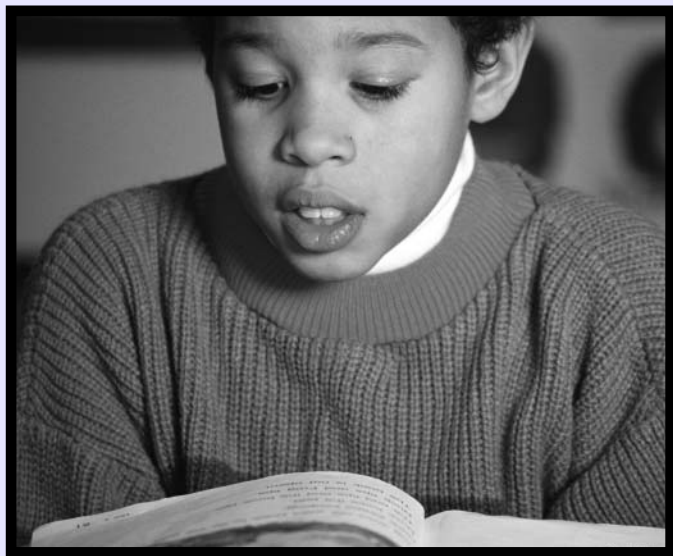


# A Focus On FLUENCY



*Editor's Note: This abridged article is the second of two installments. The first part was published in the April Special Educator. The entire document can be downloaded at [www.prel.org](http://www.prel.org). Fluency is one of the five essential components of Reading First.*

## Independent Silent Reading in the Classroom and Fluency Development

Although repeated oral reading is an effective way to provide students with reading practice in the classroom, struggling readers need many more practice opportunities than repeated readings in the classroom can provide. These are the readers who fall victim to what Stanovich (1986) calls "the Matthew effect," a Biblical reference to Matthew 25:29 - "unto everyone that hath shall be given...; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." Or, in more familiar terms, "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." As Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) explain, students who are good readers read more, get more practice, and so become better readers. However, students for whom reading is an unrewarding and difficult struggle quite naturally avoid reading. As a result, these students have less exposure to and practice with text, which leads to a delay in the development of word recognition automaticity. This delay, in turn, slows comprehension development and limits vocabulary growth.

For teachers of struggling readers, the challenge is to find additional opportunities for meaningful reading practice. To meet this challenge, teachers have long been encouraged to promote independent silent reading in the classroom by using procedures such as free-time reading, voluntary reading, Sustained Silent Reading, Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading, and Drop Everything and Read.

Because of the lack of experimental research evidence, the National Reading Panel (2000) did not endorse independent silent reading in the classroom as a way to build fluency. However, neither did it reject the practice.

Independent silent reading serves many functions in school programs, including the development of independent reading habits. Further, the Panel called for more experimental research designed to examine the role of independent silent reading in fluency development. The point to take away from the Panel's finding is that, on its own, time spent in silent reading in the classroom is not likely to lead to increases in reading fluency for the students who need the most help. For these students, silent independent reading can take away time from needed reading instruction.

The fact remains, however, that struggling readers are unlikely to make reading gains unless teachers find ways to encourage them to read more on their own, both inside and outside of school. Indeed, research about the out-of-school reading habits of students has shown that even 15 minutes a day of independent reading can expose students to more than a million words of text in a year.

What can teachers do to make independent reading time more productive for fluency development? Anderson (1990) suggests the following:

- Help students learn how to select books at appropriate reading levels and related to their interests. Make book selection a part of the regular reading group activity.
- After silent reading, set aside time for students to discuss what they read.
- Have students recommend books to each other.
- Involve parents and other family members by giving them tips on how to read with their children.

## Integrated Fluency Instruction

One promising intervention, Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI), combines the research-based practices of repeated, assisted reading with independent silent reading within a three-part classroom program. The three components are a reading lesson that includes teacher-led, repeated oral reading and partner reading, a free reading period at school, and home reading. This intervention has produced a gain of almost two years in the reading performance of 2nd grade students.

Of course students, particularly beginning and older struggling readers, need exposure to good literature and to the varied vocabulary that it contains. To build their fluency, however, these students may also need practice reading texts that will allow them to develop a large sight word vocabulary and to increase their confidence as readers to the point where they can tackle more difficult selections.

