



How to use graded readers

Graded readers are a very useful resource for English language learning. This guide explains what they are, how they can help increase your students' motivation and contribute to their learning, and how you can use them effectively with your classes.

What are graded readers?

A graded reader is a book that has been written for a certain level of language learner. The different elements in it, which normally include vocabulary, grammar, illustrations, design, and cultural references, have all been carefully planned so that the language learner can read it fluently. Graded readers can be adaptations of books written for native speakers or original stories and non-fiction. They are usually part of a series which contains a large number of graded readers suitable for different language abilities.

The benefits of using graded readers

Graded readers are an effective and motivating resource for many reasons:

- Many graded reader series derive their syllabuses from coursebook syllabuses and they are also usually mapped to CEFR levels. This makes it easier for you and your students to choose graded readers which complement your coursebook. Once a student has identified their level in a reader series, they can choose any other title within that level and be confident that it will be suitable for them.
- When they use graded readers, students can see the grammar and vocabulary they have used in their English lessons in new and interesting contexts, which will help them to learn and remember the language.
- Using graded readers increases students' contact time with English, especially if students read regularly in class and at home. This will help to develop their reading and comprehension skills, allowing them to read more quickly and fluently.
- Audio is available with many graded readers, and this can help to improve listening and pronunciation skills.
- Graded readers can provide a starting point for many different activities and projects.
- Reading for pleasure, finishing a book, or choosing their own book to read can give students a great deal of satisfaction. Reading all the books in a series or, as their reading improves, moving to a higher level in the series can provide students with a great sense of progress and achievement.

Graded readers and extensive reading

Graded readers are most often used for extensive reading. Numerous studies have reported that extensive reading can help students improve not only reading skills but also vocabulary, spelling, grammar, listening, and writing. When students read extensively, they read over a period of time; they should know almost all the words on the page and should not need to use a dictionary. Extensive reading can be contrasted with intensive reading, which involves close reading of shorter texts, with specific language aims and tasks. In extensive reading, students read primarily in order to enjoy the experience of reading itself; they may not know all the vocabulary and grammar, but they can understand the text without too much effort, and enjoy what they are reading.

To get the most from extensive reading, it is important to establish a reading routine: best results come when students read frequently and regularly, even if only for short periods of time.

Setting up a graded reading programme

There are two main types of graded reading programme: one involves using a class set of readers, the other involves a library of graded readers. Both are beneficial, and you can choose one or the other, depending on what is appropriate in your context. You can also choose to start with class sets, and then move on to a class library once your students are more familiar with graded readers.

Class sets of graded readers

All the students read the same graded reader at about the same pace, either in class, at home, or both. Because the class moves at more or less the same pace through the book, using a class set is a good option for students who are reluctant readers or unfamiliar with using graded readers. It also allows you to lead activities more easily and focus on specific aspects, themes, or topics, as appropriate to the needs and interests of your students.

As an alternative to reading one book with the whole class, you could split the class into two (e.g. by level or by what the students want to read about), and assign each half of the class a different graded reader. This gives students some choice and also creates opportunities for different kinds of activities, e.g. explaining, describing, and making comparisons.



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A library of graded readers

If you have the resources, you can create a library of graded readers covering a range of levels and topics. You could choose to buy a selection of printed books or create a digital library of graded reader e-books. Individual students then choose the books they would like to read, either at home, in class, or both. You could give students a target number of books to read per week, month, or term, and monitor their progress.

Libraries are useful for mixed-ability classes because students can read at the level that suits them. Students are also motivated by being able to choose the stories, topics, and text types that interest them. Another benefit of a library is that a wider range of books is available, and this will encourage students to read more.

Choosing graded readers

Choosing the right graded readers is key to the success of your graded reading programme. Ideally, students choose their own books, which helps to give them a sense of ownership over their reading. However, this is not always possible. If you are using a class set, you need to choose one or two graded readers for all your students. You might also want to choose for students who are not familiar or confident with reading in English. In these cases, you can still involve the students in the choice by giving them a shortlist of graded readers and letting them vote. You can show them book covers and descriptions online or in a catalogue to help them decide.

When choosing graded readers, there are three main things to consider:

Series

A good first step is to choose a particular series of graded readers. This allows your students to become familiar with the levels, titles, and format of the series, and more able to choose on their own. Here are a few questions to ask yourself when deciding on a graded reader series:

- Are the levels appropriate for my students?
- Are the books appropriate for this age group?
- Will the books interest my students?
- Do I want audio?
- Do I want print or digital books?
- What activities and extra resources are available?

