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# Maximizing Small Group Reading Instruction

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**Abstract**

In this article, the authors revisit the common practice of small group reading instruction. They challenge the idea of grouping readers based on text levels and instead review supplemental intervention group research that suggests targeted skill practice as a more optimal use of time in small groups. They then present the ABCs – a focus on assessment, basics & books, and clarity in communication—as the central principles that should guide how we instruct reading in small groups.

**Teaser Text**

*Small groups could be one of the most valuable aspects of our reading instruction, but are we really capitalizing on this instructional practice? What happens in small groups? Are students' needs being met? Are they growing as much as they can as readers? In this article, the authors revisit this practice and recommend refocusing on the ABCs.*

**Pause & Ponder**

1. Reflect on how small group reading instruction is going at your school. Are all students making progress? Are all students achieving to their maximum potential?

2. What assessments do you use to guide your small group instruction? How do those assessments help you form groups? What do the assessment results say about what your students need?

3. How do you select books for your small group?

4. Reflect on the feedback you give to students during small groups. Do you provide corrective feedback during small group instruction? Is it specific? Is it scaffolded? Is it actionable? If you've answered "No" or "Maybe" to any of these questions about feedback, consider the sample feedback in this article. How did your explicit and supportive feedback help your readers?

**Maximizing Small Group Reading Instruction**

Small group reading instruction is often touted as a best practice (see Reutzel & Clark, 2018) and has long been considered a mainstay in U.S. elementary classrooms. In fact, over two-thirds of elementary teachers report teaching in small groups at least a few times a week (Lenski et al., 2016; NCES, 2019). Its popularity is hardly surprising: by meeting with students in smaller groups, teachers hope to differentiate instruction to varied student needs, provide specific feedback and support to accelerate student learning, and even build relationships and promote positive social interactions (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2010).

These factors certainly explain the appeal of small group instruction. The practice allows for differentiation and personalized instruction that seem untenable at a whole-class level. Still, with the heightened focus on ensuring our practices are grounded in an evidence base, it's important to ask: to what extent does small group reading instruction align with research evidence?

The answer is a bit complicated. On the one hand, research makes it clear that differentiation in literacy can be effective (Puzio et al., 2020) and that small group literacy interventions lead to considerable growth (Wanzek et al., 2016). But on the other hand, we lack evidence for differentiating instruction based on text levels (Puzio et al., 2020; Young, 2022)— which is how most teachers currently conduct their small groups (Conradi Smith et al., 2019; Griffith & Duffett, 2018).

Clearly, it is time to revisit the practice, which is the purpose of this article. We start by addressing that small group reading instruction is an *expensive* practice— and therefore, if it is to be done at all, it needs to be effective. We then describe why differentiating by text level is ineffective and instead examine what can be learned from supplemental literacy intervention research. For the

remainder of the article, we draw from the research base to present what we call the ABCs of small group reading instruction.

## Small Group Instruction is Expensive

We like to remind the teachers that we work with that conducting and managing small-groups effectively is *expensive*. Effective small group instruction is expensive because it costs a lot—not in terms of money, but in terms of management and planning. Teachers need to be able to consume and interpret a variety of assessment data to create flexible small groups. After forming groups, teachers have to design and deliver appropriate, differentiated lessons and provide timely, corrective feedback for students.

All the while, teachers have to consider how to engage the rest of the students—which takes considerable effort! What should the rest of the class be doing? What are some activities that are meaningful and engaging and not just busy work? These activities should reinforce and extend their reading and writing skills, but need to be self-directed and not-too-loud. Preparing and conceiving of such work can be difficult, further underscoring how expensive small group instruction is.

## Why Differentiation by Text Level Likely Doesn't Work

Given the expense of small-group reading instruction, some might question its worth. In a recent meta-analysis of Tier 1 literacy differentiation at the elementary level, the authors noted that there is no research to suggest that differentiating by text level works (see Puzio et al., 2020). Moreover, it's been suggested that differentiation by text level is inconsistent with the science of reading and that it unfairly disadvantages poor and minoritized students (see Young, 2022).

When teachers differentiate by text level, they typically administer a running record or a reading inventory, and then group students according to various text levels. Then, the teacher often teaches the same “strategy” or skill to students, but uses different leveled texts (e.g., K, M, O) for each group.

