

What to Assess

Because fluency lays the groundwork for comprehension and reading motivation, it is important for us to understand what fluency is and how to best assess it, as well as teach it. Fluency has been defined as “reasonably accurate reading, at an appropriate rate, with suitable expression, that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read” (Hasbrouck and Glaser, 2012). Most fluency assessments focus one or all of the three elements above: accuracy, rate, and expression.

- When a reader reads accurately, they are able to identify regular and irregular words quickly and efficiently.
- When a reader reads at an appropriate rate, they read at a rate that allows them to comprehend well, neither too quickly nor too slowly to make meaning of the words on the page.
- When a reader reads with expression they read with a pitch, tone, emphasis, and rhythm that orally conveys the meaning of the words being read.

All three of these elements of fluency are interrelated, but often when we assess fluency we use short timed measures that *only* focus on rate, and can mistakenly lead us to believe that reading fast means reading better. A more robust and nuanced approach to fluency assessment recognizes that rate is not *simply* about speed, and that accuracy and expression are as important elements of fluency as rate. In short, we need to pay attention to all three elements of fluency—accuracy, rate, and expression—in our fluency assessment practice. We also have to make sure that we are connecting our fluency assessment and instruction to the ultimate goal of reading: comprehension. And not making fluency a goal in and of itself, but a means to the kind of coordinated reading that fosters comprehension.

Ways to Assess

Basically, there are four common types of fluency assessment:

1. Standardized Benchmark and Progress Monitoring Assessments

Standardized benchmark assessments, such as those available are usually used two or three times a year to make sure children’s fluency growth matches that of children at the same grade level. Standardized progress monitoring assessments, in contrast, are used more frequently at regular intervals to track children’s growth in fluency, often in the context of an RTI model, with a tiered intervention. Some common forms of benchmark and progress monitoring assessments for fluency are DIBELS, AIMSweb, and i-ready.

2. Informal Assessments

These are assessments that exist outside of a systematic program or curriculum and generally assess elements of fluency related to accuracy and expression, but may also sometimes, like more standardized fluency assessments, be used to assess reading rate. For this reason, administration of these assessments should not be limited to benchmark assessment periods (typically 3 times per year), and should instead be

utilized anytime teachers need to check in on a child's fluency—provided the information is actually informing the planning and delivery of instruction. Some informal assessments we recommend are:

Informal Observational Assessments

Informal fluency assessments are based on close observation of children's reading behaviors, and while the format of the assessments differ, they are all similar in that they require the teacher to listen very closely to how a child is reading, including intonation.

- **Anecdotal Notes on Fluency**

The teacher listens to a child read and takes notes on the child's accuracy, rate of reading, and expression. This assessment is useful when listening to an individual child read during small group instruction when you may not have time to do a formal running record.

- **Running Records**

After the teacher listens to a child read a passage and records their error patterns, they also pay attention to the child's phrasing, smoothness, pace, and expression. Sometimes, a rubric is then used by the teacher to think about what they have noticed about the child's fluency, and what it may be good to focus on next for supporting the child's fluency development. Follow up questions or prompts to better understand their comprehension, such as "Tell me more about..." or "What happened next?". Sometimes a rubric is then used by the teacher to think about the child's approach to understanding the passage, and what it may be good to focus on next for supporting the child's comprehension development.

- **CLI Guided Reading Behaviors Checklists**

Divided by reading level, these check lists cover the kinds of fluency behaviors, strategies, and skills associated with different levels. These checklists/assessments can help determine what fluency behaviors, strategies, and skills are particularly useful to know at what levels, as well as what you may need to directly teach children to help them manage a new text level.

- **The Listening to Reading--Watching Writing Protocol (LTR--WWWP)**

In this informal assessment developed by the reading researcher, Nell Duke and colleagues, the teacher listens to a child read aloud or watches them write to observe various literacy skills, including fluency. The assessment contains a highly useful multidimensional fluency scale to help teachers analyze the fluency related behaviors, strategies, and skills they have observed a child using.

3. Informal Reading Inventories

These tests—in which a teacher records children's miscues as they read a passage aloud—often include a fluency rubric for analyzing children's phrasing, pace, and expression. Similar to running records, these assessments differ in that they come with matched texts and pre-written comprehension questions, which can be both useful and limiting, depending on the context in which they are used and interpreted.

