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PRE-K-6



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# Fundamentals of Literacy Instruction & Assessment, Pre-K-6

## Second Edition

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and

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# 11 Fluency Instruction

Jan Hasbrouck and Martha C. Hougen

*I don't get it. Sam knows all his letters and sounds and can read almost any word in the second-grade books. But he doesn't seem to understand what he reads, even though his listening comprehension is on grade level. I have noticed that he reads very slowly, probably because he wants to be accurate. It seems to take forever for him to finish one sentence! How can I help Sam?*

This teacher has aptly described a student, Sam, who may have problems with his reading fluency. Reading fluency is the ability to read accurately at a rate that mirrors speech, with expression and comprehension. Sam may have other reading challenges that the teacher should investigate, but lack of reading fluency appears to be Sam's biggest obstacle. This chapter provides an overview about fluency and how to help students like Sam.

## WHAT IS READING FLUENCY? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Reading fluency has long been considered an essential skill that must be developed by readers to facilitate the comprehension of what has been read and to motivate engagement in the act of reading. The concept of reading fluency has been discussed in professional literacy circles since 1886 (Huey, 1908/1968).

Since the 1970s, there has been a flurry of research about fluency and its relationship to comprehension (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, & Thompson, 2011). It has been confirmed that the human brain has

**OBJECTIVES** After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Identify and define the three primary components of reading fluency.
2. Explain why it is important for students to learn to become fluent readers.
3. Explain this statement: "Teaching students to read faster is not the answer."
4. Explain the role that both accuracy and rate play in helping students to comprehend text.
5. Explain how the statement "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer" relates to reading fluency.
6. Describe the different levels of text: independent, instructional, and frustration.
7. Explain the use of CBMs, including ORF assessments, for benchmark testing, universal screening, and progress monitoring.
8. Identify and explain four instructional strategies to improve students' reading fluency.

the capacity to perform tasks, such as reading, at an automatic, nearly unconscious level once sufficient learning has occurred (Dehaene, 2009, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017). Readers who have achieved automaticity, immediately and effortlessly recognizing words in print, can allocate their cognitive processes (thinking) to the meaning of what is being read rather than thinking about how to decode the words. When readers have to devote a significant amount of their cognitive resources to simply decoding and recognizing words, the cognitive resources available for paying attention and for processing information are limited, resulting in impaired comprehension. Therefore, it is important that students become fluent readers, reading text with minimal effort so that they can concentrate on the meaning of the text.

Many reading professionals refer to the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (NICHD, 2000) as being a modern watershed in terms of reading fluency. In the section on fluency the report stated: “Fluency is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension. Despite its importance as a component of skilled reading, fluency is often neglected in the classroom” (NICHD, 2000, p. 11). This strongly worded proclamation was a wake-up call to educators to learn more about the importance of fluency and how to provide instruction in the classroom. New research completed since the publication of the *Report of the National Reading Panel* confirms the importance of fluency to support comprehension (Foorman et al., 2016).

### Defining Reading Fluency

Although reading fluency has been a topic of discussion and a focus for research for over a century, there are still many questions surrounding the definition of the term, in part because fluency has many subtle components that are interdependent and therefore difficult to separate (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). Although there may not be a firm consensus on a single definition of reading fluency, most definitions include three components: **accuracy, rate, and expression** (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2019; Schwanenflugel & Benjamin, 2017).

The skills or mechanics needed for fluent reading depend upon the development of basic skills in word-decoding, text-decoding, and comprehension fluency skills. Figure 11.1 illustrates the mechanics (skills) of fluency (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2019; Hudson et al., 2009).

Fluency is reading with reasonable accuracy, appropriate rate, and suitable expression.

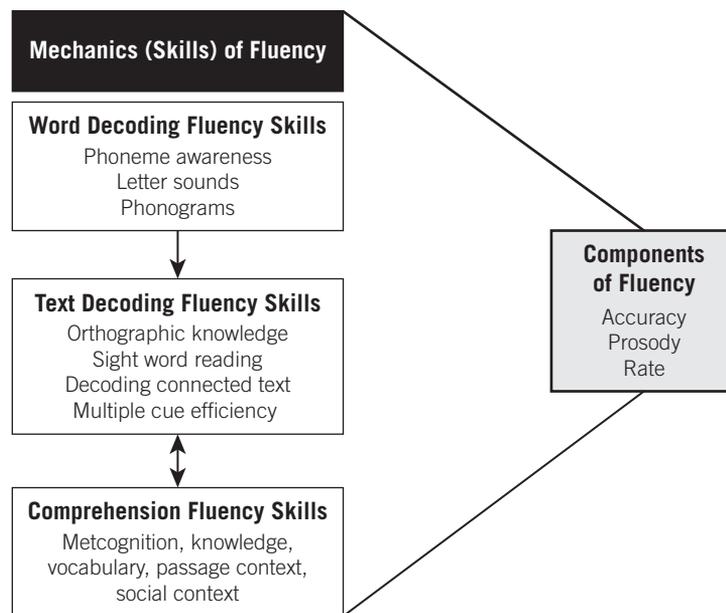


Figure 11.1. The mechanics (skills) of fluency. Source: Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2019; Hudson et al., 2009.

