



Decodable Text Guidance

What is a decodable text?

Decodable texts are written to be over 80% decodable. They allow students to practice introduced phonics patterns. For example, if the reader has mastered the single consonants, short vowels, and digraphs, “shop,” “this,” and “cat” could be included in the text. However, “shape” and “voice” would likely not be included because the student has not mastered vowel-consonant-e or vowel teams yet. The DCRC Letter Introduction Scope and Sequence helps guide teachers by listing which words would be decodable to a particular student based on which letter-sound correspondences had been introduced. As you try to determine what would be decodable for your students, check the word lists on the Letter Introduction Scope and Sequence. To make sense, decodable texts must also include high-frequency words that may be irregular to the child (i.e. “he” and “she”).

Decodable texts are organized by which phonics pattern has been introduced.



The cat sat
on a mat.

What is a leveled text?

Leveled texts rely on repetition of both high-frequency words and syntactic patterns to allow the reader to access text. A syntactic pattern is a word arrangement pattern. For example: “I like to ____” or “We pick ____ at the farm.” The reader can rely on the repetition of high-frequency words, syntactic patterns, and pictures to access the text. *Leveled texts are organized by level “difficulty,” which encompasses a variety of factors. Some organization systems (i.e. the Lexile framework) consider only text complexity (sentence and word length and difficulty), while other organization systems (i.e. Fountas and Pinnell) consider text complexity, genre, text structure, content, theme, and more to decide text difficulty.*



Kites go from here to there.



Bees go from here to there.

→ What does it mean when we say a student “is” a Level B?

Traditionally, this means the student has demonstrated the ability to read a Level B text with 95% accuracy and 90% comprehension. The example shown here is a Level B text, typically associated with mid-Kindergarten. It reads: “Kites go from here to there. Bees go from here to there.” For a child in mid-Kindergarten, you will notice that none of the words are decodable. By Kindergarten Unit 4 in Foundations ©, for example, students have learned to decode CVC (closed) words with single correspondences like *rot*, *pun*, and *cat*, and will soon be introduced to digraphs. They have not learned any long vowel sounds like those in *kite*, *here*, and *bee*. The high-frequency words they have learned by Unit 3 are: *the*, *a*, *and*, *are*, *to*, *is*, *his*, *as*, *has*, and *was*.

What is an authentic text?

Authentic texts are written without consideration for reader level or decodability.

Authentic texts are usually organized by genre, like in the public library.



What texts should beginning readers use?

Multiple studies have shown that “students who use decodable/controlled text in their early reading instruction get off to a stronger start in their reading development” (Blevins, 2006; see also Cheatham and Allor, 2012; Compton, Appleton, and Hosp, 2004). Blevins’ study, for example, found that first grade students who practiced their phonics skills with decodable texts grew from 28% on-level to 72% on-level after half a year of decodable text use, while students who did not use decodable texts grew from 40% on-level to 54% on-level in the same time. Kilpatrick (2010) also found that the National Reading Panel (NRP) studies with the highest effect size *all* included decodable texts, while the NRP studies with lower effect sizes did not all include decodable texts.

Blevins (2016) explains: *“We can teach an award-winning phonics lesson, but if we follow that up ... with texts... containing few decodable words, our efforts might be in vain. That’s because students gravitate toward the word-reading strategies that work most frequently for them. If they are given texts in which they have to rely on sight words, context, and picture clues to figure out or even guess words, that’s what they think reading is. This might work for them for a while, especially through about mid-Grade 1 when the texts are short and simple and there is a close picture-text match. However, as soon as these supports are taken away, the students’ reading falls apart.”*

Duke (2019) asserts there are three reasons to use a decodable text: “[1] to bridge an important developmental transition in word reading, [2] to provide a field for the transfer of letter-sound knowledge to reading, and [3] to encourage beginning readers to decode.” The case for decodable texts weakens, however, as students learn more decoding skills. First, leveled and more authentic texts start to naturally contain a higher percentage of words the child can decode. Second, decodable texts -- by nature -- are limited in their word choice and so may limit child’s (1) interest and motivation and (2) vocabulary growth (Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K., 2018). This same article confirms that more research must be done about the exact “tipping point” from decodable to leveled, or more authentic, texts. The Clinic recommends that students secure NWF-WRC (i.e. approach grade-level benchmark, or around 10 WRC in one minute) before reading a leveled text.

When can a student start with a decodable text?

Duke (2019) suggests students should be able to decode a simple CVC word and know around 20 high-frequency words before working in a decodable book. Prior to that developmental milestone, students can work on securing whole-word reading and reading short phrases.

Can you work on comprehension in a decodable text?

Yes! The point of reading is reading comprehension. Refer to the Simple View of Reading: Students must attain automaticity with word recognition/decoding to be able to understand the text they are reading. The aim of decodable texts is to allow students to practice phonics patterns to the point of automaticity, freeing up their working memory for comprehension. However, decodable texts are naturally limited in word choice, so leveled or authentic texts may be more suitable for vocabulary development, learning about the world, and reading comprehension skills (Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K., 2018). Language comprehension can always be taught using read-alouds if a student has not yet achieved decoding automaticity.

Should I use decodables during guided reading? Is that “allowed” in DCPS?

In SY16-17, the Elementary English Language Arts Team designed Weekly Templates based on the research of Blevins and David and Meredith Liben to “boost” the Elementary English Language Arts block. This added decodable texts to the Language Arts block. Decodable texts are recognized by the Elementary ELA Team as an important part of students’ beginning reading development. Please refer to the DCRC’s Small Group Needs-Based guidance for how and when to use decodable texts during small group reading.