

Is Guided Reading Going Astray in Your Classroom?

*An Exclusive Special
Report for IRA Members*

This text is adapted from Jan Miller Burkins and Melody M. Croft's *Preventing Misguided Reading: New Strategies for Guided Reading Teachers*, copublished by the International Reading Association and Corwin Press.

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There seems to be much confusion surrounding guided reading—the term even means something different from school to school. Authors Jan Miller Burkins and Melody M. Croft assert that guided reading is not really about reading levels, benchmark texts, or offering the “right” prompt to students when they struggle with words. Rather, guided reading is, for them, about supporting children as they develop strategic approaches to meaning making.

Based on their 50 years of collective experience, Burkins and Croft present their personal clarifications, adaptations, and supports that have helped them work through their own tricky spots as they guided readers. Within their book *Preventing Misguided Reading*, they clarify misunderstandings about guided reading instruction in the following areas:

- the teacher’s role and the gradual release of responsibility
- instructional reading level
- text gradients
- balanced instruction
- integrated processing
- assessment

In this special report, Burkins and Croft discuss their discoveries related to text gradients and provide two strategies to help guide your instruction in this area.

A Look at Text Gradients

The science behind matching students to texts is actually a bit shaky. This work is based on the flawed premise that we can strictly define along quantitative parameters the relationship between a student and a book, and that this relationship will consistently bear out, reproducing itself as other students meet these leveled texts. In reality, we find that this assumption does not always hold up in application.

In fact, we see a lot of logic in the work of Rosenblatt (2004), who suggests that the interaction between a student and a book varies greatly based on what the reader brings to the experience. Along these lines, DeFord, Lyons, and Pinnell (1991) explain that there are only text gradient approximations that serve as a guide rather than an inflexible sequence. It makes sense to us that the relationships between students and individual texts are idiosyncratic and cannot be narrowly defined along levels.

Most teachers of guided reading understand that all texts on a particular level are not the same. Texts vary greatly along a host of traits. Furthermore, what one educator describes as a Level D text, another describes as a Level E, and still another may describe as Level C. Also, an array of student factors, such as background knowledge and motivation, can influence a student’s interaction with a text. Clay (1991) writes, “Gradients of difficulty are essential for teachers making good decisions about materials they select for children to read but all gradients are inevitably fallible” (p. 201).

Although educators tend to understand this fallibility, in practice they often find students (and themselves) locked in a particular set of books that someone, who may or may not be more expert than they, has decided represents a particular level of difficulty. This strict definition of levels is sometimes due to the reporting requirements under which many of us work. It is common for districts to require teachers to note guided reading levels on report cards or other forms of documentation. We have even heard of situations in which students are retained because of their failure to meet the grade-level standards defined by guided reading levels.

There is nothing theoretically wrong with a text gradient. In fact, it is a useful tool for helping students develop smoothly operating systems for negotiating print. Text gradients also give teachers

a skeleton around which they can organize instruction, monitor student progress, and engage in professional discussions. We believe that the texts for most beginning readers should have vocabulary that is necessarily controlled, and that the growth of a novice in any area, from cello playing to rock climbing, tends to progress most solidly with practice in successively difficult material. The challenge, as is often the case in education, is maximizing the benefits of a text gradient while minimizing its shortcomings. Toward this end, we offer the following suggestions.

Strategy: View Students' Reading Levels as a Range or Cluster

In many classrooms, teachers and students are locked into narrow definitions of reading and readability levels. We suggest, however, that educators can view text gradients through the lens of their limitations

and work to employ them flexibly. To assist with this type of flexible consideration of the text gradient, we have found it helpful to view readability as a range rather than a narrow band. For example, we might refer to a student as working in a C–E cluster, rather than saying that the student is working in Level D. Broadening the reading level boundaries in this way gives teachers flexibility in text selection as they try to negotiate text and reader factors that vary from one reading experience to another.

Referring to ranges or clusters of levels rather than isolated levels also helps us focus on reading process rather than reading levels. Furthermore, this broader perspective minimizes the push to move up the levels. It blurs the categorical progress through an alphabetical or numerical trajectory. A student working in an A–C cluster is less obviously behind a student working in a C–E cluster than a student working in Level B compared with a student working in Level D.

Some of this is semantics; a student working in texts ranging from C to E may very well spend the bulk of his or her time in Level D texts or in easy Level E texts. Nevertheless, the subtle difference in word choice gives teachers more freedom to pull in more challenging or simpler texts regardless of level, as these texts support instruction

and often provide ways of thinking around flexible grouping.

Although considering reading level as a cluster of levels helps students and teachers think less categorically, it also helps parents consider reading process beyond level. One of the biggest challenges in dealing with guided reading levels, or any text gradient for that matter, is the difficulty associated with helping parents understand their limitations. Parents can unintentionally perpetuate labels, competition, and categorical thinking. Taking the emphasis off levels, as much as your school district allows, and placing it squarely on reading process can help parents support students' entire reading processes.

Strategy: Linger at Level E

After talking at length about narrowly ascribing to levels within a text gradient, we want to take a minute to do what may seem contradictory to our prior discussions: We want to talk about Level E specifically. We have found that, for students learning to read along the text gradient trajectory, Level E is a particularly critical point. Level E is generally the place at which students either take off with their self-extending systems solidly supporting them or flounder with habituated, inefficient processing. If students have successfully worked—and worked is the key



here—to integrate print and story through Level E, then they are often able to move on to increasingly difficult levels of text smoothly, rapidly, and with less work. It is as if the work of figuring out how the act of reading *works* takes some focused, periodically intense effort in the earliest levels. Once this act of reading is actually figured out, however, reading improvement is largely a matter of doing more of the same in increasingly difficult texts.

If, on the other hand, teachers scaffold students so heavily in Levels A–D that, when they get to Level E, they are there only by the effort of their teacher and not by their own puzzling through the reading process, then each successive level becomes increasingly laborious, and the students often spend their time struggling in subsequent levels while a smoothly integrated system eludes them. Level E can be a brick wall in the text gradient. If students rely so heavily on the predictable patterns of the texts and the tight match between print and pictures prior to Level E, then their reading process may fall apart when they meet the demands of Level E.

Melody has seen this climax in development with dozens of first graders, and Jan has seen this as she has watched beginning readers across whole schools: The students who do not have well-established, balanced reading processes at Level E tend to struggle increasingly



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as they get into more and more difficult text. Furthermore, they are likely to get stuck in subsequent levels. Teachers find themselves saying, “I have used every Level H book in the book room, and this group just does not seem to progress. What do I do now?” Students who do not establish their reading processes before Level E often plateau.

To prevent such plateaus, we suggest two things: First, in the levels preceding Level E, work strategically to foster independence as students develop a smoothly operating reading process. This effort requires that you continuously draw their attention to the ways that print and story confirm each other. Second, spend enough time around Level E (i.e., in the Level D–F cluster) to make sure that students are balanced, independent,

and successful. Time and time again, we have seen students who are efficiently accessing and integrating cueing systems at Level E move beyond students who are inefficient but working in Levels G or H. Students who are solid, balanced readers at Level E often skip levels as they move through the text gradient. Again, learning to read is less about level and more about the reading process.

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