



## The F&P Text Level Gradient™ Revision to Recommended Grade-Level Goals

### Introduction

This paper lays out the rationale behind our recent decision to make minor adjustments to the recommended grade-level goals on the F&P Text Level Gradient™. We have given this change a great deal of thought and feel that although these changes are relatively minor, they are necessary to reflect and support current reviews of achievement data, our classroom observations of children, conversations with teachers and current trends in early literacy education.

### Trends in Early Literacy Learning

Today's preschoolers live in a world that is substantially different from that of a decade ago. Young children are taking on literacy at an amazing rate. Long before entering school, most children encounter a great deal of meaningful print in their home and community. Many families regularly read aloud to their young children and encourage them to write to accompany their drawings. Environmental print is everywhere—children encounter print and numbers all around them—in paper form, on computer screens, and on television; many play competently with a range of electronic devices—those intended for children as well as gadgets for adults such as smart phones, tablets, and computers. As a result, many young children have an amazing degree of tech savvy, beyond that of some adults!

Preschools are changing too, not eliminating play but extending it to include literacy-related functions. Rich literacy experiences are now woven throughout the prekindergarten classroom, providing many opportunities for learning through play. Play has always involved imitation of adult activities, and increasingly it involves the tools of literacy. Children's play reflects the world they see around them—a world teeming with print. Three- and four-year-olds naturally begin to absorb and recognize the print they see every day. They notice symbols and signs for their favorite restaurants, point out letters in street signs, connect pictures and print on menus, find the crackers they like in the supermarket. All of these actions are signs of children's growing literacy development (Burns & Griffin 1999).

Preschool enrollments have increased from 39% (7.1 million) in 1985 to 52% (8.4 million) in 2009 (The National Center for Education Statistics). An increasing number of children are engaged in and acquiring early literacy skills prior to entering

Kindergarten. In preschool, children are helped to make meaning of print and comprehend their world. Their experiences provide a foundation for language and literacy development that will continue throughout the grades. For children who have not had the opportunities with language or print in the home, the prekindergarten classroom can level the playing field by creating those opportunities.

Research indicates that preschools that are developmentally appropriate and designed to support and extend early literacy learning produce both long- and short-term academic gain, an increase in preschool children's print awareness, and contribute to overall school readiness (Barnett 2008; Gormley, Phillips & Gayer 2008; Hustedt, Barnett, Jung & Figueras 2008; Hustedt, Barnett, Jung & Thomas 2007). While most children will not leave preschool able to read conventionally, the literacy opportunities children experience in preschool do contribute to their development as emergent readers. We now know that exposure to rich literacy experiences throughout early childhood has a tremendous positive effect on young children, and delaying these kinds of experiences until children are of school age can severely limit ultimate achievement (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

Many children now enter kindergarten with a strong foundation of knowledge surrounding literacy. They know that you read print and that it involves letters; they also know many letters. They've tried their hand (with great success) at producing their own writing and drawing. They know that you "read" computer screens and tablets. They have heard written language read aloud thousands of times, so they have an internal awareness of the syntactic patterns and vocabulary they are likely to encounter in books. Children who have been read aloud to, participated in

shared reading and shared or interactive writing, and had literacy-rich experiences in preschool/prekindergarten have been developing the language and literacy skills that will serve them not only as kindergartners but throughout their literate lives.

Also of note is the growing trend of full-day kindergarten enrollment. In October, 2008, 72% of kindergarten students were enrolled in full-day kindergarten programs, in comparison with just 28% in 1978 (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau). Children in full-day kindergarten experience more print-rich opportunities and acquire more literacy instruction compared to children in half-day kindergarten, hence they spend more time building and expanding their early literacy skills (Ackerman, Barnett & Robin 2005; Walston & West 2004; Zvoch, Reynolds & Parker 2008). A growing body of research indicates that children who participate in full-day kindergarten are making faster and higher levels of literacy growth, are better prepared for school, and held back less often. (Ackerman, Barnett & Robin 2005; Votruba-Drzal, Li-Grining & Maldonado-Cerreño, 2008; Walston & West 2004; and Zvoch, Reynolds & Parker 2008).

Early reading behaviors are developed over the preschool and kindergarten years, and they provide a firm foundation for reading instruction in first grade. Literacy learning for preschoolers must be intentionally fostered (Joint Position Statement, NAEYC/IRA). We cannot assume that children will take on literacy behaviors simply because print is all around them, nor will they learn how stories work by hearing just a few. Our intentional acts of teaching will lead them to new understandings. The instructional practices of interactive read-aloud, and shared reading, along with opportunities for interactive writing and independent writing will help children gain these early understandings.