Level

Students should choose graded readers that are slightly below their language ability so that they can read easily, without the use of a dictionary. Any words and structures that they do not know should be understandable from the context.

Students can find their level within a series by reading one page of a graded reader. If they can read it comfortably, they have found their level. If more than a few words on the page are unknown to them, they should try a lower level. If they know all the vocabulary and grammar and find the text very easy to read, they should try a higher level.

Graded readers series will often have online placement tests or apps which your students can use to find their level. For example, you could encourage your students to download Oxford University Press' free app, *How Good Is Your English?*, which includes placement tests and sample chapters of 30 graded readers.

Content

You and your students should choose only stories or topics which interest them, so that they are naturally motivated to read. If students find a graded reader uninteresting or too old or young for them, they will not want to finish it, and are less likely to start another one.

Ways to encourage your students to read extensively

Establish a reading routine

You can achieve the best results when students read frequently and regularly, even if only for short periods of time. Talk to your students about when they read and where, and ask them to share this information with the class. You can also help students to get into the habit of reading by giving them 5 to 15 minutes of sustained silent reading (SSR) at the beginning of each class. This will help them to establish a reading routine, and it is likely that they will want to continue the story they began in class at home, in their own time.

Set an example

If students see you reading, and hear you talking positively about reading, you will help them to understand the importance and enjoyment of reading. Talk about books that you have enjoyed, tell them about films based on books, show an interest in what they are reading, and ask them what they think about the books they read.

Activities to use with graded readers

Graded readers can be used in many different ways: to provide opportunities for students to share their responses to stories and characters through speaking or writing; to use critical thinking skills; to encourage imagination and creativity; and to develop students' knowledge and understanding of a wider range of topics and themes.



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By providing a range of tasks that you use before, during, and after reading the book, including prediction, evaluation, and reflection activities, you can make students curious about the book; maintain their interest; explore themes and ideas; and help them to think more deeply about what they have read.

The next section contains examples of different activities. Some of them make reference to readers published by Oxford University Press in two series: Bookworms (seven levels covering CEF levels A1 to C1) and Dominoes (five levels covering CEF levels A1 to B1). However, the activities can be used with any readers and adapted to any level. In each case, it is specified whether the activity works best with a class set or a class library, although with a little adaptation some activities could be used with either a class set or a class library.

Four activities to use before reading

1 Write the first line

This activity can be used with a class set of readers.

Aim To generate interest in a graded reader through a writing and free speaking activity

- 1 Before the lesson, write the first sentence of the reader that you plan to read on a strip of paper.
- 2 Show students the front cover of the reader, and ask them what they think it is about, focusing on the title and the illustration.
- 3 Give students a little information about the book, and how the story starts. This should be very brief, just enough for students to be able to do the next step.
- 4 Put the students into pairs and ask them to guess what the first sentence of the book is. They should write this on a strip of paper, without showing it to the other students, and give it to you.
- 5 When you have all the strips of paper, read them out or write them on the board, including the first sentence from the book. Ask students to decide which they think is the real first sentence, and discuss which other sentences would also be a good first sentence.
- 6 Ask the students to make some predictions about the story on the basis of what they know so far, e.g. What will the story be about? Who are the main characters? Where does the story take place?

2 Questions about an excerpt

This activity can be used with a class set of readers.

Aim To generate interest in a graded reader through a free speaking activity

- 1 Before the lesson, prepare a worksheet for your students: copy a short extract from near the beginning of the book onto a piece of A4 paper.

The extract should be about 50 words long, and you may want to adapt it slightly. There should be space on the page for students to write three or four questions.

- 2 Put the students in pairs, hand out the worksheet, and ask them to work together to write three or four questions that they would like answers to; the answers must not be in the extract itself. The following example is based on the opening paragraph of the story *A wise woman* in the graded reader *The Bird of Happiness and Other Wise Tales* (Dominoes Level 2, page 40).

It was a beautiful morning. Children were playing happily in the village streets. The women were washing clothes in the river and singing songs about lazy husbands. The chief listened to the two men sitting in front of him. 'The man sitting next to me is a thief,' said the older man.

