

Inside every book...



A Report on the Art and Science of Levelled Reading Books 2022



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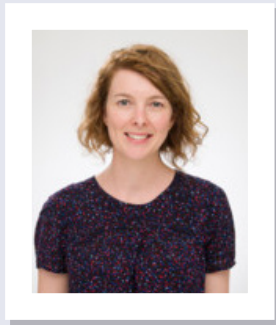
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Introduction



Learning to read is a key focus of the primary years, and necessarily so, as it unlocks students’ ability to learn across all subject areas. As readers we can better understand the world as we engage with content that informs and explains aspects of science, culture, geography, history, maths and countless other topics. Importantly, reading can also give us insight into the experiences and lives of others.



Joanna Lake

An initial goal in the teaching of reading is often to immerse students in words and books. Schools and teachers play a vital role here, and we see this implemented in our classrooms through the shared reading of texts, discussion of books, rich vocabulary talk and encouragement to engage with texts in all their forms. This ongoing immersion in literature and vocabulary is an important element when cultivating a continued engagement in reading.

Alongside this, students will also begin to have independent reading experiences, and this is where levelled texts can play a crucial role. When students have a successful independent reading experience they will often feel a great sense of accomplishment. This, in turn, is motivating and encourages students when engaging with new texts and new challenges. The supportive nature of levelled texts can facilitate these experiences and provide an essential part of a student’s reading journey.

Learning to read is a complex process, requiring the practice of a range of skills. The use of levelled decodable texts can support the development of letter sound knowledge and practice of high frequency words. As decoding becomes more automatic, levelled texts with carefully crafted stories and structured non-fiction content support the development of strong comprehension skills across a range of genres and text types. In addition to this, levelled texts provide an opportunity for students to grow their vocabulary throughout the primary years.

At OUP we have been creating levelled texts for many years—working collaboratively with experts, authors, illustrators, editors and designers. Our goal is to create engaging texts that students will enjoy and be motivated to read, and we want to share our knowledge around how we do this.

Over the last 18 months, OUP has undertaken a detailed analysis of over 2000 levelled reading books from across our most popular series including Oxford Reading for Comprehension and Project X. We’ve looked closely at what goes into our books at each Oxford Reading Level and how these ‘key ingredients’ support and stretch children as they progress. We have examined the language data and ‘science,’ as well as reflecting on the essential human expertise—the ‘art’—that informs our decisions. Our aim is to help teachers understand what we do when we level a book, how we do it, and the impact that levelled books can make as part of a rich and varied reading diet.

Joanna Lake is Senior Publisher, Literacy and Export at Oxford University Press ANZ.



About Oxford Reading Levels

Oxford Reading Levels is a system used to determine the level of many popular primary reading books from Oxford University Press (OUP). At each Oxford Reading Level, incremental changes to text difficulty based on a range of factors help to support student's progress in reading.

The Oxford Reading Levels system has been devised over decades with the help of many leading authors, editors, educational experts, and teachers.

Oxford Reading Levels range from Level 1 to Level 20, supporting readers from Foundation/Kindergarten to Year 6. The below chart shows how the levels map to student's typical progress through primary school, although different student's will of course progress at different rates and reach different points at the end of each year.

Year level	Age range	ORL
Foundation	5–6 years old	1
		1+
		2
		3
		4
Year 1	6–7 years old	5
		6
		7
Year 2	7–8 years old	8
		9
Year 3	8–9 years old	10
		11
		12
Year 4	9–10 years old	13
		14
		15
Year 5	10–11 years old	16
		17
Year 6	11–12 years old	18
		19
		20



How do levelled reading books support progress?

Students need exposure to a rich and varied ‘diet’ of reading books and materials if they are to become successful, life-long readers, who take pleasure from reading. During primary school, this will include books that are read to, or shared with, students by an adult, books that teachers direct students to read independently, and books that students choose to read for themselves.* Some books will be used for instructional purposes, some for practising specific skills or acquiring specific knowledge, and some books will be read purely for pleasure. Most books will do all of these things! It is the mix of different reading experiences that matters when it comes to achieving the goal.

Levelled reading books can play a fundamental role in helping to develop essential reading skills, breadth of knowledge, and vocabulary, as well as helping to foster positive reading habits. They support students through small steps of progression, from wordless books to carefully structured, fully decodable books, to increasingly more complex, sophisticated, and varied fiction and non-fiction texts.

In the early years of Primary school, the development of word reading skills is key—many students will be mastering grapheme-phoneme correspondences and learning to read high frequency words. Levelled texts that support practice of these skills in a systematic way ensure consistency between what students are taught in class and what they encounter when reading, which allows students to steadily gain confidence in their reading abilities.

Beyond developing word reading skills, levelled reading books can help support progress in reading comprehension and language skills, develop fluency and stamina, as well as establishing the habit of reading.

Even when students *can read*—i.e. they have largely mastered word reading—the use of levelled reading books ensures students develop a range of reading skills in a supported way. Levelled reading books offer progressive exposure to different genres, themes, plot and text devices, as well as helping to develop students’ grammatical knowledge, which in turn aids understanding.

For more details about how levelled reading books can support the development of a range of skills, [see page 7](#) of this report.




*The term ‘book’ in this context refers to any form of reading material.

Why are levelling systems for primary reading books important?

Oxford Reading Levels is a text levelling system. Text levelling systems are crucial for ensuring that levelled reading books meet certain standards, whether that be the appropriateness of the content, phonics, language, or grammatical and sentence structures used within them. This way, teachers can have confidence that students will be encountering books with the right amount of challenge, at any point in their reading journey, as they progress from learning to decode to becoming confident, fluent readers who can tackle any text.


Oxford primary reading books are carefully levelled by experts using the Oxford Reading Levels system.⁹



Levelling systems are mainly used in the following ways:



to organize books in the classroom



to help structure learning and support progress in learning



to support teacher assessment of children's reading (e.g. phonics, comprehension, fluency)



to engage children and maintain interest through age-appropriate content

How Oxford Reading Levels can help assess student's reading capabilities

The dual processes of levelling texts and assessing students' reading capabilities are linked but different.

Levelling texts involves using a detailed set of criteria to determine the level of challenge within primary reading books. Oxford Reading Levels is a system for levelling text that underpins many different series from Oxford University Press.

Assessing a students' reading capabilities—judging what they can 'do'—involves a range of factors and assessment methods, including teacher judgement. However, in any assessment, it is important that students' reading is assessed in relation to a text of an appropriate level.

Reading books that have been levelled using Oxford Reading Levels can be used to support effective assessment of students' reading.


⁹. Read Write Inc. has its own unique and carefully structured progression and is not levelled using Oxford Reading Levels.

Analysing the ‘science’ and ‘art’ of Oxford Reading Levels

A specialist team at Oxford University Press set out to analyse the ‘science’ and ‘art’ behind Oxford Reading Levels in order to create more comprehensive level descriptors. It is hoped that this robust analysis will help teachers by giving them detailed information about each Oxford Reading Level so that they can select the right books for their students.

The science

Using data from the **Oxford Children’s Language Corpus**, OUP has analysed the ‘science’ behind Oxford Reading Levels, looking at:

- ⦿ phonics (e.g. digraphs, alternative pronunciations, common exception words)
- ⦿ text features (e.g. labels, captions)
- ⦿ word level analysis (e.g. word counts per book/page)
- ⦿ sentence characteristics (e.g. sentences per book/page/paragraph)
- ⦿ sentences by function (e.g. statements, exclamations, questions, and commands)
- ⦿ sentences by structure (e.g. subject-verb-object)
- ⦿ punctuation features (e.g. commas, colons, dashes)
- ⦿ word classes (e.g. adjectives, nouns, conjunctions, prepositions)
- ⦿ vocabulary (e.g. frequency of individual words).

The art

In addition, OUP has interrogated the ‘art’ behind Oxford Reading Levels, including (among other things):

- ⦿ choosing appropriate decodable words
- ⦿ vocabulary choices
- ⦿ subject matter and themes
- ⦿ character, setting, and plot
- ⦿ story structure and book devices
- ⦿ dialogue
- ⦿ text positioning
- ⦿ design and illustration features.

The **Oxford Children’s Language Corpus** is the largest living database of children’s reading and writing in English. This unique insight into the words students write and read, allows OUP to understand the language students need to acquire at each step of their education.

The Oxford Reading Levels analysis was based on:



Books that have been developed using Oxford Reading Levels help to:



Build reading skills, confidence, stamina, and pace through:

- careful choice of words
- increasing the number of pages per book
- increasing the number of words and sentences per book and per page
- a selection of organizational features such as paragraphs, chapters, and headings
- thoughtful use of images and illustrations.



Build reading comprehension through:

- the transition from familiar topics to more complex subject matter and themes
- narrative and non-fiction structures that progress from linear to more sophisticated structures
- opportunities to encounter a variety of author voices
- gradual removal of the scaffolds that typically support understanding (e.g. fewer familiar words, more complex sentences, increased use of pronouns)
- varied punctuation.

Build language through:

- progressive use of language devices and figures of speech (e.g. onomatopoeia, alliteration, similes, metaphors, idioms)
- introduction of different types of sentences (e.g. compound and complex sentences)
- use of increasingly varied vocabulary.



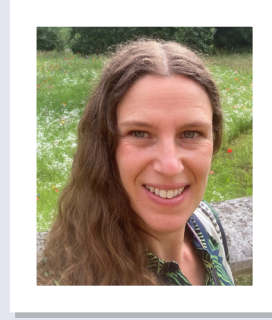
Build reading habits through:

- progressive exposure to different types of content in fiction and non-fiction
- character development, increasing complexity of plot, diversity of settings
- introduction of different genres (e.g. folk tales, classic texts).

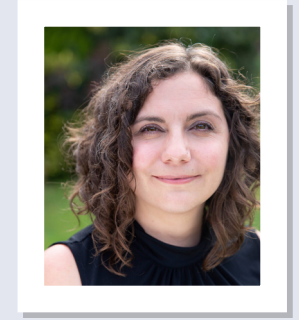


... and much more!

What makes texts difficult to read?



Dr Jessie Ricketts



Dr Helen L. Breadmore



Reading texts successfully relies on being able to read words and construct meaning. When children start to read, their first challenge is to ‘crack the code’ that links sounds to letters and letter combinations. Once children have acquired this phonics knowledge, they can ‘self-teach’, or sound out words so that they can be stored in memory and recognized more efficiently later. For this reason, children who know more about the sound (phonology), spelling (orthography), and meaning (semantics) of words will find it easier to read individual words. This is why children with greater phonics and word knowledge are usually better readers.

Two key features of words determine how easily they are read: familiarity and structure. Familiar words are read more accurately and fluently. Words are more likely to be familiar if they are acquired early and occur frequently across diverse contexts. Structural characteristics that influence reading success include word length, the nature of letter-sound correspondences, and similarity to other words. In English, the ‘regularity’ or ‘consistency’ of letter-sound relationships within a word is important: unfamiliar words with unexpected spelling patterns can be more difficult to read (e.g. yacht, island).

Being able to read individual words is necessary but not sufficient for reading success. Children must be able to construct meaning across words, sentences, and paragraphs. To do that they need to read fluently enough to build a mental ‘model’ or a representation of text that will support comprehension. This is a very complex process that is influenced by many factors related to the child, the text, and interactions between the two. Decades of research by many different academics indicate that text reading depends on the child’s reading experience, motivation, knowledge of vocabulary and syntax, background knowledge, and ability to integrate across the text and make inferences.

At the text level, research has demonstrated links between reading accuracy, fluency, and measures of

text complexity that are based on quantitative metrics (e.g. word frequency, word length, sentence length, syntactic complexity) and qualitative ratings. Little research has explored the relationship between text complexity and reading comprehension. Nonetheless, as highlighted by work on the Oxford Reading Levels project, text-level factors will interact with child-level factors to determine reading success. For example, more cohesive texts require children to make fewer inferences while they read and so will also be easier to follow. Topic choice is also important, both in terms of familiarity and interest. Texts on topics that children know more about are more likely to include known words and to enable children to draw on their background knowledge to make inferences. On the other hand, children are motivated to read more difficult texts when they find the topic interesting. Here though, it is important to remember that not all children will have the same topic knowledge due to differences in educational and life experiences.

Dr Jessie Ricketts (Royal Holloway University) works closely with practitioners and policy makers to conduct research on reading and spoken language development in childhood and adolescence.

Dr Helen L Breadmore (University of Birmingham) researches the cognitive processes that underpin successful reading and writing, and best practice in literacy education.



Further reading:

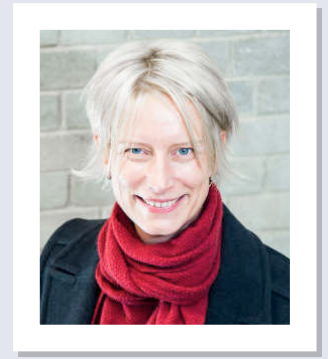
Breadmore, H. L., Vardy, E. J., Cunningham, A. J., Kwok, R. K. W., & Carroll, J. M. (2019). *Literacy Development: Evidence Review*. Education Endowment Foundation.

