

Thinking Level Ladders

How a teacher arrives at a student's thinking level in each area of writing. One ladder per area, the same five levels, a plain can-do statement on every rung.

THE VISION

How We Determine a Thinking Level

A thinking level is not a score. It is the highest rung a student can reach **on their own**. So every writing area, evidence, explanation, reasoning, structure, revising, and conventions, gets its own five rung ladder, and each rung is a plain statement of what the student can do. To determine a level, a teacher does four simple things:

- 1 Look at the student's independent work.** Not the work done with heavy help, the work the student produced on their own.
- 2 Read up the ladder for that writing area.** Find the highest rung the work clearly shows.
- 3 Mark that level.** That is the thinking level, recorded as its color and shape on the Growth Tracker.
- 4 Choose the next artifact.** The Learning Artifacts are built at levels, so the next one either confirms the level or invites the climb.

The artifacts and the ladders are two sides of one coin. The artifact draws the thinking out, the ladder gives it a name. When a student succeeds at an Independent artifact on their own, that is the evidence that they are thinking at the Independent level.

No averaging, no points. A professional judgment against a clear, shared descriptor, the same way a reading level is determined.

THE LADDERS

A Ladder for Each Writing Area

Here are all six ladders. Every area of writing gets one built the same way, so a student's profile becomes a set of ladders: strong here, still climbing there.

Evidence TAP / TRACKS, how a student finds and uses text evidence

● Foundational F	■ Emergent E	▼ Visible V	▲ Independent I	◆ Reflective R
Identifies a piece of evidence when it is clearly pointed out.	Selects appropriate evidence from a set of provided options.	Selects relevant evidence and explains why it fits.	Locates, selects, and uses relevant evidence without help.	Weighs several pieces of evidence and defends which is strongest, and why.

Explanation THINK / DEEP FACTS, how a student explains what evidence means

● Foundational F	■ Emergent E	▼ Visible V	▲ Independent I	◆ Reflective R
Restates the evidence in their own words.	Names what the evidence shows, with a cue.	Explains why the evidence supports the idea.	Explains the connection fully and on their own, moving from proof to meaning.	Explains why it matters beyond the text, reaching a larger idea.

Reasoning Reasons or Ways, how a student develops and defends a reason or way

● Foundational F	■ Emergent E	▼ Visible V	▲ Independent I	◆ Reflective R
Gives one reason or way, with a little support.	Gives more than one reason or way.	Gives reasons or ways and tells why each one fits the prompt.	Develops each reason or way fully and independently, as the prompt requires.	Ranks the reasons or ways by strength and defends the strongest.

THE LADDERS

Structure TREES, how a student organizes a piece of writing

 Foundational F Puts ideas in an order, with support.	 Emergent E Follows a given frame like TREES to organize a piece.	 Visible V Organizes a piece with a clear beginning, middle, and end on their own.	 Independent I Builds a full, well organized piece independently, thesis through significance.	 Reflective R Shapes the structure to fit the purpose and audience, and explains the choice.
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Revising READ, how a student strengthens a draft

 Foundational F Makes a change when it is pointed out.	 Emergent E Uses one READ move, add, delete, or reorder, with a cue.	 Visible V Chooses a revision move and tells why it helps.	 Independent I Revises a draft on their own, strengthening ideas and organization.	 Reflective R Weighs a draft against its purpose, revises for the greatest effect, and defends the changes.
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Conventions Editing and Spelling, how a student controls the conventions of writing

 Foundational F Fixes a convention error when it is shown.	 Emergent E Applies a taught convention rule with a cue.	 Visible V Finds and fixes a taught convention in their own writing.	 Independent I Edits their own writing for the conventions taught, on their own.	 Reflective R Edits fluently across conventions and explains why a change is correct.
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