Frequently Asked Questions

General

What does the term level mean?
A level refers to the difficulty of the book in relation to other books placed along a continuum from A to Z, easiest to hardest. We examine the characteristics of a book and place it along a gradient of books in relation to each other. A level designates the books as easier than the level after (later in the alphabet) and harder than the level before (earlier in the alphabet). We use ten characteristics to determine a level and the composite of characteristics contributes to its final designation. For a detailed explanation of each level, see Leveled Books, K-8: Matching Texts to Readers for Effective Teaching.

Do the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark levels match the guided reading levels?
Yes. This assessment is specifically designed to match the guided reading levels described in Leveled Books, K-8: Matching Texts to Readers for Effective Teaching (2006) and other publications by Fountas and Pinnell.

How can I use this benchmark system to match books leveled with other systems?
First, the website fountasandpinnellleveledbooks.com lists over 18,000 books, and the site is updated every month. You will find many books there that have been leveled with other systems. Also, many publishers place several different kinds of levels on books and/or offer correlation charts.

Should I assess both fiction and nonfiction reading?
The fiction and nonfiction book at each level are equivalent measures. You can use either text to determine the child’s ability to read at that level.

How long does it take to administer the assessment to a student?
At the earliest levels it may take fifteen or twenty minutes while it may take about 45 when your students are reading the longer texts and the discussions are more substantive. In this guide we make several suggestions on how to be efficient with your use of time.

How often should you administer the Benchmark Assessment?
We suggest that you administer the assessment at the beginning of the year to know where to start the teaching with each student. You may want to conduct the assessment in the middle of the year to take stock of student progress, the assessment becomes a tool for measuring the growth of the students and the effectiveness of your teaching. The series of assessments conducted over several years will reflect the success of the entire school in bringing each child forward in literacy outcomes.

Are Benchmark Assessment books ones the students may have read before?
In the Benchmark assessment the students are reading an unseen text, or a text that the student has not read before. You can expect the text to be a little harder that it would be if they have read it once before.

Is the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System a standardized test?
Yes, it is a standardized assessment. The administration, coding, scoring, and interpretation are standardized in procedures to get reliable results. We expect that once you get the standardized results, you will review the data to make good judgments for instruction. Good teacher decisions based on data are essential.

Is Benchmark Assessment authentic assessment?
You cannot get closer to authentic assessment than with the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. The student reads several books, thinks and talks about them, and writes about reading. This is not only a valid assessment of the competencies you want to measure, but is a good use of teacher and student time!

Some teachers feel that the assessment is an accountability measure for them. Do you agree?
As teachers, we need to seek information about our students and also to seek information that informs us about how our teaching is impacting their learning. At the beginning of the year, the assessment gives information about the starting points of the learners. As the school year progresses, the assessment becomes a tool for measuring the growth of the students and the effectiveness of your teaching. The series of assessments conducted over several years will reflect the success of the entire school in bringing each child forward in literacy outcomes.

How does this Benchmark Assessment package help me with my leveled book program?
The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment is designed to help you collect reliable evidence of student competencies and reading levels so you can begin your teaching where the learners are—at the optimal instructional level and with in depth knowledge of his reading behaviors—bringing each reader forward in his competencies. No other assessment has been directly linked to the Fountas and Pinnell levels to date, so you will also have a reliable and valid assessment to link to guided reading lessons or other small group instruction.

How does the Benchmark Assessment support my ability to conduct the assessment conference with students whose first language is not English?
You will notice that in the Assessment Guide we have provided specific support to help you understand how language differences should be noticed in the administration and interpretation of the assessment. In addition, case examples of English language learners describe and comment on real situations for you to think about and learn from.

How does the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment contribute to my knowledge of students and how they develop as readers?
You will find that the comprehensive assessment procedures and the variety of tools and options provided in the Benchmark Assessment package are rich resources for helping you systematically examine a student’s strengths and needs and begin to think about the important link between assessment and instruction. You will find detailed information about analyzing the reading behaviors of the student and linking them to specific instructional goals in the Assessment Guide. The Guide for Observing and Noting Reading Behaviors in the Assessment Forms book and CD-ROM is a learning tool in itself; it focuses attention on critical reading behaviors. The Continuum of Literacy Learning: A Guide to Teaching is the foundation for
administering the assessment

how do you know at which level to start

benchmark assessment so as to make the

administration as time efficient as possible?

We provide several time-saving options. If you

have no information on the student's previous

reading, the where-to-start word test provides

a rough starting level for assessment and will

cut down the number of books a student needs

to read before you can identify an independent

and an instructional level. If you do have

information about a student's previous read-
ing performance, we provide several charts in

the assessment guide that help determine the

starting point by looking at the texts students are

reading.

How can I assure that I am conducting the

assessment in a standardized manner?

