readability levels as their reading improves, but upper-years 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 year” indefinitely for these readers, but instead use the following strategies (and refer back to Table 1 above):

- **Emphasise the importance of variety in reading.** Rather than focusing on a book's readability level, emphasise 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 “Honours Reader” book lists.** Create special lists to direct upper-years students to challenging literature. Students may find it motivating to read from a teacher-selected list. Acknowledge students who achieve Honours 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 years. (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 lower ATOS levels that would be enjoyable and challenging for a year 12 student, 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 for Books Readability Formula is the first and only readability method based on analysis of actual student reading of entire books. Other formulas were developed from statistics derived from students reading short passages.

ATOS is based on extensive research about

- The characteristics of text that most heavily influence readability
- The world's largest database of words used in actual books (more than 30,000 books comprising nearly 500 million words)
- Comprehension statistics from 30,000 US students reading nearly 1 million books

ATOS also calculates readability from full-text computer scans of all words in a book, rather than just the sample passages used by most other formulas.

For all these reasons, ATOS most accurately measures book difficulty, especially for hard-to-measure books:

- High-interest/low-readability books, which are read by struggling readers and are often overestimated by Flesch-Kincaid and other widely accepted readability formulas
- Emergent reader books, which are often underestimated by other formulas
- Nonfiction books, which are often more difficult than fiction books but are underestimated by other formulas
- Long books, which can be underestimated by other formulas

For more information about ATOS, call 020 7184 4000.