While the intention for this is differentiation, how well is this type of grouping actually directly meeting students' needs? If Amir is in group M and struggles with decoding and encoding vowel teams, how are we ensuring he masters them just by having him in a certain level of text? Phonics instruction is incidental, at best, when differentiating this way. Unfortunately, we've watched far too many Amirs stay stuck in the same level for over a year—something we call the "*Magic Tree House* trap." (Note: We love the many adventures of Jack and Annie in the *Magic Tree House* series-- we just hate the idea of a student being stuck in Level M for a year!)

Not only does differentiation by text level lead to incidental phonics instruction, but it also likely impedes progress because it consigns students to lower text levels than they need to be reading. Research makes clear that once students move beyond the beginning stages, they can handle more complex texts as long as they have teacher support (Amendum et al., 2017). When students are reading texts that are too easy, as one case study demonstrated, teachers may not have opportunities to provide constructive feedback and support to facilitate growth (Ankrum et al., 2017).

**Small Group Instruction Does Have a Research Base**

Though they noted that there isn't research to support guided reading and differentiation by text level, Puzio and colleagues (2020) did find literacy differentiation at the elementary level effective, particularly for word-level skills and writing. When we differentiate, we can address the very different needs and skill profiles of our readers (see Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002)— whether they're already devouring high fantasy novels in the second grade or still struggling to read a paragraph fluently.

So what can research tell us about how to differentiate in small groups? When provided as intervention or supplemental grouping, small group instruction is at least as effective, and can be twice as effective, as whole-group reading (Reis et al., 2011). In one study, when teachers provided small-group instruction, third graders made greater gains in both vocabulary and comprehension (Connor et

al., 2014). In another study, fourth-grade students who received supplemental small group instruction made larger gains in reading comprehension (Wanzek et al., 2017).

When researchers have examined the effects of small group or one-on-one instruction in targeted skills across many studies, they have consistently demonstrated positive effects of such instruction (e.g., Gersten et al., 2017; Neitzel et al., 2021; Wanzek et al., 2016). And these findings makes sense! When we work with our students in a smaller setting where we can attend to their individual needs and provide specific directions and feedback, they respond, and their reading performance improves.

## The ABCs of Small Group Reading

For the remainder of the article, we advance the idea that small group instruction can be effective if we shift from differentiation by text levels and instead differentiate by reading skills needed. Our model is informed by the supplemental literacy intervention research described above, as well as the work of Walpole and McKenna (2017).

To aid teachers in a shift, we present what we call the ABCs of small group instruction, drawing attention to **A**ssessment, **B**asics & **B**ooks, and **C**lear directions & feedback. These components are hardly revolutionary; their inclusion is based on substantial evidence supporting their efficacy.

### A: Assessment [Know What Your Students Need and Group Them Accordingly]

The underlying principle behind differentiated small group instruction is that students in our classes have varied needs that can best be addressed through small groups (Amendum & Conradi Smith, 2021). In order to form these groups, we must have access to reliable and informative assessment data.

Last year's state-level comprehension test scores will not suffice for this purpose. We advocate for effective CBMs (curriculum-based measures), which have a longstanding history in classrooms (see Hosp et al., 2016). But we're also aware that sometimes teachers are required to already give certain screening measures, such as DIBELS, and so—accordingly—we want teachers to be able to work with

what they use without over-testing. [See Amendum et al., (2016) for how to make use of DIBELS assessment for this purpose.]

In Table 1, we provide a list of potential assessments teachers could consider to create groups. Necessarily, because students' reading needs vary based on their development (see Shinn et al., 1992), we recommend slightly different assessments based on whether students are beginning readers versus more advanced ones. Our chief consideration, in mapping these out, is efficiency. If a screening subtest, for example, lacks considerable efficacy, we do not recommend using it (see Amendum et al., 2021).

It's important also to note that after forming the groups based on initial assessment data, they should remain flexible. Some students will make progress faster than others. We recommend revisiting the composition of groups every three to six weeks through progress monitoring (see Walpole & McKenna, 2017). It's important to note that progress monitoring will work more easily for constrained skills (such as decoding CVCe words) than it will for unconstrained skills, such as vocabulary or comprehension.

