Selecting Texts for Students
IN YEARS 4 TO 8

One of the most important tasks for you as a teacher is selecting appropriate texts to use with your students.

> *Teachers need to choose tasks and texts that will reflect their students' lived experiences and support their development of literacy as they develop the knowledge and understandings required in the various areas of the New Zealand Curriculum.*
>
> *The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards,* page 7

When selecting texts for learning across the curriculum, a key consideration is their relative difficulty for your students. Many series, such as the instructional series[1] provided by the Ministry of Education, are accompanied by information on reading year levels. However, when you are selecting texts from a wide range of sources, many of the texts will not come with this information.

These guidelines have been designed to help you with such texts. They support you to:

- estimate the relative difficulty of texts in English for your students
- identify the characteristics of the texts that will support or challenge your students
- consider specific approaches and deliberate acts of teaching to address the challenges identified in the texts.

The framework included in these guidelines is an easy-to-use tool that will help you to quickly estimate the reading year levels of texts from a wide variety of sources, for example:

- the Internet
- newspapers
- magazines
- chapter books
- non-fiction and reference books.

The framework is based on the factors (sets of characteristics) that are most likely to affect the difficulty of texts. These are explained in Appendix One.

The framework and these guidelines are available to download as a PDF or a Word file from http://literacyonline.tki.org.nz/Literacy-Online/Student-needs/Planning-for-learning

The guidelines and their accompanying framework are based on the levelling process used for the year 4–8 instructional series produced by Learning Media for the Ministry of Education. The process is described in detail in Curriculum Update 13 (see page 16). More information about text levelling can be found in Appendix Two.

MATCHING TEXTS TO READERS

This framework cannot take account of individual readers' needs and abilities. Characteristics of a text that provide support for some readers may be challenging for others.

> *Terms like "hard" or "easy" are always relative ... A book is easy or difficult only in terms of a particular reader or even a group of readers.*
>
> Fountas and Pinnell, 2006, page 2

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[1] The instructional series include Ready to Read, *Junior Journal, School Journal, Connected,* School Journal Story Library, and the electronic storybooks. Reading year levels are listed in their inside front covers and in the teacher support materials, which also include text characteristics. See Curriculum Update 3 (see page 16) for further information on these series.

In order to select and use appropriate texts for your students, you will need to draw on your detailed understanding of your students' individual learning needs, skills, interests, and knowledge both of texts and of the world. You will also take account of each student's identity, language, and culture.

The texts you select for your students will be used for a wide range of purposes – for example, to access information and ideas related to a particular curriculum area or to foster students' critical literacy. Occasionally, you might deliberately choose a text that you know will challenge some students, in which case you will need to plan plenty of extra support, such as a shared reading approach followed by repeated readings of the text.

USING THE FRAMEWORK

The framework on page 3 provides both a **process** for estimating the difficulty of a particular text and a **record** of the supports and challenges it presents for your students. This will enable you to plan strategies for building on the supports and addressing the challenges while drawing on your students' prior knowledge and skills.

The examples on pages 4–10 show the framework applied to three texts: a newspaper article, an extract from a chapter book, and an extract from the Internet.

1.   Identifying the context for using the text

- At the top of the framework, write the title and author and, if appropriate, the source of the text.
- Texts can often be used to support learning in several curriculum areas or at more than one curriculum level. You will have already skimmed the text to assess its suitability for the topic that your class is working on. In the space provided, identify the curriculum area in which you intend to use the text with your students and the curriculum level they are working at.

2.   Considering the factors (sets of characteristics) affecting text difficulty

- In the box beside each set of characteristics, write your estimate of the reading year level that is a "best fit" for those characteristics.
- You may wish to make brief notes about particular text characteristics that may be either supportive or challenging for your students. This will help you to decide how best to use the text with your students.

3.   Estimating the difficulty of the text

- Taking all your estimated levels and notes on particular characteristics into account, make a decision on the most appropriate overall reading year level for the text.
- At times, this will be an average of your estimated reading year levels for the different sets of characteristics. At other times, you may decide to weight some characteristics more heavily than others. Use your knowledge of your students to decide the relative importance of the supports and challenges that you have identified in the text.

