

YOUTH SUCCESS MOVEMENT • FOR FAMILIES

The Full Reading Check

Five short stories, and the part of reading that nothing else measures

You can do this yourself. It needs no training, nothing but this document, and your child is never told they are being checked.

Why this one exists

The school can already tell you what your child scored. What almost nothing measures is whether they join one sentence to the next, whether they hold a whole story in mind, whether they can do anything with it once they have, and whether they notice when it stops making sense.

Those are the things the reading test actually asks for. A child can pass every check their school runs and still fail it — and nothing in between would have told you why.

This gives you comparisons rather than a score. Each one is your child measured against themselves, and each one points somewhere rather than telling you an answer. That is honest, and it is more useful than a number.

What you will be comparing

A story you read against a story they read	Whether the trouble is with the words or with the meaning.
A short story against a long one	Whether length changes anything.
A story about ordinary life against one that explains something	Whether it is about what they already know of the world.
Remembering against thinking	Whether they can work with a story once they have it.
And one story that contradicts itself	Whether anything stops them when it stops making sense.

Be clear about what this is

This is not a test. It has no score, no norms and no cut-off, and it cannot tell you that your child has anything.

It is not a validated instrument and it does not replace anything your school does. If the school has already tested your child, their data is better than this and you should ask for it — including the detail underneath the headline number.

What it is, is a way of seeing it for yourself. Every part of it points somewhere. Where something points, the next step is a conversation with someone who can look properly.

“I could not tell” is a real answer, and there is a place for it on the sheet at the back. Write that rather than picking between the choices in front of you.

Start with the shorter one

The Home Reading Check does the central comparison — a story you read against a story they read — in ten minutes. For most families that is enough, and it is the place to start.

This is the longer version, for when you want to look further, or when somebody is working through it with you. It adds length, unfamiliar subjects, reasoning, and whether anything stops them when a story stops making sense.

It works for adults too

If you are an adult who struggles with reading, or you are helping one, this works the same way. Use the grades 4 to 5 set and have somebody read the first story to you.

For an adult there is usually no school data and never will be. This is often the only way to find out where the trouble actually is.

Before you start

Run the Home Reading Check first if you have not. Ten minutes, and it tells you whether the words are coming off the page. If they are not, everything above them fails too, and a poor result here would tell you nothing new.

If the words are a struggle, still do this — but read every story aloud. That way you are looking at understanding with the print out of the way, which is the whole point.

Pick a good day. A tired, hungry or unwell child gives you a picture of the day rather than of the child.

How to do it

Where	Quiet, just the two of you.
How long	Half an hour, near enough. Five stories, four questions each, and time to think between them.
When	Not after school and not when anyone is tired. A weekend morning is best.
Order	In the order given. Do not let them see a story you are going to read aloud.
Which set	Grades 2 to 3, or grades 4 to 5. Both are in this document. If you are unsure, use the lower one — an easy story tells you plenty and a story that is far too hard tells you nothing.

What to say at the start

“We’re going to read some short stories together. Some I’ll read out loud to you, and some you’ll read yourself. After each one I’ll ask you a few things about it. There are no trick questions and it’s completely fine to say you don’t know.”

Six rules while you do it

- Read the aloud stories once, at normal speed. Do not stop, do not explain a word, and do not check whether they are following.

- Wait. Count to ten before filling a silence. Most of the good answers arrive around the sixth second, and an adult who fills the gap never hears them.
- Do not prompt, hint, rephrase or lead. If they ask what a question means, repeat it once, word for word, then wait again.
- Never correct an answer and never let on whether one was right. The moment they start hunting for approval, you are watching something else.
- Write down what they say, at least in fragments. The wording of a retell is where most of it lives, and it is gone in five minutes.
- **Watch what happens at a word they do not know.** Do they stop and stay stopped, work at it until the sentence is gone, or take what the sentence gives them and carry on? Only the last one works on a timed test, and most children have never been told it is allowed.

