



WHITE PAPER

# Fluency

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# WHAT IS READING FLUENCY?

Reading fluency refers to a combination of an individual's "accuracy, automaticity, and oral reading prosody, which, taken together, facilitate the reader's construction of meaning," (Kuhn et al., 2010, p. 240). Evidence demonstrates that reading fluency is an essential component for successful reading comprehension (Kim, 2015; NICHD, 2000). Fluent reading is characterized by the following attributes:

- *Accuracy*: the reader can decode the words on the page correctly
- *Prosody*: the expression used when reading, including intonation, pauses, and phrasing
- *Appropriate Rate*: reading at a rate that is not too slow or too fast.

Breakdowns in any of these three skills can decrease comprehension of written text.



# WHY IS FLUENCY IMPORTANT?



Fluency is necessary for comprehension (Stevens et al., 2017). The three components of fluency – accuracy, prosody, and rate – each contribute to the reading process and help students make meaning from connected text. Without high levels of accuracy when reading individual words, students have a harder time deriving meaning from text. Prosody - phrasing and expression when reading - also supports comprehension of text (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010). As students read difficult text, they increase the use of phrasing and expression to support their comprehension of the text. Reading smoothly and at an appropriate pace or rate indicates that a student has developed some automaticity and is able to retrieve previously learned words effortlessly. When less effort is required to stop and decode words, more attention and effort can be shifted to making meaning of text. If a reader is using their attention primarily on figuring out the words, then the reader cannot focus on understanding what is happening in the text as easily (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Stevens et al., 2017). This blend of skills, reading with appropriate accuracy, prosody, and rate, when mastered, increases reading comprehension.

# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN FLUENCY BREAKS DOWN?

“Fluency is necessary, but not solely sufficient, for understanding the meaning of text. When children read too slowly or haltingly, the text devolves into a broken string of words and/or phrases; it's a struggle just to remember what's been read, much less extract its meaning,” (Hasbrouck, 2008, para. 2). Dysfluent readers will read with significant pauses – usually to sound out unknown words or spelling patterns – and reading will sound ‘choppy’. This is sometimes referred to by teachers as ‘robot reading’. Conversely, fluent readers will read with a pace, phrasing, and prosody that sounds much more like talking. When fluency breaks down, it is important to determine if the student has an underlying difficulty in decoding and with which subcomponent skills.