4.   Deciding how to use the text

- Sometimes your estimate of the difficulty of a text may place it either well above or below the reading year level of the students you intend to use it with.
- If the text is very challenging, you will need to plan a high level of support for your students (for example, using a shared reading approach and modelling ways to address particular challenges such as technical vocabulary or complex sentence structures).

> Assessing text difficulty is not an exact science. Opinions may differ about the reading year level of a text. When literacy leaders and teachers work through the framework together, this provides valuable professional learning about factors and text characteristics that may support or challenge their students.

FRAMEWORK FOR ESTIMATING TEXT DIFFICULTY

Title and source: _____

Author: _____   **Curriculum level and area:** _____

Factors affecting text difficulty	Reading year level	Notes
Age appropriateness Consider: • age of the main character(s) • prior knowledge assumed by the text • maturity required to deal with the themes • familiarity of contexts, settings, and subject matter • likely interests and experiences of readers.		
Complexity of ideas Consider: • implied information or ideas (requiring readers to infer) • irony or ambiguity • abstract ideas • metaphors and other figurative or connotative language • technical information • support from illustrations, diagrams, graphs, and so on.		
Structure and coherence of the text Consider: • flashbacks or time shifts • narrative point of view • mixed text types • connections across the text • examples and explanations • competing information • length of paragraphs • unattributed dialogue • use of headings and subheadings.		
Syntactic structure of the text Consider: • sentence length • the balance of simple, compound, complex, or incomplete sentences • use of passive voice or nominalisation • repetition of words or phrases • changes in verb tense.		
Vocabulary difficulty Consider: • unfamiliar vocabulary • technical and academic terms, non-English words, and proper nouns • sentence-level and/or visual support • contextual clues • the use of a glossary or footnotes.		
Length of the text		

Estimated reading year level:	Notes:

EXAMPLE 1   **ESTIMATED READING YEAR LEVEL 5: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE**

Title and source: *"Hope that pilot whales will refloat at high tide" (The Dominion Post, 24 January 2012)*

Author: _____   **Curriculum level and area:** *Level 3, English and Science*

Factors affecting text difficulty	Reading year level	Notes
Age appropriateness Consider: • age of the main character(s) • prior knowledge assumed by the text • maturity required to deal with the themes • familiarity of contexts, settings, and subject matter • likely interests and experiences of readers.	5	*Some upsetting details* *Prior knowledge of whale strandings will help (eg SJ Level 3 September 2011)* *Whales a high interest topic*
Complexity of ideas Consider: • implied information or ideas (requiring readers to infer) • irony or ambiguity • abstract ideas • metaphors and other figurative or connotative language • technical information • support from illustrations, diagrams, graphs, and so on.	5	*Ideas that people want to help even when there is little chance of success; that whale strandings are common, and many whales die* *Need to infer why volunteers have to leave – abstract concept of "safety reasons"* *Unresolved outcome – could research online* *Abstract idea of "coincidence"*
Structure and coherence of the text Consider: • flashbacks or time shifts • narrative point of view • mixed text types • connections across the text • examples and explanations • competing information • length of paragraphs • unattributed dialogue • use of headings and subheadings.	5	*Newspaper report – includes different points of view* *Not in chronological sequence* *Connections between paragraphs not always obvious* *Reference to earlier strandings in same area* *Mix of reported and direct speech*
Syntactic structure of the text Consider: • sentence length • the balance of simple, compound, complex, or incomplete sentences • use of passive voice or nominalisation • repetition of words or phrases • changes in verb tense.	6	*Some long and complex sentences (including sixth one)* *Some passive constructions: "... medics were also called ..."; "whales became stranded"* *Typical headline format, with words omitted ("Hope that ...")*
Vocabulary difficulty Consider: • unfamiliar vocabulary • technical and academic terms, non-English words, and proper nouns • sentence-level and/or visual support • contextual clues • the use of a glossary or footnotes.	5	*No difficult technical terms* *Some vocabulary may be unfamiliar: volunteer; chief executive; refloated; marine; medics; exhibits; coincidence* *Some colloquialisms (challenging for ELL students): medics, aren't that flash*
Length of the text	5	

Estimated reading year level: 5	**Notes:** *Although some details may be upsetting, the text is a typical news report, with few major vocab challenges. Year 5 students may need some support with the typical features of a news report (eg, passive constructions).*

EXAMPLE 1 **ESTIMATED READING YEAR LEVEL 5: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE**

First aid: Volunteers try desperately to save the pilot whales, which stranded just after midday.

