How to pick books at your child's reading level without a score

Peabody guide · updated 2026-10-30

Pick books at your child's reading level with no test or score: Peabody's 19 levels in plain words, a three-line read-aloud check and the up-or-down rule.

You can pick books at your child's reading level without a test: ask them to read the first page aloud. If it comes out smoothly and they can tell you what happened, the book fits; if every line is a struggle, read it together or go down a step. Peabody puts each of its free stories on one of 19 levels, numbered 0 to 18, so "a step" means something. Below are the levels in plain words, the three-line check that points to one, and the rule for moving up or down. All of it is free, like the rest of Peabody through the end of 2026, with no account.

A level describes a book, not a child

Peabody's levels say something about a book, not your child. Each story is measured from its own text: how long its sentences are, how many words sit on a page, and which words it uses. Nothing about a child goes into it. Peabody doesn't measure Lexile, AR points or guided-reading letters, and doesn't claim to match them, so if school sends home a letter or a number, treat the two as separate rulers.

So the question at home is a simple one: does this page suit this reader today? "Today" matters, because children's reading moves quickly.

The 19 levels in plain words

The ladder from the bottom, with how many free stories sit on each rung and one to open:

- Level: 0 · What a book looks like: For a child who can't read yet: only eight letters, a few words on a page, a picture on every page. Pit, Pat · Usually: Before or starting kindergarten · Free stories: 10
- Level: 1 · What a book looks like: All the consonants and the short vowel sounds, plus a few words learned by sight. Bev Has a Pet · Usually: Before or starting kindergarten · Free stories: 10
- Level: 2 · What a book looks like: Adds letters that team up, like sh, ch and st. Still all sound-it-out. Frog on a Log · Usually: Before or starting kindergarten · Free stories: 10
- Level: 3 · What a book looks like: Pattern books: one line comes back on every page with a small change. A Cat and a Dog · Usually: Kindergarten · Free stories: 18
- Level: 4 · What a book looks like: Little stories where one thing happens. Fay and the Kite · Usually: 1st grade · Free stories: 21
- Level: 5 · What a book looks like: Short stories, a few sentences on a page. Goldilocks

and the Three Bears · Usually: 1st grade · Free stories: 19
• Level: 6 · What a book looks like: The bridge: 12 to 20 words on a page, so it looks like a real page. Mia and the Kite · Usually: 1st grade · Free stories: 8
• Level: 7 · What a book looks like: Short paragraphs for the first time. Duck Says Sorry · Usually: 2nd grade · Free stories: 33
• Level: 8 · What a book looks like: A whole page of story, with a problem to sort out. Eeyore's Birthday · Usually: 3rd grade · Free stories: 42
• Level: 9 · What a book looks like: Longer stories; a goal takes several steps. Cinderella · Usually: 4th grade · Free stories: 37
• Level: 10 · What a book looks like: Fuller scenes and more talk between characters. Beauty and the Beast · Usually: 5th grade · Free stories: 51
• Level: 11 · What a book looks like: More to hold in your head: places, people, a puzzle. Alice in Wonderland · Usually: 6th grade · Free stories: 31
• Level: 12 · What a book looks like: Longer sentences and ideas worth a second look. Circe and the Sirens · Usually: 7th grade · Free stories: 27
• Level: 13 · What a book looks like: The top of the school grades: long scenes and richer words. Black Beauty · Usually: 8th grade · Free stories: 37
• Level: 14 to 18 · What a book looks like: Past the school grades, for strong teens and grown-ups. Little Women is level 15. · Usually: Teens and up · Free stories: 71

What changes as you climb is mostly how much is on a page. Pit, Pat has about two words a page, A Cat and a Dog about four, Duck Says Sorry about sixteen, Eeyore's Birthday nearly sixty and Black Beauty over a hundred. If you want the measurements each level is held to, the reading levels cheat sheet has them in one table.

The three-line check

On the levels page there are three lines, each taken from one of Peabody's own stories, at levels 2, 6 and 10. Your child reads them aloud in order, and you stop at the first one that is hard going.

- The first line is hard? Start at levels 0 to 2, the books to sound out.
- The second line is bumpy? Levels 3 to 6: pattern books and short stories.
- The third line is hard? Levels 7 to 10: whole paragraphs, still in everyday words.
- All three are smooth, and they can tell you what the last one was about? Level 11 and up.

In the child's version, Which level am I?, they tap easy, OK or hard after each line and Peabody names one level to try: "OK" means that line's level, "hard" sends them below it, and easy on all three points to level 12. Nothing is saved or sent.

The up-or-down rule

Whatever level the check names, it is a first guess. The rule Peabody gives at the end of the check is the one I would use with any book: try the level; if it feels easy, go up one; if it's hard, go down one. Every books-for-a-level page links the level either side at the bottom, so moving is one tap.

Three things make the rule work:

- Easy isn't wasted. An easy book is practice in reading smoothly, which is how the next level stops being hard.
- Hard isn't banned. A book a level or two above is a good one to read together: new words inside a story the child can follow. Every Peabody story is read aloud on request, too.
- Interest beats level. A child who wants to know what happens will work through a harder page. Let the level guide you, not decide for you.

Unsure? Count the words your child can't read on one page. One or two is about right for reading alone; five or more is a book to share. That is a classroom rule of thumb, not a test.

A closer look, for grown-ups

For more than three lines, Peabody Teach's level finder is for teachers and parents. You listen to about a minute of reading aloud, count the words and the slips, and it says whether that passage was easy, about right or too hard, so you can stay at that level or step one up or down. It helps choose a book; it is not a diagnosis, and nothing you enter is saved or sent.

Finding the books once you have a level

Books by level has a page for each of the 19 levels: Peabody's own free stories at that level first, then the kids' book lists that suit a reader there, then the series at that age. The library has a shelf per level too, such as level 7, and the kids' lists go by school year, like the top 25 books for a 2nd grader. Their buy links are plain searches with no affiliate tag, and a public library will have most of the books.

When the level and the grade disagree

The grades in the table are the usual match, not a rule. Well below the grade, with every page hard work? That is worth a word with the teacher. Well above? Feed it: longer stories, true books, a series.

Questions parents ask

Is Peabody's level the same as my school's reading level?

No. Peabody's levels are its own, measured from each story's words and sentences; a school's letters or numbers are a different scale. Use Peabody's to choose Peabody's stories, and as a rough guide elsewhere.

How often should I check my child's level?

When books at the current level start to feel easy, go up one. There is no need to check on a schedule.

My child wants a book that is too hard. Should I stop them?

No. Read it together, take turns a page each, or have the story read aloud. Wanting a book is worth more than fitting it.

Do I need an account for any of this?

No. The check, the level pages and the stories in the library are open to anyone, with nothing to sign up for.

Free at peabody.kids/guides/pick-books-at-reading-level