What your child's school reading level means: letters, Lexile, AR and DRA

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Level M, 520L, ATOS 3.2 or DRA 28? What each school reading level measures, who makes it, where to look up books at it, and what to ask the teacher.

A school reading level is the result of one particular test or book list, made by one company, and it only means something inside that system: a letter like M comes from a teacher's guided-reading assessment, a number like 520L is a Lexile measure from a reading test, a decimal like 3.2 is an ATOS book level from Accelerated Reader, and a number like 28 is usually a DRA level. None of them converts neatly into another, and none says whether a book's content suits your child. The useful questions are: which system is it, what does the teacher use it for, and where can you look up books at it for free? This guide answers those for the four you're most likely to see.

Peabody doesn't measure Lexile, letter levels, ATOS or DRA, and never puts another system's level on its own stories or on anyone's book. Those numbers belong to the companies that make them, and only they can assign them. What Peabody can do is explain them plainly, point you to each one's own free lookup, and give your child free stories at a comfortable level in the library, free through the end of 2026.

First: the level describes the reading, not the child

Every system here started as a way to match a reader with a text. A child's level is a snapshot of how they read on one day, on one kind of passage, with one adult listening. Children read harder books when they love the topic and easier ones when they're tired, and that's fine.

The people who made the most common letter system say this themselves. Fountas & Pinnell's own blog, in a 2016 post called A Level is a Teacher's Tool, NOT a Child's Label, argues against children measuring themselves by "moving up levels" and against levels on report cards. If a school sends a level home, treat it as a hint about which books to try, not a grade.

Letter levels: "my child is a Level M"

What it is. Letters from A to Z are guided-reading levels. The best-known set is the F&P Text Level Gradient, made by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, where A is the simplest text and each letter is a small step harder. Some schools use other letter systems that look similar but aren't the same.

Where it comes from. A teacher listens to your child read short benchmark books, counts the mistakes, asks about what happened, and decides the highest level they read well with

teaching. It's a classroom tool: it tells the teacher which small-group books to use next.

Where to look up books. The official F&P levels are kept in a paid website for teachers. Many public libraries and school libraries have leveled sections or can tell you a book's letter. Ask the teacher for three or four titles at the level, and then let your child pick books that look a little like those.

What to ask the teacher. "Is this the level for reading with you, or reading alone?" Guided-reading levels are often the level for reading with teaching, so books for reading alone at home can be a step or two easier.

Lexile measures: "my child is 520L"

What it is. A Lexile measure is a number followed by L, from MetaMetrics. There are two kinds on the same scale: a reader measure, from a reading test your child took, and a text measure, from software that looks at a book's words and sentences. Below zero, it's shown as BR (Beginning Reader), as in BR150L, and the smaller the number after BR, the further along the reader. These details are from MetaMetrics' own explainer, What does the Lexile measure mean?.

Where it comes from. Your child's school or state test reported it. MetaMetrics' explainer says about two dozen tests can report a Lexile reader measure.

How to use it. MetaMetrics suggests a range rather than one number: from 100L below your child's measure to 50L above it. So a 520L reader would try books from about 420L to 570L. The same explainer says plainly that a Lexile measure covers only how hard the text is, not its content or quality, so a high-measure book can still be one for an older reader.

Where to look up books. MetaMetrics' Lexile Find a Book searches books by measure, grade and interest; Peabody's directory has a note on what it allows without an account.

ATOS and AR points: "my child reads at 3.2 and needs 10 points"

What it is. ATOS is the readability formula behind Accelerated Reader (AR), from Renaissance. An ATOS book level is written like a school year and month: Renaissance's own quiz notes on AR BookFinder explain that a book at 4.5 is one a typical fourth grader in the fifth month of the year could likely read alone.

Interest level is a separate thing. Each AR book also has an interest level: LG (kindergarten to 3rd grade), MG (4th to 8th), MG+ (6th and up) and UG (9th to 12th). Renaissance describes it as about the age the content suits, based on theme, characters and plot, and says grown-ups make the final call. A book can be an easy read with older content, or the other way round.

What AR points are. Renaissance says points measure how much reading practice a child is getting, and that each book with an AR quiz gets points from its difficulty and its length. A long, hard book is worth more than a short, easy one. Points come from passing the school's

quiz on the book.

Where to look up books. AR BookFinder searches every book with an AR quiz by title, ATOS level and interest level. Your child's school decides the target range and points goal.

DRA levels: "my child is a DRA 28"

What it is. The Developmental Reading Assessment, now in its third edition (DRA3) from Pearson, is a test a teacher gives one-to-one from kindergarten to 8th grade. Pearson's page says it looks at the reading level a child reads at independently or with teaching, along with fluency reading aloud, understanding, engagement and what the child likes to read.

Where it comes from. The teacher listens to your child read a benchmark book, asks them to retell it and answer questions, and records the level. Like letter levels, it's for planning teaching.

Where to look up books. There is no public DRA book search. Ask the teacher what the number means in their classroom this term, and for a few titles that fit.

Why the numbers don't convert

You'll find charts online that line up letters, Lexile measures, DRA levels and grades in one table. Treat them as rough at best. The systems measure different things: a teacher's judgement of a child reading aloud, a formula run over a book's text, a multiple-choice reading test. A child might be a confident reader of one kind and a slower reader of another. Even MetaMetrics' own explainer says Lexile measures shouldn't be tied directly to grade levels.

That's also why Peabody doesn't map its own levels onto any of these, and doesn't tell you "the reading level of" a famous book or how many AR points it's worth. Those numbers belong to their makers, and their own free finders above answer them correctly.

What to ask the school

1. Which system is this, and which test gave it?
2. Is it a level for reading alone, or with help?
3. What range should I look in at the library?
4. Can you name three books you'd suggest at it?
5. Is my child where you'd expect for this time of year, and is there anything you'd like us to do at home? The last question is the one that matters. A teacher can answer it in a sentence, and it's more useful than any chart.

Where Peabody fits

Peabody sorts its own free stories by how they're written: the longest sentence, the words on a screen, and how many uncommon words they use. Grown-ups see that in plain words and a rough grade band, explained in reading levels by grade. It's a separate scale, not a translation

of any school system.

If you'd like to check where your child reads comfortably right now, the five-minute read-aloud in what reading level is my child? works with any book. Then let them choose: the best book is usually one they want to read that's a little easy.

Lexile is a trademark of MetaMetrics, Inc. Accelerated Reader, ATOS, the F&P Text Level Gradient and DRA are trademarks of their owners. Peabody isn't connected to any of them; they're named here only to explain them.

Questions parents ask

Can I convert a letter level to a Lexile measure?

Not reliably. They measure different things in different ways, and the companies don't publish one official conversion between them. Use each system's own book search, or ask the teacher for titles.

What does "reading level J" mean in grade terms?

It depends on the school's own expectations for the time of year, which vary. Ask the teacher whether J is where they'd expect your child to be now, and whether it's a level for reading alone or with teaching.

What are AR points for?

They're Accelerated Reader's way of counting reading practice. Each book with an AR quiz gets points from its difficulty and length, and a child earns them by passing the school's quiz on that book. The school sets the goal.

Why won't Peabody tell me the Lexile measure or AR level of a book?

Because Peabody doesn't measure Lexile or ATOS, and those numbers belong to MetaMetrics and Renaissance. Their free searches, Lexile Find a Book and AR BookFinder, give the official answer.

Is a higher level always better?

No. A book that's too hard to enjoy teaches less than one that's a little easy and read happily. Comfort, interest and plenty of reading matter more than the number climbing fast.

Free at peabody.kids/guides/what-your-childs-school-reading-level-means