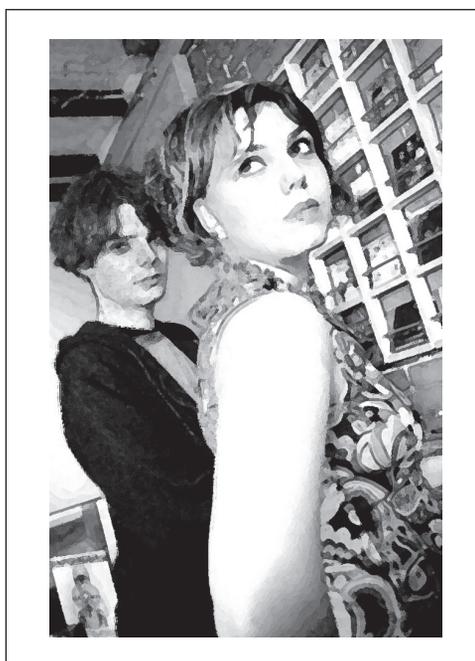


If the Book Fits: Selecting Appropriate Texts for Adolescents With Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Many adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) experience difficulties reading. To improve reading outcomes for these students, research has demonstrated the importance of providing students with appropriate texts. Appropriate texts are those that match both the reading and interest levels of students and are often credited with reducing frustration and facilitating comprehension. This article presents research on selecting appropriate texts and provides teachers with practical suggestions and resources to use when supporting selection of independent reading material for adolescents with LD.

Keywords

reading, secondary, instruction, learning, disabilities

Ensuring that adolescents are engaged in reading is important as time spent reading often separates good readers from struggling readers (Allington, 2001). Students who practice reading improve more quickly and are subsequently more motivated to continue reading, thus creating a cycle of increasing achievement. The opposite is true for students who struggle with reading and therefore avoid it,

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a phenomenon experts call the *Matthew effect* (Stanovich, 1986). Unfortunately the majority of adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) fall in the latter group and experience difficulties when reading. In fact, 62% of eighth grade students with disabilities read below a proficient level according to data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The high percentage of adolescents with LD who do not read at proficient levels is concerning because these students are at greater risk of academic, social, emotional, and economic difficulties (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD], 2008). These students are more likely to be retained, feel isolated from the larger school community, and ultimately drop out of school (Daniel et al., 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Without adequate reading skills they will not be well positioned to secure jobs in a competitive market in which the fastest growing jobs require greater literacy skills (Barton, 2000). Finally, adolescents with poor reading skills are more likely to be adjudicated (Kutner et al., 2007).

To help adolescents with LD improve their reading skills, experts recommend several practices. First, struggling readers benefit from explicit, systematic instruction in core skill areas such as word study, vocabulary, and comprehension (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Kamil et al., 2008; NJCLD, 2008; Scammacca et al., 2007). Second, reading instruction should be couched in content area materials and texts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Faggella-Luby, Ware, & Capozzoli, 2009). Third, adolescents with LD may need reading instruction that is extended in duration, provides multiple opportunities to practice, and increases in intensity (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Faggella-Luby et al., 2009; Kamil et al., 2008). Finally, experts believe it is important to build adolescents' engagement and motivation for reading (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Kamil et al., 2008).

An important first step in building students' motivation for reading is incorporating appropriate texts into reading instruction. Appropriate texts for adolescents with disabilities are (a) written on a level commensurate with students' reading abilities, (b) aligned with adolescents' interests, and (c) diverse (Alvermann, 2002; Lenters, 2006). In the following sections strategies are presented that will assist teachers in identifying students' reading and interest levels, level of texts, and ways to incorporate diverse texts. In addition, links to resources and strategies are provided.

Select Texts at Students' Reading Level

To promote adolescent engagement in reading, texts must be written to match students' reading abilities. In other words, students will be motivated to read and spend time engaged in reading instruction when they are presented

with texts that they are able to read without excessive difficulty. Reading texts at an appropriate level will help them improve their decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills, all of which are interconnected. When students can decode texts without excessive difficulty, they will be able to read more fluently, which often improves their comprehension (Marshall & Campbell, 2006; Tyner, 2009). In fact, students do not make the same reading fluency gains when they are instructed using materials that are matched based on their grade level as opposed to reading level (O'Connor et al., 2002).