The stories are built to be compared

Within each set, the two short stories are the same length, the same difficulty, and built the same way — someone hopes for something, it does not happen, and the story shows how they feel without ever saying it.

That is what makes comparing them fair. If a story is harder than the one before it, a comparison between them tells you about the story rather than about your child.

Grades 2 to 3

Five stories, in this order.

STORY 1 • SHORT

You read this aloud. Do not let your child see the page.

Maya's grandmother was coming to visit them on Saturday. Maya had been waiting all week, and she cleaned her bedroom twice. Then she put her best drawings on the wall beside the front door.

A car pulled up outside and Maya ran out to meet it. But the lady who got out was the neighbor from across the street. Maya went back inside and did not say a word to her mother.

She took the drawings down off the wall one by one. Then she put them away in the bottom drawer of her desk.

Then ask all four, in this order, word for word.

1	"Tell me what happened."
2	"Why do you think Maya put the drawings away?"
3	"What would you say to her if you were there?"
4	"Was there anything about that story you weren't sure about?"

What to listen for. The story never says Maya was disappointed. It shows it, through what she does. An answer that only describes the action, without reaching the feeling behind it, is worth noting.

STORY 2 • SHORT

Your child reads this. Hand them the page.

Devon's baseball team had just one more game left to win. He had practiced throwing every day after school that month. He threw the ball at the garage door until it got dark.

On Saturday he put on his uniform and packed up his glove. Then he looked outside and saw the rain coming down hard. He could not even see the houses across the street.

Devon sat down on the front steps with his glove in his lap. He stayed out there a long time after his mother called him in.

Then ask all four, in this order, word for word.

1	"Tell me what happened."
2	"Why do you think Devon stayed on the steps?"
3	"What would you say to him if you were there?"
4	"Was there anything about that story you weren't sure about?"

This is built the same way as the first one and it is the same difficulty. If they understood the one you read and not the one they read, the trouble is more likely with the words than with the meaning.

STORY 3 • SHORT • SOMETHING IS WRONG IN IT

Your child reads this.

Rosa found a little grey kitten under the porch on Monday. Her father said she could keep it if no one came looking. She fed the kitten each morning before she went off to school.

Rosa gave it a name, and the name she picked was Pepper. On Friday a man knocked and said the grey kitten was his. Rosa carried the little black kitten outside and handed it over.

She did not say one word to the man while he stood there. She stayed out in the yard a long time after he drove away.

Then ask all three, in this order.

1	"Tell me what happened."
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2	“Why do you think Rosa stayed out in the yard?”
3	Only if they have not already said something: “Was there anything in that story that didn’t add up?”

What is wrong in it

The kitten is grey at the start and black at the end.

Write down whether they caught it on their own, caught it when you asked, or did not catch it. One story on one morning does not establish anything — everybody reads past things. What would matter is a pattern, and that takes more than one sitting to see.

STORY 4 • LONG

Your child reads this — or you read it aloud, if the words are a struggle.

Biscuit got out of the yard on a Tuesday and no one knew how. The back gate was shut and latched the way it always was. When Jonah got home from school he saw that the yard was empty.

The water bowl by the step had tipped over on its side. He and his sister walked around the whole block before dinner. They called out Biscuit's name at every single corner.

They asked the man at the corner store if he had seen a dog. He told them he had not seen one go past all day. By eight it was dark and their mother called them both inside.

Jonah did not eat very much of his dinner that night. He kept getting up to look out of the front window. At nine the doorbell rang and a woman was standing there.

She was holding Biscuit by his collar with both hands. She said she found him two streets over on somebody's porch. Then Jonah's sister started to cry and that surprised him. She was the one who kept saying that Biscuit would come back.

Then ask all four, in this order.

1	"Tell me what happened."
2	"Why do you think Jonah's sister started to cry?"
3	"Who was more worried during the day — Jonah or his sister? How do you know?"
4	"If you had to say what that story was about in one sentence, what would you say?"

