

Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Reading Assessment

What is leveled reading?

Leveling – A method of determining the gradient of difficulty of texts used for instruction; mostly in the primary grades.

Readability Formulas – A formula for determining the difficulty of a text using sentence length and syllable count

Types of Leveled Reading are:

Guided Reading Level – By observing and reading behaviors, instructional levels can be determined in order to group children who demonstrate a common understanding of the reading process. Guided Reading Levels are based on the works of Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell and reflect a broader gradient of texts. This leveling form uses an alphabetic code.

Lexile Level –The Lexile Framework for Reading is a scientific, proven approach to reading and text measurement. The Lexile Framework consists of two main components: a Lexile measure and the Lexile scale. A Lexile measure is the numeric representation of a reader's ability or a text's difficulty, both followed by an "L" (for Lexile). The Lexile scale is a developmental scale for reading ranging from 200L for beginning readers to above 1700L for advanced text. The Lexile Analyzer is the engine that powers the Lexile Framework. It is a software program designed to evaluate the reading demand, or *readability*, of books and test items. This process is referred to as measuring, and the result is a text measure that represents the difficulty of analyzed text. Lexile measures are based on two factors: Word frequency and sentence length, which are more formally called *semantic difficulty* and *syntactic complexity*. <http://www.lexile.com>

DRA Level - Measures level of independent reading in a student. This system, developed by Joetta Beaver, uses a numeric code that reflects the broader need for guided reading sessions to change over time.

What is a benchmark assessment?

A benchmark assessment system is a series of texts that can be used to identify a student's current reading level and progress along a gradient of text levels over time. The word "benchmark" means a standard against which to measure something. It is also a comprehensive assessment system that is linked to classroom instruction. It is a reliable and specific system for matching students' instructional and independent reading abilities to the A-Z text gradient. The benchmark assessments can be used for assessing reading lacked the kind of detailed and quantifiable assessment of reading comprehension that is crucial to truly understanding children

Why is CKS using a reading benchmark assessment? *It can help:*

- Determine your students' independent and instructional reading levels.
- Determine reading placement levels and group students for reading instruction.
- Select texts that will be productive for student's instruction.
- Assess the outcomes of teaching.
- Assess a new student's reading level for independent reading and instruction.
- Identify students who need intervention.
- Document student progress across a school year and across grade levels.
- Inform parent conferences.
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What kind of assessment data does the benchmark system give?

- Recording Forms guide teachers through an assessment protocol that reveals a wealth of information about the reader, including the reader's accuracy and self-corrections, comprehension, and fluency.
- An innovative Comprehension Conversation is part of the assessment protocol at every level and provides details about a reader's thinking within and beyond the text at levels A-K; and within, beyond, and about the text at levels J-Z.
- Optional assessments allow teachers to gather further details when necessary to more precisely pinpoint a reader's needs.

Teaching Methods Utilized at CKS:

Guided Reading - A teaching method in which students read orally and the teacher provides direct instruction in Phonics and Comprehension

Shared Reading – A teaching method in which the teacher and the students read together from a text that is visible to all, to help develop reading strategies, increase fluency, and extend phonological awareness.

Independent Reading - A teaching method that allows students to practice strategies being learned develops fluency and encourages successful problem solving.

Read Aloud – A teaching method for sharing a story aloud, developing vocabulary, modeling structure and fluency, and introducing content

Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (1 and 2): The Research Base:

The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System is designed for students in kindergarten through eighth grade and consists of a series of carefully designed benchmark books that measure the level of difficulty at which a student is able to read fiction and nonfiction texts.¹ The books range in difficulty from beginning to advanced (A-Z). They are accompanied by an extensive document, *The Continuum of Literacy Learning, Grades K-8: Behaviors and Understandings to Notice, Teach, and Support*, that lists text characteristics, reading behaviors, and features of comprehension along a grade-by-grade developmental continuum. Included are diagnostic assessments for the following components of reading ability:

- Comprehension within, beyond, and about the text
- Writing about reading
- Fluency
- Phonemic awareness
- Letter names
- Early literacy behaviors
- Phonics and word analysis
- High frequency word reading
- Vocabulary knowledge

Based on empirical research.