**Assessments.** For beginning readers, we recommend a battery of initial assessments to fully understand the child's strengths and areas of need. This battery chiefly involves assessing students' alphabet and phonemic knowledge. These assessments could include an alphabet inventory, a phonemic awareness assessment such as PAST (Kilpatrick, 2019), and a decoding inventory, such as the informal decoding inventory (IDI; Walpole & McKenna, 2017) (all publicly available).

Once students are transitional or proficient readers, and can decode CVC words and can read simple connected texts, we recommending administering a fluency measure. This should include reading a grade level passages and assessing their correct per minute (WPCM). DIBELS 8th Edition (University of Oregon, 2018) has benchmark passages as well as progress monitoring passages for grades 1-8.

For students who are below the benchmark for WCPM, it's important to further diagnose which aspects of word recognition are likely impeding progress. To do so, we recommend administering a decoding inventory to determine if the reason for a student's dysfluency is rooted in word recognition, syllabication, or morphology (see IDI, Walpole & McKenna, 2017). A spelling inventory (see Ganske, 2013), likewise, can also provide a window into how the student understands how words work and has the added benefit that it can be group-administered.

But what if students perform well on the fluency screener? What types of assessments would provide us with useful knowledge to differentiate instruction based on their language and comprehension skills? This part is more complicated, for sure. We've long known, for example, that there's little reliability across comprehension measures (Conradi et al., 2016) and that just because a student failed to find the main idea on one test with one particular passage, doesn't mean they'll struggle with that same "skill" on the next. There are still data teachers can rely on---but in this case, they tend to be more observational. Some students in the class, for example, might still struggle to make sense of text *while* they're reading, while others might struggle with summarizing after reading. Differentiation for groups of fluent readers might look different based on other factors, such as vocabulary or motivation.

**Putting it All Together.** We've stressed the importance of using assessment data to guide the formation of groups, but what does it look like in practice? We suggest teachers form groups based on one of three instructional foci: (1) decoding, (2) fluency, and (3) comprehension. How this looks in the classroom will vary based on the class composition and level. One teacher might have two groups targeting decoding and two on fluency, whereas another teacher might have one group in fluency and two groups in comprehension. To keep things manageable, we suggest keeping the number of groups to three or four. Moreover, once students are able to access grade-level text fluently, we suggest using the same text for the different groups.

**B: Basics & Books [Foreground the Essential Skills Your Students Need Help With!]**

**Basics.** To reframe how we think about instruction, we first call attention to the basics. In their meta-analysis of the effects of small-group interventions, Hall and Burns (2018) found that small groups were more effective when they were focused on targeted skills rather than a more comprehensive approach. It's important to note that they only included supplemental small groups or intervention groups in their study—–a decided distinction from schools that use small groups in a more general sense for Tier 1 instruction.

Still, their findings offer some valuable information for teachers: designing small groups around the essential need of the students/ targeted skill(s) (i.e., "basics") proves most effective. This is a different way of thinking about small group instruction, particularly for teachers used to grouping students based on leveled texts. Consider what we discussed in the assessment section above: what do those assessments tell you about what students need, and how can you ensure that what you provide in small group is directly related?

We provide examples in Table 2 and briefly describe some scenarios below. A second grade teacher might have one group who still struggles with decoding words with r-controlled vowels. He would design targeted instruction in word work, that includes Elkonin boxes, decoding and encoding individual words, and reading connected texts that include r-controlled vowels. All the while, he provides corrective and explicit feedback for them. Another of his groups has advanced decoding skills, but needs support with automaticity. To ensure that this group gets focused work on fluency, the teacher uses an interesting grade level text but provides support by echo reading it first with the students, before having them read the text again with partners.

A fourth grade teacher might have one group of students who seem to easily work their way to the end of the text, but who can’t recall much about it what they read. For that group, some

concentrated work on tracking the meaning of the text *while* they're reading—such as through paragraph shrinking (see McMaster & Fuchs, 2016) ––could prove valuable. Paragraph shrinking involves students working in partners and alternating reading the paragraphs while prompting each other with questions to recall the paragraph's gist. She might have another group of students who can recall events or facts from what they read, but who regularly seem to struggle to put it all together to make inferences or to determine what the theme is. For these students, some explicit instruction, modeling, and intentional practice would prove useful (Duffy, 2014).