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Literacy_Development_Evidence_Review.pdf

Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). ‘Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert’. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19(1), 5–51.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100618772271>

Developing reading comprehension: how books can support progression



Professor Kate Cain

For readers of any age, successful reading comprehension is influenced by interactions between reader, text, and reading purpose.¹⁰ Learning to read with good comprehension is a developmental process. The relative influence of the skills and knowledge that support reading for understanding changes over time as readers develop word reading proficiency, extend their language skills and conceptual knowledge, and apply these to ever-more challenging books and diverse reading activities. This framework can usefully guide our selection of books for young readers to support progression.

The changing influence of skills and knowledge of young readers

In the early stages of learning to read, word reading proficiency limits the student's ability to extract and construct meaning from written text. As a result, books for beginner readers often contain limited (decodable) vocabulary, and learning to decode is a core focus of early literacy instruction. However, reading involves more than single word recognition; children's language skills support the development of successful reading and listening comprehension.

In addition, the multi-faceted process of reading comprehension requires that successful readers learn to coordinate these different skills and knowledge when reading, rather than practise them in isolation. For example, vocabulary knowledge enables inference making, and the meanings of unfamiliar words can be inferred from supportive context. Vocabulary and inference support the growth of each other over time, such that vocabulary knowledge in primary school children predicts their ability to make inferences from text one year later, and vice versa.¹¹

This illustrates a variety of factors that need to be considered to identify appropriate books at all stages of reading development.



10. Snow, C.E. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Rand Corporation.
11. Language and Reading Research Consortium and Y.-D. Chiu (2018). 'The Simple View of Reading across development: the prediction of grade 3 reading comprehension by prekindergarten skills'. *Remedial and Special Education*, 39: pp. 289–303.

The differences between oral and written language

Students' oral language skills and knowledge provide the foundation for reading development, but the language of books differs from everyday conversation. Thus, learning to read presents challenges beyond the acquisition of decoding skills. Books contain more rare and less familiar vocabulary. As a result, print is the primary means for learning new words, once students become independent readers.¹² Prior content knowledge and knowledge of text structures and rhetorical devices support integration of information within a text and facilitate inference making to fill in gaps.¹³ The process of drawing on these knowledge bases when reading provides the means to consolidate and extend knowledge, resulting in learning from text. As a consequence, there are strong associations between exposure to books and knowledge growth.¹⁴



Books also differ from conversation in the range and frequency of complex multi-clause sentences. Related to this, the amount of exposure to written language is associated with primary school student's accuracy in the production of complex sentences.¹⁵ Readability formulae that rely solely on word frequency and sentence length to estimate text complexity and ease of comprehension would recommend that short sentences are best. However, primary school students' comprehension is boosted when they read two clauses joined by a connective that signals the temporal or causal relation between them.¹⁶ Thus, levelled books that contain complex syntax, can both aid growth in syntactic competence and support reading comprehension.

A robust approach to support reading development

To support progression in reading comprehension, young readers need opportunities to practise and develop their reading skills and to secure and extend the knowledge that will support their subsequent reading development. To do so, they must engage with a range of books that contain an appropriate variety of words, sentence structures, topics, and text structures.

A robust approach to levelling will take into account these points. Such a resource will enable educators to select considerate written texts for individual readers, which provide the necessary opportunities for language and knowledge growth to foster their reading comprehension.

Kate Cain is a Professor of Language and Literacy in the Department of Psychology at Lancaster University. Her research focuses on how language skills and cognitive resources influence reading and listening comprehension development from preschool through to adolescence and is published both under her own name, and as a member of the Language and Reading Research Consortium.

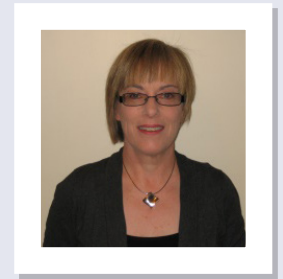
To support progression in reading comprehension, young readers need opportunities to ... engage with a range of books that contain an appropriate variety of words, sentence structures, topics, and text structures.

12/14. Language and Reading Research Consortium (2015). 'Learning to read: Should we keep things simple?' *Reading Research Quarterly*. 50: pp. 151–169.
13. Language and Reading Research Consortium, M.M.L. Muijselaar, and N.K. Currie (2019). 'Inference making in young children: the concurrent and longitudinal contributions of verbal working memory and vocabulary'. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 111: pp. 1416–1431.
15. Cunningham, A.E. and K.E. Stanovich (1998). 'What reading does for the mind'. *American Educator*. 22: pp. 8–15.
16. McCarthy, K.S. and D.S. McNamara (2021). 'The multidimensional knowledge in text comprehension framework'. *Educational Psychologist*.

Further reading:

Montag, J.L. and M.C. MacDonald (2015). 'Text exposure predicts spoken production of complex sentences in 8- and 12-year-old children and adults'. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. 144: pp. 447–468.
Cain, K. and H. Nash (2011). 'The influence of connectives on young readers' processing and comprehension of text'. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 103: p. 429–441.

Life in a busy primary classroom



Anne Bayetto

Teaching students to read offers them a passport for accessing the world. With such an important responsibility, teachers aspiring for their students to become independent and successful readers have challenging instructional responsibilities especially as students have diverse learning needs.

All students benefit from a reading policy that includes opportunities to be part of modelled and guided reading instruction while also being able to freely choose independent texts where they can apply the strategies that they have been taught. These approaches are dependent on teachers knowing and understanding their students' affective and educational dispositions and approaches. With this being the case, it is essential that teachers gather diagnostic, informative assessment data to confirm students' present reading abilities so they are better able to make on-balance decisions about what their students need to learn next.

With so many reading materials available it is essential that teachers use evidence-informed processes regarding what texts are suitable for their students at particular points in time. The need to differentiate instruction according to their students' current abilities, while scaffolding their learning as they tackle slightly more challenging texts, places daily demands on teachers' decision-making and expertise and this is why levelled reading books have a place in classrooms: they support teachers to more assuredly select suitable texts for their students.

By considering both the 'science' and 'art' aspects of levelling fiction and non-fiction books, OUP have considered the varying needs of students as they develop their reading skills i.e., through provision of interesting topics with strong use of a range of visuals, varied settings, plots, and characters. Another benefit is the opportunity for students to develop their generalisation skills by reading a range of text types at the same level. This 'lateral' reading offers opportunities for strengthening skills so they become automatic. Further, levelled reading books offer fine-grained and incremental shifts in text complexity as students progress through the levels, meaning that they are more likely to be successful readers and this in turn supports their confidence.



The comprehensive analysis of a multitude of factors apparent in current levelled reading books offers surety for teachers that when they use what they know about their students and select suitable instructional levelled reading books, they are more likely to be getting it right. Levelled reading books have much to offer both teachers and students with their steadily scaffolded and incremental reading demands.

Carefully developed levelled reading books are there for teachers on a day-after-day basis offering strong support for their planning and programming.

Anne Bayetto works at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia where she teaches undergraduate and postgraduate topics focussed on students who have literacy and/or numeracy difficulties.

Inside every book...

Books using the Oxford Reading Levels system have been carefully constructed by a team of authors and experts using detailed criteria, underpinned by extensive research and analysis.



trigraphs
alternative spellings
polysyllabic words
adjacent consonants
alternative pronunciations
digraphs
grapheme-phoneme correspondences

Phonics

summarizing
personal response
making connections
inferring
activating prior knowledge
empathizing
predicting
fluency
deducing
recall and retrieve
word meaning/s

Comprehension opportunities

comic strips
colour illustrations
vignettes
black and white illustrations
close-ups
mid-shots
full page
wide shots
half page

Illustrations

font type
background tints
space around text
layout
line length

Design features

indexes
story recaps
prologues
chapters
epilogues
contents
fact pages
glossaries
character profiles
author pages

Book features

captions
diagrams
maps
fact boxes
environmental text
labels
charts
timelines
headings
subheadings
lists
paragraph breaks
discussion boxes

Text features

vivid imagery
sentence openers
idioms
similes
metaphors
alliteration
personification
onomatopoeia
rhetorical questions
dramatic statements

Vocabulary

speech tags
speech bubbles
thought bubbles
accent/dialect

Dialogue

genre
subject matter
character/emotional based themes
conflict based themes
action based themes

Content

protagonists
self-reflection
antagonists

Character

fact files
points of view
flashbacks
cliffhangers
recounts and diary entries

Plot devices

plot twists
in medias res
passages of time
linear and non-linear narratives

Structure

contractions
dashes
commas
possessive apostrophes
brackets
indents
en rules
ellipses
question marks
colons
speech marks
semicolons

Punctuation

modal verbs
abstract nouns
compound nouns
irregular verbs
common nouns
concrete nouns
prepositions
regular verbs
adverbs
proper nouns
comparative adjectives
coordinating and subordinating conjunctions

Word class

direct speech sentences
number of sentences per book
number of sentences per page
single-clause sentences
number of sentences per paragraph
compound complex
Sentence characteristics
multi-clause sentences
commands, statements, questions, exclamations



Further information

Find out more about Oxford Reading Levels and book a free reading review:



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