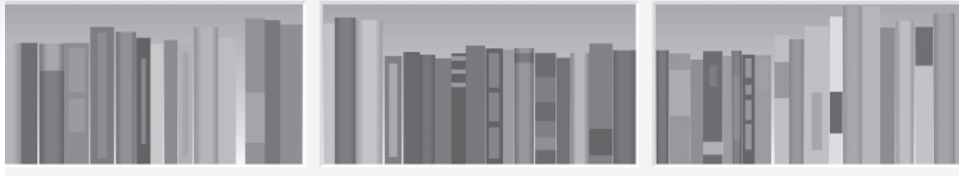




## 1



# Finding Students' Reading Levels

## Why Trying to Bench Press 150 Pounds Doesn't Make Me Stronger

This chapter will show that by incorporating the following into your classroom, you will have established the groundwork necessary to start building lifelong readers:

- Figure out students' comfort reading levels using running records
- Do group inventories when you need to save time
- Match students to books based on their reading level during choice and guided reading
- Create an environment where peers support each others' differences

I want to introduce you to one of my past students, Sofia. Sofia was 13-years-old entering the fifth grade. An English language learner with special needs, she struggled in literacy and was retained in her previous



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*Rigor isn't throwing students in the deep end of the pool and hoping they don't drown. Rigor is leading the development of each student so that they become incrementally stronger and stronger.*

school three times. As the U.S. Department of Education reported in 2003, 8 million students in grades 4 through 12 are struggling readers, so Sofia wasn't alone. In 2007, Sofia received a reading assessment to determine what texts she could read comfortably. Sofia read aloud a

couple paragraphs from *A Wrinkle in Time*, a text frequently recommended for 13-year-olds. She miscued, stumbled, or made up over 85% of the words. After 30 seconds, her voice started to shake. After 40 seconds, 100% of the words were invented. Her read-aloud made me want to reach out in empathy. Have you ever done something so frustrating that it seemed at the time impossible? It's like watching me try to do a pull up. However, *A Wrinkle in Time* is a text deemed appropriate for Sofia's age level, and students like Sofia reading below grade level are being asked to read it when they cannot, yet.

The key word is *yet*.

This chapter will show why *A Wrinkle in Time* wasn't right for Sofia at that moment. This book will show how to boost readers like Sofia so *A Wrinkle in Time* becomes a comfortable text.

Impossible will become possible for your readers. Reading is just like weightlifting. If I tried to bench press 150 pounds today, I couldn't. I wouldn't get stronger and I would leave with some broken bones because 150 pounds is beyond my ability. But if I did what I could do, 30 pounds comfortably, and tried 40 pounds a few times this week, I would slowly become stronger. Eventually, 40 pounds would become no problem, and then I could try 50.

A good approach to reading follows the same philosophy. We figure out what kids can read comfortably, and encourage them to read a ton of books with a similar difficulty level. In addition we develop their skills by guiding them with harder texts (akin to 40 pound weights) until those texts become easier. Then, voilà! Kids are able to do those harder texts

## Finding Students' Reading Levels

with ease, becoming *Reading Without Limits* readers. That's what rigor is. Rigor isn't throwing students in the deep end of the pool and hoping they don't drown. Rigor is leading the development of each student so that they become incrementally stronger and stronger.

How do you start matching texts to kids accurately? What is appropriate for Sofia to read? We follow the same principles that a physical trainer follows. Don't start with their age. Don't start with their grade-level. A trainer doesn't just look at your age when you walk into the gym. She diagnoses your ability by asking you to press weights. Then she gradually adds more until she determines what you cannot do. This chapter will show that to determine your students' reading levels, you give them different leveled texts on a developmental continuum that become increasingly difficult until you determine what they cannot do. Then you can match them to texts that they can read comfortably with excellent fluency, guide them with texts that are a little too hard, and push their reading ability with shared reading. That is why leveled reading is the basis for the *Reading Without Limits* program. We need to first identify our students' comfort zones for choice reading, then push them with guided reading on their comfort plus level, and finally practice high-level rigor with shared texts.