Photos: NAOMI ARNOLD/FAIRFAX NZ

Hope that pilot whales will refloat at high tide

ABOUT 22 pilot whales stranded near Farewell Spit, at the northern tip of the South Island, had died by last night and fears were mounting for the remaining 77.

Volunteers began leaving the scene at 8.45pm last night for safety reasons.

"It's hard to walk away," Project Jonah volunteer Jo Woods, of Motueka, said. "You get attached. My one had a big chunk behind his eye missing and every time we talked to him he would put his head up and shake it."

Project Jonah chief executive Kimberly Muncaster said yesterday volunteers had tried desperately to save the whales, which stranded just after midday. "It was very sad," she said, "but there was nothing more we could have done."

Ms Muncaster said she remained hopeful the remaining live whales would have refloated at high tide at 11pm, though there was only a small chance of this.

Volunteers had spent the afternoon trying to keep the whales cool and upright. Project Jonah marine mammal medics were also called to give the whales first aid. Rescue efforts were due to resume at first light today.

Early this month 25 whales became stranded nearby at Farewell Spit. Seven of those whales died, and another 65 whales died after becoming stranded in the same area in November.

Sad sight: The remaining live whales may have been able to refloat at high tide about 11pm last night, although there was only a small chance of this.

Ms Woods spent yesterday laying wet sheets on the whales to keep them cool and using sandbags to keep them upright. She trained as a volunteer after seeing a previous stranding on the Spit.

"I realised I would have no idea what to do and I just want to be helpful rather than doing nothing," she said.

Nils Alke of Germany was travelling through New Zealand and had come to the Spit to see some pictures and museum exhibits of past strandings.

Instead, he found a real one. "It was such a coincidence to see," he said. "It would be even better to see them swimming in the sea."

Farewell Spit EcoTours manager Paddy Gillooly has attended about 10 strandings in the past 25 years.

"From what I understand some of the ones that are left aren't that flash," he said last night. "It depends on how high the tide comes tonight, which way the wind blows, because they are in a place where the tide will just float them."

Fairfax NZ, AAP

Source: *The Dominion Post*, 24 January, 2012

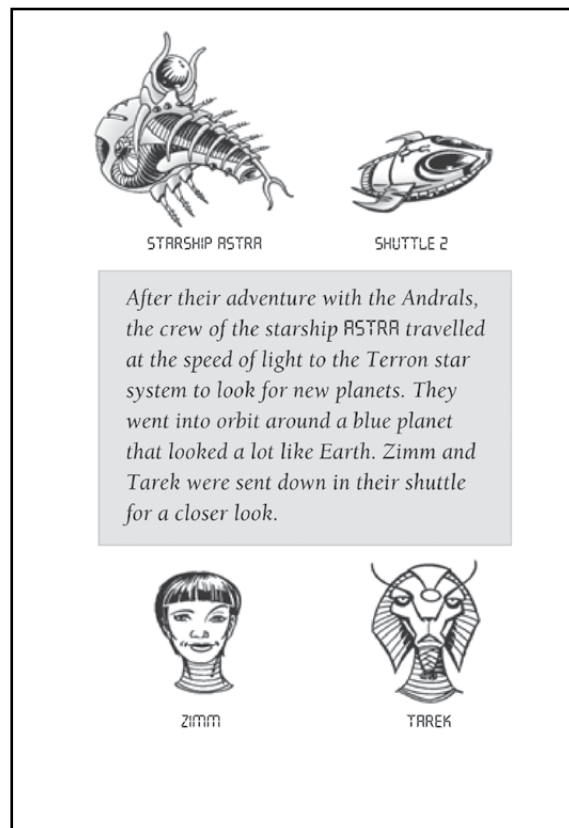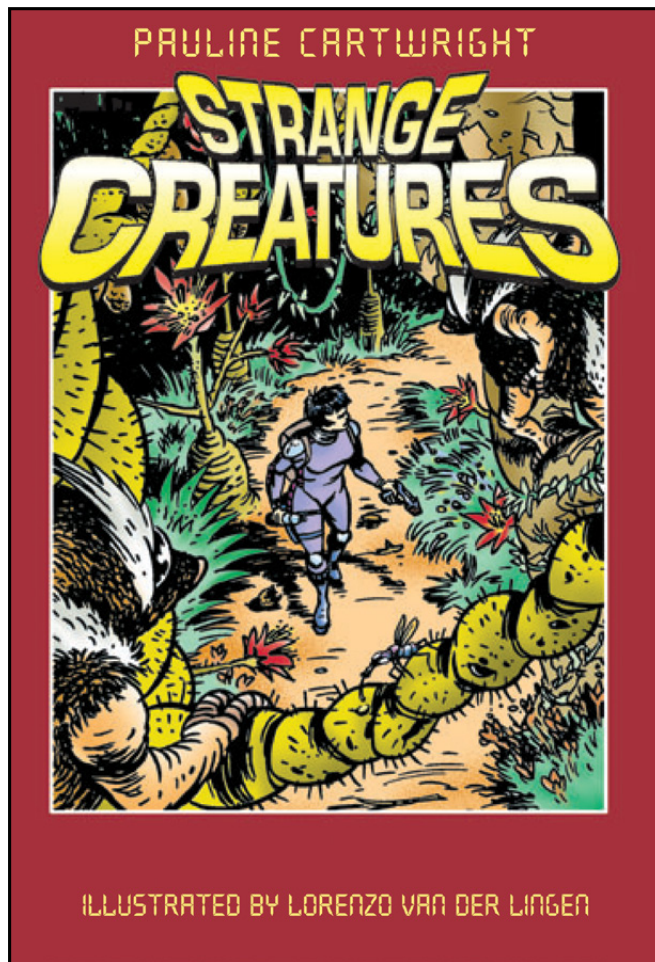**EXAMPLE 2   ESTIMATED READING YEAR LEVEL 4: EXTRACT FROM A CHAPTER BOOK**

Title and source: Strange Creatures: Chapter One: "Out of Control" (from Skyrider Chapter Books, 1999)

Author: Pauline Cartwright   **Curriculum level and area:** Level 2, English

Factors affecting text difficulty	Reading year level	Notes
Age appropriateness Consider: • age of the main character(s) • prior knowledge assumed by the text • maturity required to deal with the themes • familiarity of contexts, settings, and subject matter • likely interests and experiences of readers.	4–5	Students familiar with sci-fi space fiction High interest Alien setting and characters — idea of exploration of unknown worlds; crash landing Knowledge of meteor showers Technical knowledge ("loaded a scanner")
Complexity of ideas Consider: • implied information or ideas (requiring readers to infer) • irony or ambiguity • abstract ideas • metaphors and other figurative or connotative language • technical information • support from illustrations, diagrams, graphs, and so on.	4	Implied ideas: Astra is the support ship; Zimm and Tarek are from different planets; both are missing home Simple abstract ideas: keep in touch; trouble; excited; something unusual; gone crazy; lost contact Illustrations help visualise characters and spaceship
Structure and coherence of the text Consider: • flashbacks or time shifts • narrative point of view • mixed text types • connections across the text • examples and explanations • competing information • length of paragraphs • unattributed dialogue • use of headings and subheadings.	4	Introduction a sequel to earlier book (but can stand on its own) Connections with earlier text ("Remember the trouble …") Unresolved chapter ending 3rd-person point of view Dialogue all attributed Short paragraphs
Syntactic structure of the text Consider: • sentence length • the balance of simple, compound, complex, or incomplete sentences • use of passive voice or nominalisation • repetition of words or phrases • changes in verb tense.	4	A few complex sentences. Mostly simple Consistent past tense apart from dialogue
Vocabulary difficulty Consider: • unfamiliar vocabulary • technical and academic terms, non-English words, and proper nouns • sentence-level and/or visual support • contextual clues • the use of a glossary or footnotes.	4	Very few unfamiliar words: sensors; meteor; shuttle; starship; scanner Illustrations give clues (eg meteors)
Length of the text	4	

Estimated reading year level: 4	**Notes:** Great for ELL students — no significant vocab or structural challenges; sci-fi/space fiction may be unfamiliar, but peer reading can support this.