To describe the appropriateness of a text for an individual student, experts often use a categorical system, labeling text levels as *independent*, *instructional*, or *frustration* (Tyner, 2009). Books at a student's independent level are those that can be read with 98% to 100% accuracy. Independent level texts are appropriate when students want to read by themselves without assistance. Instructional-level texts are those that students can read with 93% to 97% accuracy. For example, given a 100-word passage, a text would be considered instructional level if a student could read the passage with seven or fewer errors. These texts are too difficult for students to read independently but can be read with teacher support such as in differentiated small group instruction (Clay, 1991). For students to improve in their reading abilities, it is important for them to have plenty of opportunities to read texts at their instructional level. These texts provide students with the opportunity to "build an effective cueing [system]: does it look right, does it sound right, does it make sense?" (Tyner, 2009, p. 58). Finally, texts at students' frustration level are those that students struggle to read and result in an accuracy rate less than 93%. Texts that are at students' frustration level should never be used for independent or small group reading; however, these texts can be used for teacher read-alouds, modeling, and shared readings. Using these texts in this manner allows students to be exposed to rich story content and vocabulary without being frustrated by attempting to read a text that is simply too difficult (Reutzel & Cooter, 2012).

There are multiple ways to determine if a text is written on a level that is appropriate for an individual student. First, teachers can administer a running record, which provides information on a student's performance when reading a selected text. Running records are convenient to use because they are quick to administer (i.e., approximately 10 minutes or less per student) and can be conducted using any text. Figure 1 provides instructions on how to administer a running record.

Another useful reading assessment is an informal reading inventory (IRI), which can help teachers identify a student's reading level and ability (Reutzel & Cooter, 2012). An IRI measures reading rate (number of words read correctly per minute) and comprehension. Like running

Administering a Running Record
Step 1: Count the first 100 words in a text
Step 2: Ask the student to read aloud the 100 words and as the student reads aloud tally the number of errors made
Step 3: Once the student has finished reading, subtract the total number of errors from 100 and then divide by 100.
Step 4: Determine into which category the percentage falls:
Independent = 98%–100%
Instructional = 93%–97%
Frustration = below 93%
For example, if a student misses seven words, the calculation would be:
$100 - 7 = 93$ and $93/100 = 93\%$,
which indicates the text is at the student's instructional level.

Figure 1. Administering a running record.

Table 1. Informal Reading Inventories.

Authors and Date	Title and Publisher
Applegate, M. D., Quinn, K. B., & Applegate, A. J. (2008)	<i>The Critical Reading Inventory: Assessing Students' Reading and Thinking</i> (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
Bader, L. A. (2005)	<i>Bader Reading and Language Inventory</i> (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
Burns, P. C., & Roe, B. D. (2007)	<i>Informal Reading Inventory</i> (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
Cooter, R. B., Jr., Flynt, E. S., & Cooter, K. S. (2007)	<i>Comprehensive Reading Inventory: Measuring Reading Development in Regular and Special Education Classrooms</i> . Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
Johns, J. L. (2005)	<i>Basic Reading Inventory</i> (9th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
Leslie, L., & Caldwell, J. (2006)	<i>Qualitative Reading Inventory—4</i> . Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
Shanker, J. L., & Ekwall, E. E. (2002)	<i>Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory</i> (4th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
Silvaroli, N. J., & Wheelock, W. H. (2004)	<i>Classroom Reading Inventory</i> (10th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
Stieglitz, E. L. (2002)	<i>Stieglitz Informal Reading Inventory: Assessing Reading Behaviors From Emergent to Advanced Levels</i> (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
Woods, M. L., & Moe, A. J. (2007)	<i>Analytical Reading Inventory</i> (8th ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.

records, IRIs are quick to administer, but they should be administered multiple times during the year to monitor student progress. For a list of IRIs, refer to Table 1.

Once a student's reading level has been determined, it is important to select texts that match this level. A readability estimate is a quick method to identify the reading level of a text. There are several methods that can be used to calculate a readability estimate. Common readability estimates used in education include the Flesch-Kincaid (Kincaid, Fishburne, Rogers, & Chissom, 1975), Fry (1975), and Raygor (1977) methods. Table 2 provides additional information about these estimates and resources to help calculate them online or using Microsoft Word.

Table 2. Methods to Calculate Readability Estimates.