### Observations of Children and Data Evidence

We have been carefully following the impact of these trends on entering kindergartners, first graders, and second graders, and continuing to do so across the year to their exit. These trends are supported by our on-site observations of children, conversations with administrators and teachers, and collection of data (visit [www.fountasandpinnell.com](http://www.fountasandpinnell.com) to view data from the Heinemann Data Collection Project and an Independent efficacy study conducted by The Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP), University of Memphis). Achievement in literacy is trending upward! Children are entering kindergarten with more literacy awareness; they are responding to literacy-rich kindergarten curricula; they are learning fast and acquiring more experience in reading and writing. Earlier and higher levels of reading are the result, and that is good news. Expectations are higher and teaching is shifting. Recommended entry-, mid-, and exit-level goals, as well as intervention goals, must change.

These gains, as revealed through administration of the *Benchmark Assessment System* as part of the Heinemann Data Collection Project and the independent efficacy study conducted by CREP, are real gains. Benchmark assessment data (see Fountas & Pinnell *Benchmark Assessment System* ©2011) does not represent a single task or even a set of isolated tasks that children practice—it's easy to have gains when children practice an isolated skill over and over (and it's easy to forget a few weeks later). Benchmark assessment involves reading extended text and talking about it in a way that demonstrates comprehension. This kind of assessment captures the complex orchestration of information that the reader must apply to process printed texts at each level.

Our observations are supported by outside data. For several decades, the International Data Evaluation Center of The Ohio State University has collected entry and exit scores for first graders drawn randomly from school sites around the United States that implement Reading Recovery®. Non-Reading Recovery children are sampled to create an “average” text-level score with which intervention children's achievement can be compared. From 2003 to 2010, researchers have noticed a steady trend upward. The average entry level for a sample of over 5,000 first graders reached above 5 in 2010 (5 corresponds to a level D on the F&P Text Level Gradient™.) Visit [www.idecweb.us/Default.asp](http://www.idecweb.us/Default.asp) to view the Reading Recovery and Descubriendo La Lectura National Reports.

### Impact on the F&P Text Level Gradient™

Given the trends, observations, and data, we have made minor adjustments to the recommended grade-level goals on the F&P Text Level Gradient™. **Please note, the F&P Text Level Gradient™—the text characteristics and the behaviors and understandings associated with each level, A–Z, as described in the Guided Reading section of *The Continuum of Literacy Learning*—has not changed and will not change.** The adjustments to the recommended grade-level goals are shown in *Figure 1* below. Remember that the recommended grade-level goals are intended to provide reasonable guidelines for grade-level expectations, which should be adjusted based on school/district requirements and professional teacher judgment. We do **not** advocate using levels as a basis for grading student achievement.

Note that end-of-year expectation for kindergarten is now level D instead of level C; accordingly, entry level for grade 1 is level D and exit level is J, with entry to grade 2 set at level J.

This does not mean that a child reading at level C at the end of kindergarten is necessarily at risk. It does mean that we want to work toward the goal of independent reading at level C to assure a solid foundation for entry to grade 1.

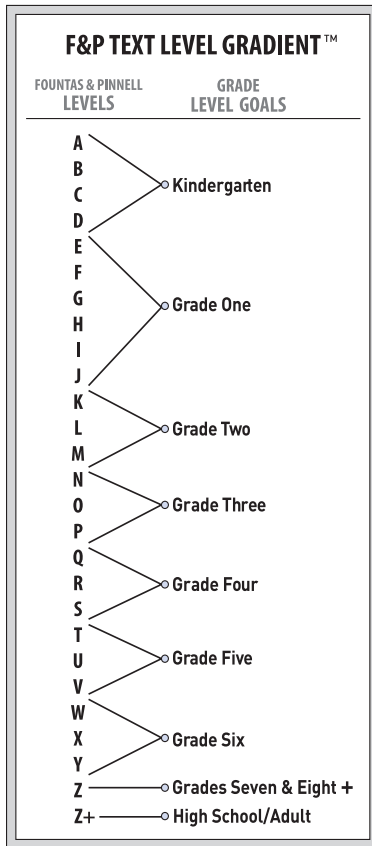


Figure 1.

