What reading level is my child? Find it, and what it means

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Find your child's reading level in five minutes with a 100-word read-aloud, then what a reading level means, why one number misleads, and how Peabody measures stories.

To find your child's reading level, have them read about 100 words aloud from a book you think fits: if they miss about 5 words or fewer (95% or better) and can tell you what happened, that level is right for reading alone; 90 to 94% is a level to read with your help, and below 90% is too hard for now. Peabody Teach's free level finder works out the percentage for you, and the steps are below.

A "reading level" itself is an estimate of how hard a text is, usually from sentence length and how many uncommon words it uses. It's useful for finding books in the right neighbourhood, and misleading when treated as a precise score. Peabody (peabody.kids) measures every story it writes in code, several ways, and shows grown-ups a level and a range in plain words, not a single number. It's free through the end of 2026.

If you've ever been told your child "reads at a 2.4" and wondered what that means, this post is for you.

Find your child's reading level in five minutes

1. Pick a book or a page you think is about right. Peabody's reading levels by grade show where each grade starts; any library book works too.
2. Have your child read about 100 words aloud, or one minute, while you count the words and the mistakes. A skipped word, a wrong word or one you have to tell them counts; a mistake they fix themselves doesn't.
3. Work out the share read right. 100 words with 4 mistakes is 96%. About 95% or better is a level they can read alone; 90 to 94% is a level to read with you beside them; below 90% is too hard for now. These are the traditional lines teachers use, a rule of thumb rather than a precise boundary. The level finder does the sum and says what to try next; nothing typed into it is saved or sent.
4. Ask what happened. If they read every word but can't retell the page, the level is too high for reading on their own.
5. Go one step up or down and try again. The hardest text they read at 95% on their own is a good place to start choosing books.

On Peabody itself there's no test to take: a child starts at a level and it moves with how their reading goes (more below). The free library is sorted by level, so you can try the steps above on a Peabody story too.

If the school gave you a Lexile measure, the free Lexile Find a Book search from MetaMetrics lists books at that measure; as of October 2026 it allows 5 searches a month without an account and more with a free account. It matches difficulty, not whether a book's content suits your child. Peabody doesn't measure Lexile, so its levels and Lexile measures don't convert one to the other.

Two different things called "reading level"

People use the phrase for two separate things:

1. The level of a text: how hard a particular book or passage is.
2. The level of a reader: which texts a particular child can read comfortably.

Matching the two is the whole game. A child reading text at the right level is practising; a child reading text that's far too hard is mostly struggling, and one reading text far too easy is mostly coasting.

Peabody measures the first one carefully. The second it treats as a starting point that a child's own reading keeps correcting.

How text levels are measured

Most readability formulas look at two things:

- Sentence length. Longer sentences are, on average, harder to hold in your head.
- Word difficulty. Measured either by syllables per word, or by how many words are missing from a list of familiar words.

Here are the six published formulas Peabody calculates for every story:

- Formula: Flesch–Kincaid · Looks at: Sentence length and syllables · Built for: General text; widely used for school grades
- Formula: Coleman–Liau · Looks at: Letters per word and sentences · Built for: General text
- Formula: ARI · Looks at: Characters per word and words per sentence · Built for: General text
- Formula: Spache · Looks at: Sentence length and unfamiliar words · Built for: Early grades, up to about grade 3
- Formula: SMOG · Looks at: Words of three or more syllables · Built for: Older readers and longer texts
- Formula: Dale–Chall · Looks at: Sentence length and words not on a familiar-word list · Built for: Grade 4 and up

Each one is marked as valid only where it was designed to be. Peabody never averages them into a "consensus" number, because averaging formulas that were built for different ages just mixes their errors together.

Why one number misleads

Here's the honest finding from the research behind Peabody's levels: readability formulas sort texts into grade bands reasonably well, but on one short story they wander by about a grade. Change a few sentences and the number moves. Two formulas can disagree by more than that.

So a story labelled "2.4" isn't meaningfully different from one labelled "2.9". Treating that decimal as precise leads to bad decisions, like holding a child back from a book they'd enjoy, or pushing them into one that's too hard.

How Peabody measures each story

Peabody's own level for a story comes from two dimensions:

- Sentences, using Flesch–Kincaid.
- Vocabulary, using the share of words outside the Dale–Chall familiar-word list, set against Peabody's own library.

It also works out a range by resampling the story's sentences, which shows how much the estimate could move. The six formulas above sit beside it for anyone who wants to look.

For the youngest readers, Pre-K to 1st grade, formulas don't work well at all. So Peabody measures what matters at that stage instead: words per sentence, words per page, sight words, whether the words can be sounded out at the child's phonics stage, and repetition.

All of this is plain code. It costs nothing to run and gives the same answer every time.

What grown-ups see

With a free grown-up account, Peabody describes a story in words, like "Written for a grade-3 reader: a comfortable read," with the measures explained in plain terms. For comparison only, it shows the published Lexile and guided-reading ranges usually given for that grade, with a clear note that Peabody measures neither of them.

Children see none of this. A child never sees a score or a level number about themselves; on the kid side, books just sit on floors of the library tower.

How Peabody finds a child's starting level

There's no test. The first time a child makes a story, they tap the sentence they can read comfortably from a handful that run from "I can see you." to "Above the timberline, the wind turned cold and the clouds began to build." That's their starting level, and they can change it with the button.

When the books a child reads look consistently too easy or too hard, Peabody can offer "Let's find your books": five quick taps at most, with five dots showing progress and no score at the end. In testing on simulated readers, it lands within one level of the right answer about 85% of

the time, and a child's later reading corrects the rest.

Lexile, guided reading and grade levels

Schools often use other systems:

- Lexile measures, a commercial scale from MetaMetrics.
- Guided reading levels (letters like F or M), assigned by teachers using a book's features and a child's reading.
- Grade-level equivalents from standardized tests.

Peabody doesn't produce any of these, and its levels aren't a substitute for them. If your child's school uses one, the most useful thing is to ask the teacher what range they suggest, then try a Peabody story a floor or two either side and see how it feels.

Try it tonight

Pick two stories from the free library, one floor apart. Have your child read the first page of each to you. The one that sounds smooth, with one or two stumbles at most, is the right neighbourhood. That's a more useful reading level than any decimal.

Questions parents ask

What reading level is my child?

A rough guide: the level where they can read about 100 words aloud with 5 mistakes or fewer (95% right) and tell you what happened. Peabody Teach's free level finder works out the percentage, and Peabody's library is sorted from Pre-K to 8th grade so you can try a level and adjust. For a formal assessment, ask your child's teacher.

Is there a free tool to find books at my child's level?

If you know your child's Lexile measure (it is often on school test reports), MetaMetrics' Lexile Find a Book searches books at that measure, with 5 searches a month free without an account as of October 2026. Peabody doesn't measure Lexile; its own library is sorted into 19 levels you can open free through the end of 2026.

Does Peabody give my child a reading level score?

No. Children never see a score. Grown-ups see a level described in words, with a range, not a precise number.

Is a Peabody level the same as a Lexile level?

No. Peabody doesn't measure Lexile. For comparison only, grown-ups see the published ranges usually given for a grade.

Why do different websites give different levels for the same book?

Because they use different formulas, built for different ages, and on short texts those formulas can disagree by a grade or more. Treat any single number as a neighbourhood, not an address.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/what-reading-level-means