Readability Estimate	Web Site
Dale-Chall	http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-dale-chall-test.php
Flesch-Kincaid using Microsoft Word	http://www.techlearning.com/article/42553
Fry Method	http://www.readabilityformulas.com/fry-graph-readability-formula.php
Raygor Estimate	http://www.readabilityformulas.com/the-raygor-estimate-graph.php

Sample Reading Interest Inventory		
Student name _____	Date _____	
What would you like to read about most?		
What would you like to read about least?		
Place a check next to the items that interest you.		
Animals _____	History _____	Sports _____
Science fiction _____	Fantasy _____	Romance _____
Cars _____	Adventure _____	Art _____
Humor _____	Mystery _____	Other teenagers _____
Horror _____	Music _____	Current events _____
Supernatural _____	Other countries _____	Westerns _____
Science _____	True crime _____	War _____
Place a check next to the items you like.		
Fiction _____	Graphic novels _____	Newspapers _____
Nonfiction _____	Poetry _____	Books on CD _____
Biography _____	Short stories _____	Comic books _____
Magazines _____	Articles on the Internet _____	

Figure 2. Sample reading interest inventory.

Select Texts That Interest Adolescents

In addition to proper reading level, texts must also be of interest to students (Guthrie & Alao, 1997). This is particularly significant during adolescence, a time when the emerging independence and affective needs of students must be taken into consideration (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Many secondary students disengage from reading because they are forced to read texts that neither interest them nor relate to their personal lives (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). To engage students with texts, teachers must pay attention to the connection between students' interests and texts that match those interests (Bean, Readence, & Baldwin, 2008). The top-ranking genres adolescents like to read include horror/scary books, comic books, magazines, mysteries, science fiction, fantasy, and series books. Adolescents' favorite topics include sports, animals, drawing, and cars/trucks (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). To determine student interest, a reading interest inventory like the one in Figure 2 can be administered.

Providing students with some choice regarding the texts they read is another effective way to peak students' interest and increase their motivation for reading (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Keeping school and classroom libraries stocked with high-interest texts that students helped select will provide adolescents with more enticing reading choices that they will be motivated to read.

High-Interest/Low-Readability Texts

Finding texts that match reading abilities and interests of adolescents with LD is often a challenge for teachers. Many times the books these students want to read are too difficult and the books that meet their instructional needs do not include appropriate content for their age group. For too long teachers have been trying to engage adolescent readers with texts that are either too difficult or not age appropriate simply because there were few other options available (Rog & Burton, 2001). In recent years publishing companies have responded to this concern by producing a greater number of books that meet older students' reading needs while also appealing to their interests. Such books are often referred to as *high-interest/low-readability* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). These texts are meant to appeal to older students while being written at easier levels that struggling readers can read without excessive difficulty.

High-interest/low-readability books are labeled and marketed according to reading level and age appropriateness. For example, a high-interest/low-readability book might be on a fifth-grade reading level but have content that appeals to an eighth or ninth grader. Some of these texts have reading levels as low as first grade, enabling older students who are reading several years below grade level to participate successfully in reading instruction. These books often resemble the *chapter books* or novels that their typical peers might read. Thus, adolescents with LD may be more willing to participate in reading instruction because they are not embarrassed by having to read books that look like they are

Table 3. Publishing Companies That Sell High-Interest/Low-Readability Texts.

Company	Web Site that Links to High-Interest/Low-Readability Books	Range of Products
Capstone Press	http://www.CapstonePub.com/category/LIB_F_FICFORMAT_NOVEL	Interest levels: 4–9, reading levels: 1–3
Carson-Dellosa Publishing	http://www.carsondellosa.com/cd2/SearchCatalog.aspx?k=high+interest+low+readability&CM_VC=10001	Interest levels: 7–12, reading levels: K–8
EDCON Publishing Group	http://www.edconpublishing.com/index.php?route=product/category&path=14	Interest levels: 3–12, reading levels: 1–6
High Noon	http://www.highnoonbooks.com/inside-readers.tpl?cart=132129406119729	Interest levels: 3–12, reading levels: 1–6
HIP Books	http://www.hip-books.com	Interest levels: 3–12, reading levels: 2–4
National Reading Styles Institute	http://store.nrsi.com/catalogsearch/result/?q=high+interest+books+for+struggling+readers&x=0&y=0	Interest levels: pre-K–10, reading levels: pre-K–7
PCI Education	http://www.pcieducation.com/search/default.aspx?keywords=high+interest+low+readability	Interest levels: 4–12, reading levels: 1–6
Perfection Learning	http://www.perfectionlearning.com/browse.php?categoryID=3929&level=2&parent=2543	Interest levels: 2–12; reading levels: 1–6
Remedia	http://www.rempub.com/reading/high-interest-reading	Interest levels: 3–12, reading levels: 1–5
Saddleback Educational	http://www.sdlback.com/estore/b/reading/v=hilo_reading	Interest levels: 4–9, reading levels: 1–6
Scholastic	http://store.scholastic.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/SearchEndecaCmd?storeId=10052&catalogId=10051&searchTerm=high+interest+low+readability	Interest levels: 4–12, reading levels: 1–12
Steck Vaughn/Houghton Mifflin/Harcourt	http://steckvaughn.hmhc.com/en/adoleslteracy.htm	Interest levels: 4–12, reading levels: 2–11
Sundance	http://www.sundancepub.com/c/@fr6bQVs_ZMevk/Pages/product.html?record@S3443	Interest levels: 2–8, reading levels: 1–8