EXAMPLE 2   **ESTIMATED READING YEAR LEVEL 4: EXTRACT FROM A CHAPTER BOOK**

PAULINE CARTWRIGHT

STRANGE CREATURES

ILLUSTRATED BY LORENZO VAN DER LINGEN

STRANGE CREATURES

PAULINE CARTWRIGHT

ILLUSTRATED BY LORENZO VAN DER LINGEN

STARSHIP ASTRA

SHUTTLE 2

After their adventure with the Andrals, the crew of the starship ASTRA travelled at the speed of light to the Terron star system to look for new planets. They went into orbit around a blue planet that looked a lot like Earth. Zimm and Tarek were sent down in their shuttle for a closer look.
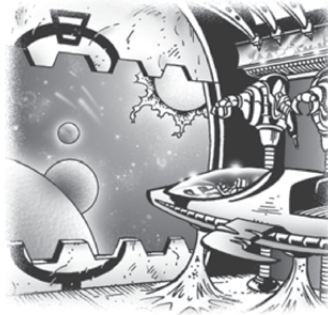
ZIMM

TAREK

1
OUT OF CONTROL

"Shuttle to *Astra* command. We are ready to leave for the surface," said Tarek.

"Keep in touch," replied Captain Voss. "Remember the trouble we had the last time your radio failed."

4

"We'll never forget our adventure with the Andrals," said Zimm. "Don't worry. We'll keep our eyes open." Zimm and Tarek were excited about exploring this new world. The sensors on the *Astra* had shown that there was something unusual living there.

5

As the shuttle sped away from the starship, Tarek loaded a scanner to send down to the planet. "This will tell us more about what is living on the surface. From here, it looks a lot like your home world," he said.

"Yes, I hope it's safe," said Zimm. "I haven't been back to Earth for so long. It would be nice to see green grass and blue water."

"I would rather swim in the red seas on my planet," said Tarek. "Blue water always looks strange to me."

6

Zimm and Tarek were pleased to be exploring together again. They began talking about the other adventures they had shared. Suddenly there was a loud crash, and the shuttle shook. Zimm's hands slipped from the controls. "What's happening?" she cried.

7

"Meteors!" said Tarek. "Put up the shields."

"It's too late," said Zimm. "We've lost power. The controls have gone crazy!"

They felt another huge crash against the side of the shuttle, and then a lot of thumps as the smaller meteors hit them. The shuttle shook this way and that. Then, all at once, it went into a spin. It turned over and over, out of control.

8

"Come in, *Astra*!" called Zimm. "We're in trouble! Come in, Captain!"

"We have lost contact with *Astra*," said Tarek. "We are on our own."

The shuttle began falling fast towards the surface of the planet. "Warning! Warning!" sounded the computer. "Prepare for crash landing!"

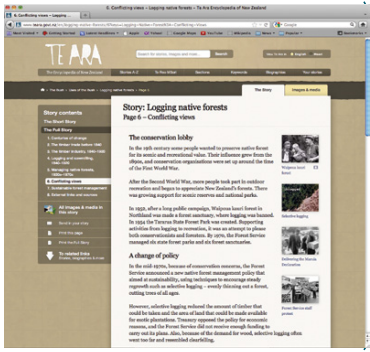**EXAMPLE 3**   **ESTIMATED READING YEAR LEVEL 8: EXTRACT FROM THE INTERNET**

Title and source: "Logging Native Forests: Conflicting Views" (from Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of NZ)

