

THE THREE QUESTIONS STRUGGLING READERS ASK WHEN THEY'RE CHOOSING A BOOK TO READ

What does it look like? For most readers selecting something to read, what the book is about is their first consideration. For most struggling readers, how the book looks is the primary factor. First and foremost, the book can't look "babyish." It has to look pretty much the same as the books all the other kids are reading. And the length has to be "just right" - long enough to look like any other novel or chapter book, but not so long as to be intimidating.

Even the appearance of each page can be a factor: a bit narrower column width, slightly larger line spacing, starting each chapter halfway down the page are all techniques HIP Books use to increase white space and make a book appear more accessible to a struggling reader. These techniques also make a book appear longer without increasing the amount of reading required. Remember that, for reluctant readers, every page turn is an achievement!

A couple of things to avoid: hyphenated words at the end of lines and enlarged print. You might be surprised at the frequency of miscues caused by hyphenated words, even for good readers. And while large print might appeal to those of us needing reading glasses, it might as well flash "SPECIAL" in neon lights in the eyes of adolescents.

What's it about? Just because a twelve-year-old reads at Grade 2 level doesn't mean that he's interested in reading the same material that a seven-year-old wants to read. Topics, themes and issues in a book must be appropriate to the age of the readers, regardless of their reading level. Characters in a novel should be at least the same age as or older than the reader. Look for stories with plenty of action and minimal description. Short chapters with titles, illustrations, and cliffhanger endings support comprehension and prediction, and keep readers hooked from one chapter to the next.

How hard is it? Some publishers will stamp a grade-level readability score or code on the back cover. This label can be the kiss of death for a struggling reader, even though it may be useful general information for a teacher. However, calculating an average reading level of an entire book can mean that there might be some sections that are very easy and some that are quite difficult. Lexile levels are simply whole-book averages and don't predict variations from page to page or chapter to chapter. For teachers, it's important to be aware of the overall reading level, but also to look for texts that have a consistent degree of difficulty from page to page to page.

For both teachers and students, a quick perusal of a few random pages of a book can give an indication of how challenging that book might be. Is there a lot of unfamiliar vocabulary or figurative language? Are there contextual supports for difficult words? Are there many long, convoluted sentences? Are there too many short, choppy



sentences? Struggling readers need words and sentences that flow naturally and smoothly.

It goes without saying that every reader is different. What might appeal to one reader can be completely uninteresting to another. But asking ourselves the key questions that our readers might ask can help us match the right book to the right student at the right moment.

TEN THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN BOOKS FOR STRUGGLING READERS

- General appearance like any other trade novel
- Friendly-looking page design with plenty of white space
- Themes and topics relevant and interesting to age of readers
- Clearly defined and appealing characters, older than the readers
- Plots that keep moving forward with lots of action
- Engaging and natural language
- Contextual support for complex vocabulary
- Careful use of figurative language and literary devices
- Manageable sentence lengths with no hyphenated words
- Consistent reading difficulty on every page