The precise steps of the assessment conference

are described in the assessment guide and sys-
tematically presented on the recording form

for each book. The introduction is standardized

and printed on the cover of the book as well as

on the recording form. The steps of the admin-
istration, the scoring, and the analysis are all

standardized. In addition, the tools supporting

the assessment—the F&P calculator/stopwatch

and the at-a-glance charts (assessment at-a-

glance and coding and scoring at-a-glance)—

provide an easy way to maintain consistency

as well as helping you internalize the steps. Fur-

ther, the professional development DVD provides

clear examples and plentiful practice

opportunities for developing precision and con-
sistency throughout assessment conferences.

Should I administer the assessment to a

student who speaks very little English?

We suggest that you follow your school policy

regarding the assessment of students whose first

language is not English. If you would

administer other standardized tests to those

students, then you should administer this one.

You will find that the gradient of texts will allow

most children at least to begin to engage in the

reading process.

Can I show the child the pictures during the

introduction of the text?

Do not show the pictures during the introduc-
tion. The student may look at the front cover as

you read the introduction. It is important to fol-

low the standardized directions for the admin-

istration so your results will be consistent.

Why do we assess the child on a "cold"

reading?

On a cold reading, with only a minimal intro-
duction, you have the best opportunity to

observe what the reader can do independently.

It is important to have this information in order
to guide the reader in his or her independent

choices and to determine what the reader

needs to learn next.

Why is the introduction so short? Why can't

I tell the child more about the text?

Because you want to learn what the child can do
independently, it is important not to tell him too

much about the text in advance of reading. The

introduction is scripted so that the assessment

can be as standardized as possible. This stan-
dardization is necessary so that we can interpret

the results for a class or a school of students.

oral reading

Is it permissible for the child to point and

read the text?

Instruct the child to point under the words at

Levels A and B. After that you do not tell the

child to point or not to point. If a child is point-
ing beyond level C, you may want to make a

note of it as it is likely interfering with fluent,

phrased reading.

What if I can’t keep up with the coding and

I miss some of the student errors?

If you find you cannot keep up with the coding

ask the student to stop until you catch up. The

more experienced you get in administering the

assessment, the faster your coding will go.

If the student is reading a text that is very

hard, is it necessary for him to finish the
text so I can determine accuracy level?

No, you can stop the reading early. You will

want to say, “This is a very tricky story. You can

stop there.” As a teacher, you have gathered

the data you need and you can discontinue the

testing. There is no need to have the student

continue to read if the accuracy rate has gone

well below 90%.

When I am assessing and the first book the

student reads is too hard, what should I do?

You should judge how hard the book is and move

down at least a couple of levels so you can find

the easy level and the instructional level.

When I am assessing a student, can I skip

levels?

Of course you can skip levels. Your goal is to

have the student read the fewest number of

books that will give you the data you need as

efficiently as possible. If you find a text is very

easy, you may want to skip a level or more to

get to one that is closer to instructional level.

The same applies when a text is very hard and

you need to find an instructional level, in this

case you may want to skip down some levels.

The directions sometimes indicate the

student should continue to read the text

silently; wouldn’t it be better if I listened to

the student read the whole book?

No. It is important to give the student the oppor-
tunity to process the text without the oral rein-
forcement. The oral reading also slows the

reader down.

frequently asked questions
At what level should I expect the student to read fluently?
You should expect the student to read with phrasing and fluency as soon as the early reading behaviors are well under control. We expect the behaviors to be well under control at about the end of Level B or beginning of Level C in instruction. Readers will not be reading fast with complete fluency at the early levels because they are still learning ways of processing print. You should expect, though, to see some phrasing, especially on texts that have dialogue.

Should the child who is reading Level A and B read fluently?
No, you want the child to slow down his language to read one word at a time. At these levels the child is learning to match one spoken word with one word. Slow, careful pointing and reading is what you are helping the child control.

Is fluency a stage of reading?
No. Fluency is not a stage of reading. After about level C, readers can read with phrasing and fluency at every level if it is within instructional or independent range.

Do I have to calculate the oral reading rate?
We recommend calculating reading rate at levels J and above only. We have provided you with a formula for calculating reading rate on the Recording Form. You may also use the F and P Calculator/Stopwatch provided with this assessment system to get a quick and accurate score.

Is rate an important factor when children are just beginning to learn to read?
We suggest that you begin to notice the reading rate at about the beginning of grade two as one indicator of fluency.

What is the appropriate oral reading rate for each level?
We have provided ranges for reading rate. See the tables on page 00.

Why is reading rate important?
Reading rate is one indicator of whether the reader is putting groups of words together in processing the text. When a reader is reading one word at a time the reading gets bogged down and the reader is not likely to be able to attend to the meaning of the text.

Comprehension Conversation
Can a child look back at the text during the comprehension conversation?
Though you should not instruct the student to do so, it is permissible for the child to initiate looking back in the text. If the student begins to read the text, ask him to tell the response in his own words.

What happens if the child has to refer back to the text to answer a question? Does this affect the comprehension score?
If a child initiates looking back in the text, locates the information, and provides a correct response then you should give credit for the answer. Looking back in the text will not affect the comprehension score.

