

# Using Readability Levels to Guide Students to Books

- **Emphasize the importance of variety in reading.** Rather than focusing on a book's readability level, emphasize how important it is to enjoy many different kinds of literature. Encourage students to explore new subjects, new genres, and new authors. Recommend that they read nonfiction books written at their reading levels. Also, suggest longer books at their current reading levels.
- **Use "Honors Reader" book lists.** You can create special lists to direct upper-grade students to challenging literature. It's motivational for students 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's OK for students to go back a few levels and read classic books they may have missed in the lower grades. (In some cases they may benefit from rereading a classic they read when they were younger but can now appreciate more deeply.) There are some great books written at fifth-grade levels that would be enjoyable and challenging for an eleventh-grader, such as Fahrenheit 451 (5.2 ATOS readability level) or The Yearling (5.0 ATOS readability level). These students already read well—now they should also become well-read.

## About ATOS

The ATOS for Books 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 on:

- 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 students reading almost a million books

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

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

- "high-low" books, which are read by struggling readers and often are overestimated by Flesch-Kincaid and other widely accepted readability formulas
- emergent reader books, which often are underestimated by other formulas
- nonfiction books, which often are more difficult than fiction books but are underestimated by other formulas
- long books, which can also be underestimated by other formulas

For more information about ATOS, call (800) 656-6740.



Accelerated Reader is the daily progress-monitoring assessment technology designed to help you motivate and monitor student reading practice.

When Accelerated Reader is used according to recommended Best Practices for classroom implementation, it has been shown to accelerate reading growth for all students, regardless of ability.

## Readability:

### What It Is and Why It's 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 Accelerated Reader, which emphasizes 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—for more information on this formula, see the back page of this pamphlet.

### What It Is Not

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 analyzes the suitability of the content or the literary merit for individual readers. This decision is up to educators and parents, who know best what content is appropriate for each student.

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## Judging the Suitability of Books for Individual Students

In this guide, we'll refer to three different levels to use when matching books to students. The first two levels refer to a 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. That means the text can be understood by readers with an average mid-fourth-grade reading ability.
- **Interest level** refers to the sophistication and maturity level of a book's content, ideas, and themes. These levels are 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** measures the most difficult level of text a student can comprehend, based on standardized tests or results from 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. That's why using all three levels—and considering the maturity level of each student—is so important.

These three levels often differ, which presents both challenges and opportunities in the classroom. You can use the differences in the three levels 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 written at their grade level.

The table on the next page shows some other possible scenarios that might occur with specific readers in your classroom, along with practical advice for addressing these situations.

### Readability:

#### How To Use It in the Classroom

Self-selection of books is an essential component of Accelerated Reader because it empowers students to choose books that appeal to them. Of course, you need to set some guidelines. Here's how you can use readability levels, reading levels, and interest levels to guide students to the right books:

1. **Start by explaining the levels to your students.** Take a few minutes in class to explain the differences, using sample readability, interest, and reading levels and sample books that are similar to those that most students in the class would encounter. Tell students that reading level is about them (their tested reading level), while readability level and interest level are about the book. The readability level is about the difficulty of the text, and the interest level is about the content and whether it's suitable for a certain age group. Show students how Accelerated Reader books are labeled and what the labels mean.
2. **Note the students' reading levels and zones of proximal development (ZPD).** Reading level is usually the grade-equivalent score from a recent standardized test. Obviously, it's difficult to limit a student's reading to just one level. Therefore, we recommend that students read in a range corresponding to their ZPD, the range of levels that is neither too hard nor too easy. For example, a student with a tested reading level of 3.5 would read in a range of readability levels such as 2.8–4.0. If you know the student's reading level, you can determine the ZPD by using the Renaissance Learning Goal-Setting Chart, which can be printed from the AR software.

## Advice for Matching Books to Students

Student	Book	Example
High-performing third-grade reader	Suggest books with higher readability level than interest level. Make sure that the student is still reading within her zone of proximal development (ZPD).	<i>Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel</i> ATOS readability level = 4.4 Interest level = LG
Struggling fifth-grade reader	Suggest books with low readability level and interest level that matches the student's age.	<i>The Upstairs Room</i> ATOS readability level = 2.9 Interest level = MG
High-performing sixth-grade reader	Suggest books with higher readability level than interest level. You can also suggest books with lower readability level, but with content or literary devices that may make text more difficult. Make sure that the student is still reading within her zone of proximal development (ZPD).	<i>Black Beauty</i> ATOS readability level = 7.7 Interest level = MG
Struggling high-school reader	Suggest books with low readability level and upper-grade interest level. Conduct Status of the Class 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

LG = lower grades (K–3) • MG = middle grades (4–8) • UG = upper grades (9–12)

3. **Guide students to select books with readability levels in their 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.
4. **Guide students to select books within the appropriate interest level.** Since interest levels are simply divided into three categories (“LG” for lower grades, “MG” for middle grades, and “UG” for upper grades), you can direct students to choose only from the category that is right for them. For example, lower-grade teachers might want to make a rule that their students read only LG interest-level books. You can grant exemptions if you feel an individual student could handle the ideas and content of a book with a higher interest level.

5. **Monitor progress daily.** After helping students select books, monitor comprehension with the daily routine called Status of the Class. This routine involves a short conversation with each student, in which you talk to students about their progress through their books. 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 move up to higher readability levels as their reading improves, but upper-grade readers pose unique challenges. As they move up, they find that there are fewer and fewer books to choose from at higher readability levels. For this reason, we recommend that you not continue to “up the level” indefinitely for upper-grade readers, but use these strategies instead: