

A young girl with dark hair in pigtails, wearing a white collared shirt and a dark blue vest with a large bow, is focused on reading a book. She is in a library, with bookshelves filled with books visible in the background. The lighting is soft, highlighting her face and the book.

Renaissance

In response to:

Misunderstanding student reading levels

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Foreword

Let me begin with a straightforward statement: Students' independent reading is quite different from their instructional reading. One is undertaken alone while the other occurs under the guidance, scaffolding, and support of a teacher.

I begin with this point because the title of a recent book and related article are rife for misunderstanding. Last fall, Timothy Shanahan published *Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives*. The Hechinger Report then published [an interview with Shanahan](#) titled, "Why one reading expert says 'just right' books are all wrong."

The moment I read the headline, I knew it would be misinterpreted. And I soon started to receive questions. In an era where many schools—driven by *the Science of Reading*—are discontinuing their use of leveled readers, and where Shanahan correctly points out that "leveled readers" can lead to "leveled lives," some educators are wondering about the book levels and reading ranges that appear in Renaissance's Accelerated Reader and myON programs.

Are these the things educators are being told to avoid? **No, not at all.**

To understand why, it's essential to return to my starting point, about the difference between students' independent reading and instructional reading. It's also essential to look at the types of texts causing Shanahan's concern



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What are leveled readers in education?

A leveled reader is a text that is intentionally written or selected to align with a specific instructional reading level or reading skill. Leveled readers are key elements of some reading curricula and are typically organized into progressive levels (such as A–Z or 1–30) that correspond to increasing demands in vocabulary, sentence structure, text length, syntax, cognitive load, use of print features, and/or specific reading skills that have been a target of instruction.

Leveled readers often display several defining features:

- Contrived rather than authentic text
- Predictable progression in difficulty
- Controlled vocabulary and syntax
- Intentional alignment to specific reading skills or behaviors (e.g., decoding multisyllabic words, inferencing)
- An explicit instructional purpose, given that they're often used during guided reading or small-group instruction to reinforce skills recently taught.

Leveled readers have become a topic of increasing concern for a number of reasons, including:

1. Leveled readers can become labels for students. Students may be described as “a Level J” or “a Level N,” which can narrow expectations and weaken student agency.
2. Leveled readers can restrict access to books. While intended to promote success, limiting students to intentionally leveled texts can reduce motivation and discourage curiosity and risk-taking.
3. Leveled readers can become equated with student worth. When levels become public, students may internalize them as measures of intelligence rather than as temporary instructional indicators.

Differentiating instructional reading from independent reading

The reference to reading instruction is key to this discussion. Shanahan’s concern is focused on what happens during instructional reading, which is not a solitary activity. A teacher is present to mediate the reading process and, when necessary, provide scaffolding.

While teachers are called upon to use complex and challenging texts during instruction, they do not merely assign these texts and walk away. Shanahan explains it like this in his Hechinger Report interview:



What I’m recommending is instructional differentiation. Everyone will have the same instructional goal—we’re all going to learn to read the fourth-grade text. I might teach a whole-class lesson and then let some kids move on to independent work while others get more help. Maybe the ones who didn’t get it, read the text again with my support. By the end, more students will have reached the learning goal—and tomorrow the whole class can take on another text.

As this passage makes clear, Shanahan’s concern is not related to the research-based best practices associated with students’ independent reading of authentic books while using Accelerated Reader and myON. However, because guidance on both practices contains references to “levels” or “ranges,” confusion may arise.

To fully understand the difference between leveled readers and independent reading levels, it helps to situate both within the broader framework of reading purpose:

Purpose	Description
Instructional reading	Reading with teacher guidance and support; involves challenge, skill development, and immediate feedback.
Independent reading	Reading without teacher assistance; emphasizes fluency, comprehension, stamina, and enjoyment.

Differentiating instructional reading from independent reading

Student reading levels: Why purpose matters

Because students undertake independent reading without the scaffolding a teacher may provide during instructional reading, suggested “reading ranges” for independent reading are often lower than those suggested for grade-level instructional reading.

For example, through Accelerated Reader, a student with a tested reading level of 6.0 is guided to a “ZPD” of 4.0–6.1, as expressed **on the ATOS scale**. This represents “the readability range from which students should be selecting books in order to ensure sufficient comprehension and therefore achieve optimal growth in reading skills without experiencing frustration,” as noted in our **Star Reading Technical Manual**.

In contrast, when the Common Core State Standards identified “Band Level Text Difficulty Ranges”—a suggestion of what constitutes “reading on grade level” during instruction—grade 6 students were to be reading at a higher level: 7.00–9.98 on the ATOS scale.