Question 3 is doing a particular job. It cannot be answered by pointing at one sentence. It needs two parts of the story held together — Jonah not eating and getting up to the window, against his sister saying Biscuit would come back. A child who has the story and cannot do this has understood it and has never been asked to use it.

STORY 5 • LONG • EXPLAINS SOMETHING

Your child reads this — or you read it aloud, if that is what you did for story 4.

A river does not run flat because it is always running downhill. In some places it drops so fast that a boat cannot get up it. Long ago some people found a way around this problem.

They built locks along the river to lift the boats up. A lock is a deep stone box that sits in the river itself. It has a heavy gate at each end that can open and shut.

One gate is down at the low water and one is at the high water. A boat sails in through the low gate and the gate shuts behind it. Small doors open under the water and let the river pour in.

The boat goes up as the water rises inside the box. A rubber duck goes up the same way in a bath that is filling. When the water inside is as high as the water above, the gate opens.

The boat then sails out of the lock at its new height. Going the other way, it all happens backward. The water drains out of the box through the doors. The boat sinks down and sails away.

Then ask all four, in this order.

1	"Tell me what that was about."
2	"Why does the boat go up when the water comes in?"
3	"If you had to explain a lock to a younger child, what would you say?"
4	"Was there anything in that you weren't sure about?"

Compare this against story 4. Both are the same length and the same difficulty. One is everyday life and one explains something they have probably never met. If story 4 went well and this did not, that raises the question of how much of the world they have met — which needs completely different help from anything else here.

Grades 4 to 5

The same five jobs, written for an older reader. Use one set or the other, not both.

STORY 1 • SHORT

You read this aloud. Do not let your child see the page.

Theo had spent three weeks building the model bridge for the science fair. He had cut every piece of thin wood and glued the joints himself. His father had offered to help twice, and both times Theo had said no.

On Friday morning he carried the bridge out to the car in both arms. His little brother pushed the back door open before anyone could stop him. The bridge caught the edge of the door frame and the middle section folded.

Theo picked up the pieces and put them in the trunk without a word. At school he told his teacher he had chosen not to enter after all. He spent the rest of the day helping other kids set up their boards.

Then ask all four, in this order, word for word.

1	"Tell me what happened."
2	"Why do you think Theo told his teacher he had chosen not to enter?"
3	"What would you say to him if you were there?"
4	"Was there anything about that story you weren't sure about?"

What to listen for. The story never says Theo was upset, or proud, or that he did not want anyone to know. It shows all of it through what he does and what he says instead.

STORY 2 • SHORT

Your child reads this. Hand them the page.

Nadia had played the same piece on the piano for almost two months. She went through it every evening after dinner until she knew it by heart. Her grandma had promised to come and hear her play it at the concert.

On Saturday Nadia put on her good shoes and waited by the front window. Her mother came in and said that grandma's flight had been called off. Nadia said that was fine and went upstairs to get her music folder.

She played the piece at the concert and made only one small mistake. Then she folded the music and put it at the back of the cabinet. She did not take it out again for the rest of the school year.

Then ask all four, in this order, word for word.

1	"Tell me what happened."
2	"Why do you think Nadia put the music at the back of the cabinet?"
3	"What would you say to her if you were there?"
4	"Was there anything about that story you weren't sure about?"

Built the same way as the first one and the same difficulty. If they understood the one you read and not the one they read, the trouble is more likely with the words than with the meaning.

STORY 3 • SHORT • SOMETHING IS WRONG IN IT

Your child reads this.

Marcus found an old pocket watch in a box up in his grandpa's attic. The glass over the face was cracked and the hands had stopped at four. His grandpa said the watch had belonged to his own father before him.

Marcus took it home with care and set it on the shelf above his desk. He looked at it every morning while he was getting ready for school. In October his cousin came to visit and asked to see the watch.

Marcus handed him the round silver watch with the clear unbroken glass. His cousin turned it over twice and said it was not worth very much. Marcus put it back on the shelf and did not mention it again.

Then ask all three, in this order.