As a reminder, when we refer to basics, we don't want teachers to forget to spotlight actual reading in small groups. Reading provides an opportunity for students to get constructive feedback and support with the books they read to facilitate their growth as readers. Getting such feedback is contingent on reading more. It is easy to get lost in teacher talk or explanations and suddenly 20 minutes have gone by and students have only read for a handful of those minutes. In fact, our observations are backed by research: in one survey, teachers estimated that their students read in small group for only 4-6 minutes (Conradi Smith et al., 2019).

**Books.** In addition to thinking through whether students need basic support in an element of phonics or fluency ("the basics"), it's essential, too, that the actual *texts* we use takes center stage. Too often, we've observed teachers grab a book based on its level and/or based on its length rather than based on its content. It's important to remember that we're not just reading for reading's sake.

We are reading to learn more about the world around us, to dive into stories that make us consider another perspective (Bishop, 1990), or to celebrate the turn of a phrase an author offers. We advocate for greater attention to the actual book to be read. Most teachers already agree that the book shouldn't be dumb, bad, or boring---but beyond those considerations, how should teachers actually select the books that we use?

First, we think it's important to think about the purpose the text is serving. Beyond the content that it's providing—which we think should be interesting and informative!— teachers should also consider how the books meet students' needs. For small groups of beginning readers still practicing word recognition and decoding skills, we recommend using decodable books some of the time. Decodable books have been referred to as *accountable* texts (International Literacy Association, 2019) with good reason: in reading them, students are held accountable for the instruction they have received. By encountering some of the patterns they have learned in real, connected texts, students have the opportunity to apply and practice skills they have recently learned while reading connected text.

For students for whom word recognition isn't the issue, consider how the small group texts can serve the specific issues for which your students need support. For example, if you have a group who could benefit from instruction in prosodic reading, consider finding a text full of poetry or dialogue. On the other hand, if your students need to work on making inferences related to character development, choose a text that lends itself well to that instructional focus. Regardless, for students who performed satisfactorily on their fluency measure, we want to underscore the importance of using rich, grade-level, texts.

Notably, it's hard to keep up with trends in book publishing, but we underscore the importance of updating your bookshelves! Newer books tend to be more diverse, in general (see Flores et al., 2019), and they tend to hold more appeal for students. In Table 3, we provide some resources to help you find and read about popular and high-quality children's literature. Note: this list certainly is hardly exhaustive and we highly recommend working with your school's media specialist and your local librarian!

In addition, we think it's helpful to consider the texts your students read over time. Hiebert (2017) describes this as coherence across texts—the importance of students reading multiple texts on a topic in order to solidify their knowledge base and vocabulary. Research makes this clear: in his study of

intertextuality, Sipe (2000) demonstrated that students' connections between and among texts can promote their narrative understanding, their understanding of genre and text structure, and their overall interest and engagement in the story.

Finally, and importantly, the book should drive the comprehension strategy taught, not the other way around. This might be a difficult reframing for many teachers, especially given many district curriculum maps we have seen which focus on a particular comprehension strategy for a week or more, but it makes sense. No reader picks up a book and says, "Hot diggity, I'm going to practice inferring today." Instead, proficient readers use strategies on an as-needed basis.

In consequence, our comprehension instruction should be deliberate and should come from the reading of the book's content (Willingham, 2006/2007), rather than the fact that our curriculum map says all third graders need to be practicing finding the main idea for the month of March. We recognize this idea calls for a substantial shift in thinking and we also acknowledge that such a shift requires that school administrators "enforce" the standards with a little more flexibility.

After teachers have chosen quality books—books that they know their students will be interested in and that will include rich vocabulary, and strong plots or information—the teacher needs to read it and think about the strategies used to make sense of it. After that, when working with the small group, explicitly teach (or remind) students about the strategy (Willingham & Lovette, 2014), model it using a think aloud (Ness, 2018), and then provide students with specific and clear feedback after they've had an opportunity to apply it.