The assessment is based on empirical research on language development, vocabulary expansion, reading acquisition, and reading difficulties. In particular, the Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) Benchmark Assessment System assesses the five elements of reading that are described by the National Reading Panel—phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.² In addition, it addresses issues of student motivation and interest in reading.

Engaging Texts.

Assessment need not be a boring and tedious process. The National Reading Panel cautions that “the motivation of both students and their teachers is a critical ingredient of success.”³ A unique feature of the F&P Assessment System (1 and 2) is the collection of fiction and nonfiction texts that are designed to interest and engage readers while at the same time yielding important information for the teacher. When the system was field tested, it was discovered that the children liked to read, talk about, and write about the assessment books, and often asked to take them home. ¹ This assessment has been extensively field-tested with students from a large and diverse group of schools ² National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000a).

³ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000a), p. 8.

A gradient of difficulty.

A major goal of the assessment system is to estimate a student's reading level in order to provide instruction at the appropriate level of difficulty. Research indicates that fluent reading "develops as a result of many opportunities to practice reading with a high degree of success."⁴ With careful assessment of a student's current reading level, the teacher knows where to begin. Each level brings new challenges in the form of a vocabulary, words to decode, high frequency words, concepts, and syntax. Supportive teaching enables students to expand their reading strategies by gradually increasing the level of challenge while also assuring that they are successful each day. The gradient of text that forms the foundation of this benchmark assessment system has been created and refined as a teaching and assessment tool over the past twenty years.⁵ First published in 1996, these text levels were adopted by the New Standards Project of the National Center on Education and the Economy and the University of Pittsburg for the purpose of establishing national primary literacy standards.⁶ The levels on the Fountas and Pinnell gradient are cited by most major publishers of leveled books for children.

The Continuum of Literacy Learning.

The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (1 and 2) are accompanied by *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*. This document describes text characteristics at each level, as well as reading behaviors and understandings for teachers to notice, teach, and support in order to help students think within, beyond, and about the text. *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* provides specific guidance for teaching students at each grade and text level in seven instructional contexts: (1) Interactive Read Aloud; (2) Shared and Performance Reading; (3) Writing About Reading; (4) Writing; (5) Oral, Visual, and Technological Communication; (6) Phonics, Spelling, and Word Study; and (7) Guided Reading (small group instruction).

After teachers assess their students, they can consult the continuum for specific direction in teaching key strategies across instructional contexts.

Determining Text Reading Level:

The process of administering the benchmark text reading level is:

1. The assessor reads a standardized introduction.
2. The student reads orally while the assessor observes, codes, and analyzes reading behavior.
3. The assessor and student engage in a conversation about the book. The assessor uses a standardized set of prompts to assess comprehension level.
4. As an option, the teacher may have the student write to a prompt to express further information about his or her comprehension and ability to express understanding of a text.
5. The assessor scores accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

6. Based on these scores, the assessor determines the student's *instructional, independent, and placement* level (for small group instruction). At the *instructional* level, a student is given the opportunity to read new and more challenging texts. The teacher provides an introduction that makes the new text accessible. This introduction includes discussion about vocabulary and about the meaning of the text. Research indicates that teaching specific words prior to reading helps vocabulary learning and reading comprehension.⁷ Conversations about books are also important for helping children learn new words and concepts, which they must relate to prior knowledge and experience. Talk that is centered on literary texts give students opportunities to use new words and new language structures that they encounter in the books they are reading.⁸ At the *independent* level, a child is able to read with only minimal teacher support. The teacher supports the reader, demonstrating and prompting for fluency and rapid word solving. This activity helps the student develop fluency and phrasing. Fluency is an essential component of reading instruction. Teachers can have students reread instructional level and independent level texts to build fluent processing. Research provides evidence that "repeated and monitored oral reading improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement."⁹ Research indicates that "children need opportunities to use what they have learned in problem-solving unfamiliar words that they encounter within continuous text. They use word-solving strategies to take words apart while keeping the meaning in mind. Reading words accurately and automatically enables children to focus on the meaning of text."¹⁰

Diagnostic assessments of reading skills.

