

Fluency is defined as the ability to read words accurately, smoothly, and with expression. It is a bridge between word recognition and comprehension; fluency allows readers to make meaning from a text “on the run.” By listening to a child’s oral reading fluency, we can learn information that immediately informs our instruction. This overview of the *what*, *why*, and *how* of fluency instruction:

- Values fluency as a foundational skill for learning to read
- Takes a culturally relevant-sustaining approach to the teaching of fluency, which considers how the home language, cultures, identities, and interests of children are relevant to and integrated into our teaching of fluency
- Recognizes that the fluency instruction is one aspect of literacy that must be taught alongside of—and connected to—other areas of literacy learning

What Are the Elements of Reading Fluency?

- **Accuracy** is the ability to read the words in the text as they are written. The goal of accurate reading is automatic and effortless word recognition—no decoding, no word solving, just reading.
- **Rate** is the speed at which a person reads text. The goal is for the reader to have the ability to read the text at the appropriate speed, and to determine what is appropriate based on the nature of the text.
- **Phrasing** is the ability to group words together as in normal speech, pausing appropriately between phrases, clauses, and sentences. Phrasing requires readers to read texts in meaningful chunks, paying attention to prepositions and punctuation.
- **Expression** is the ability to read words in text with the appropriate stress and intonation. It’s often called “reading with feeling.” Prosody, the defining feature of expressive reading, requires proficiency in all the variables that speakers use to help convey aspects of meaning and to make their speech lively: timing, phrasing, emphasis, and intonation.

While these four elements traditionally encompass what “fluent” reading looks like, we must be cautious in defining a child only in terms of these four elements. For example, people of color have historically developed “fluency” in “reading” social contexts and environments—temperaments and moods of people. This way of “reading” is a skill that needs to be counted as a demonstration of reading (Muhammad, 2020). It is dangerous to define any child’s reading ability by a limited number of skills.

Speaking of what’s “counted” in terms of measures of fluency, we must recognize how the text children are being asked to read affects their oral reading fluency, and therefore their performance on an assessment. Because fluency is so intricately connected to word recognition skills, oral reading expression (prosody), and text comprehension, fluency can be very context-specific. That is to say, a child may be more fluent in one text over another. For this reason, when a child appears to read “disfluently,” particularly children developing English language proficiency, all the components of the reading process need to be explored and understood to get at the root of why a child may not be fluent with a particular text (Montero and Kuhn, 2016). This exploration must include whether or not they are being given texts to read are of interest to them and are reflective of their identities.

Why is Fluency Critical to Reading Development?

Fluency is intricately connected to other areas of literacy learning. Phonological awareness is the process by which readers start understanding how sounds make up words and phonics is the understanding of how letters and sounds are connected. Early literacy skills like these lead directly into the process of decoding. The more skilled a reader is with decoding, the more fluent they become. As fluency increases, so does the reader’s ability to comprehend what they are reading. When readers no longer have to think about every sound and letter and can, instead, read with automaticity, their brains can attend to meaning. Fluency, supported by phonemic awareness and phonics, is vital to reading comprehension.

Conversely, a lack of fluent reading behaviors, referred to as disfluency, can affect a reader’s motivation and comprehension. When a child’s reading slows down periodically, it is difficult for them to make meaning from the text because so much of their mental energy is devoted to deciphering words. Reading can become a labored, tedious task that is almost completely devoid of meaning, satisfaction, and enjoyment. If reading consistently takes so much work, children will understandably not persist through text, and not be motivated to read in the first place.

How Can We Support the Development of Fluency?

» Read to children

Reading aloud allows children to hear what fluent reading sounds like. While reading to children, we model and explicitly teach what it takes to read accurately, at an appropriate rate, and with good phrasing and expression. The books we are reading aloud to children must be representative of their home languages, cultures, and communities. Consider having children make and read their own bilingual books based on their own experiences—this can be especially supportive of fluency as children are often able to expressively read words and sentences they wrote themselves and have meaning to them.

» Provide supported practice

This experience lets children feel what it's like to apply fluency skills. Having children read repetitive lines in text together or share a rhyming poem helps them get a feel for rhythm and patterns. Other supportive practices for developing fluency include reading while listening, where children listen repeatedly to a recording of text while reading along, until they are able to read the material on their own with fluency. Visual supports in the texts will further support English learners in using this strategy, which simultaneously exposes children to oral and written language in an engaging and interesting manner.

» Incorporate activities for performing reading

When children are able to perform reading through readers theater or other performance styles, they have an opportunity to demonstrate expression in different ways. Oral story-telling, for example, which may not include reading from a script, is another form of literacy that can be particularly joyful and evident of a child's ability to fluently express ideas and storylines. A broader view of literacy encompasses the multiple ways literacy can look in context, and honors the community wisdom and cultural traditions of the diverse group of children in our classroom. Performance reading of all kinds is often a joyful experience for children—particularly when the performance celebrates a part of who they are. Joy in instruction is critical to engagement and motivation, which is fundamental to reading development.

» Give children time to read

Children should read often. When they read and reread texts, they gain fluency and are able to read smoothly with each repeated reading. This reading time also enhances motivation. By extending independent reading time to encompass these various ways of reading—alone and in collaboration, with a new text or a beloved familiar text, silently and out loud—we send the message that there are many enjoyable ways to read, and that how we become fluent readers in our second language or our first language can be approached in a variety of ways (Montero and Kuhn, 2016).

» Articulate the significance of fluent reading

Fluency, one foundational reading skill, is a means to becoming the readers children are capable of becoming. Children must understand that these skills are relevant and useful in their lives so that they can express themselves, gain knowledge, analyze texts and the world around them, and make a difference in the lives of others. In other words—connecting the dots between fluency and reading, reading and writing, and literacy and opportunity is crucial for children. Connected to this is the idea that the learning of foundational skills must be balanced with time spent on other areas of literacy learning like comprehension, building knowledge and intellect, and criticality.

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Fluency Instruction

An Overview

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