

[Why it's time to stop using guided reading levels](#)

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Breaking up is hard to do.

But I'm doing it.

I'm breaking up with a system I've held onto for twenty years.

I'm breaking up with Fountas and Pinnell's text leveling system. You know – the guided reading levels from A to Z.

I was *all in* on F & P. I spent countless hours leveling my classroom library. I even helped other teachers level *their* libraries.

Read on to learn why I'm replacing my popular post, "Printable Leveled Book List" (viewed over 200,000 times), with a post about why I'm letting go of the levels entirely.

Where did the guided reading levels come from?

Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, leaders in balanced literacy, introduced the Fountas & Pinnell Text Level Gradient in 1996. When I began teaching in 1999, I was thrilled to discover a system that (I thought) would help my students find their "just right" level.

Never mind that I could never quite figure out why this book was a level N, and that book was a level O. (They looked the same to me.) And how could *this* book be a level E when it was so hard for my students, while this other level E book was a piece of cake?

I was confused, but I trusted Fountas and Pinnell. After all, their work was based on the work of Marie Clay – and apparently she'd done her research. (Turns out her beliefs were based on observations, not on how the brain learns to read, but never mind.)

I loved that Fountas and Pinnell worked with “literacy experts” to level their books according to these factors:

- genre
- text structure
- content
- themes and ideas
- language and literary features
- sentence complexity
- vocabulary
- words
- illustrations
- book and print features

The levels made my teaching life easier because grouping my students by reading level helped me organize my small group instruction.

And even though Fountas and Pinnell didn’t recommend leveling classroom libraries, I did so because a leveled library made it simple to help students find “just right” books (or so I thought).

Guided reading levels are based on a faulty understanding of how reading works

Fountas and Pinnell tell us that their Text Level Gradient is useful to “support the child’s development of self-initiating actions that he will be able to apply to a range of texts of similar difficulty.”

Huh?!

What does that even mean?

Unfortunately these “self-initiating actions” in the early grades include teaching kids to use the picture and the first letter to identify words instead of reading through words from left to right. This is known as three-cueing. It bypasses orthographic mapping and is actually a **hindrance to reading development**.

The early guided reading levels (levels A-D) consist of predictable, repetitive books with words students can't yet sound out. The only way they *can* "read" these books is with three-cueing!

If Fountas and Pinnell had this foundational piece wrong (and **they still aren't budging**), why should I trust them at all?

Guided reading levels are arbitrary

I have to admit that I was often puzzled by the guided reading levels assigned to particular books. Two books could be assigned the same level; a child would find one very difficult and the other easy. Why? I assumed that my confusion was due to my own lack of knowledge. (Surely there couldn't be a problem with the whole system.)

But the fact is that readers don't have a single level. What they can read is influenced by their interests and background knowledge. When I taught my youngest to read, I used decodable books. But early in his journey he started reading the **"Who Would Win" series** apart from our phonics lessons because I'd read them to him so many times already. With a great deal of effort, he could read these books because he was so interested in the topic, understood the series' text structure, and already knew much of the vocabulary.

Guided reading levels don't give us useful information

"This child is reading at a level E."

So what? What does that even mean? Does it tell us what skills the student has? Does it tell us what the student needs to learn next?

Instead of giving our students an arbitrary level (based on a system created by people we can't trust), we should note how they're doing in basic reading skills like phonemic awareness and phonics. Do they read at an appropriate rate? Do they understand what they read?

Using a universal screener like Acadience or Dibels 8 will let us know whether these students are meeting benchmark for their grade level or if they're at risk for reading failure.

Diagnostic assessments will help us nail down the issue so we know exactly what to teach them next.

Now *that's* useful information!

Teaching students to read at their “instructional level” isn’t based on research

As a teacher, I spent a lot of time using **running records** to find each student’s independent, instructional, and frustration level. It took a lot of time, but I thought that teaching them in small groups using their instructional level made perfect sense. I thought that directing kids to their independent level during free reading was best.

Despite claims to the contrary, leveling is not based on research. **According to researcher Timothy Shanahan**, discussions in favor of leveling text are “tainted by selective citing.”

- People have cherry picked studies to support their claims.
- People have made claims the researcher didn’t make.
- People have ignored limitations specified by the researcher.
- People have cited expert opinions as if they were research findings.

The bottom line?

Shanahan writes that “there is no credible evidence supporting learning benefits from teaching kids at their levels.”

Students benefit from reading complex text with support

It’s time to let go of the idea that we need to find the instructional level for students to read in small groups. Scores of research has shown us that students show greater gains when they read complex texts (at or slightly above grade level). **See references here.**

An important aside: Please note that students who are still learning to decode are not ready for complex text. They should receive explicit instruction in phonemic awareness,

*phonics and fluency and practice with engaging **decodable text**.*
Learn more here.

This doesn't mean that we throw students into complex texts and expect them to swim.

We support them by doing one or more of the following:

- Build background knowledge before reading.
- Have students read a simpler text on the same topic before reading the complex text aloud.
- Pre-teach challenging vocabulary.
- Read the text aloud before having students read it.
- Before the group lesson, have students read along with a recording.
- Ask questions after students read short portions of the text.
- Help students use a graphic organizer during or after the reading.
- Teach students to ask and answer questions as they read.

So how do we help students find books they can read on their own?

The fact is that once students move out of decodable text, we need a way to help them find texts they can read independently. Reading at their approximate level is important when they're reading without support. Despite what some science of reading advocates like to say, just because students know the code doesn't mean they can "read anything."

But if not guided reading levels – what?

I've let go of the idea that this is a perfect science (it's not science at all). It's an art. Lexile levels, which level books by word and sentence difficulty can get you started, but they won't get you all the way there. Remember – the more interest and background knowledge students have on a topic, the more difficult text they can read.

When you organize your classroom library by topic, you can look in the "animals" bin to help an animal lover find a book that isn't overwhelming. It might feature fewer words with a reader-friendly layout. But be prepared for that student to surprise you by reading a more challenging text when he or she has the interest and background knowledge to make the text more accessible.

When you also organize your classroom library by chapter book series, you can help students find a series they love and encourage them to read more of them.

What to tell parents

If your school has traditionally reported guided reading levels to parents, communicate exactly why you're making a shift. "Guided reading levels don't give us much information about a reader's strengths and weaknesses. Instead of assigning levels, we'll be identifying exactly what your student's skills are and what he or she needs to learn next."

So ... what do you think? Are you ready to break up too?

For further reading

- Buckingham, Jennifer. **Benchmarking assessments and levelling should be consigned to history**, an article for Nomanis
- Shanahan, Timothy. **Rejecting instructional level theory** (blog post with links to research)
- Shanahan, Timothy. **Eight ways to help kids read complex text** (Reading Rockets blog post)
- Shanahan, Timothy. **Should we teach students at their reading levels?** An article for Literacy Leadership
- Shanahan, Timothy. **To Lexile or not to Lexile – that is the question**. An article for Reading Rockets
- Shanahahn, Timothy. **Why children should be taught to read with more challenging texts**. An article published in *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*.
- **Supporting All Learners with Complex Text**, an article from Achieve the Core
- Vaites, Karen. **Leveled reading groups don't work – why aren't we talking about it?**