Author: Nancy Swarbrick   **Curriculum level and area:** Level 4, Social Studies

Factors affecting text difficulty	Reading year level	Notes
Age appropriateness Consider: • age of the main character(s) • prior knowledge assumed by the text • maturity required to deal with the themes • familiarity of contexts, settings, and subject matter • likely interests and experiences of readers.	8	Assumes some familiarity with conservation issues, conflict and protest, political background ELLs students may not be familiar with NZ political background Maturity needed to deal with opposing viewpoints (conservationists/commercial interests)
Complexity of ideas Consider: • implied information or ideas (requiring readers to infer) • irony or ambiguity • abstract ideas • metaphors and other figurative or connotative language • technical information • support from illustrations, diagrams, graphs, and so on.	8–9	Many complex abstract ideas ("selective logging"; "social and economic interests") Connotative/metaphorical language ("Public opposition to logging swelled", communities "faded away") Lots of historical and political information Support from photos and videos (online version)
Structure and coherence of the text Consider: • flashbacks or time shifts • narrative point of view • mixed text types • connections across the text • examples and explanations • competing information • length of paragraphs • unattributed dialogue • use of headings and subheadings.	7	Subheadings make structure clear Chronological structure helps reader make meaning Features of a report – topic sentences followed by examples Mostly short paragraphs Connected ideas – e.g., about protest and conflict
Syntactic structure of the text Consider: • sentence length • the balance of simple, compound, complex, or incomplete sentences • use of passive voice or nominalisation • repetition of words or phrases • changes in verb tense.	8–9	Some long and complicated sentences, including complex and compound sentences Frequent use of passive voice
Vocabulary difficulty Consider: • unfamiliar vocabulary • technical and academic terms, non-English words, and proper nouns • sentence-level and/or visual support • contextual clues • the use of a glossary or footnotes.	8–9	Many proper names may be unfamiliar to ELLs Many terms used in a specialised way, e.g., "privatised", "scenic and recreational value", "confrontations", "deregulation"
Length of the text	7–8	A short text for this level, but a lot compressed into it

Estimated reading year level: 8	**Notes:** Because of the many unfamiliar words, some long and complicated sentences, and the large amount of detail compressed into a short text, this will be challenging for most of my yr 7–8 students. Best used with a shared reading approach and modelling of appropriate strategies.

EXAMPLE 3   ESTIMATED READING YEAR LEVEL 8: EXTRACT FROM THE INTERNET

Story: Logging native forests
Page 6 – Conflicting views

The conservation lobby

In the 19th century some people wanted to preserve native forest for its scenic and recreational value. Their influence grew from the 1890s, and conservation organisations were set up around the time of the First World War.

After the Second World War, more people took part in outdoor recreation and began to appreciate New Zealand's forests. There was growing support for scenic reserves and national parks.

In 1952, after a long public campaign, Waipoua kauri forest in Northland was made a forest sanctuary, where logging was banned. In 1954 the Tararua State Forest Park was created. Supporting activities from logging to recreation, it was an attempt to please both conservationists and foresters. By 1970, the Forest Service managed six state forest parks and six forest sanctuaries.

A change of policy

In the mid-1970s, because of conservation concerns, the Forest Service announced a new native forest management policy that aimed at sustainability, using techniques to encourage steady regrowth such as selective logging – evenly thinning out a forest, cutting trees of all ages.

However, selective logging reduced the amount of timber that could be taken and the area of land that could be made available for exotic plantations. Treasury opposed the policy for economic reasons, and the Forest Service did not receive enough funding to carry out its plans. Also, because of the demand for wood, selective logging often went too far and resembled clearfelling.

Growing criticism

Conservationists argued that trees could not be selectively logged without damaging the complex structure of the surrounding forest.

The Forest Service stopped logging kauri, but insisted that other native forests were still needed for timber. This led to a series of clashes in the 1970s, first over beech forests on the West Coast and in Southland, then over the central North Island podocarp forests at Pureora and Whirinaki. Public opposition to logging swelled. The Maruia Declaration, calling for the protection of native forests, had 341,159 signatures when it was presented to Parliament in 1977.

At loggerheads

The conservationists' ideals sometimes conflicted with social and economic interests. Many small sawmills still depended on native forests, and people in nearby villages relied on the mills for work. In 1976 it was estimated that native sawmills employed over 2,000 people in rural areas where there were few other job options. At Pureora and Whirinaki, there were confrontations between conservationists and forestry workers. When logging stopped at Pureora in 1982, the small King Country communities of Pureora and Barryville faded away.

From timber to tourism

The West Coast Forest Accord of 1986 aimed to ease the transition from logging native forest in the region. Some native forest was reserved, but clearfelling was to continue in North Westland and Buller until the exotic forests there had matured. This compromise was unacceptable to some conservationists, and there were more protests. In 1999, the government announced that logging would end by 31 March 2002. To compensate locals, a $120 million fund was set up to create other jobs, such as in ecotourism.

