

Accelerated Reader Tip Sheet



The Purpose of Accelerated Reader:

Power Practice

Reading is a skill and, as with every skill, it requires not just instruction, but practice. Reading practice serves a number of purposes. It enables students to apply the skills and strategies that they are taught. It provides opportunities to check student learning and identify weaknesses. And, it draws students into the world of “real” reading—a world in which people learn from, and enjoy, books.

Practice does not automatically lead to growth, however. To be effective, practice must have certain attributes: it must be at the right level of difficulty, cover a sufficient amount of time, be guided by an instructor, and be enjoyable enough to sustain. The purpose of Accelerated Reader (AR) is to enable powerful practice. It does this by:

- Providing data that helps monitor and personalize reading practice.
- Encouraging substantial amounts of practice, according to guidelines based on research findings.
- Making practice fun for students by facilitating successful encounters with text.

Accelerated Reader provides other research-proven benefits as well. It promotes wide reading, which is the most effective method for building vocabulary. And through its progress-monitoring and feedback mechanisms, it reinforces student effort—one of the most important practices in classrooms that work, according to education expert Robert Marzano. Supported by a vast body of scientific research, AR has been favorably reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse and the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring.

How Accelerated Reader Works

At the heart of Accelerated Reader are a few basic components:

- 1) Scheduled reading time: where students select and read library books that match their individual ability levels and interests.
- 2) Timely testing: when a student finishes a book, he or she takes an AR Reading Practice Quiz on a computer, which assesses general comprehension of the book just read.
- 3) Track record of performance: as Accelerated Reader scores the quiz, keeps track of the results, generates reports to monitor student practice, guides students to appropriate books and targets future instruction.

Zone of Proximal Development

Common sense tells us that whenever we practice a skill, we will get the most from our efforts if we work at the right level. If, for example, a 50-year-old woman is new to weight training, 10-pound weights will likely be more suitable than 30-pound weights. On the other hand, if an athletic 20-year-old practiced only with 10-pound weights, she likely wouldn't develop to her full potential.

The same principle applies to reading—practicing with books that are too hard results in frustration.

Practicing with books that are too easy does little to improve skills and leads to boredom. With AR, we use the term zone of proximal development, or ZPD, to match students to appropriate books. Based on a concept developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, the ZPD represents the level of difficulty that is neither too hard nor too easy, and is the level at which optimal learning takes place.

Each of your students has completed a STAR baseline test to set his/her ZPD. This suggestion is a personalized starting place for reading practice and may need to be adjusted over time. It's just like working with a personal trainer. He'll do an initial assessment to get you going. But he'll monitor you closely and make adjustments to your practice routine so that you continuously work within the zone of difficulty that will lead to the greatest gains.

Book Level represents the difficulty of the text. It is determined by a readability formula called ATOS, which analyzes the average length of the sentences in the book, the average length of the words, and the average grade level of the words. ATOS reports the overall book level in terms of grade. For example, a book level of 4.5 means that the text could likely be read by a student whose reading skills are at the level of grade four, in the fifth month of the school year. It does not, however, mean that the content is appropriate for a fourth-grader.

The Importance of Good Comprehension

Research shows that the most important factor in accelerated reading growth is good comprehension. Therefore we encourage students to strive for high scores on AR quizzes and maintain an average score of at least 85 percent—with 90 percent being even better. Why then, you may be wondering, does AR give students points for scores of 60 percent and higher, if an average of 85 or 90 percent is the goal? Remember, points tell you how much reading practice a student has done. If a student spends two weeks reading a 10-point book and scores 100 percent, AR records 10 points, which is a fantastic accomplishment. If the student only scores 60 percent, AR records 6 points, which is not so good but does document the time and effort he put in. The Reading Coach's role is to either guide the student to a more appropriate book and/or help the student develop comprehension strategies so that he will be more successful with future books and quizzes.

