

The *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System*, Third Edition

An Overview of the F&P Text Level Gradient™ for Literacy Leaders

“A level is a teacher’s tool, NOT a child’s label.”

— Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell

What is the F&P Text Level Gradient™ and what place do “levels” have in reading instruction?

The F&P Text Level Gradient™, created and refined as a teaching and assessment tool over the past twenty years, consists of twenty-six points on a gradient of reading difficulty. Each point on the gradient, from the easiest at level A to the most challenging at level Z (Z+ in special cases), represents a small but significant increase in difficulty over the previous level. The Z+ category creates a twenty-seventh point that indicates adult-level reading.

The gradient provides a basis for you and your staff to analyze texts and organize them for instruction. Books for instruction in guided reading are organized by level to support the selection of books that offer your students the appropriate amount of challenge to expand their competencies. That will help you set goals and know which students need intervention. The student’s reading level represents the range of behaviors and understandings needed to successfully process texts at the level. These very specific behaviors and understandings are listed in *The Literacy Continuum*, and they become goals for instruction.

Levels can be a resource for you and your staff to guide student choices for independent reading, but they should not be a limitation or a requirement. Since you and your staff are the experts at analyzing and determining the difficulty level of a text, you can predict whether a student will experience frustration in reading it. You can also compare students’ current reading levels to grade-level expectations in your school or district.

What Is a Text Gradient?

A text gradient is:	A text gradient is not:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ A tool for teachers to use in analyzing texts.◆ A tool for selecting books for small-group reading instruction.◆ A tool for recording progress over time in reading.◆ A reference for teachers in designing lessons and planning teaching moves.◆ A support for teachers in guiding readers to make good choices for independent reading (when necessary).◆ A guide to determining whether readers are meeting grade-level expectations.◆ A signal that a reader may need intensive intervention in reading.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ A tool for students to use in choosing books for independent reading.◆ A tool for students to use in tracking their own progress.◆ A label that students attach to themselves as readers.◆ A label for book baskets in a classroom library.◆ An incentive for students to practice reading.◆ A way for students to compare themselves with others.◆ A grade on a report card.◆ A label to be communicated to parents.

An Overview of the F&P Text Level Gradient™ for Literacy Leaders continued

Cautions in Using the F&P Text Level Gradient™

As useful as the F&P Text Level Gradient™ is in particular situations, it is easy to over-rely on text levels to inform teaching decisions and book selection. Focusing too much on text levels can, in the long run, cause problems. Below are some cautions to help your staff avoid these problems.

1. It is detrimental to a student’s self-esteem and to their love of reading when they are encouraged to measure their own progress by “moving up levels.” Students should not use levels to compare themselves with others or to compete, as this is counterintuitive to building a classroom community where each student is respected, has a sense of agency, where collaboration is more valuable than competition, and where all students grow up seeing themselves as literate.
2. Second, telling students to choose by “level” is not an authentic way to select books to read independently. Readers, including adults, do not always read at their highest reading level nor do they choose books by level in a bookstore or library. As much as possible, strive for students to choose books in a way that all readers do—books that interest and engage them. Reading and talking about engaging books will provide intrinsic motivation.
3. Third, advocate for the appropriate use of levels in your school. Informing parents of the level can make them uneasy because they may see the level as a very precise measure. In fact, students should read and engage with a wide range of texts every day, and texts will naturally vary in complexity. You do not want parents to think their children should be reading on a precise level all of the time. Too much emphasis on levels can lead to misconceptions on the part of families. When levels become too important, even teachers can become competitive. Fountas and Pinnell believe very strongly that students’ reading levels have no place in teacher evaluation or on report cards. The F&P Text Level Gradient™ and leveled books are instructional tools for teachers who understand them—nothing more. Above all else, a level is a teacher’s tool, not a child’s label.

What other resources are available to continue the conversation on assessment and levels with your staff?

JOIN THE FOUNTAS & PINNELL LITERACY™ COMMUNITY

We invite you to join the thousands of educators from around the world on one of the fastest-growing online literacy communities and gain exclusive access to tools, resources, conversations, videos, tips, inspiration, and much more.

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Designed for teachers, literacy leaders, and district administrators — make The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy™ Community your daily literacy retreat to reflect, recharge, research, and redefine your schools literacy instruction.

References:

Fountas, I. C., and G. S. Pinnell. 2017. *Benchmark Assessment Systems 1 & 2*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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