**C: Clear Directions & Feedback**

Without question, the top benefit of small group reading is that it affords teachers the opportunity to witness and support students' actual reading progress. Here's where we want to capitalize on the *proximity* afforded in small group instruction. Teachers have a small group of students near them —

often at a kidney-shaped table— and teachers are able to specifically address the needs of the individual students. We recommend leveraging this proximity to provide very clear and explicit directions and very personal and specific feedback (see Table 4 for examples). Good teaching, after all, involves making appropriate instructional moves and adapting as needed to ensure that students are being challenged appropriately (see Vaughn et al., 2020).

**Setting a Purpose**. Given the coordination demands of teaching small groups while also managing everyone else in the class (see Table 5 for ideas), we've found that most teacher language revolves around preparation and management. Teachers fire off questions and directions to begin: "Is your pencil sharpened?" "Don't forget your notebook." "The password to unlock the iPad is TC1945." Once teachers deem the students ready, they tend to jump right into the work. "Open your books to page 54."

But if our small groups are guided by the need for differentiation and the belief that we can meet students where they are and assist in accelerating their reading development, we can't underscore enough the value of setting a clear purpose for each lesson with students. To start, we recommend providing explicit directions about the target of the lesson. *"We're going to continue reading The Wild Robot. Last time we read, Roz was fully activated by the otters and emerged from the crate like a hatchling. Today, I want you to pay attention to how the author describes the setting. As you read with your partner, take some notes on details you notice. After 6 minutes, we'll share what we've noticed."* In setting the purpose, we recommend keeping it short and simple, and using consistent language such as "pay attention" or "notice."

**Consistent Feedback**. When teachers provide feedback to students, that feedback should center on the purpose set for the lesson. So whether students are working on blending sounds, reading with prosody, or making inferences, it's up to teachers to provide them with live, real-time feedback.

However, we recognize that small groups often feel jampacked and teachers might find it tricky to provide substantive feedback to students. One idea is to have post-it notes readily available and teachers can provide specific thoughts for one student each day. A simple framework to consider using is That's Good/Now This (Chappius, 2009).

We've actually had post-it notes printed up to help provide more consistent feedback. On the top of the post it notes (That's Good), we note something that the student is doing well (e.g., "Nice job with *revolution*---great use of decoding skills!". On the bottom of the post-its (Now This), we would note something we wanted the student to be working on (e.g., "Try to justify your ideas with evidence from the text, not just your opinions."). We've found the limited size of the feedback helps us actually provide feedback consistently and the student walks away from group with an actionable plan of one thing to work on.

**Global Feedback.** Small group instruction affords us the opportunity to meet with a small group of students regularly and to get to know their skills and their reading –and them!— better. Teachers should make sure to celebrate students now and again by reasserting for them what they are witnessing about their students' growth. In his book, *Choice Words,* Peter Johnston (2004) talks about pointing to students' *learning trajectories*--- how you, as the instructor, have the opportunity to remind students about what they've accomplished and how much they've grown. This isn't necessarily forefront on an eight-year-old's mind, but it's something teachers can easily point out.

In doing so, you also equip them with what Dweck (2006) calls a "growth mindset"— the belief that, with effort, a skill or ability can be developed and improved. Examples of positive global feedback could be, "Look at how you're now able to decode those bigger words! That was something that was challenging for you a few weeks ago, but now you're isolating the prefix and breaking down the syllables!"

**Bringing It Back Together**

It’s difficult to reflect on a practice, particularly if it’s one that feels like it has been working. When we were classroom teachers, it’s an area that we all felt worked for us, in theory. It wasn’t until we were privy to larger group data that we realized small group instruction certainly was not working the way it should. Because the practice of small groups is expensive—and there’s so much we have to have in place in order for them to be productive and effective— we believe it needs to be revisited and reconsidered. We're convinced, from the research, that small group instruction can be valuable. But to maximize the practice—and to maximize students' reading potential— some things need to change.

**Take Action!**

1. Revisit the assessments you use to form your small groups for reading instruction. What's valuable? What's missing?
2. Do your students need basic decoding skills? If so, decide what skill needs to be taught, deliver your instruction explicitly, and provide practice related to the skill.
3. If your students are working on fluency or comprehension, use grade level texts. Be sure to provide instruction informed by, and responsive to, assessment data.
4. List some of your favorite grade-level books. Reread them and consider the comprehension demands of each. Plan your questions and think aloud based on what strategies are needed by the reader to comprehend the text.
5. Print out some of our recommended language frames to help you provide explicit and supportive feedback to students.

