

What Is Reading Fluency, and Why Is It So Important?

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“My student can read every word in this book, why does his teacher say it is too hard?” As a teacher this is a phrase we hear every year. When it comes to a student’s ability to understand or comprehend a book there is a lot more than just being able to pronounce all the words. The gold standard of reading is reading fluency.

Defining Reading Fluency

Reading fluency is defined by the National Reading Panel as a student’s ability to “read text with speed, accuracy and proper expression.” (NICHD, 2000). This ability to read smoothly through text and punctuation, emphasize quotations and change the tone of their reading based on things like questions and exclamations leads to a “conversational” reading style. The student’s ability to read text “conversationally” has been directly related to their comprehension of the text itself. Just because they can pronounce all the words does not mean they understand what they are reading.

Common Pitfalls

One of the traps students, parents and teachers fall into is thinking the student is understanding the text because they can read all the words. Our ability to decode and read words far exceeds our ability to understand them and this is true for adults as well. Just because you can pronounce “oxidane” does not mean you understand the meaning of the word. (It is a chemical name for water.) The same is true for students, reading each word on a page does not mean they are linking them together to form larger ideas and truly comprehending the text. Speed alone is also not a good marker of a reader’s ability. Many students (and adults) can whiz through a page, be asked what they just read and come up blank. So what makes up reading fluency?

How To Assess Reading Fluency

When assessing a student’s reading fluency many factors are looked at. First students read out loud to the examiner. The examiner makes notes on the speed, accuracy and change in tones of the student’s reading in certain parts of the text. They are also looking for patterns in the student’s reading, what they do when they come to difficult words, are they repeating themselves or re reading lines, and a variety of other cues that help them better understand the student as a reader. After the reading process the student is asked a variety of questions to fully gauge how well they understood the text and how they can express themselves and connect to what they read.



How Can I Help?

The next obvious question is “What can I do to help?” Reading fluency is a complicated subject that educators spend years studying and put in hundreds of hours watching students read, but that doesn’t mean you can’t help out. The best thing you can do is encourage reading. Regardless of what they are reading students should be constantly encouraged to read. Some students will gravitate toward quality fiction literature and others will want to look at the pictures in a nonfiction book, either way they are being exposed to sentence structure, vocabulary and the format of varying texts. All of this is building their skills and comfort as a reader.

You can take an active role by reading along with them as well. For younger readers you can read a story to them and for more advanced readers you can grab your own copy of their book and read it independently. Ask questions while you read about what might happen next or why you think the character did that. These are the types of questions examiners ask to see if students are thinking about what they are reading. Use the resources at your local library to break out of the norm. Libraries offer a wide variety of fiction, non-fiction, magazines, audiobooks, tablets, e-readers, and listening stations that can grab the attention of even the most hesitant readers. Listening to an audiobook or other narrator while following along has shown to greatly improve fluency.

My Struggling Reader

Every student is different and picks things up at a different pace. By reinforcing positive strategies you can help develop any reader’s skills. [Grade 1 worksheets](#) will help you develop reading skills Consistency is key, reading fluency is not a skill that is taught once and learned forever. It is a set of skills that need constant practice to develop and maintain. Appeal to your student’s interests, find materials on sports, space or cooking. By combining their reading with their interests you tap into a huge resource of vocabulary they should already know from experience and be consistently seeing across mediums.

Younger and older students can benefit from multisensory experiences as well. Use a cook book to make dinner, make a craft from a DIY book, build sight words and vocabulary words with modeling clay or write them in sand trays. By including our sense of touch and smell along with physical activity you are tapping into more areas of the developing brain. [Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences](#) outlines the various ways we learn and present information.

Taking it to the Next Level

Educator’s train for years to assess reading fluency in children and hone their skills with students every day. That doesn’t mean you can’t ask quality questions of your reader at

home. When it comes to reading fluency and comprehension there are three levels of questions, [Within The Text](#), [About The Text](#), and [Beyond The Text](#).

Within The Text refers to information that can be found directly in the wording: Who was in the room with the main character? These questions show that a reader is reading fluently and understanding what is going on in the text.

About The Text covers topics like author's craft, the use of cliffhangers and symbolism. Why do you think the author ends the chapter with an exciting event? These questions show if a reader is able to analyze the text from an outside perspective.

Beyond the text is far more abstract and requires the reader to relate to the story on a personal level: How would you feel if you were in the character's position? This level of questioning makes students connect characters to real life and empathize with them. It is a skill that takes not only plenty of reading but also real world experience to properly develop. [Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell](#) have developed meticulous programs outlining, developing and assessing reading ability. Their programs are widely used in schools and their assessments have become synonymous with reading fluency and comprehension.

Reading Across All Subjects

Reading is a cornerstone of all education. In each area of study students need to be able to read and write fluently in order to complete tasks, take notes, and gather information. It is not surprising that students who can read more fluently perform better overall in school. Reading fluency has also been shown to correlate to numerical fluency as well. Studies have shown a direct link between a student's reading ability and their ability to perform numerical calculations. (Balhinez and Shaul, 2019)

Reading fluency is all about a student's ability to read and understand what they are reading. It goes much more in depth than just their ability to decode and pronounce the words on a page. You can help them by simply exposing them to literature. Time should be made everyday for reading and it should not be a struggle, encourage quality materials but don't force them to read what you think they should be reading. Reading should be fun and a big part of that is they should be encouraged to pick their own reading materials.