intended for younger students. High-interest/low-readability books span a variety of genres, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and graphic novels. The use of high-interest/low-readability nonfiction texts (also referred to as expository texts) can also help adolescents with disabilities access content standards addressed in the general education curriculum that would otherwise be too difficult with traditional grade level texts. Moreover, adolescents with LD should have adequate access to and practice with nonfiction texts. This is important since this type of text can be a large component of secondary curricula and can be especially difficult for students with LD to comprehend (Gajria, Jitendra, Stood, & Sacks, 2007). Table 3 provides information about companies that publish high-interest/low-readability texts. Several of these companies produce accompanying lesson plans, activities, and online resources for teachers and students.

Select Diverse Texts

Incorporating diverse texts into reading instruction is an important way to address the needs and interests of adolescents with LD. Diverse texts address real-life problems and represent a variety of cultural, linguistic, and demographic groups (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Diverse texts provide students with opportunities to identify with characters who are similar to them, which is an important element when plan-

ning reading instruction that will engage older struggling readers who are anxious to “see themselves” in texts. Simply including any text about individuals from diverse backgrounds, however, is not an effective practice. The texts should be evaluated for quality and authenticity. High quality diverse texts should (a) be accurate in their representation of historical events and settings, (b) provide reflections of accurate cultural norms, values, and language use, (c) be devoid of racial and cultural stereotypes, (d) ensure accuracy in their depiction of difficult social issues as complicated and multifaceted rather than as simple generalizations, and (e) represent diversity within a specific cultural group. The use of trade books, digital and web-based texts, and books that incorporate pop culture can be effective in introducing more diverse texts into reading instruction (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

Text diversity also refers to texts from a variety of genres and print and media sources such as digital texts, hypermedia texts, web-based texts, and periodicals (Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, & McCormick, 2010). The incorporation of digital and web-based texts is a promising way to engage adolescents and provide them with access to appropriate texts. Emerging research indicates that adolescents are particularly motivated to engage in literacy-related activities that incorporate digital technologies (e.g., text messaging, chat rooms, social networks, the Internet; Alvermann, 2002).

Digital and web-based texts also can support universal design for learning, a flexible approach to instruction that allows for the individualization of instructional goals, curriculum, and assessment (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Traditional textbooks and print materials are more difficult for teachers to adapt and individualize, but digital texts and web-based curricula offer more possibilities for customization and individualization (Edyburn & Edyburn, 2012; Pisha & Stahl, 2005). For example digital and web-based texts can (a) incorporate audio supports and text-to-speech features that will read text aloud, (b) be tiered to accommodate a range of student reading levels, (c) provide advanced organizers and summaries, (d) provide highlighting and note taking features, and (e) embed vocabulary and dictionary supports that provide word meanings when students click on unknown words (Boone & Higgins, 2003; Edyburn & Edyburn, 2012; Malmgren & Trezek, 2009). In addition, digital texts can include video clips that build students' background knowledge on a topic and can provide links to additional resources that students might find interesting or helpful.

Publishing companies such as those found in Table 3 often include online and digital materials that accompany their print materials. Another source for digital texts (also known as ebooks) is the Internet. For example, Google Books (<http://books.google.com>), Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org>), Apple's iTunes store, and some public libraries provide access to thousands of digital texts, including classic literature, contemporary fiction, and nonfiction. The wide selection of digital texts and their built in capabilities for accommodation and individualization can offer adolescents with LD more enticing reading options than might typically be found in classroom or school libraries. Digital texts can also be a valuable tool in helping adolescents with LD access the general education curriculum. For example, if a ninth grade English class is reading *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare, students with LD could use a digital copy of the text so that they can easily look up unknown words or phrases and have parts read aloud to them. Similar benefits would apply to content area textbooks used in science and social studies classes.

