

## Writing Prose and Reading Ages

Children listen to and can understand stories long before they can read, so don't confuse 'hearing age' and 'reading age' – they're two different things. Listening is a key skill in developing reading ability and that is why storybooks or storytelling are such important activities or parents and caregivers of very young children.

The most important learning to read period for any child is 2 through to 7 years old. The key part of this is developing verbal skills through hearing spoken language from birth. Crucial brain pathway development occurs during the period 0 to 7 years and, if it is missed, leads to problems of comprehension, empathy and socialisation in later life.

Acknowledge from Day 1 what you're doing with a baby. "Shall we go to the shops, now?" "Come on; let's get you clean and comfy." The important message here is: "Mums, talk to your kids! Dads, listen – and answer questions." So we write books that help with this, and nothing helps as much as parental and caregiver commitment to the process of communication.

That said, every child is different and so there is no such thing as one size fits all. The key is to find stories children enjoy – the stories we want to write, hopefully. The sooner children start to enjoy stories the sooner they will develop reading skills and the desire to read for themselves.

Start children on short simple stories and move onto longer more complex stories as soon as they are able to sufficiently understand and enjoy them. New words and phrases are learned through hearing them for the first time and learning their meaning from a parent, caregiver or teacher.

There is conflicting information about reading age from countless sources and it is better not to take specific reading ages too seriously. Different schemes exist; different publishers have different categories, and children reach above level when stimulated – by a deep interest in the story, or because the book is being 'taught' – and fall below their normal reading age during times of stress, reverting to familiar books they read when younger. Suitable stories may wander through two or three different reading levels and change under time and circumstances.

The general methods used to find reading age measure the point at which ability stops, thus a story said to be suitable for a particular reading age would be difficult in parts for some around that reading age.

Ensure the story content does not present too much of a challenge, to avoid a negative experience in the early stages. Once the desire to read has started to develop, more challenges can be introduced.

### A common banding is as follows:

#### AGE

**0-2** Rag books, activity books, board books, 'toy books' - e.g. in the bath, squeaks & textures, etc. The book as a fun thing - familiarity, anticipation, questions, parental or caregiver 'storytelling.' Idea that what's on the page connects to real things, and to the child's life and family.

**2-5 years** Pre-schoolers. Between 2 and 7 is when a child is most receptive to learning to read. The importance here of physical contact and 'fun' cannot be under-estimated to ensure the emotional aspect of communication. Presentation of 'the same as me' and 'different from me' contexts.

**3-7 years** Still building on recognition and the presentation of something new. Beginning to incorporate the imaginary and fantastical, the idea of 'what if' and wonder and the child's own permission to enter a world where lions CAN come to tea, velveteen rabbits come to life and dinosaurs tempt us to bad behaviour.

**5-8 years** The development of reading skills, whether from print books or e-books, etc. So must be stories that engage them fully and make them want to read on. Again, affirmation of life as it is and life as it could be.

**6-10 years** Beginning to meet with the child's own hobbies, interests, desire to know, reading not only for pleasure, though that should be a constant, but also to learn and understand.

**7-12 years** A further development and the beginning of the transfer from child to young adult. (This is essentially an uneven or irregular process; intensely individual.)The themes can be at once more complex and more focused. Self-choice in bookshops, or from library visits. The development of autonomy. Yet in times of stress, reading levels can drop so younger books remain favourites.

**9-14 years** Depending on the child's personal development they could be reading across a wider range in terms of style and expression, subject matter, etc. Graphic novels, series, 'the real world' and fantasy, growing up, who you are in terms of race, nationality, religion, ability, etc.

### **The Historic Reading Age Mess**

Some reading material assessment schemes assume children under five do not read and then magically at five years suddenly have a reading ability. Other different schemes confusingly conflict, assessing the same reading material suitable for reading ages of both 5 and 14, no help to parents or teachers.

Many book shops, especially national chains, neatly band books into strict age bands, but the overlooked reality is children themselves have a wide reading age spread which can be over several years. Progressive authors and publishers understand these problems and attempt to spread reading age advice such as 'up to 7.' However the major players in the book distribution industry still insist upon rigid story age banding, thus many good stories are never found simply because they are classified in the wrong place.