Some questions might be: *Where is the village? Why are the women using the river to wash clothes? What kind of chief is it? Why did one of the men call the other a thief?*

- 3 Put each pair with another pair and get them to ask each other the questions they have prepared; they won't know the answers, so they should guess. Getting the right answer is not important – the aim is to encourage students to use their imagination.
- 4 Working with the whole class, ask each group of four students in turn to read out one of their questions, and ask the other students in the class to give possible answers. Discuss with them which answer seems most likely.

3 Matching covers with titles

This activity can be used with a class library.

Aim To generate interest in graded readers through a free speaking activity

- 1 Show students three or four different front covers of readers, using either the readers themselves or images on PowerPoint®. Cover the titles of the books so that students can't see them.
- 2 Discuss the cover illustrations or images with students, and ask them what they think each reader might be about.
- 3 Tell or show them the title of one of the readers, and ask them to guess which cover it matches. They can do this as a whole class or in small groups.
- 4 Ask students which cover they chose and why.
- 5 Get students to match the remaining titles with their covers.



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4 Matching back cover blurbs with titles

This activity can be used with a class library.

Aim To generate interest in different graded readers through a reading and free speaking activity

- 1 Before the class, prepare a worksheet consisting of the photocopied back cover blurbs of three or four different readers. Make sure the blurbs do not mention the titles of the readers.
- 2 Show students the front covers with the titles of the readers using either the readers themselves or images on PowerPoint.
- 3 Hand out the worksheets and ask students to work together and decide which blurbs go with which front covers.
- 4 Ask students which covers they chose and why.

Note This activity follows on well from the activity 3, or could be done instead of activity 3.

Six activities to use while reading

Generally speaking, while-reading activities in the classroom are more suitable when students are all reading the same one or two books. However, where possible, there are suggestions for adapting an activity for use with a class library.

1 Write a postcard

This activity can be used with a class set of readers.

Aim To maintain interest in a graded reader through a writing activity

- 1 Before the lesson make sure you have some postcard-sized pieces of blank white card, one for each student.
- 2 Ask students to work in pairs and give each pair two pieces of card. They should work together to write a postcard from one character to another in their reader. For example, in *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens (Dominoes, Level 2) they would write as if they were Nicholas Nickleby writing to his mother, Mrs Nickleby. If you wish to provide some support, you could specify what kind of information the postcard should contain and how many words.
- 3 If you have time, or for students who finish early, ask them to draw a picture on the other side of the postcard of something that is relevant to the story. When all the postcards are finished, students should deliver them to a different pair on the other side of the room.

- 4 Students read the postcard they have received and write a reply in character on the other piece of card, e.g. *from Mrs Nickleby to Nicholas Nickleby*.

- 5 At the end of the activity, the postcards can be read by the rest of the class, and displayed on a wall of the classroom.

Note Students usually enjoy reading each other's postcards, and this activity should motivate them to engage more closely with the characters and the story they are reading.

2 Giving a present

This activity can be used with a class set of readers or a class library.

Aim To maintain interest in a graded reader through a writing activity

- 1 Ask students to think of one character in the book and decide what would be the best present for that person. They can do this in pairs, or individually.
- 2 Students complete the following sentence with the present they have chosen: 'I would give _____ a /some _____.'
- 3 Students add a reason for their choice of present. An example using the story *A wise woman* mentioned in activity 2 on page 3, might be 'I would give the village chief a lie detector, because it would make his job easier.'
- 4 When the students are ready, ask some of them to read out the first part of their sentence, i.e. the present, but not the reason for giving it. Encourage the other students to suggest the reason and then get the student to read out the reason they wrote down. This step can also be done in small groups, rather than as a whole class.

Variation Instead of a present, students can write a piece of advice they would give to one of the characters, e.g. by completing the following sentence: 'If I were you, I would ____.'

Note 1 This is a very short, easy activity that can be done more than once, with different characters, at different points in the story.

Note 2 This activity could be adapted for use with a class library: in step 4, students work in pairs or small groups. They read out the whole sentence and the other students ask them questions to find out more about the character and the story. This will allow students to share what they've been reading and generate interest among students in books they haven't read yet.



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3 True/false sentences

This activity can be used with a class set of readers.

Aim To check comprehension and maintain interest in a graded reader

- 1 Ask students to work in pairs or small groups and copy two sentences from a specific section of the reader, e.g. from a particular chapter.
- 2 Ask them to change one or two details in one of the sentences and make it false. For example, in the reader *Nicholas Nickleby* they might change the sentence *Nicholas hated working at Dotheboys Hall* (true) to *Nicholas loved working at Dotheboys Hall* (false).
- 3 Have students read their sentences to the class.
- 4 The class listens and decides which sentences are true, which are false, and why.