**Figure 1.1** Getting Comfortable During Choice Reading

### **$\frac{2}{3}$ (AVERAGE AGE OF STUDENTS) = THE READING SPAN**

For most classrooms, readers are on a range of reading abilities, in many cases a span of six years, according to the thorough reading researcher Thomas Gunning. The range of reading levels in a class is usually two-thirds

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**Figure 1.2** Students Reading on Different Levels  
During Choice Reading

the average age of students. The average age of fifth graders is 10. Two-thirds of 10 is 6.3. That means on average you may have a range of second to eighth grade reading levels in a fifth grade classroom. The span only increases as students get older. With such a span, we need to differentiate the reading material.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1.2 shows Alex reading *The Kite Runner* and Theo reading *Time Warp*

*Trio*. That's a span of over six years in reading ability. The class runs smoothly because each seventh grader is matched to the appropriate level text in his or her comfort zone.

For teachers who studied education in school, you might have heard of a theorist named Lev Vygotsky who championed developmental learning. Vygotsky believed that we are each on our own developmental continuum and therefore we have our own individual needs. This is why Sofia shouldn't be reading *A Wrinkle in Time*, yet. Parents know that first hand. Just because your child is 12 months old that doesn't mean she is walking. Lev Vygotsky makes the case for differentiated instruction and describes three zones of learning.<sup>12</sup>

**The Zone of Actual Development** is where a learner can do the task independently without help. This is what I have been referring to as the *comfort zone*. Weight lifters who do many reps are in their comfort zone. Choice reading should take place in this zone.

**The Frustration Zone** is where work is too difficult, even with the teacher's support, the zone that Sofia demonstrated. For the most part, we

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shouldn't be giving any work to kids in the frustration zone. Kids aren't going to become better readers if you give them frustration zone work; in fact, they are going to become more disengaged from school. That doesn't mean that you can't give them difficult work, just stay away from the frustration zone. If learners are working in their frustration zones, it must be carefully planned, clearly communicated with empathy, and be limited to short periods.

**The Zone of Proximal Development** is where learners can accomplish the task with the help of their teacher. That's the ideal zone for shared and guided reading.

Go to [www.reading-without-limits.com](http://www.reading-without-limits.com) for a list of commercial reading inventories if your school doesn't already have one. Here is a list of some of my favorites:

- *Teachers College Running Records*: This inventory is my favorite because it is quick to use, free, and includes authentic texts. You typically can pinpoint a reading level in 10 minutes.
- *QRI-5*: This is a great choice if you want a more comprehensive assessment. It includes word lists and listening passages.
- *Comprehensive Reading Inventory*: If you have Spanish-speaking students, this assessment includes Spanish assessments so you can determine students' English and Spanish reading levels.
- *Make It Yourself*: If you have a leveled classroom library, you can ask kids to read 100 words straight out of the book with follow-up comprehension questions. You can also supplement a purchased reading inventory with your own leveled texts to add more authentic passages to your assessment kit.

If you don't already have one in your school, choose a reading inventory, make lots of copies, and create a schedule that allows you to meet with each student.

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The implications are clear: We need to assess reading levels in order to make sure kids are working in a zone where they can learn. Thus, the first step in developing a strong reading program, and the first step we take in *Reading Without Limits*, is to find our students' levels. This step applies to all teachers, whether you are teaching struggling readers in high school or students ranging from emergent to fluent in elementary school. It is also extremely relevant if you aren't a reading teacher. What if you are giving students material, from word problems to work in textbooks, in their frustration zone? This chapter will show you how to find an answer to that question.

I will show practical ways to assess reading levels, both for teachers with more time and teachers with very little time, in all grades. If your school already has an assessment in place that determines reading levels, this chapter shows kid-friendly ways to supplement your program. Mix and match the suggestions to best suit the needs of your students, classroom, and school. Once you determine what your students can read comfortably, then choice reading, guided reading, and shared reading will all fall into place.

### **DETERMINE A STUDENT'S READING LEVEL BY USING A RUNNING RECORD**

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There are many different ways to assess student reading levels, ranging from commercially developed inventories to teacher-developed approaches unique to each classroom. No matter which method you choose, we have found at minimum it should be able to do the following:

- Determine a student's comfort reading level
- Be scaled so that it measures progress
- Assess students' reading fluency, ability to decode, reading comprehension, and ability to retell

## Finding Students' Reading Levels

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In order to do all of the above, we administer one-on-one reading assessments. My favorite is running records, developed by New Zealand reading researcher Marie Clay.<sup>13</sup> Running records ask students to read a passage out loud so we can assess fluency and decoding. Halfway through the reading, students read on in their heads. After the reading, students answer comprehension questions and retell.