**More to Explore**

1. http://www.textproject.org/teacher-educators/frankly-freddy/a-new-kind-of-leveled-text-meeting-the-needs-of-challenged-readers/
2. http://shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/what-should-small-group-reading-instruction-look-like3.
3. https://www.readingrockets.org/article/differentiated-instruction-reading
4. https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/turn-small-reading-groups-into-big-wins
5. https://readingsimplified.com/small-group-guided-reading-structure/

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Table 1

*Potential Reading Assessments*

| Level | Screening | Diagnostic |
|---|---|---|
| **Beginning** | PAST<br><br>Informal Decoding Inventory<br><br>DIBELS Letter Naming<br><br>DIBELS Nonsense Word Assessment | Developmental Spelling Assessment (DSA)<br><br>Informal Decoding Inventory<br><br>Alphabet Awareness Assessment |
| **Transitional/Proficient** | Oral Reading Fluency measure | Informal Decoding Inventory<br><br>Observational & informal measures of comprehension |

Note: Assessments can be found at https://thepasttest.com, https://dibels.uoregon.edu, and Walpole & McKenna (2017).

Table 2

*Sample Targeted Small Groups for Differentiation*

| Group | Instructional Focus | Instructional Strategies |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Group A | Decoding | • Based on district's scope and sequence, provide instruction in phonemic awareness focusing on blending and segmenting. For example, utilize Elkonin boxes to foster connections between phoneme and grapheme correspondences<br>• Explicitly teach graphemes for decoding and encoding<br>• Provide opportunities for practice reading connected text using accountable texts |
| Group B | Fluency | • Teacher choral reads a section of text with students, modeling pacing and expressive reading.<br>• Students reread texts with partners and receive constructive feedback<br>• Some targeted decoding and encoding practice of multisyllabic words |
| Group C | Comprehension | • Teacher models comprehension through think alouds<br>• Partners read text in chunks, summarizing paragraphs as they read.<br>• Teacher provides graphic organizers and leads inferential discussion |

Table 3

*Children's Literature Resources*

| Blogs | Twitter & Instagram |
|---|---|
| cbcbooks.org/readers | @colbysharp |
| kirkusreview.com | @heisereads |
| diversebooks.org | @KIDLIT411 |
| hereweeread.com | @MCChildsBookDay |
| | @MrSchuReads |
| | @thetututeacher |

Table 4

*Examples of Feedback*

| Decoding | Fluency | Comprehension |
|---|---|---|
| If student misreads a word, then:<br>• Teacher may use a physical prompt first such as pointing to the misread word or pointing to the part in the word that tricked the student<br>• Point to the misread word<br>• Point to the part in the word that tricked the student<br>• Say, “Tap and blend your sounds.”<br>• Provide sound for unknown grapheme and say, “This part says ‘/oo/’ now tap and blend your sounds<br>• If student misreads a multisyllabic word say, “Where are you breaking the word?<br>• Scoop the word into syllables for the student | If student needs help in prosody then:<br>• Scoop your words<br><br>If student needs help with rate then:<br>• Try to sound like you are talking<br>• Read to the punctuation before stopping<br><br>If student needs help with expression then:<br>• Pay attention to the punctuation.<br>• Watch the signs to know when to pause.<br>• Make your voice go up for a question<br>• Make your voice go down at the period | If student needs help building a mental model then:<br>• Prompt to use the 5 W’s. Say, “Think about Who?, What Happened?, Where?, Why? and When?”<br><br>If student needs help with vocabulary then:<br>• Prompt to reread the sentence and use context to determine meaning<br>• Look at word parts (morphology)<br><br>If student needs help monitoring then:<br>• Show me the part of the book that made you think that<br>• Show me your evidence |

Table 5

*Options for Student Work When They Are Not with the Teacher*

| Possible Activities |
| --- |
| • Rereading texts with a partner to reinforce fluency and comprehension<br>• Extend or clarify thinking about a text by composing a written response<br>• Conduct word hunts for specific patterns in texts<br>• Utilize high-quality computer programs for students to practice various skills<br>• Self-selected reading with accountability |