Variation If the group has read most of the book, you could assign different chapters to different pairs or groups to work on.

Note This activity is suitable for students at lower levels.

4 Interviewing a character

This activity can be used with a class set of readers.

Aim To develop interest in a main character of the story through a speaking activity

- 1 Before the lesson, ask one of the students to be the character that is going to be interviewed. He or she will need to prepare a little and be confident of that character's role in the book.
- 2 Tell students they are going to interview a character in the story, and tell them who the character is. Ask them to work in small groups to prepare two or three questions to ask the character. The questions could focus facts, reasons, or explanations.
- 3 While the rest of the class are preparing their questions, the interviewee should sit separately and prepare four or five questions 'in character' that they will ask the rest of the class about things that happened in the story, e.g. *What do you think about when I said/did X?* or *What should I do if X happens?* or *Should I do X or Y?*
- 4 When the questions are ready, ask the interviewee to sit at the front of the class, and let the interview begin, with the groups taking turns to ask their questions.
- 5 The interviewee asks his or her prepared questions. Each question should be answered by each group; the interviewee can then choose the answer they like best.

Variation You can choose more than one student to play the part of the interviewee, in order to share the responsibility, with each person answering questions in turn.

5 Write a haiku

This activity can be used with a class set of readers or a class library, and should be done when the most of the book has been read.

Aim To develop appreciation of a story through an imaginative writing activity

- 1 Tell students they are going to work in pairs to write a haiku. Explain that a haiku is a short poem in which the first and third lines must have five syllables, and the second line must have seven syllables. This example is based on the reader *Pollyanna* by Eleanor H. Porter (Dominoes Level 1):
Poor little orphan
Always playing her 'glad game'
Happy in the end

The haiku the students write should be based on a character in the book, a specific event, or it could be a summary of the whole story.

- 2 While students are writing, circulate and help, if necessary. Remind students to check that they have the correct number of syllables in each line.
- 3 Ask students to say their haikus aloud. Display them on a wall of the classroom, if possible.

Note If you are doing this activity with a class library, in step 1, get students to write their haiku on their own, or with another student who is reading or has read the same book. Steps 2 and 3 are the same. The haikus can help to generate interest among students in books they haven't read yet.

6 Performing a short scene

This activity can be used with a class set of readers.

Aim To deepen understanding of the story and its characters through a drama activity

- 1 Tell students they are going to perform a short section of the book they are reading.
- 2 You or your students choose the section to be performed. It could be a couple of paragraphs or a whole page, depending on the story. It should contain an interesting, exciting, or important scene and should have at least two characters in it.
- 3 Put the students into groups. Group size will depend on the number of characters in the scene. Give them time to decide on roles, prepare their lines, and practise their performance. Encourage them to think carefully about the character they are going to play to help make their performance more convincing. If possible, get the different groups to prepare their scene in different places inside and outside the classroom, so that the groups don't disturb each other. If necessary, devote more than one lesson to this preparation.



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- Each group performs for the rest of the class.
When they have finished, encourage the class to say what they enjoyed about the performance.

Variation Instead of the whole class working on the same section of the book, they can choose different sections, or you can allocate different sections to different groups. In this case, it's a good idea to have the groups act out their sections in the order they appear in the book.

Five activities to use after reading

Writing a book report is commonly used as a follow-up activity in extensive reading, but even for stronger students, writing a book report can be challenging, while for weaker students, it can be very difficult. The activities below suggest easier options for getting students to write about a book they have just read.

1 Writing a book report using a model

This activity can be used with a class set of readers or a class library.

Aim To provide students with the opportunity to write about a reader through a controlled writing activity

- Prepare an example of a short book report, printed in double line spacing to allow for editing. Give each student a copy. This will be the model that students will use when they write their own reports. An example might be:

Nicholas Nickleby was written by Charles Dickens. It is set in Yorkshire, Devon, and London. The story takes place during the 1830s. It is about the adventures of Nicholas, who has to find a way to support his mother and sister when his father suddenly dies. What I like about this book is that Nicholas always finds a way to help the unhappy people he meets.

