

The New Zealand Curriculum

Update



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Welcome to *The New Zealand Curriculum Update*

Curriculum Updates support school leaders and teachers as they work to design and review their school curriculum, in line with the New Zealand Curriculum and with current knowledge and understandings about effective classroom teaching.

Curriculum Updates are published in the *Education Gazette* and are available online at http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/curriculum_updates

This Update explains the recent changes in levelling processes for items in the *School Journal* and in the other instructional series for year 4–8 students.

	TSM	Audio
Mihi and the Foghorn Father	✓	✓
Power	✓	
"Our Hero" – the Story of George	✓	✓

Supporting the New Zealand Curriculum			
	WHAT WAS ...	IS NOW ...	READING YEAR LEVEL
Junior Journal		Level 2	3
School Journal	Part 1	Level 2	4
School Journal	Parts 2 and 3	Level 3	5 and 6
School Journal	Part 4	Level 4	7 and 8

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
Te Kaitiaki a te Minitanga
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Levelling the School Journal

The School Journal is designed to support students in years 4–8 to develop the knowledge and skills required to meet the reading and writing demands of all areas of the New Zealand Curriculum.

It is one of several instructional series supplied free to all New Zealand primary schools by the Ministry of Education. Journals are also supplied to secondary schools to support those students currently working within curriculum levels 3–4.

Recent changes to the Journal's previous four-part structure relate the series much more closely to the New Zealand Curriculum. There

are now **three** different *School Journals*, aligned to curriculum levels 2, 3, and 4. The changes have also clarified the **reading year levels** and **target audiences** for each Journal.

The level of difficulty of **each item** in a Journal is indicated by the reading year level listed in a table on the inside front cover.

Text levelling

When a teacher is selecting appropriate texts for particular students, it's helpful to have some indication of a text's level of difficulty or "readability". Often, suggested readability levels are derived from a computer program or standard formula that takes account of just one or two objective measures (for example, sentence length) to determine text difficulty. At times, this can produce skewed results. To counter this, text levelling can also take account of factors such as: the number of unfamiliar ideas and concepts presented in the text; the complexity of the text's structure, syntax, vocabulary, and other language features; the layout; and the support given by illustrations, photographs, and other visual features.

When choosing a text for a student, the suggested readability level is an important consideration. But just as important is the teacher's ability to take into account the student's interests, needs, and prior knowledge.

Levelling School Journal texts

In the past, *School Journal* texts have been levelled using the Elley Noun Frequency method, which measures the familiarity of vocabulary to provide a "reading age" appropriate to the text. Teacher support materials have encouraged teachers to supplement indicated levels with other information about the text, their own professional judgment, and knowledge of their students' needs.

When analysing students' PAT results, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research found that: "the concept of 'reading age' provides only a rough guide to the complexity of a text, and the term is not a valid way to describe a student's level of reading expertise". By year 4, "year level is a slightly better predictor of scale score than age" (*The Literacy Learning Progressions*, page 7 foldout).

From August 2011, the concept of "reading age" is being replaced with "reading year level" to describe the level of text difficulty for students in years 4–8. The reading year level takes account of a wide range of characteristics in the texts students need to be able to read in order to meet the reading demands of the curriculum. These text characteristics are described in the reading standards.

How are reading year levels determined?

To determine the reading year level of each *Journal* item, a levelling process is used that combines a computer-based readability formula (Dale–Chall) with an analysis of text features. The Dale–Chall readability formula examines sentence length and familiarity of vocabulary to arrive at a reading year level for the text. This result is adopted as a baseline, which is then moderated against a range of other factors that affect text difficulty. This process leads to a final reading year level that reflects a comprehensive analysis of the text.

In the example on the right, the Dale–Chall formula suggests a year 6 reading year level for Sue Gibbison's article "Our Hero" – the Story of George" (*School Journal*, Level 2, August 2011). However, this article is clearly appropriate for curriculum level 2 (particularly the health and physical education and English learning areas). As can be seen in the example, detailed analysis of text features confirms a reading year level lower than that indicated by the Dale–Chall formula on its own.