The F&P Assessment System provides for separate diagnostic assessment of individual components of reading.

Differentiated comprehension assessment. The comprehension score is differentiated by the *kind* of thinking the student exhibits, and receives a score for each of the following:

1. Thinking *within* the text involves decoding the words, searching for and using information, and reaching a literal understanding of the fiction or nonfiction text.
2. Thinking *beyond* the text involves making inferences; synthesizing new information; making connections with content knowledge, background experiences and other texts; and making predictions.
3. Thinking *about* the text involves analyzing the text for aspects of the writer's craft or critiquing the quality or objectivity of the text.

The teacher can look at these scores for an individual student over time or can profile the whole class and small groups to see where the instructional emphasis should be. Then, using *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* for several different

areas Guided Reading, Interactive Read Aloud, Writing about Reading), teachers can provide specific and systematic instruction on comprehension. Research supports instruction in specific comprehension strategies in order to help children gain the meaning of texts.

Writing About Reading Assessment.

For each benchmark text, a standardized Writing about Reading prompt is provided. The student may complete this assignment alone. The writing prompts are designed to be similar to those that students will encounter on standardized tests. The results of this assessment give the teacher evidence of a student's ability to express key understandings and analytic thinking in writing. Then, using *The Continuum of Literacy Learning for Writing about Reading*, teachers can provide specific and systematic instruction on how to use writing to express and extend thinking about reading. When readers have had ample time to process instructional text, comprehension strategies are reinforced through writing, which often involves using simple charts or graphic organizers to help readers focus on concepts and their relationships.

In-depth Fluency Assessment.

In addition to the basic evaluation of fluency included in the text reading assessment, the F&P System includes a six-dimension fluency assessment that will help teachers be more specific in their teaching of phrasing, pausing, appropriate word stress, intonation, reading rate, and integration. Fluency is given close attention in the F&P system because fluency is critical for reading comprehension. The National Reading Panel notes that "fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression." They also note that fluency is necessary for reading comprehension because "if text is read in a laborious and inefficient manner, it will be difficult for the child to remember what has been read and to relate the ideas expressed in the text to his or her background knowledge." Fluency, according to the Panel, is often neglected in classroom instruction.

Phonemic Awareness Assessments.

The F&P System 1 (grades K-2) provides four assessments of Phonological Awareness: Initial sounds, Blending Words, Segmenting, Words, and Rhyming. Phoneme awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read.¹⁷ Research supports phonemic awareness instruction as an essential foundation for learning to read and has been found to be very effective in preventing reading difficulties.¹⁸ Kindergarten and first grade teachers will want to use these assessment results to inform phonemic awareness instruction, which includes manipulating sounds in speech and working with rhymes, words, syllables, and onsets and rimes. Initially this is done without letters, but after children learn the tasks of hearing, identifying, segmenting, and blending phonemes in words, they can work with sounds and letters together.

Letter Name Assessment.

A Letter Recognition Assessment is provided in F&P System 1 (grades K-2). Teachers will want to administer this part of the assessment to test the child's knowledge of the relationships between letters and sounds. Research provides evidence that "using letters to manipulate phonemes helps children make the transfer to reading and writing."¹⁹ In addition, "teaching sounds along with the letters of the alphabet is important because it helps children to see how phonemic awareness relates to their reading and writing.

Early Literacy Behaviors Assessment. An Early Literacy Behaviors Assessment is provided in F&P System 1 (grades K-2). This assessment, linked to *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*, provides information about ways to teach young children how to look at print. Critical early concepts help them understand how to look at letters, how letters are put together to make words, and how print is arranged from left to right. These basic understandings are important foundations for using letter-sound relationships.²¹ The students are taught to distinguish letters by their features, to read left to right with word-by-word matching, and to return to the left after reaching the end of the line. Using easy early books, using magnetic letters to make words, and writing are important activities at this stage of reading development.

Phonics and Word Analysis Assessments.