Providing adolescents with LD opportunities to learn with digital texts supports not only their academic achievement but also their postsecondary goals. Facility with digital texts and technologies is a skill that experts believe is especially important as students near graduation and begin to look for employment or pursue post secondary education (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, 62% of working Americans use the Internet as a primary tool in their jobs. Moreover, digital literacy is important as an increasing number of daily activities in higher education, health care, and banking are commonly conducted online (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011).

Putting It All Together

Helping adolescents with LD improve their reading skills is a critical yet complicated task. One important element in planning responsive reading instruction for adolescents with LD is text selection. What might proper text selection look like in practice?

- *Step 1. Determine students' approximate reading level.* Some schools administer schoolwide reading assessments to determine students' reading levels, in which case teachers can request the data for their students. If the school does not administer such an assessment, teachers can administer an assessment like an IRI in their classroom. It is important that students' reading levels are monitored throughout the school year so that they accurately reflect changes in students' reading progress across the year.
- *Step 2. Administer a reading interest inventory to determine students' interests.*
- *Step 3. Locate materials that appear to match individual student's reading levels and interests.* Some book publishers provide the approximate reading level of a book on the front or back cover, or the levels can be looked up online. If the reading level for a book is unclear or unknown, readability estimates can be calculated. If teachers are having difficulty locating books or technology-based texts that are written on an appropriate level and that match students' interests, collaborating with others may be helpful. Teachers can consult school media specialists or curriculum coordinators to find materials within the school. If the school does not have enough appropriate materials, teachers can (a) collaborate with administrators to try to allocate funds to purchase books, (b) work with the local public library to borrow books, or (c) write a minigrant to purchase books. Teachers can also select ebooks that are available on the Internet. In addition to evaluating books based on their reading level and whether they match students' interests, it is also important to ensure that any depictions of diverse groups are accurate and respectful. Finally, as much as possible, books should include a technology component. This could include having a CD or digital copy of the book or web-based links and resources.
- *Step 4. Verify that books are a good fit for students.* While a student is reading a book, conduct a running record to verify that the book is not at the student's frustration level.

Figure 3 summarizes these steps and provides a record-keeping form and checklist that can be used when selecting texts for individual students.

Text Selection Record Form and Checklist

Student name: _____ Student age and/or grade level _____

Student's approximate reading level: _____

Beginning of year _____ Mid-year _____ End of year _____

Student's expressed interests _____

Checklist

1. Does the text match student's instructional reading level?
2. Does the text reflect student's expressed interests?
3. If the text is depicting diverse cultural or linguistic groups is it done in an authentic and respectful way?
4. Is the text digital or web-based?
5. If the text is not digital or web-based can it be linked to web-based or other technological supports?

Figure 3. Text selection record form and checklist.

Table 4. Web Sites Related to Adolescent Literacy.

Organization	Web Site	Materials About Adolescent Literacy or Adolescent Struggling Readers
All About Adolescent Literacy (AdLit.org)	http://www.adlit.org	Free classroom materials Description of research-based reading strategies Professional development modules Research reports
Alliance for Excellent Education	http://www.all4ed.org/adolescent_literacy	Research and policy reports Case studies of school districts
Center on Instruction	http://www.centeroninstruction.org	Professional development modules Webinars Conference information
Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR)	http://www.fcrr.org	Professional development resources Research and policy reports Webinars
ReadWriteThink	http://www.readwritethink.org	Assessment materials and tools Lesson plans Student materials and printouts Professional development materials Classroom strategy guides Professional library recommendations Webinars
Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts (VGC)	http://www.meadowscenter.org/vgc	Professional development materials Online professional development opportunities Lesson plans and classroom activities

It is important to note that proper text selection is only one element of a quality, comprehensive reading program for adolescents with LD. To address all of the necessary

elements adequately is beyond the scope of this article. See Table 4 for a list of organizations and research centers that maintain websites that provide resources related to

adolescent literacy, particularly reading instruction for adolescents with disabilities and struggling readers. In addition to providing information related to text selection, these organizations also address other aspects of secondary reading instruction (e.g., reading assessments, content area literacy, comprehension instruction). The websites found in Table 4 include research reports, lesson plans, teaching strategies, professional development opportunities, and discussion forums that may be helpful initial resources for educators.

Texts that match a student's reading ability and interests will help motivate them to read and remain engaged during reading instruction. These texts should be (a) written on the student's instructional level, (b) appealing to adolescents' interests, and (c) representative of diverse perspectives, genres, and formats. High-interest/low-readability texts can serve as effective and efficient resources for teachers who are struggling to find reading material that meets older students' needs. With the right texts at their disposal, educators will be one step closer to helping adolescents with LD become more engaged in reading.

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