

Procedure for Ranking Reading Passages by Level of Demand

All of the reading passages from the six tests to be studied were reformatted into a common font and a common page set-up. No information was retained in this format that identified the state or the test. Reading passages included in sample ACT, SAT, and NAEP assessments were also re-formatted to the common format. All reading passages were then mixed and the complete group was given to each of three raters. All genres were included in the group, so the entire set consisted of poems, short stories, essays, speeches, and informational texts.

All three raters were experienced with leveling texts for secondary students, and were very familiar with secondary curriculum and assessments. One is a retired high school English teacher and department head with over 30 years experience; one is a university professor and teacher of graduate courses in reading and writing for over 25 years; and the other is a former high school English teacher, district-wide English Language Arts director, and curriculum and test developer.

The raters were told to assume that all passages appeared on high school level reading tests taken by 10th/11th-grade students. They were asked to use their experience in secondary reading to judge the difficulty level presented by each reading selection. Each rater then read and sorted the set of reading passages according to the rater's evaluation of each passage's level of difficulty from most easy to most difficult.

After the first sort was completed, all raters shared their first three groupings—low, middle, and high. Agreement at this sectioning was very strong with approximately 75% of the passages sorted into the same high/middle/low distinctions. Through further discussions, the three raters ranked the passages from low to high within a group—low middle to high middle, for example—and then ranked all passages in the set from low to high, from 1 the lowest demand to 27, the highest.

After the complete ranking was accomplished, the entire set was evaluated in order to determine possible cuts at six levels. When these cuts were established, the leveled sets were analyzed in order to determine the characteristics of passages scoring at each of the six score points.

Reading Passage Demand Level Descriptions

Level 1

- o Focus on simplistic topics and/or themes
- o Present a moral rather than a universal theme, and that with a simple message
- o Be structured in a straightforward manner, linear text
- o Be devoid of ambiguity in message or interpretation
- o Present a superficial treatment of ideas—decoding *is* comprehension
- o Be concrete and literal
- o Use simple, repetitive vocabulary
- o Use simple sentence structures

Level 2

- o Familiar, predictable structures
- o Topic/theme may be clichéd
- o Familiar vocabulary used in familiar ways
- o Familiar environments/settings—particularly in time setting
- o Metaphors/symbols have a one-to-one correspondence
- o Main points/ideas repeated throughout the text without extension or elaboration
- o Simple messages are obvious even when not directly stated
- o Simple, unaffected dialogue
- o One dimensional characters
- o Simple sentence structures
- o Linear structure

Level 3

- o Predictable structures/organization of ideas or story
- o Somewhat multidimensional—may include more than a single situation, relationship, or concept.
- o Obvious theme or main idea, easily discernable, often through the title
- o Common, everyday language with few unfamiliar words
- o Uncommon language not crucial to comprehension of text
- o Specialized vocabulary defined clearly through context
- o Facts provided are repeated for emphasis

Level 4

- o Common experiences and worlds, yet more universal themes
- o Straightforward presentation of those worlds, themes, information
- o Some unusual language, but common concepts and, on the whole, familiar language

- o Failure to understand specialized terminology does not interfere with comprehension
- o Some subtle inferences need to be drawn
- o Character relationships may be subtle or somewhat ambiguous
- o Step-by-step organization
- o Clear cause/effect relationships of facts to results or actions to plot
- o Information presented concrete and descriptive rather than theoretical/abstract
- o Familiar concepts presented; relationships to prior knowledge straightforward
- o May include simple figurative language
- o Dialogue advances the plot

Level 5

- o Familiar life experiences and settings, but may be somewhat removed in time and/or place
- o Require inferences about the “big ideas” located in prior knowledge such as concept of family, e.g.
- o Implications go beyond the text—more universal themes and insights into human nature
- o Include shifts in perspective or multiple perspectives
- o Dialogue reveals character
- o Vocabulary may be unfamiliar though still highly contextualized and may demand more global than local inferences
- o Figurative language beyond cliché and presents important information
- o Although perhaps less familiar setting, common experiences
- o Requires complex acts of inference about familiar material
- o Includes abstract ideas and arguments

Level 6

- o Informational:
 - o Unfamiliar concepts, removed from day-to-day experience
 - o Abstract issues/arguments—scientific or social issues; non-intuitive
 - o Complicated—numerous ideas, concepts, idea density, high-concept load
- o Literary:
 - o Unfamiliar settings
 - o Multi-faceted characters
 - o Non-predictable plot
 - o Characters traits inferred from dialogue and/or actions
 - o Complex social issues
 - o Perspective evident in dialogue
- o Language is arcane or specialized, technical