

Reading Levels: 1908 vs. 2014

Some of you may remember the [1908 curriculum manual](#) I dug up in the Minnesota Historical Society archives a few months ago. When compared with a current public school reading list, it demonstrated that today's schools are offering a more narrow view of western civilization and a simplified level of reading material.

I thought of this manual again when I ran across a handy [text analyzer](#) offered by Accelerated Reader. (For those unfamiliar, Accelerated Reader is a program used by schools across the country to test a student's comprehension of the books they read.)

Seeing a chance to get an objective analysis of the material in the 1908 manual, I entered the available texts from the sixth grade reading list. Here's what I found:

1908 6th Grade Reading List

Title and Author	Reading Level
1. <i>Adventures of Ulysses</i> , Charles Lamb	8.8
2. <i>Tales from Shakespeare</i> , Charles and Mary Lamb	8.5
3. <i>The Hoosier School-boy</i> , Edward Eggleston	6.8
4. <i>A Wonder Book For Girls & Boys</i> , Nathaniel Hawthorne	7.7
5. <i>The Last Days of Pompeii</i> , Edward Bulwer-Lytton	9.2
6. <i>Andersen's Fairy Tales</i> , Hans Christian Andersen	7.0
7. <i>In the Days of Giants</i> , Abbie Brown	6.8
8. <i>The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood</i> , Howard Pyle	8.0

Source: Accelerated Reader and Minnesota Educational Association, *Course of Study for the Common Schools of Minnesota, 1908?* Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



As you can see, the book selections have reading levels which, according to Accelerated Reader's standards, span from late sixth grade (6.8) to early ninth grade (9.2).

By contrast, the chart below shows a number of titles from

a [sixth grade reading class](#) at South View Middle School in one of Minnesota's top school districts – Edina Public Schools:

6th Grade Reading List South View Middle School (Edina Public Schools)

Title and Author	Reading Level
1. <i>Hatchet</i> , Gary Paulsen	5.7
2. <i>Passage to Freedom</i> , Ken Mochiuki	4.1
3. <i>Climb or Die</i> , Edward Myers	4.7
4. <i>The Girl Who Married the Moon</i> , Joseph Bruchac	5.7
5. <i>The Buried City of Pompeii</i> , Shelley Tanaka	5.7
6. <i>Dinosaur Ghosts</i> , Lynett Gilette	6.3
7. <i>Lost Temple of the Aztecs</i> , Shelley Tanaka	6.1
8. <i>The Great Wall</i> , Elizabeth Mann	6.4
9. <i>Under the Royal Palms</i> , Alma Flor Ada	6.6
10. <i>Chuck Close Up Close</i> , Jan Greenberg	5.8
11. <i>The Adventures of Sojourner</i> , Susi Trautmann Wunsch	7.8
12. <i>Eugenie Clark: Adventures of a Shark Scientist</i> , Ellen Butts	7.7

Sources: Accelerated Reader and South View Middle School, Edina Public Schools.



The syllabus is unclear on whether or not all of these books are actually read during the year, but either way, it is interesting to note that over half of the titles register below the sixth grade reading level. Even more interesting is the fact that only two of the books on this list fit into the reading level range (6.8 to 9.2) of the 1908 list.

Sadly, the reading level of the English curriculum sinks even further when we move from the suburb of Edina to the city of Minneapolis. As this [syllabus](#) from Lake Harriet Community School (in the Minneapolis Public Schools district) aptly illustrates, the sixth grade literature selections barely make it into the fifth grade level:

6th Grade Reading List Lake Harriet Community School (Minneapolis Public Schools)

Title and Author	Reading Level
1. <i>Seedfolks</i> , Paul Fleischman	4.3
2. <i>What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything?</i> , Avi	3.9
3. <i>The Quality of Mercy</i> , Anne Schraff	4.5
4. <i>Touching Spirit Bear</i> , Ben Mikaelson	5.3
5. <i>Walk Two Moons</i> , Sharon Creech	4.9
6. <i>The Hunger Games</i> , Suzanne Collins	5.3
7. <i>Tuck Everlasting</i> , Natalie Babbitt	5.0

Source: Accelerated Reader and Lake Harriet Community School, Minneapolis Public Schools.



Still unconvinced that academic rigor has declined in the public schools? Ask your child's teacher for a class syllabus and test the book list for yourself at the [AR text analyzer](#). We'd be curious to hear the results.