Identify Student User Names and Passwords

Each of your students is assigned a user name and password, which they know, but if for some reason, you need their password, it can be found in your students' folders.

Labels On Books

In order for students to select books that are right for them, all the books in the Reading Explorer bins/library for which there are AR quizzes are/will be labeled with their book level and point value.

Figure Out Computer Access for Student Quizzing

AR recommends that students take a quiz within 24 hours of finishing a book, which is why the testing component is part of the Reading Explorers program. If students have to wait longer to quiz and they do poorly, it's hard to know if they had problems comprehending what they read or if they simply forgot some of the details. The results are incorporated into the database.

Why ZPD Covers a Range of Levels

AR expresses the ZPD as a range. Rather than tell you, for example, that a student should practice reading books at a 2.8 level, we might suggest a ZPD of 2.8 to 4.0. There are two reasons for this.

- 1) Identifying a student's ZPD is not an exact science. People are too complex, and the reading process too dynamic, for us to tell you precisely which level book would be most suitable for a particular child. Experiential background, vocabulary, culture, and interests all affect how hard or easy a book is to read.
- 2) It's important that students have a large variety of books from which to choose. This allows them to pursue their interests and results in the most authentic and motivating reading experience. We urge you not to strictly control students' choices within their ZPDs. While you might be tempted to have a student first read books at a 2.8 level, then a 2.9 level, 3.0 level, and so on, research does not show that this kind of progression with library books leads to greater gains. The practice also severely limits a student's choices and turns reading into a chore.

Make Sure Students Know Their ZPD

A fundamental principle of Accelerated Reader—and effective education, in general—is that students must become self-directed learners. For this reason, they must know their own ZPD so they can select books that fall within their range. You will find that this kind of involvement builds a sense of self-control in students and is highly motivating. You will also discover that students acquire an understanding of what is the right level of challenge for them. As a result, students can provide valuable input as you guide their reading practice.

Averages of at Least 85 Percent Show Students Are Reading in Their Zone

The ZPD that STAR Reading reports may—or may not—be the right ZPD for an individual student. No single testing event can be guaranteed to be perfectly accurate. It's just like seeing that personal trainer: If you are tired or distracted the day you go in for an initial assessment, his conclusions about your fitness level may not be exactly right. That's why the most important indicator of your capabilities is what you actually can accomplish in each training session. It's also why the best indicator of a student's reading ability is how well the student does with daily reading practice. The quizzes act like a heart monitor—they give you information that tells you how hard the student is working.

We know from our research that if a student is able to maintain an average score on AR Reading Practice Quizzes of at least 85 percent, the student is working at the optimum level of difficulty. That means if a student is unable to achieve an average of 85 percent, you would first look at the student's technique: is he/she applying basic comprehension strategies? If the technique is good but the student continues to struggle, you would then guide the student to lower-level books. As the student's skills improve, open up the higher end of the range from which the student is choosing books to encourage more challenging reading.

For example, let's say Sally's STAR Reading test score suggests a ZPD of 3.0 to 4.5. Sally reads two books—one at a 3.0 level and one at a 3.3 level—but she does poorly on the quizzes, averaging only 65 percent. Her teacher, Mrs. Brown, coaches Sally to summarize in her head what she's read each day, and to briefly review a book before she quizzes. However, Sally continues to score low. Mrs. Brown concludes that Sally's ZPD is a bit lower than the one suggested by STAR Reading and asks her to choose books with a book level of 2.2 to 2.8. Sally reads a number of books within this new range, averages 90 percent, and gains confidence. Mrs. Brown has another conversation with Sally, who says she's ready to once again try harder books. Mrs. Brown guides her to books written at a level of 2.2 to 3.2. By opening up the top end of the range while keeping the low end the same, Mrs. Brown encourages more challenging reading but still allows Sally to read books with which she knows she will be successful. When you first start using AR, you may wish that there were more definite "rules" for establishing ZPDs and guiding book-level choices. The truth is, students are too individual for rules to work. When to recommend lower- or higher-level books, how far to widen a book-level range—these decisions depend on many factors. The only hard-and-fast guidelines we can give you are:

- 1) Get to know your students.
- 2) Aim to keep them involved in reading practice that is successful and enjoyable, that builds confidence, and that advances their skills.
- 3) Keep an eye on the data, and if a student can maintain an average of at least 85 percent, he or she is working at the right level.