### Accuracy

The first essential component of fluent reading is accuracy. In fact, accuracy may be considered to be the foundation of fluency. For the reader to understand what is being read, the text must be read with a certain level of accuracy, reading words correctly as they appear in the text. We do not know exactly how accurately a reader must read to obtain adequate or even minimal comprehension. However, there seems to be general consensus that comprehension is impaired when text is read with less than 95% accuracy. This means students should be able to correctly read at least 95 out of every 100 words when they are reading on their own (Rasinski et al., 2011). Fluent readers should read text at an appropriate rate for the task while maintaining a reasonable level of accuracy.

### Rate

Reading rate is sometimes mistakenly used as a synonym for fluency, but rate technically refers only to the speed with which students read text. Most teachers have had experience with students who read quickly but do not have good comprehension. Speed alone is not sufficient to facilitate comprehension, and a fast reader is not necessarily a fluent reader. In fact, fast readers may be reading inaccurately, or perhaps are reading too quickly to think about what they are reading. The rate or speed at which text is decoded and identified is clearly one aspect of fluency. Some teachers encourage their students to “read as fast as they can”—this is *not* good practice. Rather, students should be encouraged to do their “best reading.” The goal is that the student’s best reading will be as effortless as speaking (Stahl & Kuhn, 2002). This is addressed further in this chapter in the section on instructional strategies to improve fluency.

### Expression

There is one additional component that is commonly considered a characteristic of a fluent reader: the ability to read with appropriate expression. Sometimes, expression is referred to as *prosody*, a component of expression (Schwanenflugel & Benjamin, 2017). Expression refers to the pitch, tone, volume, emphasis, and rhythm in speech or oral reading. Readers who read with expression “chunk” words together into appropriate phrases. There is far less research on the contributions of expression to comprehension than has been conducted on accuracy and rate, but emerging findings suggest there is some relationship. At this point, it is unclear whether good expression is a cause or an outcome of comprehension or if the relationship is in fact reciprocal. However, the extent to which a student uses correct expression while reading orally indicates how well a student comprehends the text (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). If you do not know what you are reading about, it is difficult to phrase the words appropriately and to emphasize the correct words to obtain meaning.

## What the Research Says About the Role of Reading Fluency in Literacy

As the NRP report made clear, reading fluency is an essential component of reading because it is necessary for comprehension (NICHD, 2000). The ultimate goal of reading is to understand what has been read. To understand the role that fluency plays in reading comprehension, it is helpful to know how the brain processes information.

The human brain processes information (such as the visual images of printed text) using a complex, interconnected system that begins with working memory (Miyake & Shah, 1999). The working memory of the brain temporarily stores and manages information that will be used to complete the complex cognitive tasks involved in learning, reasoning, and comprehending. Scientists acknowledge that individual brains differ in their function and capacity. However, the models of working memory embrace the idea that in order to function, all brains need to process information in a manner that is manageable (Dehaene, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017). If too much information comes into the brain at once, the working memory becomes overloaded and comprehension is impaired. Conversely, if information comes into the brain too slowly, the working memory cannot devote sufficient attention to the information to identify a pattern or see a relationship to prior learning (Dehaene, 2009; Miyake & Shah, 1999; Montgomery, 2002).

**Table 11.1.** Levels of text difficulty

Independent-level text	The reader makes no more than one error in 20 words (95% and higher accuracy) and shows good comprehension.
Instructional-level text	The reader has 90%–94% accuracy and satisfactory comprehension. This type of text is used with teacher or peer support and is appropriate for fluency practice.
Frustration-level text	The reader makes more than one error per 10 words, less than 90% accuracy, and shows poor comprehension. Do not require students to read at this level.

From Betts, E. A. (1946). *Foundations of reading instruction, with emphasis on differentiated guidance*. New York, NY: American Book Company.

Because of this, a rate of reading that is appropriate to the task (neither too fast nor too slow) must be utilized by the reader in order for comprehension to be facilitated. Of course, the brain must process information accurately for accurate comprehension to occur. **Thus, comprehension is impaired or limited by reading too fast, too slowly, or inaccurately and is facilitated by reading at an appropriate rate for the task with reasonable accuracy. In other words, fluent reading assists comprehension.**

Reading at a rate appropriate to the task acknowledges that we read different types of material at different rates depending on the difficulty of the text (see Table 11.1). Think of how quickly you read a novel with a great story. Compare that to how you might read a physics text. Most of us read the novel quickly and accurately, without thinking about decoding individual words. In contrast, if you are not knowledgeable about physics and you are reading a physics textbook, you are likely to read much slower, taking time to decode difficult words and to contemplate their meanings.

