

THE BASIC READING SERIES PLACEMENT TEST

The BASIC READING SERIES consists of readers and workbooks at six different reading levels: Levels A to F. Beginning readers will, of course, begin with Level A, *A Pig Can Jig*, Part 1. But what about children with prior reading experience? At which level should they begin? For these children, the authors devised the BRS Placement Test.

Purposes and Uses of the Placement Test

The Placement Test is an instrument for rapidly assessing a child's ability to decode and figure out new words. Its principal use is to place a child in the BRS program by determining the level of instruction at which he or she will most likely find success while still being adequately challenged. This kind of information is especially necessary when children come from a reading program that is markedly different from BRS in fundamental features.

Besides its placement function, the test can be useful in a variety of other situations. It can be helpful in establishing reading groups within a classroom or in reassigning children to existing groups. When a child is being taught or tutored individually, periodic assessment with this instrument can help the child gain a sense of his or her own progress (not always clear to the child who is working alone and therefore lacks opportunities to compare himself or herself with peers).

The Placement Test is a useful screening device to determine if a child needs remediation or help with particular decoding problems. The test may also be used to measure a child's progress during the program. In short, the Placement Test is useful whenever a parent or teacher wants to assess a child's progress in a rapid and informal manner.

General Description of the Placement Test

The Placement Test is an informal oral test requiring a child to read a series of words and sentences selected from the sequenced vocabulary of the BASIC READING SERIES. There are six subtests (A through F), each on a separate folded sheet of paper, and these correspond in their spelling patterns to the different levels of the series. Thus, a child's performance in reading a given test sheet approximates the performance one can expect from the child in the corresponding level of the reading program.

The subtests for the various levels are like a series of graded steps that the child tries to climb, seeing how far he or she can climb comfortably, safely, and with confidence. The parent or teacher observes and records the climbing effort to be able to later give advice on weaknesses and strengths and on better climbing methods. The test results also enable the climber to look back down his or her own path to see how far he or she has come and to establish realistic goals for the future.

There should be no time limit placed on the test, as its purpose is to assess decoding abilities without regard to the amount of time taken. But the examiner should take note of such aspects of performance as the rate and fluency with which children read and their ability to figure out words for themselves in addition to noting decoding successes and errors.

Administering the Placement Test

Since the test is individually administered, it is desirable to do it away from distractions, with a table and two chairs. The examiner should sit where it will be easy to hear every utterance of the child, so that there will be no occasion to ask the child to repeat. (Such a request often causes a child to think that he or she has made a mistake and to start guessing at other possible responses.) At the same time, the examiner should be so positioned that his or her notetaking will not distract or discompose the child. Notetaking is essential but should be done as inconspicuously as possible.

Recording the child on a smartphone can be of great help, as this makes it possible to conduct the test without any notetaking in the child's presence. The examiner can listen to the recording later, turn up the volume to catch any unclear utterances, and make notes without the child being present.

Children should be as relaxed as possible during the test and motivated to read as well as they can. It may help to explain that the purpose of the test is to help the parent or teacher learn how to help the child read better. Children who are not used to an individually administered oral test may need special attention, since such children may become anxious and have difficulty responding orally. If such anxieties cannot be allayed beforehand, they must of course be taken into account when test results are evaluated.

There is no time limit on the test; but the rate at which a child reads is one aspect of his or her reading skill, and as such should be observed and noted. In general, the test can be completed in ten to twenty minutes.

Once the child is seated and ready for the test, give the child the folded sheet for Level A and have him or her read both the words (on side 1) and the sentences (on side 2). When the child completes the Level A sheet, give him or her the Level B sheet. Ask the child to read both sides of each sheet, proceeding upward through the levels until the child reaches a level that is obviously quite beyond his or her present skills. With each folded sheet, have the child read the side with single words first, then the reverse side with sentences. As the child reads, record every error on a separate copy of the test. Since some children will make several errors in rapid succession, it is necessary to record in shorthand or with symbols. The authors have used the following marking system with success:

~~get~~ (*word crossed out*) = Child does not attempt to read the word and presumably cannot do so.

?
get (*question mark above word*) = Child hesitates considerably before reading the word; does not respond to it automatically.

got
get (*word written above printed word*) = Child reads the word incorrectly as noted.

~~get~~
get (*word written, then lined out*) = Child independently corrects the initial misreading.

In addition to recording a child's decoding errors, the examiner should also record comments and other significant observations. For example:

Speed of reading. Apart from accuracy, does child read rapidly or slowly?

Fluency of reading. Does child read smoothly, indicating automatic responses to spellings, or does child falter, read with many hesitations, and have to struggle frequently with decoding?

Independence in figuring out words. When child falters, does he or she attempt reliable word-attack methods based on the spelling of the word, or does the child make erratic guesses based on configuration or context?

Vision. Does child give evidence of any vision problems by holding the sheets very close, squinting, and so forth?

Unusual psychological states. Does child show any signs of undue anxiety, tension, and the like?

Child self-analysis. Children sometimes offer assessments of their own performance and comment on their difficulties. Does the child offer any such comments, and are they useful?

Interpreting Results of the Placement Test

The Placement Test is not a standardized test that can be scored by tallying errors and applying formulas. The test is a more sensitive instrument than that, its purpose being to expose decoding difficulties and inabilities of children and to collect this data so that the examiner can see a complete pattern of relationships and draw appropriate conclusions from that pattern.

In determining placement, the examiner should use the data to determine the following: What is the level at which a child will be challenged, but not overwhelmed by tasks that are too numerous or too difficult? What is the level at which the child still has things to learn, but where the challenges will not be so many as to be frustrating and discouraging? That is the level in the reading series that the parent or teacher seeks when placing a child.

The level of instruction will not be determined precisely merely by counting the child's errors on the Placement Test. Rather, it will be determined by all observations the examiner has made in administering the test. The level of instruction will be the earliest point at which a child shows a great deal of hesitancy and lack of fluency — the point at which the child may lose the sense of some sentences because of inability to decode key words. If a child is to be placed in a reading group, it should be a group in which the child is challenged somewhat, but not too much. The child must experience success and come to feel confident at the level of placement if he or she is to learn well and grow to new challenges.