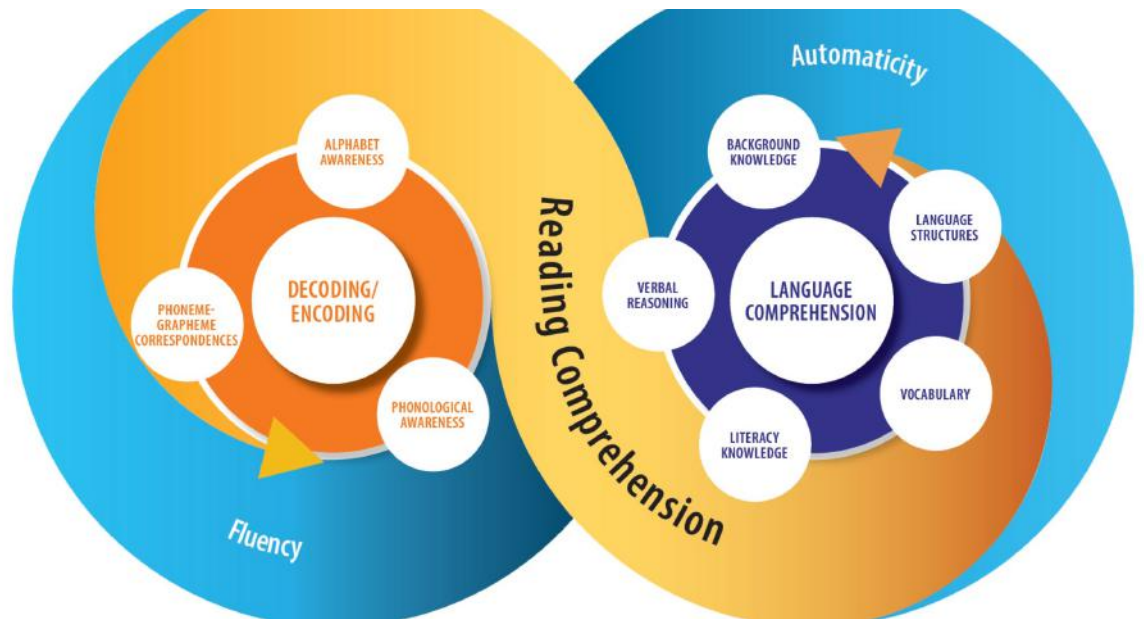


# HOW ARE FLUENCY SKILLS MEASURED?

Research supports the use of a simple one-minute assessment of students' automaticity (accuracy and rate) as an accurate indicator of a student's overall reading ability (Hasbrouck, 2006; NICHD, 2000). Quick assessments measuring words-correct-per-minute (WCPM), often called oral reading fluency (ORF), can be administered as often as needed as a screening or progress monitoring task. Accuracy is assessed by having students read a new passage while the teacher notes errors and records the number of words read correctly in one minute. Prosody is often assessed with rubrics that help students and teachers reflect on the pauses, intonation, and expression students use when reading.



# HOW SHOULD WE TEACH FLUENCY?



Fluency is necessary for comprehension (Stevens et al., 2017). The three components of fluency – accuracy, prosody, and rate – each contribute to the reading process and help students make meaning from connected text. Without high levels of accuracy when reading individual words, students have a harder time deriving meaning from text. Prosody - phrasing and expression when reading - also supports comprehension of text (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010). As students read difficult text, they increase the use of phrasing and expression to support their comprehension of the text. Reading smoothly and at an appropriate pace or rate indicates that a student has developed some automaticity and is able to retrieve previously learned words effortlessly. When less effort is required to stop and decode words, more attention and effort can be shifted to making meaning of text. If a reader is using their attention primarily on figuring out the words, then the reader cannot focus on understanding what is happening in the text as easily (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Stevens et al., 2017). This blend of skills, reading with appropriate accuracy, prosody, and rate, when mastered, increases reading comprehension.

# WHAT EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES CAN I USE TO IMPROVE FLUENCY?

Teachers should first determine if the student has an underlying difficulty in decoding by using a decoding inventory. Students who are still working on learning phonics skills will benefit from explicit and systematic phonics instruction in addition to practice reading connected text using the strategies listed below. Once requisite foundational skills are established, students can continue to improve fluency skills through a variety of instructional activities.

**Repeated readings.** Repeated reading routines include reading a passage multiple times, practicing a poem or play for a performance, or listening to a fluent version of the text before rereading. Repeated readings help students to develop fluency (Stevens et al., 2017). Many researchers have noted greater fluency gains when students, given sufficient support and monitoring, participate in repeated readings of challenging texts that are on or above grade level (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Stahl & Heubach, 2005).

**Wide reading.** Wide reading, which refers to reading a variety of texts spanning genres and structures, can also improve fluency for students who have well-established foundational skills. Wide reading may also lead to improvements in vocabulary and comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). However, evidence indicates that independent silent reading, an often-practiced strategy in many classrooms, is an ineffective practice for students with reading and especially fluency difficulties (NICHD, 2000).

**Paired reading.** Paired reading routines include reading with a partner and assisted reading or reading with a teacher who reads slightly quicker than the student. One possible routine involves scaffolding support through multiple rereads. First, the teacher models reading the text fluently. Then, the teacher provides support while the students practice reading the same passage or text with a partner. The teacher draws attention to meaningful phrases, and guides students in the provision of meaningful feedback including error corrections (Stevens et al., 2017). Evidence supports the use of paired reading routines as a means of improving student fluency (Musti-Rao et al., 2009; Yurick et al., 2006).



# CONCLUSION

Fluency has been called the “bridge between decoding and reading comprehension” because it is so important to students’ ability to understand texts (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Fluency not only facilitates comprehension, but it also serves as a quick way to screen students for reading difficulties and can be improved through classroom instruction. Through assessing fluency, teachers gain valuable information that they can use to support students’ reading development.



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