There are many commercial running record inventories available, many for free, that produce running records as a system. These reading assessment systems provide a range of texts on different levels of difficulty. Using the texts and the questions provided, you match students to the texts that they can read comfortably. Running records require meeting with a student one-on-one. I know one-on-one assessments may not be realistic for every teacher. Some high school teachers teach upward of 200 students a day. Therefore, in the section that follows I suggest alternatives for teachers who aren't able to do one-on-one inventories. But I recommend one-on-one assessments above all others.

Here is an example of a running record. It is divided into three parts.

1. Students read 100 words aloud so you can assess fluency and decoding
2. Students read on in their heads
3. Students answer comprehension questions and retell the passage

As a student is reading aloud, the teacher takes notes. Determine if a student makes an error as she reads aloud (a miscue) or self-corrects herself (not a miscue). Basically, you are looking for your student's percentage accuracy with a passage. If the passage is just right, the student will read with 96% or better accuracy. I will explain why 96% is an important number in the next section. That's why running records stop oral reading at 100 words. It's simple math!

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### Alex Rodriguez

Imagine you are about to graduate high school. One of the most famous baseball teams gives you a call. They want you to play for them! This is exactly what happened to Alex Rodriguez.

At eighteen years old, Alex Rodriguez played his first major league game. He started with the Seattle Mariners. Rodriguez, or A-Rod, is now famous for playing for the New York Yankees.

1. The section above the line includes 100 words. Ask the student to read it out loud. Track how many words the student accurately is able to read or decode. Each time they make a mistake, write down what they said. Note their fluency: Is it smooth?

Rodriguez was picked first out of every player to play when he was just eighteen years old. This happened in 1993. It took A-Rod three years to start leading the pack. After three years playing with the Mariners, he had the best batting average in the league. He also hit 36 home runs. In 1998, he became the third player in all of history to hit 40 home runs and steal 40 bases in one season. He was definitely “out of the park”!

2. Students read the rest of the passage in their heads.

After a couple of trades, A-Rod started playing for the New York Yankees. This was great for Rodriguez, because he got to also play with his best friend. Wouldn't you want to be on the same team as your best friend? Together, they also made it to the World Series!

3. Then, students answer multiple comprehension questions that range in difficulty. In addition, they retell the passage in their own words.

#### Comprehension Questions:

(Retell) Can you tell me what the passage was about?

1. (Identify detail) How old was Alex Rodriguez when he first played for the Major Leagues?
2. (Interpret multiple details) When did Rodriguez start demonstrating that he was a baseball star?
3. (Make inference) What does the following mean? “It took A-Rod three years to start leading the pack.” Why?



## Finding Students' Reading Levels

### Record Miscues with a Running Record

In order to determine a student's comfort level, you need to record percentage accuracy as they read. As the student is reading, record miscues: mispronunciations, insertions, omissions, and any words that you shared because the student asked for help. Miscues subtract from percentage accuracy. If a student makes five miscues out of 100 words, then they read the passage with 95% accuracy. For instance, if a student says "sweet" instead of "sweat," leaves off the "s" on the end of a word, or adds a word like "the" to the sentence, these are all errors that count against percentage accuracy.

### The Difference Between Self-Corrections and Miscues

In addition, record self-corrections: hesitations, corrections, or repetitions. If a student miscues a word and fixes it later, do not count it as an error. Self-corrections do not take off from percentage accuracy. Table 1.1 shows what distinguishes miscues from self-corrections.

Running records also include comprehension questions and time to retell. Start with the retell. Proceed level by level until you find texts that students read with 96% or better fluency and decoding and 90% or better comprehension. That means you found their comfort level. Table 1.2 shows how to determine whether or not a text is at a students' comfort, guided, or frustration level.