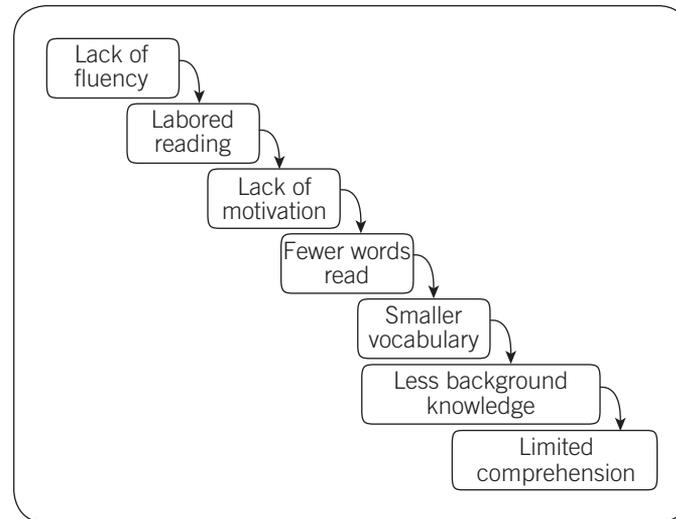
Another way that poor fluency skills can impede comprehension has to do with what Stanovich referred to as the “Matthew effect” (Stanovich, 1986, 2009). The term refers to a biblical verse in the Gospel of Matthew describing the phenomenon in which it seems that in life the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Stanovich applied this concept to struggling readers, who early on in the process of learning to read begin to lag behind their peers, and throughout the subsequent years often fall even further behind, in part because they simply are reading far less text. The good readers get “richer” because they are reading significantly more text than their less capable peers and thus deepening their decoding and word-recognition skills and increasing their vocabulary. Stanovich and colleagues also found that the act of reading helps create motivated or “avid” readers, and they even go so far as to state that their data indicates that those who read a lot enhance their verbal intelligence—that is, reading actually makes them smarter! (Baer, Kutner, & Sabatini, 2009; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).

Figure 11.2 illustrates the vicious cycle that occurs when students struggle with fluency. When students do not read fluently, they read less and often struggle to comprehend what they read. Reading fluently with comprehension depends on fluent and accurate decoding of words, enabling fluent reading of connected text.

It is helpful to think of fluency as a link in a chain connecting beginning decoding skills and comprehension skills (see Figure 11.3). Fluent reading enables students to link from word-by-word decoding to being able to read with automaticity and to concentrate on the meaning of the text.

If readers do not develop adequate levels of fluency, the chain link will break, and the student may not decode accurately and quickly enough to adequately understand what he or she is reading. These students typically become our reluctant readers, often with dire consequences for themselves, their families, and society (Wayman, Wallace, Wiley, & Tichá Espin, 2007).

It has been noted that the role of fluency changes across the developmental stages of reading. For emergent readers, the **accuracy** of reading, rather than the rate, should be the focus. Accuracy plays the most important role in comprehending in kindergarten and early first grade. Once students are reading connected text with reasonable accuracy—typically by the middle of first grade—the **accuracy and the rate** of their reading is strongly tied to their overall reading skill, including comprehension (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp et al., 2001). Some researchers have noted that once a student’s reading level is



**Figure 11.2.** The vicious cycle. From Dale, E. (1965). Vocabulary measurement: techniques and major findings. *Elementary English*, 42, 895–901.

around the sixth-grade level, factors other than fluency, such as vocabulary and background knowledge, become more important in the overall reading process (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001).

## WHAT SHOULD STUDENTS KNOW AND BE ABLE TO DO AT SPECIFIC GRADE LEVELS?

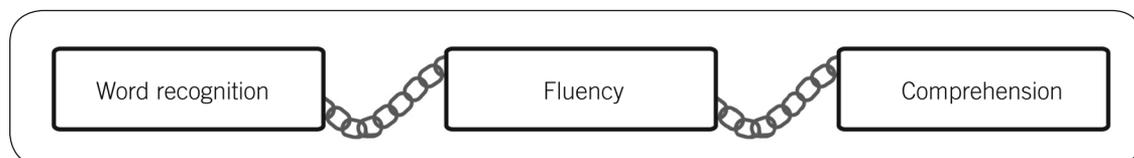
The CCSS describe the following fluency expectations of students:

### Kindergarten

- Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding. (For kindergarten students, the CCSS recommends using text that contains only pretaught or easily decodable words.)

### Grades 1–5:

- Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.
- Read grade-level text with purpose and understanding.
- Read grade-level text orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression.
- Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary (CCSS ELA-Literacy.RF). Note that the fluency expectations for students in Grades 1–5 are identical. What changes from grade to grade is the sophistication and grade level of the text. (NGA & CCSSO, 2010)



**Figure 11.3.** Fluency is the link between word recognition and comprehension.

## HOW DO WE ASSESS READING FLUENCY?

It should be clear from the information presented so far that assisting students to become fluent readers also plays an important role in helping them become motivated readers who enjoy the process of reading and who can learn from what they read. The process of assisting all students to become fluent readers logically starts with identifying which students are already sufficiently fluent and which students would benefit from fluency instruction or intervention. Stahl and Kuhn suggested that when fluent readers read aloud, their reading mirrors their speech in rate, accuracy, and expression (Stahl & Kuhn, 2002). In other words, when fluent readers read text aloud, it sounds as smooth and effortless as their speech.

This implies that simply listening to students read text aloud might be a way to start the process of identifying fluent and dysfluent students. In addition to this initial and informal assessment, there are assessment tools available for teachers to systematically and objectively identify students at various levels of need for assistance with reading fluency, which are discussed in the paragraphs that follow. Teachers who are responsible for teaching students to become successful readers should know how to use such assessments appropriately to both identify students who might need special assistance with fluency and to assess their ongoing progress—or lack of progress—once instruction has started. There are reliable, valid, and classroom-useful assessments that help teachers accomplish these important tasks by targeting the three primary components of fluency: rate, accuracy, and expression.