There is a sound theoretical reason for having level D as the recommended instructional level goal for the end of kindergarten. When we look at the early development of a reading process, a great deal of learning is taking place as the child takes on very easy level A and B books. The child is learning “how reading works”: moving left to right (at first assisted by the finger), noticing spaces between words, recognizing some signposts, and using the kind of language you find in books. Children may know the alphabet letters, but in levels A and B they are learning how to use the alphabet while reading. The letters are embedded in words, and very soon they learn to recognize patterns and associate letters and sounds. But at the first three levels (A, B, and C), children depend heavily on patterned language and on illustrations. They work out decoding skills and use them in these very simple books with high support. A reader at level D, however, must rely much more on knowledge of print, word patterns, and letters and sounds. The reader cannot rely on “remembering” the text or solely on the illustrations. At level D, the proficient reader uses meaning; language syntax or grammar; and the visual information (letters connected to sounds) in words in a smoothly orchestrated way to process page after page of print, always thinking about the

meaning of the text. While there is still much to learn, that reader is on the way to developing an independent reading process.

You will notice as you move up the text levels on the F&P Text Level Gradient™ that there are fewer gradations at each grade level. That’s because texts in these categories become more complex and there is wider variety. Readers who are processing higher-level texts have greater challenges. For example:

- There are a large number of high-frequency words, including more complex ones.
- There is new technical or literary vocabulary.
- Text structures are complex and harder to follow.
- There are subtle meanings and abstract ideas.

The amount of growth in a single year depends on the student and the teaching the student receives. Each successive level of the gradient makes greater and more varied demands on the reading process. Typically students advance through at least a few levels each year, but as the levels increase so does the difficulty of the texts, so advancement through the higher levels sometimes takes longer than through the lower levels. (Refer to *Figure 2* for a concise summary of the factors related to text difficulty.)

As the F&P Text Level Gradient™ shows the recommended entry-, mid-, and exit-level goals for each grade, the arrows represent the range of these expectations, not necessarily the reality in every school/district. When you begin at the level each child can learn, you can provide teaching that supports progress up the gradient. There will be overlap where each child enters and exits. The arrows now fall between the grade-level goals to make the grade-level spans more clear and account for overlap/range.

### Examining the revised Grade-level Goals

As thoughtful educators, you may not want to make changes immediately in your district expectations or curricula. As you examine the revised grade-level goals on the F&P Text Level Gradient™, we advise the following steps:

1. Bring principals and kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2 teachers together for conversations. Talk about text levels but also about student behaviors and evidence of learning (see *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* © 2011 for the behaviors and understandings to notice, teach, and support):
  - a. What, in general, are your very proficient readers achieving by the middle and end of the year?
  - b. What are your average readers achieving by the middle and end of the year?
  - c. At what levels are children considered for intervention as they enter grade 1 or 2?

<b>Factors Related to Text Difficulty</b>	
<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>
<b>Genre</b>	The <i>genre</i> is the type of text and refers to a system by which fiction and nonfiction texts are classified. Each genre has characteristic features.
<b>Text Structure</b>	The structure is the way the text is organized and presented. It may be <i>narrative</i> , as in most fiction and biographical texts. Factual texts are organized categorically or topically and may have sections with headings. Writers of factual texts use several underlying structural patterns to provide information to readers: <i>enumeration, chronological sequence, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution</i> . The presence of these structures, especially in combination, can increase the challenge for readers.
<b>Content</b>	The content refers to the subject matter of the text—the concepts that are important to understand. In fiction, content may be related to the setting or to the kinds of problems characters encounter. In factual texts, content refers to the topic being focused on. Content is considered in relation to the prior experience of readers.
<b>Themes and Ideas</b>	The themes and ideas are the big ideas that are communicated by the text. A text may have multiple themes or a main theme and several supporting themes or ideas.
<b>Language and Literary Features</b>	Written language is qualitatively different from spoken language. Fiction writers use dialogue, figurative language, and other kinds of literary structures. Factual writers use description and technical language. In hybrid texts you may find a wide range of literary language.
<b>Sentence Complexity</b>	Meaning is mapped onto the syntax of language. Texts with simpler, more natural sentences are easier to process. Sentences with embedded and conjoined clauses make a text more difficult.
<b>Vocabulary</b>	Vocabulary refers to the meaning of words and is part of our oral language. The more the words are accessible to readers in terms of meaning, the easier a text will be. An individual's <i>reading and writing vocabularies</i> are words that they understand and can also read or write.
<b>Words</b>	A text contains printed words that must be recognized and solved. The challenge in a text partly depends on the number and difficulty of the words that the reader must solve by recognizing them or decoding them. A text that contains a great many of the same common words makes a text more accessible to readers.
<b>Illustrations</b>	The illustrations are the drawings, paintings, or photographs that accompany the text and add meaning and enjoyment. In factual texts, illustrations also include graphic representations that provide a great deal of information readers must integrate with the text. Illustrations are an integral part of a high-quality text. Increasingly, fiction texts include a range of graphics.
<b>Book and Print Features</b>	The book and print features are the physical aspects of the text—what readers cope with in terms of length, size, and layout. Book and print features also include tools like the table of contents, glossary, pronunciation guide, index, and sidebars.

