

Introduction to Reading Fluency

To support accuracy and the ease of reading



For reading experiences to be enjoyable and meaningful, students must be able to orchestrate skills in word reading, vocabulary, and comprehension with accuracy and ease.

This challenge has led to varying definitions for reading fluency, the skill many have called the “gateway skill” to meaningful reading. Although consensus about a definition of fluency eludes reading educators, these definitions provide a working understanding of the concept:

- “Accurate reading at a minimal rate with appropriate prosodic features and deep understanding” (Hudson, Mercer, & Lane, 2000, p. 16);
- “Reading fluency refers to efficient, effective word recognition skills that permit a reader to construct meaning of text. Fluency is manifested in accurate, rapid, expressive oral reading and is applied during, and makes possible, silent reading comprehension” (Pikulski & Chard, 2005, p. 3);
- “The ability to read connected text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically with little conscious attention to the mechanics of reading, such as decoding” (Meyer & Felton, 1999, p. 284).

Common across all of these definitions is the importance of (a) accuracy in word recognition; (b) a focus on comprehension; and (c) the facility or ease with which both of these processes work together. Because of its dependence on accurate word reading, fluency is also contingent on the skills necessary to develop word reading, namely language and vocabulary skills, phonemic awareness, depth of decoding skills, and a range of prior reading and instructional experiences. Proficient readers are so automatic with each of these component skills, that they are able to focus their attention on constructing meaning while reading (Kuhn, 2008; Kuhn & Stahl, 2000).

It is important to note that students need to develop fluent recognition of individual words as well as fluent decoding of connected text. Fluency at the word level, often discussed as automaticity, is heavily influenced by a student's basic decoding or word analysis skills. Fluency at the passage level builds on that skill and becomes closely linked to comprehension of the content of material being read. This tutorial focuses on promoting fluency at the passage level. In limiting the scope of the tutorial, we do not mean that fluency at the word level—or even at the level of saying individual sounds for letters—is unimportant. Fluency in reading individual words is essential for building fluency at the passage level. Developing word level fluency is simply a topic for a different tutorial.



Two interrelated issues linked to fluency are prosody and reading speed. Reading prosody, or the skill of reading aloud with proper intonation, phrasing, and expression is commonly viewed as a byproduct of well-developed fluent reading. Some have emphasized the importance of prosody by recommending that instructional time and assessment should focus on this skill; however, it is difficult to assess something that is subjective in nature (i.e., prosody).

Rasinski (2004) reframed prosody by explaining that reading with prosody indicates that a reader is constructing meaning, demonstrated by reading with expression, through accurate and efficient word reading and coordinated comprehension skills and strategies. The most common measure of fluency, oral reading fluency or ORF (see Lembke & Busch, 2004), involves calculating the number of words a student reads correctly in a one-minute sample of passage reading. Consequently, many people equate fluent reading erroneously as speed reading. We believe Samuels (2006) explains it best when reflecting on the research-base when he stated that “the essence of fluency is not reading speed or oral reading expression, but the ability to decode and comprehend text at the same time” (p. 9).

Even though fluent reading isn't sufficient for being a proficient or strong reader, the research is clear that fluency is necessary for successful reading because of the prominent role it plays in comprehension (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hosp, 2001). If a reader has to spend too much time and energy decoding individual words, she will be unable to concentrate on what the words mean (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Simmons, 2001). Struggling readers are often identified by their inaccurate and halting approach to reading connected text, which inhibits their understanding of what they have read. In addition, struggling readers often avoid reading when possible. Their limited word-identification skills and minimal time spent reading negatively affect their vocabulary and comprehension skills.

Without intervention, the trajectory of growth for non-fluent readers is likely to be flat, which predicts long-term reading difficulties that, in turn, are likely to affect other academic domains.

Historically, reforms in reading instructional approaches have been described as a dichotomy in which one approach (e.g., word recognition instruction or a “bottom up” approach) was considered antithetical to the other (e.g., meaning-based instruction or a “top-down” approach).



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We believe the most powerful explanations of how students develop their reading require both of these approaches to be developed simultaneously. While students are developing automatic recognition of letters and words that will allow them to read texts independently, they should be challenged to expand their oral language, academic vocabulary, and listening comprehension. All of these components will continue to play a critical role in their understanding of complex texts as they grow older.

Our interpretation of the literature suggests that building reading fluency effectively should require a brief emphasis in most students' lives. For students with learning disabilities, the instructional strategies we suggest here will need to be more systematic and consistent, but should complement rather than supplant overall reading instruction which would include time spent teaching vocabulary and comprehension.

Reference:

Teaching Tutorial 6: Repeated Readings to Promote Fluency

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