### Assessing Expression

Researchers, including Cole and his colleagues at Boulder Learning in Boulder, Colorado, have developed voice recognition and evaluation software that may someday allow teachers to objectively and precisely rate a student's oral reading expression and eventually be able to compare it with some normative standards or expectations (Bolanos et al., 2013). However, currently there are no tools available to classroom teachers to objectively score for students' expression or prosody. Instead, qualitative rubrics or rating scales developed by researchers to guide the assessment process are commonly used to evaluate expression and assign a grade or performance level. A widely used rubric is the four-level scale from the NAEP that ranges from well-phrased, expressive reading at Level 4 to word-by-word, monotonic reading at Level 1 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2002; see Box 11.1). Other scales have been created for assessing expression that allow teachers to rate a student's pace, smoothness, phrasing, expression, and intonation (Rasinski, 2004).

### Assessing Accuracy and Rate

The most widely used procedure for assessing students' accuracy and rate is based on a body of research conducted over the past 30 years called Curriculum-Based Measures (CBMs). Numerous CBM studies have used measures of accuracy and rate to assess students' skill development and progress in reading, math, writing, and spelling (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2016; Wayman et al., 2007). The CBM assessment called oral reading fluency (ORF) requires using standardized procedures that involve having a student read aloud from unpracticed passages or lists of letters, letter sounds, or words for 1 minute while an

#### Box 11.1. NAEP descriptors of expression

Level 4: Reads with expressive interpretation

Level 3: Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups

Level 2: Reads primarily in two-word phrases that are awkward and haphazardly grouped

Level 1: Reads primarily word-by-word (Institute of Education Sciences, 2002)

examiner identifies errors. At the end of 1 minute, a score of words correct per minute (WCPM or the number of letters, sounds, or words correct per minute) is calculated. That score can then be compared either to an established benchmark that indicates proficiency or to a specific goal set for that student. Students **at or above** the designated CBM benchmark are considered at low risk, likely on track with their reading skill development. Students **below** benchmark are considered possibly at risk if they are slightly below the benchmark, and students are likely at risk if they are **significantly below** benchmark. *Additional diagnostic assessments of specific foundational reading skills, including phonemic awareness and phonics/decoding, should be administered to all students below benchmark to determine what skills to target in an intervention.* (See Hasbrouck and Glaser, 2019, for in-depth discussion of which foundational skills to assess, when and how.)

### Norms for Oral Reading Fluency

In 2017, Hasbrouck and Tindal published an updated set of national norms for ORF (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2017). These norms were created to provide educators with guidelines for what ORF scores would be appropriate for students in Grades 1–6 across the school year. Fluency rates for students in Grades 7 and 8 are included in the 2006 norms (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). A student’s score from a 60-second assessment on an unpracticed grade-level passage could be compared with the Hasbrouck and Tindal chart for the student’s grade level and the time of the school year in which the assessment was administered. Hasbrouck and Tindal recommend that if a student’s ORF score is more than 10 words below the 50th percentile, the teacher can flag that student as one who might need some additional instructional support (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2017; see Figure 11.4). The percentile number indicates the percentage of scores that fell at or below that score.

Grade	Percentile	Fall WCPM*	Winter WCPM*	Spring WCPM*
<b>1</b>	90		97	116
	75		59	91
	<b>50</b>		29	60
	25		16	34
	10		9	18
<b>2</b>	90	111	131	148
	75	84	109	124
	<b>50</b>	50	84	100
	25	36	59	72
	10	23	35	43
<b>3</b>	90	134	161	166
	75	104	137	139
	<b>50</b>	83	97	112
	25	59	79	91
	10	40	62	63
<b>4</b>	90	153	168	184
	75	125	143	160
	<b>50</b>	94	120	133
	25	75	95	105
	10	60	71	83
<b>5</b>	90	179	183	195
	75	153	160	169
	<b>50</b>	121	133	146
	25	87	109	119
	10	64	84	102
<b>6</b>	90	185	195	204
	75	159	166	173
	<b>50</b>	132	145	146
	25	112	116	122
	10	89	91	91

**Figure 11.4.** Compiled oral reading fluency norms. Key: WCPM, words correct per minute. (From Hasbrouck, J., & Tindal, G. [2017]. *An update to compiled ORF norms* [Technical Report No. 1702]. Eugene: Behavioral Research and Teaching, University of Oregon.)

Researchers generally agree that performance at the 50th percentile serves as a reasonable benchmark for fluency performance (O'Connor, 2017). However, some states and districts across the country have set their state standards for reading fluency at the 75th percentile or even higher. This decision possibly comes from the belief that it is better to set higher standards for students' performance, or perhaps from the notion that students should be performing above average. Although setting high standards for our students is usually a good thing, in this case it is a mistake. **There is ample empirical evidence that it is essential for students to read fluently at least at the 50th percentile; however, there is insufficient research to suggest that pushing students to read above the 50th percentile has any benefit** (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2019). Very few students will be able to achieve levels at or above the 75th percentile, so they and their teachers may become frustrated with the attempt. Students simply do not need to read as fast as possible to become good readers. Students who read in the average range on unpracticed grade-level materials are likely on target to become effective readers.

### Using Oral Reading Fluency as Benchmark/Screening Decisions

CBMs of ORF may be used as benchmark or screening assessments. This type of assessment is used to determine if a student might need instructional assistance and if students are making expected academic progress over time.