### Evaluate Comprehension with Tiered Questions and a Retell

When evaluating the retell, consider if students incorporated any miscomprehension as part of the accuracy score for comprehension. However, if you

**Table 1.1** The Difference Between Miscues and Self-Corrections

Miscues (count off accuracy)	Corrections (do not count off accuracy)
Mispronunciation	Hesitations
Insertion (sound or word)	Corrections
Omission (partial or whole words)	Repetitions

■ *Reading Without Limits* ■**Table 1.2** How to Calculate a Student's Comfort Level

	<b>Word Accuracy</b>	<b>Comprehension Accuracy</b>
Comfort Level for Choice Reading	96% +	90% +
Guided Reading Level for Guided and Shared Reading	76–95%	75% +
Frustration Level	75% or below	50% or below

haven't taught students how to retell yet, then don't count an incomplete retell as part of their comprehension accuracy score yet. Some commercial running records come with retell rubrics. Try to find the passage that a student can retell comfortably with few or no errors for the comprehension questions: that's their comfort level.

**Where to Start?**

I highly recommend choosing a running record inventory that has been prepared for you. My favorite inventory is the Teachers College Running Records, which are available for free on the Teachers College website. This inventory comes with everything you will need, including running record student and teacher passages. I typically start about two years below a student's grade (not age) level when beginning a running record as a baseline. If they rock it, I jump up a couple years. Otherwise, I continue administering running records moving up the continuum until I find where they hit about 96% accuracy and good comprehension. It's just like weightlifting . . . find the spot right before their arms start to quiver.

Visit [www.reading-without-limits.com](http://www.reading-without-limits.com) to see reading assessments in action for a range of levels, as well as the notes teachers took for each assessment.

**Kid-Friendly Way to Start the Assessment**

Students may become stressed when they get an individual reading assessment. It can almost feel like a pop quiz. If you purchased an inventory, it might include a script for how to start the assessment. I find that many kits'

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scripts are too formal and potentially scary—especially for a struggling or disengaged learner. Here's what I say, regardless of the inventory, to keep it kid-friendly to ease comfort. We used this script with great success with the incarcerated youth who are wary of one-on-one meetings.

- **Establish Purpose:** We are about to do a reading assessment so I can figure out what books to recommend to you.
- **Determine Personal Habits:** What does reading look like in your day? What was the last book that you read? Has a teacher ever given you a reading level before? What did the teacher say?
- **Explain Process:** (If the test asks students to read aloud) You are going to start by reading aloud. Then, halfway through, I'm going to stop you and ask you to keep reading on your own. If you make a mistake as you read aloud, it's OK to go back and fix it. I want you to do your best. At the end of the passage I'm going to ask you a few questions about the passage. You can go back as often as you like to find the answers, if that's easier for you. Have you ever done something like this before?
- **Check-in:** How are you feeling? Do you have any questions?
- **Address Common Concern:** You may notice that I'm taking some notes. Don't worry about it; they just help me remember!

### Testing Frequency

The ideal frequency is to administer a new running record, or whatever assessment you may be using, every six to eight weeks until students are on grade level. We do this because we found that most students move up comfort levels every six to eight weeks. For students on grade level, we administer assessments every term. I recommend frequent assessments because it pushes kids to their fullest potential.

### Find Time

One of the biggest pitfalls is finding time to administer running records. Therefore, plan to set aside time to meet with each student individually.

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With our schedules, this is really hard to do. In our first year at KIPP Infinity, Michael Vea, the nonfiction studies teacher, and I met each student at their local library to administer the reading inventory before the school year started. Now when students come to the school to register, we have half a dozen teachers on hand to administer the reading assessment over the course of a few hours. That system is much more sustainable! Your school might already have a schedule in place for you to administer the inventory. But some schools do not. If you find yourself in the latter category, as I did in my previous schools, my best advice is to try to administer the inventory as quickly as possible. Make a schedule and stick to it. Or find colleagues to help. For secondary teachers, try using lunchtime and time before or after school. For elementary or self-contained teachers, create centers activities that allow you to do running records while the rest of the class is busy doing something different. The sooner you know your students' reading levels, the sooner you can start choice, guided, and shared reading.

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*Sabrina,*

*I'd love to spend time getting to know you a little better as a reader.*

*You have an appointment with me this Wednesday at 12:30. Please meet me in the classroom and bring your lunch. You don't need anything else. It should take about 15 minutes.*

*See you then!*

*Mrs. Witter*

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**IF YOU DON'T HAVE TIME FOR ONE-ON-ONE RUNNING  
RECORDS DO GROUP INVENTORIES**

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If administering one-on-one assessments isn't practically possible, here are some other ideas for ways to determine a student's comfort reading level.

