

Phonics and Fluency, Grade 1

Fluency

What is fluency and why is it important?

Fluency is the ability to read a text rapidly and accurately and with proper expression. The goal of reading is not to sound out words—it is to comprehend. Fluency means freedom from word-identification (decoding) problems that can interfere with comprehension while reading. The reason for teaching students how to sound out and read words is to give them a strategy for accessing words they have never encountered while reading (Adams, 1990). By second grade, many students can decode common words but still require considerable practice to develop fluency and automaticity.

Fluency also means reading with proper inflection and expression, which develops as students cluster words into phrases, and attend to phrases, text meaning, and punctuation. When reading orally, good readers read with expression. The ability to read a passage with expression is a good indication that the reader comprehends what he or she is reading. An older student who labors over each word or reads word-by-word with little inflection or expression and disregard for sentence punctuation will have problems comprehending text. Because he or she is focused on decoding, comprehension suffers. Having students repeatedly practice reading a text or providing them with good oral reading models—by reading out loud to them, having them read along with the *Listening Libraries*, or having them read with a partner—will help them improve their ability to read with proper inflection and expression.

Fluent readers are able to focus on comprehension and not on word recognition. The ease and accuracy with which they are able to decode words based on sound/spelling cues is crucial to developing fluency. Researchers who have studied decoding make the point that when a reader cannot recognize or decode a word, it is impossible for him or her to understand what the word means (Adams, 1990; Pressley, 1998). Automaticity is the bridge between decoding and comprehension. Fluency allows the reader to focus.

By Grade 2, students are increasing the fluency they began developing in Grade 1. More and more emphasis is now put on the students' ability to read with fluency. A lack of skill in decoding words directly affects students' ability to understand more complex text. This is because word recognition and comprehension compete for attention: the more effort is required to decode a word, the less attention readers have left for comprehension. When readers skip words in a text or fail to access critical words of the text, comprehension suffers (Adams, 1990).

Some of the scientific evidence supporting the concept that fluency improves comprehension includes a study of 7- to 10-year-old students who were termed "weak" readers (Tan & Nicholson, 1997). The researchers found that "weak" readers who received word recognition and fluency instruction answered more comprehension questions correctly than did those who did not receive such instruction. Other studies have confirmed that more rapid decoding—automaticity with the code—improves comprehension (Breznitz, 1997a; 1997b).

Instruction in fluency

Fluency develops with practice. When students are given specific activities designed to increase reading fluency the results can be dramatic.

Using a variety of well-proven activities, students can develop fluency. All of these activities or techniques use repeated oral readings of manageable texts. Manageable texts are generally considered any text that the student can read with about a 95% degree of accuracy (Partnership for Reading, 2001).

Difficulty Level of Text	Difficult Words	Percent of Accuracy
Independent Level	1 in 20	95%
Instructional Level	1 in 10	90%
Frustration Level	2 or more in 10	Less than 90%

1. **Model fluent reading**

Reading aloud to students provides them with a model of fluent reading. They learn about voice inflection and how it helps convey meaning. Reading aloud to students daily provides constant reinforcement in their efforts to become fluent readers. After each reading, the students should read the same text orally to the teacher or another person to practice what has been modeled for them.

2. **Reading with a recording**

Providing students with fine examples of oral reading such as in the *Listening Libraries* in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!*, accomplishes the same end as reading aloud to them. The student should read along with the recording and then orally read the same text that was read to him or her. In order to assess students' fluency, teachers should periodically listen to them read selected passages.

3. **Monitored repeated oral reading**

Research suggests that one way to help students build fluency is monitored repeated oral reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Partnership for Reading, 2001). In addition, researchers have found that young readers at all skill levels improve their fluency from an instructional level to a mastery level after just three readings of the same text (Sindelar, Monda, & O'Shea, 1990).

4. **Provide feedback**

Listening to young readers as they read orally and giving them feedback as they read helps them gain fluency by making sure the students attend to vital text cues—phrasing, punctuation, unusual text types, headings and captions, and so on. All of these help good readers read fluently.

5. **Choral reading**

In choral reading, students read as a group. This method of oral reading provides the security of the group and allows the weaker readers the support of other more fluent readers. With choral reading, it is important to make sure that students read at a normal pace and that everyone is together.

6. **Partner reading**

With partner reading, the students are paired up and read to each other. It sometimes helps to pair stronger readers with weaker readers, although this is not necessary as long as the material the students are reading is at an independent level.

At the heart of each of these methods used to improve fluency is the *repeated, oral* reading of the same text. Reading the same text three to five times helps students increase fluency from reading to reading. This helps build confidence and enables them to eventually read the text independently and with fluency. Oral reading is essential as it allows the other person—teacher, aide, parent, student partner—to hear what is being read and to help the reader when necessary.

Monitoring fluency

The process of monitoring fluency growth is fairly simple. The student reads orally for one minute. As he or she reads, the teacher notes errors. When the time limit is up, the words the student read incorrectly are counted.

Total number of words - words read incorrectly = fluency rate

As the student becomes more fluent, the number of words per minute that he or she can read with accuracy increases. On average, first graders increase in fluency about 2.10 correct words per minute per week, second graders increase about 1.46 correct words per minute per week, and third graders increase approximately 1.08 correct words per minute per week (Fuchs et al. 1993).

The chart below shows the rate in words per minute at which students should be reading with accuracy and inflection at different times of the school year beginning with second grade.

Grade	Beginning of School Year	Middle of School Year	End of School Year	Percentiles
Grade 2	79	100	117	75th percentile
	51	72	89	50th percentile
Grade 3	99	120	137	75th percentile
	71	92	107	50th percentile
Grade 4	119	139	152	75th percentile
	94	112	123	50th percentile
Grade 5	139	156	168	75th percentile
	110	127	139	50th percentile

Grade 6	153	167	177	75th percentile
	127	140	150	50th percentile

Source Adapted from Hasbrouck, J. & Tindal, G. (2005). *Oral Reading Fluency: 90 Years of Measurement* (Tech. Rep. No. 33). Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon, College of Education, Behavioral Research and Teaching.

Conclusion

The goal of all reading instruction is to help the students become confident, fluent, independent readers who comprehend what they read and continually challenge themselves to read increasingly more complex text. This cannot happen if the reader is stuck in the word identification level of reading development. Fluency practice can help students internalize decoding skills and focus their cognitive energies on deriving meaning from text.