1	"Tell me what happened."
2	"Why do you think Marcus did not mention the watch again?"
3	Only if they have not already said something: "Was there anything in that story that didn't add up?"

What is wrong in it

The glass is cracked at the start and clear and unbroken at the end.

Write down whether they caught it on their own, caught it when you asked, or did not catch it. One story on one morning does not establish anything.

STORY 4 • LONG

Your child reads this — or you read it aloud, if the words are a struggle.

The power went out on our street just after seven on a Thursday night. My sister and I were doing homework at the kitchen table when it went. It all stopped at once, and for a moment the whole house was silent.

Our mother found the flashlight in the drawer where she always keeps it. She said the storm had brought a line down somewhere up the road. We lit two candles and set them on saucers in the middle of the table.

My sister said we should just go to bed, but nobody moved at all. Instead our mother started telling us about the winter she turned ten. She told us about the ice storm that had closed her school for nine days.

We had never heard that story before, and she told it for a whole hour. The lights came back on a little before ten and the fridge began to hum. My sister blew out the candles and carried the saucers to the sink.

Nobody said a word about the story or about going back to the homework. The next morning my sister asked our mother what happened after the ice melted.

Then ask all four, in this order.

1	"Tell me what happened."
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2	“Why do you think nobody moved when the sister said they should go to bed?”
3	“How did the evening change for them? How do you know?”
4	“If you had to say what that story was about in one sentence, what would you say?”

Question 3 is doing a particular job. Nothing in the story says the evening turned into something they enjoyed. It has to be worked out from the sister asking, the next morning, what happened after the ice melted.

STORY 5 • LONG • EXPLAINS SOMETHING

Your child reads this — or you read it aloud, if that is what you did for story 4.

Most of the salt in the ocean did not start out in the ocean at all. It came from the land, carried down by rivers over millions of years. Rainwater picks up a weak acid from the air as it falls toward the ground.

When that rain runs over stone it lifts tiny amounts of salt out of it. Every single river carries some of that mineral salt down toward the sea. The amount in any one river is far too small for anyone to taste.

But the rivers have been doing this for a very long time without stopping. When the sun lifts water off the ocean and into the air, the salt stays. The water leaves and the salt does not, so over millions of years it built up.

Rain then falls on the land again and the whole cycle starts over. Some salt also comes up through cracks in the rock at the bottom. Volcanoes under the sea add salt straight into the water around them.

The ocean is not getting much saltier now, though, and here is why. Salt is taken back out about as fast as it arrives, and locks into the rock.

Then ask all four, in this order.

1	“Tell me what that was about.”
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2	"Why does the salt stay in the ocean when the water goes up into the air?"
3	"If you had to explain this to a younger child, what would you say?"
4	"Was there anything in that you weren't sure about?"

Compare this against story 4. Same length, same difficulty, one everyday and one explaining. If story 4 went well and this did not, that raises the question of how much of the world they have met.

The last question

After the fifth story, once the pages are away, ask this casually. It takes ten seconds.

“When you read, what are you trying to do?”

If they say	What that tells you
“To say the words right” · “Not to make mistakes” · “To get to the end”	They have learned that reading means saying the words correctly — because that is what has been praised, corrected and scored. More phonics practice makes this worse. A child who believes this has no reason to notice when the meaning stops working.
“To find out what happens” · “To learn something”	They know what the job is. Whatever else you found, this part is working — and it is worth telling them so.

Ask it again another day. It is one question on one morning.

What to write down

Not right answers — things they did. Tick each one you saw.

Joining it together

- ☐ Retold it in their own words rather than echoing yours. A word-for-word echo is memory, not understanding.
- ☐ Told it roughly in order — a sequence rather than a pile.
- ☐ Used joining words. “So”, “because”, “after that”.
- ☐ Said why something happened before you asked.
- ☐ Pointed back into the story to back up an answer. “Because earlier it said...”

Holding the whole thing

- ☐ Could say what it was about in one sentence.
- ☐ Gave an answer that could only fit that story, not a general one.