## Finding Students' Reading Levels

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### Five-Finger Test

Teach students the five-finger test. Students read a page aloud to themselves. If they don't know the meaning of five words on one page, the book is too hard. If they don't know the meaning of one word or fewer, the book is too easy. To find their comfort level, students should be aiming for not knowing about three words a page. Teach students to do a spot check at the beginning and middle of the book. The five-finger test is great for elementary students.

### Self-Evaluation

In class, give students a selection of texts to read, but don't put them in leveled order. Ask students to read through the materials and answer comprehension questions for each. Then ask students to self-identify the text that they felt most comfortable with. This will give you at least a ballpark of what texts your student should be reading. It's also a great indication of how well students self-assess. Then, once you set up reading conferences in your class, you can ask kids to read the text level that they identified aloud to see if it falls within 96–99% accuracy. Self-evaluation is a great tool to use for secondary students.

### Group Inventories

In my first couple years of teaching, I used group inventories because my class periods were very short and I didn't have the opportunity to give inventories to students outside of class. The QRI-5 provides a group administration option for grades three and above. In a group inventory, students are given grade-level passages to read independently. For students who do well, give a harder passage the next day. For students who struggle, give an easier passage. You can assign this for homework. Then assess students who don't do well comprehensively to get more information. Group inventories do not allow you to hear students read aloud, but they are practical if you are running low on time and provide a starting point. They work well in any grade. Many are available

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online, such as the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment, if you have computers in your classroom.

### MATCH STUDENTS TO BOOKS BASED ON THEIR COMFORT LEVEL

Now it's time to match kids to texts. All of the different reading inventories use different scales: some use letters, lexiles, or numbers. Table 1.3 shows the most common developmental reading scales and how they correlate to grade level.

Most approaches to scaling books look at vocabulary, sentence structure, and the overall structure of the text. It's actually really cool! Books on the lower developmental end start off simply: typically with one plot in fiction or one main idea in nonfiction. But as books become more difficult, their structures become more complex. If you want to see how these formulas calculate levels, check out the Fry graph readability formula on [www.reading-without-limits.com](http://www.reading-without-limits.com).

**Table 1.3** How Different Reading Levels Correlate

Grade	Fountas and Pinnell Letter	Lexile	DRA
K	A-E	200–400	A-1 through 3
1	D-I		4–16
2	J-M	300–600	18–30
3	N-P	500–800	30–38
4	Q, R	600–900	40–42
5	S-U	700–800	44
6	V-X	700–1050	
7	Y	850–1100	
8	Z	900–1150	
8+	Z +	1000–1200	

## Finding Students' Reading Levels

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Which books students read and how they are matched will depend upon what kind of reading they are doing. Next I give some guidelines for matching students to choice, shared, and guided reading texts. Now that you've identified your students' comfort zones, it's time to match them to texts to read during choice, guided, and shared reading.

### **Texts for Choice Reading**

Match students to texts where they are able to decode 96% or more words and have at least 90% comprehension of the texts. These are texts that students can read comfortably. Give students the opportunity to choose their books, and allow tons of time for students to read those books. If your library for choice reading is leveled, you can show kids where to go to find their comfort level.

### **Texts for Guided Reading**

Texts that fall a grade level above comfort level are a student's guided reading level or comfort-plus level. These texts are teacher-chosen and usually shorter than a text a student would choose for choice reading. Teachers group students according to their guided reading level, and they might have half a dozen groups at once in their classroom. Avoid matching students to guided reading texts where students decode less than 75% of the words or where their comprehension falls below 75%.

### **Texts for Shared Reading**

The teacher chooses shared reading texts and everyone in the class reads the same text. These texts are more difficult than guided reading texts. If decoding or comprehension falls below 75% for a student, the teacher should scaffold the text for those individual students.

Not sure how to level a text? Try <http://www.arbookfind.com> or <http://www.lexile.com>. Enter the name of the book and the Web site will give you its reading level.

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## CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE PEERS SUPPORT EACH OTHER'S DIFFERENCES

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Kids love videogames because they advance levels and moving up to the next level, while not easy, isn't impossible. The level of difficulty is just right to push kids to want to achieve more, in the same way that leveled reading gives students a myriad of texts at a harder level awaiting them. With students working with different reading levels, it's a reality that you will have students who might either feel self-conscious that their level is lower than others, or you might have students who tease kids who have a lower level than they do.