Some researchers argue that to build fluency, students should practice orally re-reading text that is reasonably easy for them - that is, text that contains mostly words that they know or that they can decode easily. These texts are at the students' independent reading level. A text is at students' independent reading level if they can read it with about 95% accuracy.

Other researchers, however, argue that the instructional approaches that have been most successful in building fluency involve students reading text at their instructional level - containing mostly words that students know or that they can decode easily - or even at the frustration level, if they have strong guidance and feedback.

Independent Level Text	Instructional Level Text	Frustration Level Text
Relatively easy text for the reader, with no more than approximately 1 in 20 words difficult for the reader (95% success)	Challenging but manageable text for the reader, with no more than approximately 1 in 10 words difficult for the reader (90% success)	Problematic text for the reader, with more than 1 in 10 words difficult for the reader (less than 90% success)

To determine whether students' fluency growth is increasing at a normal rate, the teacher compares their scores with published oral reading fluency norms. Teachers can use these norms as benchmarks as they establish beginning-of-the-school-year baseline information about the fluency of their students. They can also refer to the norms during the school year as they work with students to increase their reading fluency.

### Oral Reading Fluency Norms

Grade	Percentile	Fall WCPM	Winter WCPM	Spring WCPM
2	75	82	106	124
	50	53	78	94
	25	23	46	65
3	75	107	123	142
	50	79	93	114
	25	65	70	87
4	75	125	133	143
	50	99	112	118
	25	72	89	92
5	75	126	143	151
	50	105	118	128
	25	77	93	100

(50th percentile for upper grades: 125-150 WCPM)

Note. From "Curriculum-Based Oral Reading Fluency Norms for Students in Grades 2 Through 5," by J. Hasbrouck and G. Tindal, 1992, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 24, p. 42. Copyright 1992 by The Council for Exceptional Children. Reprinted with permission.

## Determining Reading Fluency

Teachers can use both informal and formal assessments to determine individual students' levels of fluency and to gauge their progress in fluency development. For both types of assessment, teachers can assemble a set of passages from the grade level materials used in the classroom or they can use commercially published packages of practice passages.

Informal fluency assessment can begin as early as the second semester of 1st grade, with teachers listening to students read and recording students' rate and accuracy, as well as making judgments about their performance. More formal assessments usually begin at the start of 2nd grade, with teachers administering reading fluency assessments to establish baseline data for each student. This baseline data is usually the number of words read correctly in a grade-level passage in one minute. Teachers may also record the number and type of errors. Throughout the year, teachers may use fluency assessments on a regular basis to help them evaluate student progress and set instructional goals.

To conduct an informal assessment, the teacher has each student read aloud a passage that he or she has not read previously, but that is at the student's independent reading level. As the student reads, the teacher records information about word recognition errors, rate of reading, and use of expression. To check comprehension, the teacher asks the student to read the passage silently and to then answer several questions about it.

More formal assessment of a student's oral reading involves timed readings of grade-level passages. In a typical timed reading, a student reads an unpracticed grade-level passage for one minute. The teacher follows along in a copy of the passage and marks with a slash any errors the student makes. The teacher counts substitutions, mispronunciations, omissions, reversals, and hesitations for more than three seconds as errors. Insertions and repetitions are not counted as errors because the extra time required for students to add words or to repeat words increases the total reading time.

At the end of one minute, the teacher determines the student's reading fluency level by taking the total number of words read in one minute and subtracting the number of errors (only one error per word is counted). The words correct per minute (WCPM) represents the student's fluency score. For example, if a 1st grade student reads 53 words in a minute and makes 7 errors, the student has a fluency score of 46 WCPM. More accurate fluency scores can be obtained when teachers use the average of two or three fluency readings from three different passages. The results can be placed on a graph to show a student's reading fluency growth over time.

In setting fluency goals for students, teachers need to remember that fluency is not just speed and accuracy, but speed and accuracy to support comprehension. Educators also need to be careful that they do not overinterpret the norms, especially with regard to English Language Learners.

## Conclusion

Without question, fluency is an essential component of successful reading - the failure of students to become fluent readers can have repercussions throughout their lives. The need for instruction that helps students to achieve fluency is clear and unequivocal. However, in spite of its importance, fluency is only one aspect of reading, and students also need instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension to become successful readers. Indeed, some researchers found that too much attention to fluency in a reading lesson could detract from reading comprehension. Instructional procedures to improve fluency can produce important results, but they appear to do so as one part of a reading program, not as stand-alone interventions. ■