Let’s think about why we would not want students attempting to read on the very upper edge of their abilities when undertaking independent reading. First and foremost, it would harm motivation.

Student reading levels and reading motivation

In his book *Raising Kids Who Read*, Daniel Willingham uses “the umbrella term ‘academic reading’ to contrast...with ‘pleasure reading.’” He delineates between these two types of reading because “kids might confuse academic reading with reading for pleasure. If they do, they’ll come to think of reading as work, plain and simple.”

He adds that “academic reading feels like work because it is work” and that “pleasure ought to be the litmus test for reading for pleasure.” But there’s no pleasure in reading beyond the edge of your ability. Even the Common Core, which placed more emphasis on text complexity than previous standards sets, **called for students to** “experience the satisfaction and pleasure of easy, fluent reading.

Clearly, these are two very different things.



Do student reading levels restrict access to books?

As a final consideration, let's explore the extent to which reading "levels" or "ranges" are intended to restrict students' access to challenging texts—whether in the context of instructional reading with leveled readers or independent reading through Accelerated Reader and myON.

At the heart of Shanahan's concern, and that of others, is that leveled readers are often used **in a highly restrictive manner**. Struggling students may seldom if ever be exposed to more complex texts. In contrast to this approach, the book levels and reading ranges in Accelerated Reader and myON are merely intended to "give teachers and librarians a beginning—a place to start in their task of matching a student to a book," to quote Renaissance guidance.

Our guidance also notes that, while book levels and reading ranges are important tools in guiding independent practice, "matching students to books remains as much art as science, which is why teachers and librarians are, as they have always been, essential in the teaching of reading. No formula can take the place of a trained educator who knows her students."

In short, book levels and reading ranges simply provide a starting point.

Once students begin their independent reading, Renaissance products provide a constant feed of information regarding reading comprehension and level of text complexity. Our guidance notes that "daily monitoring of students' reading behavior and comprehension gives the educator more reliable information about reading ability and provides the information needed to continually guide student reading and create students who love to read."

The key role of background knowledge in student reading

In supporting students' independent reading, many educators may over-rely on readability formulas to gauge the difficulty of a text. But research has documented that background knowledge—which is not measured through readability formulas—is "a powerful determinant" of reading comprehension, to quote a well-known paper by Donna Recht and Lauren Leslie.

In other words, students can successfully read more challenging texts about topics with which they're already familiar, while they will likely struggle to read easier texts on topics they don't know much about.

In this context, **E.D. Hirsch contends** that readability formulas only convey theoretical difficulty, while actual difficulty depends on the knowledge the reader brings to the text. Based on the knowledge a student already possesses, he or she can be, for example, "an excellent reader about dinosaurs and a terrible reader about mushrooms," Hirsch explains.

As a result, a student's level of knowledge about a book's topic deserves just as much consideration as the readability of the book in relation to the student's general reading ability. This key point risks getting lost in blanket statements about "just-right books."

Student reading levels: Understanding the nuances

As I noted [in an earlier Renaissance blog](#), reading is an activity that takes many forms, from casually scrolling through a newsfeed to poring over a complex academic paper. Reading can be 100 percent pleasure or 100 percent work.

In that blog, I contend that discussions about student reading should recognize three distinct categories:

1. Reading to students.
2. Reading with students (instructional reading).
3. Having students read independently.

Each type of reading makes an important contribution to students' literacy development, and—perhaps more importantly—different rules govern what constitutes “success” in each.

Clearly, we want students to read increasingly complex texts with our support. At the same time, we want them to read independently and—to make this an enjoyable experience—we encourage students to follow their interests and explore new titles and authors. In this context, we're less strict about insisting that they only read “grade-level texts.”

Finally, we may also choose to read aloud to students, tapping into the dynamic that human beings are pre-wired to learn language by hearing it spoken. Here, the guidance is that teachers “consider selecting the majority of [their] read-alouds from texts written one to two grade levels above the grade level [they] are teaching” for maximum benefit, to quote Steven Layne's *In Defense of Read-Aloud*.

So, we have three essential types of reading with different purposes and different rules for what constitutes the “right” books and “right” level. In all three cases, however, there should clearly be:

- A preference for authentic texts rather than contrived leveled readers; and
- A desire to engage students with challenging texts from a variety of genres while also ensuring high rates of comprehension.

As I note in my earlier blog, it's unfortunate that instructional reading so dominates the conversation that there's little time left to consider the roles of reading to students and having students read independently, even though both are supported by an extensive body of research.

In an era of flatlining or even declining reading performance among K–12 students, a more holistic approach to books and reading is certainly warranted.

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