Reading To, Reading With, and Reading Independently

Emergent readers spend most of their reading time listening to stories. As their skills develop, they may be paired with peers or adult tutors who read with them. Finally, as students' skills develop, they transition to independent reading. When a student reaches this stage, however, "Read To" and "Read With" activities need not be dropped. In fact, reading to students of all ages is a highly motivating way to introduce students to interesting books, model good reading behaviors, and promote discussion. Reading with students is an effective remedial technique and helps support students as they move into more difficult material.

Teach students how to quiz

We recommend these strategies to students:

- Take the quiz within 24 hours of reading a book.
- Briefly review the book before you quiz. Retell the story in your head or to a friend, or review the table of contents.
- Make sure the quiz title matches the book title.
- Don't rush through the quiz.
- Read each question twice and all four answer choices.
- Paraphrase a question if necessary.

Promote Self-Directed Learning

When we're pressed for time, we often fall into the habit of telling students what to do because it's faster than waiting for them to think for themselves. As you meet with students, strive to help them reflect on their own behaviors and abilities and model the kind of thinking you would like them to take on. Here are suggestions for what language to use.

Figure Out Computer Access for Student Quizzing

AR recommends that students take a quiz within 24 hours of finishing a book, which is why the testing component is part of the Reading Explorers program. If students have to wait longer to quiz and they do poorly, it's hard to know if they had problems comprehending what they read or if they simply forgot some of the details. The results are incorporated into the database.

Instead of Saying...

Say This

"Put this book back. It's too hard for you."

"Why have you chosen this book? Did you notice the book level is higher than your ZPD? Do you still want to read it? What will help you read this successfully?"

"You need to read within your level."

"It's okay to read a few books outside your ZPD, but to get better at reading, most books must be within it. If you read this one, how about we say the next three books must be within your ZPD? If you get high scores, we'll move you into harder books."

"You should be choosing green books, not blue ones."

"I think this book would be a stretch for you, but I know you're really interested in this topic. I could pair you up with Bobby and you could read this together, or you could wait a couple of months. Which would you like to do?"

"I want you to stop reading all these halfpoint and one-point baby books. Find something worth 2 points."

"Let's find books that will make you stronger as a reader. The other girls are really enjoying _____. Why don't you take a look at those and the other 2-point books in the reading corner? Pick one, and I'll check in with you every day to see how you're doing."

Put Comprehension First

A flood of research supports the critical role that reading practice plays in building reading skills, improving test scores and preparing students for college. A study of 174,000 students in 32 countries, for example, revealed that time spent reading books is the single best predictor of academic achievement, more highly correlated than even socioeconomic status or ethnicity. But what must that practice be like? When we examine the reading achievement of students who use AR, we find that those who maintain high scores on quizzes make the most gains. In other words, "just reading" is not enough. Accumulating points is not enough. Students must understand what they are reading, and they must understand it well. To achieve high averages, students must score 100 percent on many, if not most, of their AR quizzes. A perfect score indicates that a student understands the key points of a book. It also means the student is reading within a good learning zone.

Practices to Avoid

All of us, in our attempts to promote learning, sometimes engage in practices that seem to make sense but are actually ineffective. Fortunately, our research tells us not only what works, but what doesn't work.