Benchmark assessments are widely used these days, especially in elementary schools, and are often administered three times each year to all students in a school, a process referred to as **universal screening**. Well-known examples of benchmark/screening assessments include DIBELS-8, Acadience, AIMSweb, easyCBM, FAST, and the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI). Although the reliability and validity of these assessments have been well documented, **teachers should be cautioned to use results from benchmark/screening assessments as only one indicator or snapshot of a student's performance**. Teachers should always consider other relevant sources of evidence about a student's reading ability, including daily performance in class work, language proficiency levels, and results from skill-specific diagnostic assessments.

### Confusion About Oral Reading Fluency Assessments

The labeling of the CBM measures listed previously as ORF assessments implies that these assessments measure the complete skill of reading fluency. This has led to understandable confusion by many educators (Hasbrouck, 2010b; Rasinski & Hamman, 2010). Some think that ORF is a measure of rate only or that using CBM benchmark/screening measures implies that fluency is the only reading skill that needs to be assessed and considered for making instructional decisions about students. Many mistakenly conclude that students who read fast are good readers and that if students who read slowly are simply taught how to read faster, they will become better readers overall!

Because accuracy and rate are used in ORF measures, and accuracy and rate are two key components of the skill of reading fluency, this confusion is understandable. However, when used for benchmark/screening decisions, CBM assessments are not simply measures of fluency skill levels and were never intended to be interpreted that way. Instead, **the CBM assessments are highly efficient and reasonably accurate indicators of general reading ability**. Measures of rate and accuracy have been identified as strongly predictive indicators of *overall* reading performance, including comprehension. Numerous studies conducted over the past several decades have clearly established that these fluency-based measures are strongly correlated with measures of reading comprehension and overall reading proficiency (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, et al., 2001; Hosp et al., 2016; Wayman et al., 2007).

It is most accurate and appropriate to think of these CBM benchmark/screening measures as "thermometers" that help determine students' general academic (reading) health or wellness. They cannot provide a specific diagnosis or imply an appropriate treatment plan, but scores can be used to raise a red flag of concern about a student. Once a student has been identified as likely at risk of reading difficulty, a teacher should next look at other assessments that will help diagnose specific

skill deficits in the key areas of reading (Diamond & Thorsnes, 2008; Hasbrouck, 2010; Hasbrouck & Glasser, 2019).

## Monitoring Students' Progress in Using Oral Reading Fluency Assessments

The purpose of progress monitoring is to help teachers determine whether their students are benefiting sufficiently from instruction, including intervention instruction, and whether that instruction should be adjusted. CBM can be used to help provide this important information for students who are receiving on-level instruction in Tier 1 programs, as well as those students receiving extra assistance in Tier 2 or Tier 3 (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp et al., 2001). As they involve the assessment of accuracy and rate, these CBM assessments are also useful to specifically monitor the progress of students' fluency skill development.

### *Tier 1 Progress Monitoring*

For students who are on level or above and appear to be succeeding with their Tier 1 classroom instruction, systematic progress monitoring involves simply repeating the CBM benchmark/screening assessments that were conducted in the beginning of the school year. These assessments should be administered three to four times a year for all students (at the beginning, middle, and end of the year), at least in the primary levels of elementary schools, and annually in the fall for intermediate-level students. Results can then be routinely analyzed each time they are administered; data should also be considered across a single school year and from grade to grade to help ensure that no student falls behind in those early, critical years of reading instruction. Because these measures do involve assessing accuracy and rate, when students continue to perform at the 50th percentile or higher on fluency norms, a teacher can also safely assume that their progress in reading is adequate. Additional checks of expression should also be taken periodically as a more complete assessment of fluency skill development.

For students above sixth-grade reading level, administering a multiple-choice cloze assessment or maze may be more appropriate. A cloze assessment asks the students to silently read a portion of text with certain words removed. The students are to insert the appropriate words so the sentence makes sense (Hosp et al., 2016; Wayman et al., 2007). A maze assessment uses a variation of the cloze format. Every fifth or sixth word in the text is omitted. Students are given a choice of three words to replace the omitted word—the original word and two other words that do not fit in the sentence. The reader selects which of the three options make the sentence meaningful (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp et al., 2001; Hosp et al., 2016).

### *Tier 2 and Tier 3 Progress Monitoring*

Students receiving support in Tier 2 (supplementary instruction) or Tier 3 (more intensive intervention) should also participate in the repeated CBM benchmark/screening assessments conducted across the school year along with their Tier 1 classmates. Of course, teachers will also be carefully observing the students during their daily instruction and will administer assessments and quizzes provided in the core reading program. However, for students who are struggling and receiving extra instruction or intervention, additional data should be collected frequently to monitor their progress. More frequent monitoring is necessary because even when academically challenged students are making progress, gains can be small and difficult to detect. Teachers simply cannot afford to wait to determine if their students are benefiting from their Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction. For students at these levels, educators find that incorporating ORF assessments, administered weekly or biweekly, can help determine which students are making sufficient progress and which might need to have some changes made in their instructional intervention. For example, during small-group time, teachers may 1) decrease the size of the group, i.e. from eight students to four; 2) meet with the small group more often, i.e., daily instead of 3 days a week; 3) provide more practice opportunities, and 4) examine the intervention used, i.e., is it evidence-based? Is it systematic and explicit? Is the intervention being taught with fidelity as it was designed to be taught?