Political change

The Labour government elected in 1984 supported both conservation concerns and deregulation. It separated the commercial and non-commercial functions of several government departments, and in 1987 the Forest Service was disbanded. Exotic forests were managed by a state-owned Forestry Corporation until 1989, and were then gradually privatised. Most of the state's native forests passed into the care of the new Department of Conservation (DOC). DOC was responsible for national parks, reserves and indigenous forests not intended for wood production.

From 1975 to 1987, production of native timber from publicly owned forests declined dramatically. Political changes put an end to the logging of most native forest on public land, and to a way of life for many people.

Waipoua kauri forest

Selective logging

Delivering the Maruia Declaration

Forest Service staff protest

Source: *Te Ara,* www.teara.govt.nz/
en/logging-native-forests/6,
updated 2 March 2009
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Zealand licence

APPENDIX ONE: FACTORS AFFECTING THE DIFFICULTY OF TEXTS

The following factors need to be taken into account when determining the difficulty of a text:

- curriculum level
- age appropriateness
- complexity of ideas
- structure and coherence of the text
- syntactic structure of the text
- vocabulary difficulty
- length of the text.

These factors are linked to the descriptions of the key characteristics of texts described in the National Standards for reading. These descriptions "show how the texts at each successive level become more complex in terms of content and theme, structure and coherence, and language. The descriptions have been carefully developed to guide teachers' decisions as they select appropriate texts, not just for reading instruction but for *all* curriculum tasks." (*The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards*, page 12)

The factors are often interrelated, and it is generally the balance of the supports and challenges they present as a whole that determines the reading year level.

Curriculum level

The content of a text may be appropriate for the level of the New Zealand Curriculum that your students are working at, but its language, structure, and complexity may give it a higher level of difficulty. In this case, you may still decide to use the text, but you will need to plan a greater level of support for your students.

Age appropriateness

You will need to decide whether the content of the text is suitable for the age of your students. You could take account of factors such as:

- age of the main character(s)
- prior knowledge assumed by the text
- maturity required to deal with the themes of the text
- familiarity of contexts, settings, and subject matter
- likely interests and experiences of your students.

Complexity of ideas

This includes factors such as:

- implied information or ideas (requiring readers to infer)
- irony or ambiguity
- abstract ideas
- metaphors and other figurative or connotative language
- technical information
- support from illustrations, diagrams, graphs, and so on.

Assessing text difficulty in relation to this set of factors must take account of the following key characteristics of texts identified in the National Standards.

Year 4	Years 5–6	Years 7–8
some abstract ideas that are clearly supported by concrete examples in the text or easily linked to the students' prior knowledge	abstract ideas, in greater numbers than in texts at earlier levels, accompanied by concrete examples in the text that help support the students' understanding	
some places where information and ideas are implicit and where students need to make inferences based on information that is easy to find because it is nearby in the text and there is little or no competing information	some ideas and information that are conveyed indirectly and require students to infer by drawing on several related pieces of information in the text	elements that require interpretation, such as complex plots, sophisticated themes, and abstract ideas
figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, or personification	figurative and/or ambiguous language that the context helps students to understand	metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation
visual language features that support the ideas and information, for example, text boxes or maps	illustrations, photographs, text boxes, diagrams, maps, charts, and graphs that clarify or extend the text and may require some interpretation	illustrations, photographs, text boxes, diagrams, maps, charts, and graphs, containing main ideas that relate to the text's content

The structure and coherence of the text

This includes factors such as:

- flashbacks or time shifts
- narrative point of view
- mixed text types
- connections across the text
- examples and explanations
- competing information
- length of paragraphs
- unattributed dialogue
- use of headings and subheadings.

Assessing text difficulty in relation to this set of factors must take account of the following key characteristics of texts identified in the reading standards.