Here are some ways to anticipate those pitfalls and keep leveled reading fun.

### Post Growth

Encourage growth mindset, a theory established by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck. Growth mindset suggests that people develop their abilities through dedication and hard work. It also suggests that achievement is limited by encouraging fixed mindset. Fixed mindset is when people believe that skills are innate and not able to change.<sup>14</sup> Show leveled growth without posting original levels. Each time students grow a level they color in the chart. Or, to make it more of a team effort, save time for the class to track their progress by coloring in each of their teammate's progress whenever growth is achieved. During morning announcements, principals can celebrate growth and effort. *Juan advanced a reading level today. Let's give him five snaps!* A secondary school leader could say, *Agnieszka continues to try to learn as much as possible. She has embraced her challenges and has been especially receptive to critical feedback regarding how to improve her reading. I want to praise her for her continued love of learning in English class.*



## Finding Students' Reading Levels

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### **Build a Differentiated Community**

From the beginning of class, show that you are celebrating growth, not achievement. Lelac, a fifth and sixth grade reading teacher in Washington, DC, does an activity similar to the following. She posts the developmental leveled continuum (she uses the A–Z scale) in a circle around the room. She asks Shamar to stand under level L. As this activity is a simulation, it doesn't represent his real level. Lelac then tells the class that Shamar came in on level L, but he worked really hard during class. He started zooming up levels. By January he was level N (Shamar moves to that level). By June, he was level P (Shamar moves). Shamar ended up making a ton of growth. Then she does a different simulation with Shamar. She asks Shamar to stand under O. Shamar, who started class as a strong reader, didn't push himself. He kept reading similar books, and didn't want to read harder texts during shared or guided reading. By the end of the year, he only moved up to P (Shamar moved). Lelac then asks her class, "Which student ended up ahead?" With the class, she discusses that the first, hard-working student's habits would enable him to continue growing even after this year. As Lelac recounted, "It is crucial for students to understand that they are in fact in a position of infinite power and potential, that they should feel inferior to nobody and be ashamed of nothing. If they work hard, they can and will come out on top."

### **Start with an Easy Book Unit**

If you haven't had the opportunity to determine reading levels, start the year with an "easy book unit" in elementary or middle school classrooms. Urge students to identify books that they think would be quick reads. For the first few weeks of school, students read upward of a dozen books. This helps build library routines because kids are moving at an accelerated pace. When the playing field becomes equalized during an easy book unit, there is less

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stigma attached to reading levels later on, once you have the opportunity to administer reading inventories. I find this strategy effective for all grade levels, and it helps give you a little more time to administer reading inventories.

### Use Texts from All Levels

During instruction, avoid using texts that are exclusively on grade level. There are rich resources within texts at all gradients. For instance, in the first grade book *Henry and Mudge*, the first page's text reads "Henry and Mudge, a boy and his dog, are meant to be together. Most often they are, but not always." What a great text to teach understanding appositives! *Who's Henry? Who's Mudge? How do you know? Has anyone read this book before? Isn't it awesome?* Books at all levels are rich with teaching opportunities. If you are a secondary teacher, don't knock elementary texts and vice versa.

Once you figure out your students' reading levels, you are well on your way toward meeting the needs of all of your kids, including the Sofias in your classroom. Guess who just started high school, and who can read *A Wrinkle in Time*, no problem? Sofia advanced from level G to Z, a difference of seven grade levels, in three years and is well on her way to and through college.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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1. Sample inventories with several students reading on a range of levels and the notes that the teacher took
2. Fry Graph for Estimating Readability
3. Suggestions for how to set up a leveled library

## Finding Students' Reading Levels

**MILD, MEDIUM, SPICY NEXT-STEP SUGGESTIONS**

	<b>Mild</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Spicy</b>
Assessing Readers	Administer a whole group inventory to determine which students are not able to answer on grade level passages. Then pull identified students for additional inventory assessments.	Get your friends to help! Show a couple running record videos and teach your friends the basics. Later, match five kids per friend. You just finished a class!	Ask students to do a think aloud as they independently read to show you the thinking that is happening in their head as part of their reading inventory. Tell students, <i>"I want to hear the thinking in your head. Each time you do a reading strategy, say it out loud."</i> Then evaluate which strategies they are using.
Peer Support	Nothing works better than keepin' it real. Share with students your concerns about teasing from the offset, and what you do and don't want to see.	Celebrate texts within all gradients of difficulty. As you keep a chart of books you are reading, make sure to throw in books at all levels and sell the heck out of them. Allow students at higher levels periodically to check out a high-interest lower-level text.	Create progress growth charts rather than level growth charts. At the beginning of the year, give each student an end of year grow goal two or more grade levels above where they entered, and chart progress.