**Table 11.2.** Differences between curriculum-based measurement benchmark/screening assessments and progress monitoring assessments

Benchmark/screening	Progress monitoring
Scores compared to established norms or <i>benchmarks</i>	Scores compared to individually set <i>performance goals</i>
Administered <i>three or four times per year</i>	Administered as often as <i>two times per week, once per week, bimonthly, or monthly</i> depending on services student is receiving
Scores recorded as <i>numbers</i>	Scores recorded on individual student <i>graphs</i> for visual analysis of data trends
Assessment passages are always at the student's <i>current grade level</i> (e.g., all second-grade students read second-grade passages).	Assessment passages are either at the student's <i>current instructional level or one level above</i> (goal level; e.g., a fourth grader reading at the second-grade level uses either second-grade or third-grade passages).

### Curriculum-Based Monitoring for Progress Monitoring Versus Benchmark Assessments

When using CBM assessments for monitoring students' progress, most of the standardized procedures that are used with benchmark/screening assessments are used, but with four differences, which are discussed in the following list. See Table 11.2 for a summary.

1. Perhaps the most significant variation is that for progress monitoring, students' performances are compared to **individually set goals** and previous performance rather than being compared to a set of grade-level norms and benchmarks.
2. A second difference is that progress monitoring is conducted at **more frequent intervals** than benchmark/screening. Your assessment schedule depends on the severity of student need. Emerging research suggests that assessing students every 3 weeks by having them read two passages may be the most appropriate practice (Jenkins & Terjeson, 2011; Van Norman, Christ, Ardoin, Eckert, & White, 2018). More research in this area is needed so that more precise guidance can be provided.
3. The third difference between the benchmark and progress monitoring assessments is that a student's results from progress monitoring assessments are typically **recorded on line graphs** so that teachers and specialists can easily evaluate an individual's progress—or lack of progress—over time. See Figure 11.5 below. These graphs provide easy-to-interpret visual displays of student progress when compared to a predetermined individual performance goal. The most important use of a graph is to help inform the teacher when a student is making less-than-expected progress. (See vertical line in Figure 11.5.) Immediate adjustments can be made in the student's instruction, such as targeted instruction in decoding accuracy, irregular words, vocabulary, or comprehension. Students can be taught how to monitor their own practice. A detailed explanation and a sample student chart is provided in Application Activities.
4. The final difference between CBM benchmark/screening and progress monitoring assessments is **the level of difficulty of the passages**. The passages used for benchmark/screening are always at the student's grade placement level, even when it is clear the student is reading well above or well below their current grade. However, the difficulty level of the passages for progress monitoring varies. When progress monitoring, students can be assessed using passages that are easier or more difficult than their current instructional level or one level above their current instructional level—also called "goal level"—and the technical adequacy of the measures is not affected (Wayman et al., 2007). For example, if a sixth-grade student is currently reading at about the third-grade level, she can have her progress monitored using either third-grade passages (instructional level) or fourth-grade passages (goal level).