- ☐ Named the feeling the story showed but never said.
- ☐ Did about as well on the long story as on the short one.

Working with it

- ☐ Answered question 3 on the long story with something from the story itself.
- ☐ Put two parts of the story side by side without being shown how.
- ☐ Reached something the story never said outright.
- ☐ Could explain the last story to an imaginary younger child.

Noticing when it broke

- ☐ Caught the thing that did not add up, on their own.
- ☐ Caught it when you asked.
- ☐ Went back and reread without being told to.
- ☐ Answered the last question in terms of meaning rather than getting it right.

At a word they did not know

- ☐ Carried on and kept the sentence.
- ☐ Stopped and stayed stopped.
- ☐ Worked at it until the sentence was gone.
- ☐ Sounded it out and clearly knew the word once they heard it.

Anything I could not tell	

What it points to

Work down these in order. Each one narrows it. None of them settles it.

What you saw	Worth looking at	What to do
Understood story 1, struggled with story 2	The words. The understanding part was never really reached.	Stop here. Go back to word reading. Then run this again, reading every story aloud.
Struggled with both 1 and 2	Something above the words.	Keep going down the list.
Fine on story 2, adrift on story 4	Holding it all. The story may not be getting packed away as they go.	Teach packing — pause, say what has happened so far, then carry on. Strengthening memory is also worth doing. Neither alone is a certain fix.
Adrift on both 2 and 4, whatever the length	Not holding. Language, or how much of the world they have met.	Use the next row to tell which.
Fine on story 4, adrift on story 5	How much of the world they have met.	Build it deliberately, across subjects, over years. Read aloud well above their level.
Adrift on both 4 and 5	Language and joining things up.	Ask why, every day, in ordinary conversation — and wait ten seconds for the answer.
Remembered it fine, could not answer question 3	Working with a story rather than building it.	Change the questions rather than the reading. After anything they read or watch, ask one question

What you saw	Worth looking at	What to do
		that cannot be answered by pointing at a sentence.
Did not catch the thing that was wrong	Possibly nothing checking as they read. One story does not establish it.	Watch for it over the next few weeks. If nothing ever stops them, teach stop-and-check and plant deliberate mistakes when you read together.
Stopped dead at words they did not know	Getting past a gap rather than understanding.	Tell them plainly that carrying on past a word they do not know is allowed. Then practice it out loud together.

Expect more than one

Most struggling readers show two or three of these. You are not looking for one tidy answer — you are looking for the first thing to work on, which is the one furthest up this list.

And if you could not tell, write that down. A form that makes you choose will make you choose something.

If all of it looked fine and they are still not passing

That happens, and it is worth knowing rather than hunting for a fault that is not there. Four things sit between reading well and scoring well, and they belong to the test:

- **Time.** Reading well and slowly still fails a timed test. Ask the school whether they finished.
- **Stamina.** Half an hour with you is not an hour in a hall. Fine at ten minutes and gone at forty is a different problem.
- **The questions.** Test questions are text too, and often harder than the passage.

- **The day itself.** Nerves, or having already decided they will fail.

Two things worth checking whatever you found

An eye exam. Not the school vision screening, which checks distance. Reading is a near task. If your child has not had a proper exam, get one — it belongs to an eye doctor and it is quick to rule out.

How the page looks to them. Different from whether the eyes work. Ask whether the letters ever seem to move, blur or swim, whether they lose their place, and whether a page becomes uncomfortable after a few minutes. Try a colored overlay and watch what happens. Five minutes, and nothing is lost if it shows nothing.

Do it again

Once is a single snapshot and children have bad days. Do it again in three months, at the same level, and compare.

Movement over time tells you far more than any one attempt — and you will be the only person who ever sees it.

And what to say to your child

“That was really helpful. Thank you.”

Nothing else. No feedback, no corrections, no explaining what you found. They helped you with something, and that is all they need to know.

Nothing in this document is a diagnosis, a test, or a measurement of a child. It points; the people you take it to make findings. Youth Success Movement · youthsuccessmovement.org