Part of the problem is the book classification industry (e.g. Nielsen who register books and insist on a rigid age range of 0 to 5, then 5 to 7, etc. Such age bandings do not help non-experts (i.e. most parents) who, as a result, may not select the most suitable story book for their children. Parents (and teachers) naturally want to feel their children are progressing so it does not help if the most suitable story for a child 6 to 7 years old is classified 5 years or less. Children themselves all want to be grown up. A 6 or 7 year old doesn't want to read books labelled for under-5s.

Chris Brown, former primary head teacher and review editor for *The School Librarian* tells us, "As a head teacher I'd have deplored receiving books for children's pleasure-reading age-banded - I'd need to deface them with black permanent pen-blobs over the offending bit of the cover - and in selecting books on a limited budget on the whole I'd have avoided those known to be age-banded."

Many publishers and authors do not say which reading age measuring scheme they use, so even if parents and teachers had the substantial time to study and understand all the reading age assessment schemes, they would still be in the dark unless they tested each individual book themselves.

The simple solution is to apply common sense, that is, know your child and spread the reading age, e.g. a story suitable for a 5 year old might also be suitable for children between 3 and 7 years old.

### **Reading Levels for Children: Vocabulary and Types of Kids' Books**

When writing for kids or young adults, it is important that you always have a specific age group in mind and that you know the vocabulary to describe your type of children's book. Below you will find details about the word usage, content, and length of children's books and young adult novels. Let's consider some definitions of children's book types by age group:

- **Primary level.** Children ages 6 to 8, or 1st through 3rd grades.<sup>1</sup> These children read picture books, easy-to-read books, and picture storybooks. Easy-reader books are meant for children to read alone, and sentences should average 5 to 6 words, with 10 as the maximum number.
- **Elementary level.** Children ages 8 to 12 (4th through to 6th grades. <sup>1</sup>) These children read sentences of approximately 10 words, with 20 as the maximum number. Most books written at this level range between 20,000 and 40,000 words.
- **High school level.** Children ages 13 to 17, or 7th through 12th grades.<sup>1</sup> Very often younger children and 6th graders read books at this level. This level uses adult structure and vocabulary. Most books written at this level range between 25,000 and 55,000 words, but longer lengths are found.

*Note: US school grades.*

### **Types Of Children's Books**

Check the text of your children's manuscript to be certain that the words used are age appropriate. Using words that children do not understand is a common mistake among inexperienced writers looking to place their children's books. For example, if you are submitting a young-reader book, choose words that children aged six to nine will understand. The information below will help you to choose your words (and topics) wisely.

#### **Picture books definition**

These books run from 50 to 1,500 words. Many children have a short attention span, so this length is appropriate. There are three categories of picture books:

- Books for babies to three-year-olds. These books have very little text.

Supported by Tauranga Writers Inc

- Books for toddlers to five-year-olds. These books are designed to be read aloud and at one sitting. They should have a happy ending. Length of sentences is about five to six words. These books should take no longer than 15 minutes to read.
- Books for five- to eight-year-olds. These books contain a story. They should have a beginning, middle, and an end. The plot should be simple. These books may also be read aloud.

#### **Picture story books definition**

These books are filled with illustrations but have a more complicated plot than picture books. The text drives the story. These books are written for five- to eight-year-olds. Picture stories have lots of action. These books are read to children, so the words used must be understandable to them.

#### **Young reader books or 'easy-to-read' books definition**

These books run from 500 to 2,000 words, but 1,500 words is preferred. The children reading these books are six- to nine-year-olds. About 50 pages in length with only 40 or so pages of text. Sentences should contain approximately five words, with a few up to eight words. These books are created for children to read on their own.

#### **Young adult novels definition**

These books are created for readers 12 to 18 years old. The protagonist should be a teenager and the plot significant to this age group.

#### **'Hi-Lo' books definition**

These books run from 400 to 1,200 words. They are considered high interest, low reading level. These books are created for slow readers. They contain a lot of action. Sentence length is about 11 words. The ratio of all children's books published is about 60% fiction and 40% nonfiction.