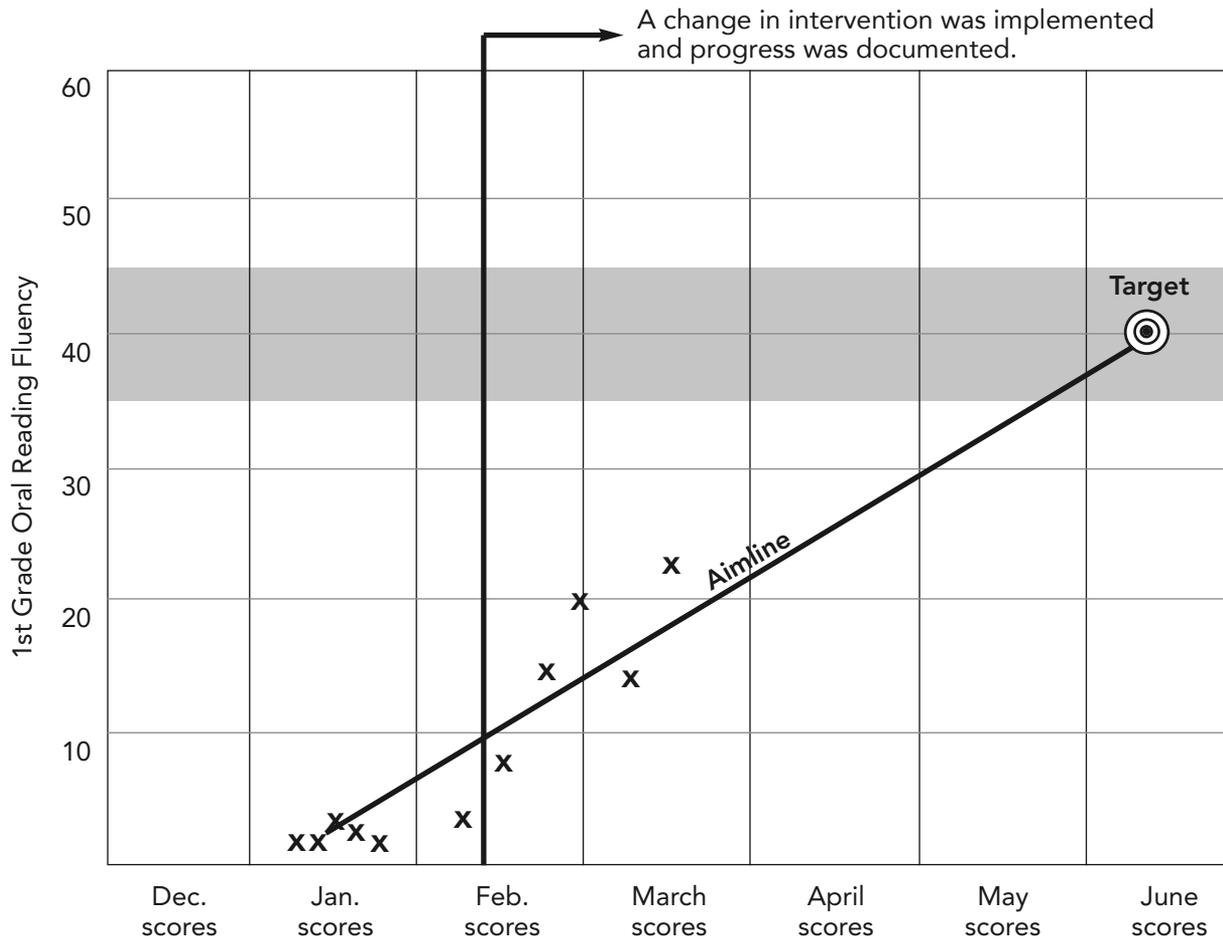
#### Reflect

Think about the student that you are tutoring. Have you formally or informally assessed his or her fluency skills? How might you use CBMs as a progress monitoring tool with your student?



Table 11.3 is a research-based guide to the expected word gains for students reading at various grade levels (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, Walz, & Germann, 1993). Teachers can use this chart to help set fluency goals for students. You will note that students reading at the first-grade level make more gains per week than older students. As students reach their optimum fluency rate, the number of words gained per week levels off.

### Progress Monitoring: The Teacher's Map



Note: Example of a progress monitoring chart you will likely see in your student's school records. The data points (Xs) are words correct per minute (WCPM). The solid line (Aimline) shows the expected trajectory your student will need to follow in order to reach Benchmark (or low-risk) levels by the end of the year.

Figure 11.5. Charting/graphing progress monitoring oral reading fluency: words correct per minute (WCPM). From Smartt, S., & Glaser, D. [2010]. *Next STEPS in Literacy Instruction: Connecting Assessments to Effective Interventions*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.

Table 11.3. Expected fluency gains

Words correct per minute gains per week	
Grade 1:	2–3 words
Grade 2:	1.5–2 words
Grade 3:	1–1.5 words
Grade 4:	0.85–1.1 words
Grade 5:	0.5–0.8 word
Grade 6:	0.3–0.65 word

Source: Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, Walz, & Germann (1993).

## HOW DO WE DEVELOP FLUENCY EFFECTIVELY, EFFICIENTLY, AND IN A MANNER APPROPRIATE TO THE AGE/GRADE LEVEL OF OUR STUDENTS?

It is well established that readers with inadequate fluency skills often struggle with comprehension, and it is rare that students with poorly developed fluency are highly motivated readers who eagerly look forward to opportunities to read. However, simply increasing a student's levels of accuracy and rate and improving their oral expression cannot guarantee that the student's comprehension will also increase. In other words: **Fluency is necessary but not sufficient for reading comprehension.** Teachers must keep this concept in mind when designing appropriate fluency instruction and interventions for students. As Kuhn and colleagues stated: "It is critical that we establish . . . instruction that assist(s) learners in becoming truly fluent readers rather than just fast ones" (Kuhn et al., 2010, p. 246). Other researchers have also warned teachers not to expect that if students simply read more, they would achieve adequate levels of fluency (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Wide reading of many different types of text can help to increase the vocabulary and world knowledge of students and develop their sight vocabulary, but teachers must teach challenging words in the text and continue to emphasize that comprehension is the goal of reading by holding students accountable for what they read (Foorman et al., 2016). Research strongly suggests that some students will require systematic instruction and teacher guidance in order to become skillful and motivated fluent readers.

### Findings From Fluency Research

From the numerous studies conducted over recent decades, some key points should be considered when designing fluency instruction and intervention for students (Rasinski et al., 2011). Following are some of these key findings from fluency studies.

The NRP reported that oral reading practice with teacher guidance improves fluency for typically developing students but that silent reading and independent practice is likely not sufficient to improve students' fluency skill (NICHD, 2000).

Repeated reading remains the "gold standard" of fluency interventions, and it is more effective when teachers provide feedback or have the student read along with a model as part of repeated reading than independent repeated reading (Kuhn et al., 2006).

For some students, the same amount of time spent engaged in "wide reading" (sustained reading of a variety of texts) has as much positive impact on fluency as rereading a single piece of text (Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008), and other researchers found that wide reading must be monitored and students held accountable for attending to what they read (Osborn, Lehr, & Hiebert, 2002).