Figure 2.

- d. Which children seem to “fall apart” over the summer? Which children stay strong? At what levels are these children reading?
2. Examine the benchmark assessment levels of kindergartners, first graders, and second graders in your district. Try to look at several years if possible.
  - a. What are the average entry and exit levels?
  - b. What drop can be observed over the summer? (If you have data on the same children from year to year, look at individuals who stay strong and those whose levels drop.)
3. Based on your school/district requirements and professional teacher judgment, decide whether the revised recommended grade-level goals on the F&P Text Level Gradient™ fit your needs as a district. You may decide that the previous grade level recommendations fit your situation better. Either way, you can continue using the Guided Reading section of *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* (©2011), as no changes to the text characteristics or the behaviors and understandings associated with each Fountas & Pinnell level have changed.
4. If you change your goals, take a look at teaching practice and determine whether it needs to change. Consider:
  - a. Enriching classroom collections by moving some higher-level texts into the kindergarten classroom to be used toward the end of the year.
  - b. Providing professional development on guided reading for primary-grade teachers.
  - c. Supporting teachers in continuing a strong instructional program during the last two months of school.
  - d. Revising goals for early intervention so that struggling readers have the opportunity to increase their understandings.

## What about Intervention?

We are not suggesting that more time will be needed in kindergarten or in grade 1 or in *Leveled Literacy Intervention* (©2009) if goals are raised. The learning is accelerated as it increases.

Children come in knowing more (even if they are not actually reading) and they progress faster with the intensive instruction they are provided.

If you are already using the *LLI Orange System*, which is intended for kindergarten, you have several options:

- Use level B and D books from your guided reading collection to provide a few more lessons with the instructional level of D. Often, kindergartners move quickly through level A and teachers do not need all the lessons, so they can move more quickly to level B.
- Give children small-group guided reading, so that they become **independent** at level C.
- Switch to the *Green System of Leveled Literacy Intervention*, and do the ten lessons at level D. You will find that children are reading a level B book every other day.

Booster packages for the *LLI Orange System* and the *LLI Green System* are currently in the planning stages. The package to support *LLI Orange* will include 40 new leveled books and lessons (10 level D books, with 10 supporting level B independent books, plus 10 level E books, with 10 supporting level C books). The package to support *LLI Green* will include 20 new leveled books and lessons (10 level K books, with 10 supporting level I independent books). These booster packages will enable schools currently using *LLI Orange* and *LLI Green* to move toward reaching these new goals.

## Conclusion

It is important to see the F&P Text Level Gradient™ as a continuum of progress for your readers. Reading is a highly complex process. Readers must build a system of strategic actions for processing texts A–Z+ that begins with early reading behaviors and becomes a network of strategic activities for reading increasingly difficult texts. The construction of systems “in the head” is unique for each student. Marie Clay (1991) described readers’ paths to proficient reading as “different paths to common outcomes.” Your role is to notice each student’s precise literacy behaviors and provide appropriate teaching that supports students in developing their systems of strategic actions.

The trends discussed above—1) technology use among preschoolers and school-aged children, 2) increase in prekindergarten enrollment, and 3) increase in full-day kindergarten programs— are impacting literacy achievement upward: expectations have risen, teaching is shifting. The recommended grade-level goals on the F&P Text Level Gradient™ are reasonable expectations. We hope you will continue to engage in professional conversations in your school/district on text levels, student behaviors, and evidence of learning from *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* to determine reasonable grade-level expectations for your school. We encourage you to visit [www.fountasandpinnell.com](http://www.fountasandpinnell.com) for additional resources, citations, and discussion around the F&P Text Level Gradient™ and related topics.



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