- Students should cross out the parts of the *Nicholas Nickleby* report that are not relevant to the book they have read, but leave the parts that are relevant to all readers, i.e. '... was written by .../it is set in .../the story takes place .../it is about .../what I like about this book is ...'
- Students write the information about the book they have read in the relevant places in the report.
- When they have finished, they should check their report to make sure that the sentences are correct and make sense.
- After making any final changes, they should write out a fair copy of their report. They can do this in class or for homework.

Note If more than one student has read the same book, they can work in pairs or small groups to write a book report.

2 Headlines

This activity can be used with a class library.

Aim To give students free speaking practice with an activity that focuses on a brief summary

- Show students examples of some headlines of just four words that summarize the contents of some graded readers they have recently read. The title of the book must not appear in the summary. For example:

Brave boy helps family
Unlucky lovers die unnecessarily
Boy finally leaves jungle

- Show the book titles and ask students to match them with the headlines. In these examples:

Brave boy helps family *Nicholas Nickleby*
(Dominoes Level 2)
Unlucky lovers die unnecessarily *Romeo and Juliet* (Bookworms Level 2)
Boy finally leaves jungle *The Jungle Book*
(Bookworms Level 2)

- Students work individually (or in pairs if some students have read the same books) to produce a four-word headline of the graded reader they have just read.
- To finish, you can display a jumble of the headlines and titles on the board or a wall of the classroom and ask students to match them up.

Note This activity is quite short and can be done by itself, or as a lead-in to the mini-saga activity.

3 Mini-sagas

This activity can be used with a class set or a class library.

Aim To practise writing a summary

- Tell the students they are going to write a mini-saga of the reader they have just read. A mini-saga tells a story in exactly 50 words; it doesn't contain the title of the book or give any information about the author; it simply tells the story. Here is an example based on the story *A wise woman*, mentioned on page 3:

The chief loved finding imaginative solutions to people's arguments. He told his wise wife Zia never to help with this work. But one day she helped and he was angry with her. Zia found a clever way of solving their argument, and the chief realized he had been a fool. (50 words)

- Ask students to work in pairs and write a first draft in which they try to be brief but without worrying about the target of 50 words. This normally produces about 70–80 words.
- Ask students to go through the first draft, trying to reduce it to 50 words, or about 50 words. They can do this in various ways:



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- by eliminating unnecessary adjectives and adverbs
- by using pronouns (e.g. *she* instead of *the woman*)
- by writing a complex sentence instead of several simple sentences.

4 Students write a fair copy of the mini-saga in exactly 50 words, and add the title.

5 When all the mini-sagas are finished, encourage students to read each other's work, and display them on a wall of the classroom, if possible.

4 My favourite scene

This activity can be used with either a class set of readers or a class library.

Aim To get students to think about the reader they have just read through a piece of free writing

- 1** Ask students to decide which scene or chapter they enjoyed most in the book they have just read. It could be a key moment or episode, or even a very short scene.
- 2** Give them some guidelines for what they should write, such as a description of what happened, the reason they liked it, and how they felt when they read it. You could write a list of questions or prompts on the board to guide them.
- 3** While students are writing, circulate and help, if necessary. Remind them to include all the points mentioned in the guidelines you gave them.
- 4** Students do the writing in class or for homework; or they can begin in class and finish it for homework.
- 5** When all the pieces of work have been handed in, students could read each other's work or you can read out a selection. You could also display them on a wall of the classroom.

5 Design a poster

This activity is good for lower-level students and is an effective way of creating interest in different readers when the students are using a class library. The idea is for students to look at each other's posters and become interested in the books they represent. The activity can also be done when students are using a class set of readers; in this case the students benefit from seeing how other students have responded to the same book.

Aim To create interest in different graded readers

- 1** Tell the students they are going to make a poster to advertise the reader they have just read. If more than one student has read the same reader, they can do this in pairs or small groups. The poster must include the title of the book, an illustration (either one that is copied from the book or one that they create themselves), and one or two sentences from the reader that they think would interest their classmates.
- 2** Have the students plan the content and layout of the poster: *Where will they put the title? What kind of illustration will they use? Which sentences would be best?* Circulate and help, if necessary.
- 3** Give students large pieces of card for their posters. They could start working on their poster in class, and finish it for homework.
- 4** When the posters are ready, display them in class. Allow time for the class to look at all the posters and share questions, comments, and recommendations on the books they have read. After the lesson, you could also display the posters in other parts of the school for other students to see.

For more information on graded readers and further activity ideas, go to

www.oup.com/gradedreaders



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