What if the child does not understand the question?
Be sure to rephrase the question until the child understands it. Your goal is to determine whether the student understood the information in the story, not whether the student understood the question.

How can I keep up with the note taking?
After you have administered the conversation one or two times, you will be able to interpret the student’s comments and connect them to the “key understandings” in the first column. Check the ones the student has covered and take notes only on the additional information provided by the student (if any). Also, you can take a quick moment to make these checks right after the conversation (while the student writing or after she leaves).

What should I do if the student does not come up with the key understandings?
You can use the probes or questions to elicit answers. You do not need to score the student lower because you had to probe for answers. Some children are not accustomed to spontaneously talking about their thinking, yet they may understand the text very well and demonstrate it when questioned.

Should I “count” the “right answers” the student makes in order to come up with the comprehension score?
No. These texts vary and have different requirements in terms of key understandings (thinking within, beyond, and about the text). Look at the rubric for scoring each category (within, beyond, and about). Make a holistic decision as to the extent to which the student has demonstrated thinking.

Where can I find more information about thinking within, beyond, and about the text?
You will find very detailed descriptions in Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency: Thinking, Talking, and Writing About Reading, K-8 by Fountas and Pinnell (Heinemann, 2006).

How can I make the comprehension conversation sound “natural”?
You will find some suggestions on page 00 of this guide.

Interpreting & Reporting Results
What if the student achieves instructional or independent level at two levels?
Occasionally you will find that a student performs the same on two levels of text. Use the highest of the levels as your indicator.

What if a student reads a text at the instructional level and then a higher level (harder) text at the independent level?
You will want to have the student try another more difficult text to see if the independent level was achieved because the topic was easy. If this text is hard for the student, you will probably want to begin at the original instructional level. If this text is easy for the student, continue until you find another instructional level and begin there. When you begin teaching, you will have the opportunity to observe the reader closely with other texts and can always move up or down a level and change groups if needed.

Does the student’s guided reading group have to be at her instructional level?
No. The “recommended placement level,” which is the recommended level for guided reading may be a level lower or higher, depending on your analysis. Pages 00 to 00 describe the thinking process involved in finding a placement level.

What if I have students on six or seven different placement levels? Should I have that many guided reading groups?
It is very difficult to have a large number of reading groups. It makes it hard for you to provide instruction to students on a regular basis because you certainly cannot see all groups every day or even over a week. As you look over your recommended placement levels, you may have to put students who have different...
What if I have a student who is so far ahead of the class that he doesn’t belong in any group?

This kind of student can enjoy participating with the fastest progress group because he will benefit from discussion with others and there is always something more to learn. Remember that these groups are dynamic, so you can always invite the student to participate in reading some texts and not others. In addition, you will want to provide challenging independent reading for the student (extended through individual conferences).

What if I have a student who reads far above grade level (for example, a first grader who reads level O)?

Look carefully at the comprehension. Chances are, this student has literal comprehension, but lacks rich understanding. Another factor to consider is stamina. The student may be able to read and even have minimal understanding of a high level text; however, it may not be a good experience for her to plow through long chapter books on a regular basis. In general, students enjoy age-appropriate material, so you can extend this student by providing texts just one or two grade levels above her present one. There are always a few students who are truly exceptional, and for those readers you have to teach for comprehending through interactive reading aloud, minilessons, guided reading, and literature discussion. Use The Continuum of Literacy Learning: A Guide to Teaching in the benchmark system to find teaching goals.

How will I know how assessment level relates to our standards for grade level performance in our district?

Your school and your district should make decisions about expected grade level standards, taking into account your state goals. You can refer to our Text Gradient chart (see page 05) for suggested indicators, but adjust them if you have rationales for a different standard.

How can we use the benchmark assessment data to improve our school?

Have regular faculty meetings to examine the data within and across grade levels. Look at the general reading levels of the age cohort, but don’t stop there. Use the case examples in the guide to help you think about some priorities for teaching students. Think across the language and literacy framework. You can teach for comprehending through interactive instructional levels in a single group. Try to vary your interactions within the group accordingly, giving some students more support and others more challenge (for example, with writing). Most teachers find it difficult to work with more than four or five groups.

What if I have a student who reads at a level far below the rest of the students?

This student needs intervention to make accelerated progress, so the first thing to do is to try to get some extra services. At the same time, this student desperately needs classroom instruction, so you should try not to remove him from all of the teaching you are providing. If at all possible, provide enough individual support that the student can participate in a group and can make better progress.

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What if I have a student who is at the highest level of a high level text; however, it may not be a good experience for her to plow through long chapter books on a regular basis. In general, students enjoy age-appropriate material, so you can extend this student by providing texts just one or two grade levels above her present one. There are always a few students who are truly exceptional, and for those readers you have to teach for comprehending through interactive reading aloud, minilessons, guided reading, and literature discussion. Use The Continuum of Literacy Learning: A Guide to Teaching in the benchmark system to find teaching goals.

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