How School Journal editors determine reading year level

Example: "Our Hero" – the Story of George

Curriculum contexts: Level 2

Health and physical education: Personal Health and Physical Development: Safety management

English: Reading: Purposes and audiences

Curriculum level and areas

Baseline reading year level (from Dale-Chall): year 6

Suggested reading year level

Factors affecting level of difficulty	Reading year level
Age appropriateness Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> age of protagonist(s) prior knowledge assumed by text maturity required to deal with the themes familiarity of contexts, settings, and subject matter likely interests/experiences of readers. 	4
Complexity of ideas Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> implied information or ideas (requiring readers to infer) irony or ambiguity abstract ideas metaphor and other figurative or connotative language technical information support from illustrations, diagrams, graphs, and so on. 	4
Structure and coherence of the text Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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
Syntactic structure of the text Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> simple, compound, complex, or incomplete sentences use of passive voice repetition of words or phrases tense changes. 	4–5
Vocabulary difficulty Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> technical terms, non-English words, and proper nouns sentence-level and/or visual support contextual clues the use of a glossary or footnotes. 	5

Text features

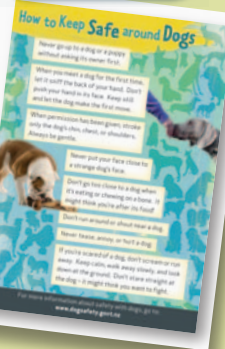
Analysis

Final reading year level (combining baseline reading year level and text features): year 4

Rationale for levelling decision: The high Dale–Chall result is almost certainly due to the presence of many names of organisations in a relatively short text. There are no significant connotative or figurative language features. The text is not too difficult for year 4 students. Its curriculum context, interest level, and age

Reading year levels for texts

A subheading introduces the procedural text.



Rationale for selecting the text for the School Journal

This highly emotive story is told in a simple, easily accessible style. It will strongly appeal to children (particularly animal lovers) and is timely, given the number of recent, highly-publicised dog attacks. The article is accompanied by information on how to stay safe around dogs, including a link to the Department of Internal Affairs' dog safety website.

Notes

- Most children involved (and shown in the photos and illustration) are aged around 5–8 years.
- The concept of safety around dogs is highly relevant to this age group.
- Animals are a familiar and popular subject for children of this age, and the story will have strong emotional appeal.
- The concepts of bravery and medals will be familiar to students, though the information about different kinds of medals (such as SPCA and Vietnam war medals) will be new.
- Some simple inference is required: for example, "this time, it was the other way around".
- There are some simple abstract ideas within the experience of children of this age and easy to understand in context: "a friendly little dog", "bravery", "a hero", "always be gentle".
- Figurative language is easy to work out in context: "had to be put down"; "a lion's share of courage".
- Photographs and/or illustrations clarify the concepts of a "Purple Heart Medal", a Jack Russell terrier, and two pit bull terriers and show the statue and the children. Two photos have captions.
- The dog safety website provides further information at an appropriate level.
- The text is structured as a report in two parts: the recount of George's bravery and its aftermath and the procedural information about safety around dogs.
- The narrative is in the past tense, in chronological order, but with a break in time of two years.
- The procedural text is broken into short segments and uses the imperative mood ("Don't run around ...").
- A subheading introduces the procedural text.
- Paragraphs are brief and manageable.
- Only four sentences have more than twenty words.
- There is a mixture of simple sentences and of compound and complex ones with two or three clauses.
- There are some simple passive constructions ("the children were attacked from behind", "George was awarded a third medal ...").
- There are some unavoidably difficult words (such as proper names, the names of organisations and dog breeds, and place names), but most of these are not essential to understanding the text, and most are explained or illustrated.

Confirmed reading level

(see factors above): 4

mainly due to the large proportion of proper nouns, place names, and conceptual, vocabulary, or syntactic challenges that would make this text inappropriate for this reading year level.



Animals are a familiar and popular subject for children of this age.

Photographs clarify concepts.



A Purple Heart medal

Passive constructions are simple.

The narrative is in the past tense and in chronological order.

In Austin, Texas, Mrs Alice Hudman read about George on the Internet. Mrs Hudman's husband, Jerry, had been in the United States Marine Corps. He had received three Purple Heart medals for bravery during the Vietnam War. Mr Hudman decided to send one of his medals to George's owner in memory of George's courage. "He was a brave little doggy," he told the local newspaper.