Examples of these type of assessments are the [DRA](#) and the [Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment](#).

4. Assessments Embedded in Curriculum

Sometimes curriculum comes with fluency assessments that match the level of texts in the curriculum, and use passages for fluency related to the topics and texts in the curriculum.

Considerations for Administering Fluency Assessments to ELL/MLL's

Adapt an approach to assessment that recognizes the richness of multilingual children's linguistic repertoires: If a child reads in their home language use fluency assessments in their home language as well as English, and, if the child is new to English, provide directions for English fluency assessments in the child's home language yourself or through an interpreter.

Use a multifaceted approach that includes informal assessments, as well as standardized assessments: Taking a multifaceted approach to assessment is important for all children, but it is particularly important for multilingual children, whose broad linguistic repertoires and depth of comprehension may not be readily apparent on singular, standardized, English-only assessments. Any of the types of informal assessments listed above can be combined with more formal and standardized forms of assessment to create a more multidimensional approach to assessment for multilingual learners, as well as their monolingual classmates

Investigate the design of the assessments being given and how they are being interpreted:

- Investigate whether the assessments are advertised as being developed for student populations that include ELL/MLLs.
- Ask about available assessments in children's home languages.
- Because a child's general English proficiency will likely impact their performance on any assessment of comprehension in English, be aware of data that come from English proficiency assessments, such as those offered by WIDA.
- When assessments are developed for native English speakers, the language, images, or task in an assessment may be unfamiliar to a child, so learn to notice such bias, and the ways in which it can interfere with children showing us what they know and are able to do.
- Be prepared to reassess children, as some ELLs who have had prior English instruction may not perform as well as they could on initial assessments for various reasons, such as differences in the assessor's dialect or rate of speech.

Interpreting Fluency Assessments and Using Them to Inform Instruction

Understand the multidimensional nature of fluency and the complexity of measuring it: Because fluency depends on many sub skills and other areas of literacy, including, but not limited to, decoding, vocabulary, and background knowledge—e.g., if we know a lot about baseball it is much more likely that we can read a passage about baseball fluently—a “below average” score on a fluency assessment can mean many things, that we as educators need to think about. We need to consider whether the fluency assessment is biased, whether the child was not familiar with the topic covered in the fluency assessment, whether, perhaps, the child's needs more support with decoding, word recognition, vocabulary, or phrasing in order to read more fluently, whether the child can read fluently in an easier lower-level passage than the one on the assessment. In other words, a “below average” fluency assessment

should not lead us to label a child “disfluent”, rather it should lead us to ask, in the most thoughtful way possible, why the assessment came out the way it did, and what we can do to support the child’s fluency development.

Communicating about assessment results: Be careful to communicate to families that many sources of information are important when it comes to looking at the entire picture of reading development. One source of data, like a single standardized fluency assessment, does not define their overall ability as a reader. The knowledge, mindsets, and dispositions about reading that a child **already brings** to the journey of early literacy learning is crucial, as is their development in identifiable areas of literacy such as fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and decoding. Speaking in friendly and accessible language about reading development will be helpful as families learn to understand where a child is and where they are headed.

When we define a child’s reading development too narrowly or specifically, we are in danger of labeling children and then potentially communicating to families about children’s literacy journey with a deficit approach. A focus on strengths in our communication—what the child already knows, and what children will learn **next**— is critical. The emphasis should be on the instruction the child will receive to gain skills, instead of on the child’s responsibility to learn skills to catch up with others.

- **Instead of:** *Dominic reads disfluently. He needs to work on learning how to read more fluently in order to meet the benchmark for third grade at this point in the year.*
- **Try:** *Dominic loves to read informational texts and fiction about the ocean. He eagerly contributes ideas and questions to our discussions about ocean-related books. He also enjoys partner reading ocean-related books out loud, with friends, and is working on rereading short sections of his favorite books to practice fluency--reading smoothly, with expression at a reasonable rate. He may enjoy partner reading at home, and can be encouraged to re-read books he particularly likes to keep developing his fluency.*

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