

## What is the Difference Between Decodable Text and Leveled Text?

| Decodable Text   | Leveled Text   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phonics patterns presented in text align with skills that have been explicitly taught.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Level is determined by length and amount of words, sentence length and complexity.</li> </ul>       |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Targeted phonics pattern is deliberately repeated to provide ample practice.</li> </ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Text is selected by topic, or interest. Focus is on “authentic” text.</li> </ul>                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High frequency words presented in text have been explicitly taught.</li> </ul>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In early texts, sentence patterns are often repeated and predictable.</li> </ul>                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Text progresses in a scope and sequence from simple patterns (e.g. CVC) to more complex.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Text is not controlled for phonics patterns that have been explicitly taught to students</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus is on accurate decoding first, before making meaning</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pictures are highly supportive</li> </ul>   |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making meaning is prioritized over accurate decoding</li> </ul>                                     |

### When should I use decodable text?

Use of decodable texts is endorsed through the past 20 years of reading research (Anderson, Hieben, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Beck & Juel, 1995; Jenkins, Vadasy, Peyton, & Sanders, 2003; Mesmer, 1999; Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998). Beginning readers learning phoneme/grapheme correspondences and regular phonic patterns benefit from a steady diet of decodable text. A systematic, sequential approach to phonics instruction including practice with decodable connected text allows students ample practice with new and previously learned phonics patterns and high frequency words to support accurate decoding and promote orthographic mapping. As readers learn more complex phonics patterns, well-sequenced decodable text naturally increases in complexity to provide continued opportunities to practice previously learned patterns.

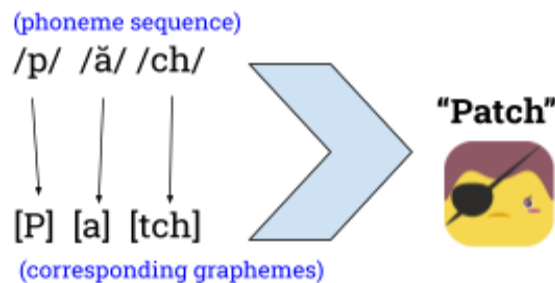
Researchers Foorman, Fletcher, and Francis have taken the stance that “[t]o immerse children in a print environment without instruction in letter-sound correspondences and practice in decodable text is to doom a large percentage of students to reading failure” (1997). Once a student has been explicitly taught and can accurately decode each of the six basic syllable types, less controlled text can gradually be introduced. Typically, this tends to occur around the end of first grade when students are expected to be able to read grade appropriate text with 90% accuracy or better. If a student has been taught consistently to use research-based cues to decode unfamiliar words, work with less controlled text should be successful.

This is not to say, however, that students should be strictly limited to decodable text throughout the school day. Regular work with complex text supports vocabulary growth, background knowledge, and

understanding of syntax and advanced language structures. However, complex text used for these purposes does not require leveling, and it is critically important that the teacher makes careful decisions about how text will be presented to early readers including appropriate scaffolds, opportunities for listening to text read aloud, explicit teaching of the skills or strategies needed to work with the text effectively, and a clear plan for the purpose of selecting the text. Thoughtful selection and presentation of complex texts build students' language comprehension, while practice in decodable texts with explicit phonics instruction builds fluency with word recognition.

### **How does decodable text support orthographic mapping?**

Orthographic mapping is “the process readers use to store written words for immediate, effortless retrieval” (Kilpatrick, 2015). In essence, it is the pathway to sight-word acquisition. In order for efficient orthographic mapping to take place, a reader must have knowledge in phonological/phonemic awareness, phonological blending, knowledge of letter/sound correspondences and vocabulary/phonological long term memory (Kilpatrick, 2015). In a nutshell, efficient orthographic mapping requires a reader to analyze the phoneme (sound) sequence in a word and align the letters representing those sounds (graphemes) to store the word as a “sight word.” Without this level of processing, it becomes very difficult to store a word for later retrieval. Phonics instruction in a clear scope and sequence explicitly teaches the reader the connection between the phoneme and its corresponding grapheme.



Decodable text used to support newly taught and previously learned phonic patterns allows a reader consistent and repeated practice with analyzing phoneme sequences and aligning these sequences to the graphemes that represent them, cementing these patterns in orthographic memory for later retrieval.

Consider the following:

Teacher A and Teacher B are first grade teachers using a new phonics curriculum. Both teachers are following the recommended scope and sequence for skill instruction. They have both taught their students how to read closed syllables (CVC), some digraphs, and several high frequency words. They are currently focusing on blends. This week, the focus is on s-blends.