Two years later, George was awarded a third medal. This time, it was the gold medal of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) in Britain. The PDSA provides free vet care for sick and injured pets of people who cannot afford vets' fees. The gold medal is Britain's top award for animal bravery, and this was the first time the medal had been given to a New Zealand dog.

The medal was hung on a statue of George, which stands in the centre of the town. "George was a small dog with a lion's share of courage," said the Director of the PDSA.

The concept of medals is familiar to children.

Figurative language is easy to work out in context.



Abstract ideas are simple and manageable.

And what about the children whom George rescued? "He's our hero," they said.



The statue of George with his medals. With George are his owner, the five children, and the Governor-General of New Zealand, Sir Anand Satyanand.

Captions unpack photographs.

Meeting the demands of the curriculum

As students move from one curriculum level to the next, the texts they're expected to read increase in complexity. The reading year levels given for the Journal and other series are based on the key characteristics of texts described in the reading standards, which reflect expectations about the kinds of texts that students need to be able to read, largely by themselves, at each curriculum level.

As students move into years 5 and 6, for example, they need to be able to manage increasingly complex and challenging texts in order to meet the reading demands of level 3 of the New Zealand Curriculum.

Levelling for other instructional series

From August 2011, information about reading year levels will be provided with all texts in the instructional series and in the accompanying teacher support materials. Schools that have access to Journal Surf will be able to search for texts at particular reading year levels in the *School Journal*, *Connected*, and School Journal Story Library series.

Connected

The *Connected* series provides material at appropriate reading levels to help your students meet the reading challenges found in science, technology, and mathematics texts. From 2011 onwards, the levelling and structure of the *Connected* series will align with those used for the *School Journal*.



Targeted series

The School Journal Story Library and the electronic storybooks are targeted series designed to help accelerate students' progress towards meeting the appropriate reading standard for their year level. These series have reading year levels one to three years below that of their target audience.

Ready to Read and Junior Journal

These series (aligned to levels 1 and 2 of the curriculum) will continue to be levelled using the colour wheel. Updated information about their levelling will appear in a future *Curriculum Update* or *Education Gazette* article.



Selecting texts for your students

The "dimensions of effective literacy practice"¹ include knowledge of the learner and of how to engage the learner with texts. Each is equally important when selecting texts for your students.

Ka Hikitia stresses the importance of enabling Māori students to achieve success as Māori. The vision of the *Pasifika Education Plan 2009–2012* is that the education system must work for Pasifika so that they gain the knowledge and skills to succeed. Māori and Pasifika students need to encounter texts, at an appropriate level of difficulty, that reflect their identity, language, and culture and engage their knowledge, skills, interests, and experiences.

Teacher support materials for the instructional series include information about text features to help you support students, including English language learners, to meet the reading demands of the curriculum. Guidelines to help you select texts at an appropriate reading year level for your students will be published in the near future.

Guiding questions He pātai

How do you use your knowledge of your students' skills, interests, and learning needs to help you select appropriate texts for them?

How can you use the key characteristics of texts set out in the reading standards to help determine the difficulty level of texts for your students?

> Further reading

- > Fountas, I. C. and Pinell, G. S. (2006). *Levelled Books K–8: Matching Texts to Readers for Effective Teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- > Glasswell, K. and Ford, M. (2011). "Let's Start Leveling about Leveling". *Language Arts*, vol. 88 no. 3, January 2011.

Helpful resources supporting this Update can be found with the online version at http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/curriculum_updates

¹ *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8*, pages 5 to 9

> *Helpful resources*

The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1–8

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards>

The Literacy Learning Progressions: Meeting the Reading and Writing Demands of the Curriculum

www.literacyprogressions.tki.org.nz/

Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4/Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Reading-and-writing-standards/Effective-literacy-practice>

Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008–2012

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/PolicyAndStrategy/KaHikitia.aspx>

Pasifika Education Plan 2009–2012

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/PasifikaEducation/PasifikaEducationPlan.aspx>

New Zealand Curriculum Update 3 (about the instructional series)

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Ministry-curriculum-guides/Curriculum-updates/NZC-Updates>

Teacher support materials for the instructional series

<http://literacyonline.tki.org.nz/Literacy-Online/Teacher-needs/Instructional-Series>

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