Year 4	Years 5–6	Years 7–8
	some information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, some competing information), which students need to identify and reject as they integrate pieces of information in order to answer questions	complex layers of meaning, and/or information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, competing information), requiring students to infer meanings or make judgments
a straightforward text structure, such as a structure that follows a recognisable and clear text form	mixed text types (for example, a complex explanation may be included as part of a report)	non-continuous text structures and mixed text types

Syntactic structure of the text

This includes factors such as:

- sentence length
- the balance of simple, compound, or complex sentences
- incomplete sentences
- nominalisation (the use of a noun where a verb or adjective would be simpler and more direct, for example, "Her investigation of the project was finished" versus "She had finished investigating the project")
- use of the passive voice
- repetition of words or phrases
- changes in verb tense.

Assessing text difficulty in relation to this set of factors must take account of the following key characteristics of texts identified in the reading standards.

Year 4	Years 5–6	Years 7–8
some compound and complex sentences, which may consist of two or three clauses	sentences that vary in length and in structure (for example, sentences that begin in different ways and different kinds of complex sentences with a number of subordinate clauses)	sentences that vary in length, including long, complex sentences that contain a lot of information adverbial clauses or connectives that require students to make links across the whole text

Vocabulary difficulty

This includes factors such as:

- unfamiliar vocabulary
- technical and academic terms
- non-English words
- proper nouns
- the extent to which photographs, illustrations, graphs, maps, diagrams, and other visual features will help to clarify challenging vocabulary
- the extent to which contextual clues and information at sentence level and the use of a glossary or footnotes will help to clarify challenging vocabulary.

Assessing text difficulty in relation to this set of factors must take account of the following key characteristics of texts identified in the reading standards.

Year 4	Years 5–6	Years 7–8
some words and phrases that are ambiguous or unfamiliar to the students, the meaning of which is supported by the context or clarified by photographs, illustrations, diagrams, and/or written explanations	a significant amount of vocabulary that is unfamiliar to the students (including academic and content-specific words and phrases), which is generally explained in the text by words or illustrations	words and phrases with multiple meanings that require students to know and use effective word-solving strategies to retain their focus on meaning academic and content-specific vocabulary

Length of the text

Longer texts are usually associated with greater difficulty.

> *Particularly for students who do not read fluently, length alone can be a formidable obstacle.*
>
> Grobe, 1970, quoted in Graves, 2003, page 7

However, longer texts may sometimes include more illustrations and examples. These may help to explain and clarify the information, thus making the text easier to understand.

APPENDIX TWO: TEXT LEVELLING

How are texts levelled?

The huge range of different methods used for levelling texts can be very confusing. It's important to remember that no levelling system can provide an absolute measure of the difficulty of a text. And any system of levelling needs to be used in conjunction with a teacher's own professional judgment, based on a sound knowledge of his or her students' needs and abilities.

There are two main methods for determining the difficulty of texts: those that rely on a "readability" formula and those that use a "text levelling" system.

Readability formulae

These are often computerised. They can be divided into "counting" formulae (which count characteristics such as word and sentence length) and "counting and comparing" formulae (which count characteristics in conjunction with calculating the familiarity of words in the text).

Readability formulae are generally consistent and accurate, in that any person or computer applying the formula will get the same score. However, a readability measure alone can give flawed information because it does not, for example, take account of a text's theme, concepts, and ideas, which may be suited to an older or more sophisticated audience.

Text levelling systems

Unlike readability formulae, text levelling systems involve subjective judgments based on qualitative criteria. They can take into account a large number of factors affecting the difficulty of a text.

Text levelling systems depend on human "judges" making decisions. As such, variability between judges can affect the reliability of levelling decisions. To help judges make more reliable decisions, levelling systems can be supported by detailed descriptions of each level and exemplar texts (sometimes called benchmark texts). Also, several people will often make judgments together.

Combined levelling systems

To increase its reliability, a text levelling system can include a readability formula as part of the evaluative process. This is the case with the levelling system used in the year 4–8 instructional series published by Learning Media for the Ministry of Education. These texts are levelled by a process involving the Dale Chall readability formula (which measures both vocabulary difficulty and the length of sentences) and a levelling framework that takes into account a number of other factors affecting the difficulty of a text. These factors are explained in detail in Appendix One.

Detailed information about the levelling process used for the instructional series can be found in Curriculum Update 13 (see right-hand column).

References and useful reading

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