Don't Overly Restrict Students' Book Choices

While our research confirms the value of having students read within an individualized zone, it also shows that students can make gains by reading a wide range of books at varying levels of difficulty. This tells us that students can be given a fair amount of freedom to follow their interests. It's okay for them to occasionally read outside their ZPD if they want to relax with an easy book, or if they are eager to tackle a difficult book that really interests them. There is no research to support "stair-stepping" book levels, that is, telling students to read a certain number of books at a specific level before moving on to the next level. This doesn't mean, however, that it's a good idea for students to read only very short, very easy books when their skills would enable them to read more complex ones. But the best way to move a student into harder books is not to say, "You must read a book at the 4.2 level," but to introduce him to books between, for example, the 4.0 and 5.0 levels that you know will interest him, and to teach the student comprehension strategies that will enable him to succeed.

Common Questions

Reading is a complex task and students are complicated human beings. Whether you're new to AR or have years of experience, questions will come up! Here are a few:

Is it unfair for every student in a class to have a different point goal?

Let's compare reading to athletics. Would it be fair for every student of the same age to practice football at the same level of intensity regardless of ability? Like running, tackling, and throwing a ball, reading is a skill. The only way for an individual to make progress is to practice at a level that is appropriate. Individualized goals level the playing field and give every student an equal chance at success.

Why do you say that students must not bring their book to the computer when they quiz? Isn't "looking back" a comprehension strategy that all readers must learn and apply?

Being aware that you don't understand what you're reading and paging back to bolster your comprehension is indeed an important strategy. It is one that students must learn to use while they are reading. In addition, referring back to a passage to find the answer to a question is an essential technique for taking a high-stakes test. However, taking an AR quiz is a different situation. It is an assessment of general comprehension of a book as a whole. If students look up answers while they take an AR quiz, the only thing that is assessed is their ability to look up answers. The better instructional approach is to encourage students to look back whenever they are unsure of what is going on in their book as they are reading it. When students are finished with a book, they can also do a self-check and see if they can recall the important characters and events. They can review the book again if they have to. After they have finished this review, then they can go to the computer—without the book—and take the AR quiz. This method reinforces looking back as a meta cognitive skill, that is, a skill students use to think about their thinking, not to answer specific test questions.

I'm concerned that if I emphasize maintaining a high average—85 or 90 percent—on AR quizzes, students will only read very easy books. Some students might even purposefully make mistakes on their STAR test in order to lower their ZPD. Isn't it better to push students into harder and harder books even if they only average 75 percent?

Even though it might seem like common sense to challenge students in this way, our research on independent reading practice does not support this practice. High comprehension is associated with reading growth; low comprehension is not. At the same time, we do want students to read within a range suitable for their actual reading ability, and we want students to ultimately be able to read complex, sophisticated material. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Introduce students to challenging text with instructional materials during your instructional reading period. Teach the strategies they need to be successful. Scaffold their efforts with pre-reading activities and discussion.
2. Keep the focus during AR time on independent recreational practice. Remember that one of AR's biggest goals is to foster a love of reading. Acquaint students with popular and engaging books by reading aloud to your class and helping individuals select books in the library. If students follow their interests, they will naturally choose books within their ZPD.

Sometimes a student wants to read outside his ZPD. Is that okay?

Yes. If students are selecting books based on their interests, they may occasionally want to read one that is below or above their ZPD. If the book looks difficult, you might play a stronger role that day in reading. If a student routinely selects books outside his ZPD, make sure he knows what his ZPD is and what it means. Probe to find out why he's making these choices. You might make a bargain with the student: He must read a certain number of books within his ZPD before reading one outside of it.

I have a student who never seems to like the book he picks so he's always returning books without finishing them. How should I handle this?

You want students to read books that interest them, so first of all, make sure students have strategies for selecting books—reading the front and back covers, the table of contents or first page, and so on.

If a student does poorly on a quiz, should I delete it and have her retake it so she can improve her score?

No. A low quiz score signals a need for diagnosis and intervention. Was the book within the student's ZPD? Did she actually read it? Is it noted on her reading log? Is the ZPD appropriate? Does the book have a specialized vocabulary that would make it particularly difficult for this student? Figure out what went wrong and then help the student have a successful experience with her next book.