

# Leveling Process for SunSprouts™ Guided Reading Program

## **Background**

It is common, and appropriate, for teachers to question the Guided Reading levels assigned to reading materials. However, it is also important that such questioning be well informed. What follows is a description of the process by which Guided Reading levels are established for the SunSprouts developmental literacy series. The purpose of this discussion is to assist teachers in making informed decisions on the appropriateness of SunSprouts for their guided reading programs.

From the beginning, SunSprouts was conceived as a developmental literacy series. The objective was to create a coordinated collection of materials that would help children develop proficiency in reading, speaking, listening, and writing in a supportive way. By “supportive way” it was meant that the needs of individual readers would be met through engaging stories featuring memorable, recurring story characters; satisfying and surprising outcomes; and a variety of fiction and nonfiction text types appealing to a range of interests. Children would be motivated to read SunSprouts stories again and again and would therefore experience a sense of purpose and value in learning to read and write.

## **The Brief**

The first stage of the process was to prepare a brief for the authors. The editor developed this brief in close consultation with an educator who is trained and employed as a Reading Recovery Tutor. The authors are professional writers, some of whom have earned national and international recognition for their literacy efforts; some are also educators.

The editorial brief defined the criteria that would be used to establish Guided Reading levels for individual SunSprouts books. The levels, although carefully and professionally determined, were not intended to be interpreted by teachers as definitive benchmarks. Rather, they are recommendations that should be moderated by the teacher’s knowledge of the learner and factors influencing the learner’s needs, such as prior knowledge and experience, socioeconomic indicators, personal interests, etc.

This editorial brief provided guidance on a number of criteria that were to be considered collectively rather than for their individual importance. These criteria included running word count, use of high-frequency words, frequency of new vocabulary, syntactic complexity, repetitive text patterns, frequency of new vocabulary, text density, and concept complexity.

The editor conducted group briefing sessions with the authors. This process ensured that the authors operated as a team, with a common sense of purpose and direction, while at the same time bringing their knowledge, experience, and individual styles to the task.

This increased the likelihood that manuscripts would adhere to the leveling criteria delineated by the Reading Recovery Tutor.

### **Initial Leveling**

The second stage of the process involved the leveling of texts. This task was undertaken by the Reading Recovery Tutor and at least two other school-based literacy teams that included staff trained and employed as Reading Recovery Teachers. To ensure a credible cross-section of professional opinion, these leveling teams were situated in different geographic areas.

The leveling teams were provided copies of edited manuscripts, including notes on illustrative content. The individual teams assessed the texts, reached a consensus on the level to be ascribed to each text, and then submitted the results to the editor.

### **Moderation Process**

At the earliest Guided Reading levels, the independent leveling groups showed a high degree of consensus. However, as the reading difficulty of texts increased, so did the degree of divergence among the groups in their findings.

In cases of divergence greater than two levels for any manuscript, the Reading Recovery Tutor examined the text to identify those elements that caused a divergence in findings. The texts were then edited to remove these elements without compromising the literary value of the text.

### **Banding Levels**

In keeping with the principle that levels are guidelines subject to teacher interpretation rather than definitive benchmarks, the books/levels were banded into color groups. Lemon, the first color band, includes only two Early Intervention levels. As texts became more complex and the leveling process revealed divergence among levelers, the books were grouped in bands of three, and then four, levels per color band. Guided Reading (GRL) and Developmental Reading Assessment levels were later assigned by experts using a similar process, as well as widely accepted conversion charts.

### **Illustration and Design**

Illustrations and photography for texts also had to conform to the specifications outlined in the leveling brief. Once illustrations and photography had been completed, digital versions of text and visuals for each book were sent to the leveling teams. The levels were then reviewed to ensure that the addition of the visual components had not altered the reading level. The design of the text (font style and size, letter spacing, word spacing, line spacing, and text density) adhered to standards proposed by the Reading Recovery Tutor.

### **Link with Support Materials**

The SunSprouts Teacher's Guides provide tools for assessment using SunSprouts books. These tools further reinforce the idea that, although reading levels have been carefully determined for this developmental literacy series, teachers must still interpret these levels

on the basis of individual performance in the classroom. It should also be recognized that Guided Reading levels have no real relevance to Shared Reading (Big Books) except as general indicators by which the teacher may gauge the likely ability of children to participate in the Shared Reading.

### **Ongoing Review**

Following publication of the SunSprouts leveled books, the Reading Recovery Tutor interviewed classroom teachers to assess whether the levels ascribed to the books conformed to educators' expectations within the context of the classroom program. The feedback was highly affirmative.

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