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## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING FOR LEVELED READING

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1. *Guiding Readers and Writers* by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell
2. *Differentiated Reading Instruction* by Laura Robb
3. *Running Records for Classroom Teachers* by Marie M. Clay
4. *Qualitative Reading Inventory-5* by Lauren Leslie

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## KEEPIN' IT REAL

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Here are some problems that we faced when assessing students' reading levels. Address the pitfalls in advance and I hope they won't happen to you!

### Sneaking Harder Books

Some teachers require students to read exclusively within their comfort level during choice reading. I wasn't that teacher, because if a kid was begging for a book, I let them read it. But, and this is a big but, monitor carefully. What you don't want is reluctant or struggling readers choosing a book on their frustration level and then getting stuck, discouraged, or starting the bad habit of fake reading. Continually check in and if it's not working out suggest a level-appropriate book with a similar theme. Another idea is to give kids some leeway by allowing students to read any level that they want once a month. Marie Clay says, ". . . there must be the opportunity for the child . . . to pull himself up by his bootstraps: texts which allow him to practice and develop the full range of strategies which he does control, and by problem-solving new challenges, reach out beyond that present control" (Clay, p. 215).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, don't be too strict in regards to kids "sneaking" harder books.

### Teacher Language Around Levels

Be mindful of your language when referencing levels in the classroom. Avoid language like, *Don't read this book because it's too hard for you* or *Is this book above your level? Put it down and get a book on your level*. Try more kid-friendly, growth-mindset language like, *I think that the books in the green baskets are going to make you feel like a strong reader. Find one*

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## Finding Students' Reading Levels

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*that you are interested in. Or, Is this book a little confusing? See if you can find a book in the \_\_\_\_\_ basket with a similar theme.*

### **Order Lots of Lower Reading Level Books**

Middle and high schools must order first and second grade level books. Many adolescents are reading in that range. Kids who read books within that range read a lot more books than kids who read books in higher book bands because the books are shorter with larger font. I am currently working with high school boys who are sixteen to eighteen years old, and of those boys, 20% are reading below a second grade level. I find myself doubling the number of books in the first and second grade range each year when I purchase books for libraries. Kids can read upward of two a day.

### **“Baby Books” + Big Kids**

Although I've never experienced this first hand, some teachers who work with high school students notice disengagement when older readers are assessed using lower-level passages that have juvenile topics. If that's the case, consider supplementing your books with high-interest, lower-level books that are produced by literacy companies targeting that market. For instance, companies produce short texts that are on a first grade level with topics that interest upper middle and high school students. Capstone Press produces nonfiction readers on a similar readability range that should interest students through high school. Or consider writing a grant for e-readers. Then download a range of books onto each tablet. E-readers provide anonymity if students are self-conscious of their levels.

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## **FOR COACHES AND SCHOOL LEADERS**

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### **Time for Assessments**

Provide time for teachers so that they can assess reading levels. Consider changing the schedule so secondary teachers have the day “off” to pull kids to assess. Or cover your teachers' classes for the day for the same purpose.

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■ *Reading Without Limits* ■

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In elementary school, consider bringing in community volunteers for a day. Share leveling resources with them. The more folks on board, the faster you will be able to determine levels.

### **Organize**

Whether it's an administrator or reading specialist who does the task, someone needs to be "in charge of" keeping the inventory records so you can track student progress as they advance in grade levels. A simple excel spreadsheet does the trick. I recommend that a non-classroom teacher performs this job so one person for all students in the school keeps the records.

### **TO SUM UP**

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- Determine the reading level of each student, ideally one-on-one using a running record.
- Do group inventories when you need to save time assessing.
- Do not match a book to a student's grade or age; match it to his or her reading level.
- Create a "reading level" free community that doesn't get hung up on peer reading levels, but instead supports stamina, love of reading, and strategic growth.