Including the phonemic awareness test, the high frequency word test, and the letter naming test, the F&P System 1 (grades K-2) includes twenty-two Phonics and Word Analysis Assessments; System 2 (grades 3-8) includes eighteen. These assessments focus on key areas such as a wide variety of letter sound relationships (for example, vowels, consonants, letter clusters, and phonograms), word patterns, and elements of word structure. Also included is an innovative Word Features Test for each grade level, which provides a measure of the kinds of words children are able to decode (for example, short and long vowel sounds, phonogram patterns, prefixes and suffixes, or multisyllabic words). Some assessments are for individual students and some can be used with groups. These assessments have been successfully used since 2002 as part of the Phonics and Word Study Lessons, and are based on the phonological and orthographic systems of the English language. Research supports systematic phonics instruction as more effective than nonsystematic instruction or no instruction. The information from these assessments will help teachers target phonics and spelling instruction by using the Phonics and Word Study continuum. Concepts are organized along a continuum of difficulty, with one principle building on another. Daily phonics lessons may be planned to provide systematic steps in learning letter-sound relationships (consonants, vowels, digraphs, and blends), as well as spelling patterns (phonograms). Within each thirty-minute lesson, ten minutes is allocated to phonemic awareness and discrimination and phonics.

High Frequency Word Assessments.

In F&P Benchmark Assessment System 1 (grades K-2), four High Frequency Word Assessments are provided to account for the 200 words that appear most frequently in print. In System 2, two High Frequency Word Assessments are provided to account for the 300 words that appear most frequently in print. Word lists were constructed from established word lists and tested over several years as part of the Phonics and Word Study Lessons.²⁴ Children must learn to take words apart to decode them but it is also important for the to develop a core of words that they know automatically and rapidly. Often, after a word is decoded several times, it becomes a known word. But other words (such as “the”) are remembered more for their visual features. The information from these assessments can help teachers plan effective teaching of high frequency words. Rapid word recognition frees attention for thinking about the meaning of the text.²⁵

Vocabulary Assessments. System 1 (grades K-2) includes 39 Vocabulary Assessments.

The first 11 focus on concept words, synonyms, antonyms, and homophones. The next 27 provide an innovative Vocabulary in Context test for each level (A to L), both for fiction and nonfiction. This assessment provides information about the reader’s ability to derive the meaning of words from contextual information. System 2 (grades 3-8) includes 40 Vocabulary Assessments, adding homographs, Greek and Latin Word roots, and Analogies, as well as two Vocabulary in Context tests for every text level L to Z.

Using *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*, information from the Vocabulary Assessments can guide instruction in several contexts, including Interactive Read Aloud, Phonics and Word Study, and Guided Reading. Through conversations with “expert others” children expand their ability to use language and solve problems.²⁶ This process is especially important for children who are struggling with the reading process, including English language learners.

Summary

The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (1 and 2) is a research-based assessment designed to assess students’ reading levels, reading behaviors, and skills in the key components of reading identified by the National Reading Panel—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.²⁷ The comprehension assessment evaluates students’ literal and inferential thinking skills--thinking within and about the text, as well as their ability to connect the content of their reading to prior knowledge and experience--thinking beyond the text. It is based on a set of engaging fiction and nonfiction texts designed to motivate students while also providing diagnostic information about students’ reading skills. This information can be used to fine-tune instruction to ensure that all students have access to texts that are at the appropriate instructional and independent reading levels, and makes it possible for teachers to reinforce and build on skills their students already have. This information is the foundation for successful reading instruction.

Note: the references in yellow below do not appear in the text and typically are not included in reference lists unless they are explicitly referenced in the text.

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Research question 3 addressed the reliability and validity of the *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System* with other assessment measures.

- There was a strong association between the *System 1* (levels A–N) fiction texts (correlation of .94) and nonfiction texts (correlation of .93) and Reading Recovery® Text Level Assessments. This is an important finding, since Reading Recovery® was recently recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as an effective and scientifically based reading program.
- The results indicate that performance on the *System 2* fiction texts (correlation of .69) and nonfiction texts (correlation of .62) is moderately indicative of performance on Slosson word reading. Again, it needs to be emphasized that the *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System 2* is more than a word reading measure, since it adds a reading comprehension dimension.
- The *System 2* fiction texts (correlation of .44) and nonfiction texts (correlation of .42) were moderately indicative of performance on DRP® word reading. (Degrees of Reading Power)