Teacher A chooses a decodable text to support his students with reading words containing the s-blends. The short text contains 19 opportunities for students to apply their decoding skills to words with s-blends.

Sam and Stan have a sled.  
"Let's sled on the hill," Stan says.  
They slip and spin on the hill. Sam slips into some slop.  
"Yuck!" Sam says. "I'm stuck!"  
"Stand still!" Stan says. "I will help you."  
Stan spots a stick.  
"Here, Sam. Grab this!" Stan says.  
Sam steps out of the slop.  
"You are swell," Sam says.

A closer look at the text indicates that students will also have the opportunity to practice previously learned decoding skills with closed syllables that do not contain s-blends. The teacher reviews the previously learned high frequency words prior to having students read the text, and introduces a new high frequency word, says, that occurs in the text. Teacher A is confident that his students have had adequate instruction in the skills needed to read this text without relying on cues outside of the text to decode the words.

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Teacher B selects a leveled text for her students based on their placements from leveled assessments. The first page looks like this:

Mike loves to play in the park after school.  
He plays ball on the playground.  
He goes down the slide.  
He hangs from the monkey bars.  
Mike eats his snack on the green bench.  
"The park is the best place to be!" He says.

The excerpt contains two opportunities for students to practice the new phonics skill they have just learned. Unfortunately, one of the words containing the s-blend also contains a spelling pattern students

have not yet learned (vCe/silent E). This leaves students only a single opportunity to combine the new skill with previous skills to decode the new word. Additionally, the leveled reader contains many words with spelling patterns students have not been taught, and only minimal opportunities to use the decoding skills they have learned:

Mike loves to play **in** the park after school.  
He plays ball **on** the playground.  
He goes down the **slide**.  
He hangs from the monkey bars.  
Mike eats his **snack on** the green **bench**.  
"The park is the **best** place to be!" He says.

Even for students who have memorized many high frequency words, this text contains several words that require more advanced decoding skills that students have not yet been introduced to. In this case, students often defer to strategies that take them away from a focus on the word itself, such as guessing by the first letter, looking at the picture to guess the word, or relying on contextual or syntactic cues to determine what word makes sense. These strategies do not support the process of orthographic mapping, since the student must move away from the phoneme/grapheme connections in order to guess the word.

### **Why is leveling of text problematic?**

It is important to understand that since text levels are determined by factors other than decodability, such as sentence length, number of words, and complexity, it is difficult to determine how appropriate an individual text will be for a student. Further, because leveled text is not focused on patterns of decodability in a predictable scope and sequence, students must rely on strategies that encourage them to guess, rely heavily on picture clues, rely on sentence patterns that do not require them to attend to each word, or focus on what makes sense, rather than identifying the actual words on the page.

Incredibly, despite the popularity and prevalence of leveled reading systems, there is scant evidence in the research to support either the accuracy of leveling systems or the effective use of leveling systems within classroom instruction (Adams, 2001; Stahl, 2003). Consider these questions: What does it mean to be a "Level C" or a "Level 12"? What skills are required to read a text at that level? Is it consistent? What does a student need to learn to graduate to the next text level?

The description of text within each "level" of a leveled system is fairly vague, and relies heavily on the structure of the text rather than the graphophonemic composition of the words on the page. For example, an explanation of characteristics of text within one leveling system include the number of lines of text per page, length of sentences, amusing characters, simple dialogue, many sentences with adjectives and prepositional phrases, and fewer repetitive language patterns. Nowhere in the description, however, are indicators that focus on the skills needed to accurately and fluently decode the text. Furthermore, systems used to create levels of text do not take into account the content itself,

including maturity of theme, symbolism, use of figurative language, necessary background knowledge, etc. These considerations are important for determining whether a text is appropriate for a particular reader.

Unfortunately, too frequently leveled texts have been used to level readers. In many schools and districts, students are assigned to text levels for reading groups and independent reading, and are held tightly to the constraints of the leveling system. Students are often given their “level” and restricted to selecting books from that level. Not only does this practice limit choice based on interest and background knowledge, but for struggling readers, may also limit exposure to higher level vocabulary, concepts and sentence structures crucial for continuing to expand language comprehension and background knowledge.

### **When is leveled text appropriate?**

An important consideration is that it is the system used to artificially “level” text that is flawed, not each text itself. Once a child has the skills in place to accurately decode a text, without relying on outside cues to take the place of the work of decoding, then all text becomes “decodable” text. In other words, when enough skills are in place to accurately decode most regular words using knowledge of the regular phoneme/grapheme (sound/spelling) correspondences in English, knowledge of the syllable types and a grasp on high frequency words that are irregular, then text can be selected based on student interest or topic rather than relying on a system of leveling.

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