Structured partner reading can improve reading fluency (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Simmons, 1997; Fuchs, Mathes, & Fuchs, 2001; O'Shea & Sindelar, 1984). Structured partner reading involves the teacher pairing appropriate partners, assigning the text for them to read, and providing a process to use when reading, listening, and providing partner feedback. When assigning partners, match a more fluent student with a less fluent student, but the two should not be vastly discrepant. The students who are struggling greatly, drastically less fluent than peers, should be partnered with the teacher or another adult. You will have the opportunity to assign partners in an application assignment at the end of this chapter.

Cueing students to attend to their accuracy and rate while reading can increase students' fluency (Stahl & Heuback, 2005).

Students can improve their fluency when the passages used for instruction are very challenging, even at a frustration level of 85% accuracy (15 of 100 words are unknown or read incorrectly), if teachers monitor the process closely and provide sufficient support including feedback (Hasbrouck, Ihnot, & Rogers, 1999).

Instructional strategies that combine 1) reading with a model of skillful oral reading, 2) repeated reading of a single text, and 3) providing progress monitoring feedback before and after practice can improve students' fluency and comprehension. Repeated reading also has a positive impact on motivation to read (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel & Meisinger, 2010).

Some researchers have concluded that expression develops from acquiring efficient word and text reading skills (Schreiber, 1991) and that it is likely improved by guided and assisted reading activities where feedback on expression is provided (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010).

We have shared the conclusions from a convergence of research on reading fluency. The next step is to implement findings of scientific research in classroom instruction.

## Research Applied to Classroom Settings

The type and amount of instruction that students will need to become fluent readers varies depending on their general reading skill level.

1. For students in Tier 1, making progress in reading, teachers should provide practice opportunities and increase the complexity of the text students read.
2. For students in Tier 2 intervention, systematic and explicit fluency instruction should be provided. Often, students exhibit the one of the following two patterns:
  - Students may be able to read grade-level text with sufficient accuracy and comprehension (95%–97% or higher words read correctly), but their fluency rates are below expected levels.
  - Students have low fluency levels and also struggle with deficits in phonics and decoding, word recognition, vocabulary, or other skill areas and require a more comprehensive intervention in a Tier 2 or Tier 3 setting.

In these cases, explicit and systematic fluency instruction should be provided as one component of a more multifaceted instructional program that, for example, addresses the student's difficulty with decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension. Review the discussion of the Simple View of Reading (Chapter 2), explaining how reading comprehension is dependent on automatic recognition of words and language comprehension. The chapters in this text discussing each of the components will help you determine what skills to target to improve fluency rates of students. Additional resources that provide specific instructional suggestions for fluency include Hasbrouck and Glaser (2019) and Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2004).

Levels of text difficulty for individual students are often described as being at an instructional level, an independent level, or frustration level (refer to Table 11.1). When you are working with students on building fluency, the text should be at their instructional reading level (i.e., reading orally with 95% accuracy) or even more challenging text with teacher support (Stahl & Heuback, 2005). When the students are working independently, the text should be at the independent or instructional level; the student should be able to read the text with at least 95% accuracy with no support or feedback (Hasbrouck, 2006).

### Tier 1 Fluency Instruction

Research is clear that many—if not most—students will develop adequate fluency levels by simply engaging in reading, especially if they also hear models of fluent reading and receive feedback about their reading accuracy, rate, and expression. Two commonly implemented but **less effective** ways teachers try to encourage reading are round-robin reading and silent sustained reading; neither is an effective method to increase comprehension.

In round-robin reading, students take turns reading aloud from unpracticed text, often in a whole-class, large-group setting. Teachers use this technique with varieties of text genres including novels, social studies, or science texts. Note that only one student is reading at a time while the others are

typically losing interest and not paying attention. Sustained silent reading (SSR), sometimes called Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), requires students to read silently in self-selected texts for a designated period of time, sometimes up to 20 or 30 minutes or more daily. Often, students choose books that are either too easy or much too difficult for them, so they are not improving their reading skills. Also, too much time can be wasted as students choose their books, and typically students are not accountable for what they are reading. Although some students might benefit from these activities, neither of these methods provides the amount of practice that at-risk or struggling readers will need to develop their fluency. Also, both activities limit the amount of modeling and opportunities for specific feedback provided by the teacher, critical for effective instruction.

Teachers can consider replacing round-robin reading with choral reading or cloze reading (Hasbrouck, 2006). In choral reading, students read a text aloud in unison along with the teacher—all students are participating. Cloze reading involves having the teacher read text aloud while students follow along silently in their own copies of the text or from a shared text posted on a whiteboard. From time to time, the teacher randomly pauses before reading a word, and the students read that omitted word aloud in unison.

Another alternative to SSR, DEAR, and round-robin reading is structured partner reading, where assigned partners take turns reading aloud and provide each other feedback including pointing out errors and supporting correct pronunciation and decoding of words. Structured partner oral reading can take several forms, including simultaneous oral reading; taking turns reading a sentence, paragraph, or page aloud; sharing one book; and each student having his or her own copy of the text (Fuchs et al., 1997). Students can be taught even more explicit feedback techniques that extend the practice to vocabulary and comprehension development (Fuchs et al., 2010).

A popular and effective approach to encourage students to reread passages to become fluent is reader's theater (Rasinski, 2010; Worthy & Prater, 2002; Young, Durham, Miller, Rashinski, & Lane, 2019). Students are assigned parts in a short play and practice their lines to prepare for a performance reading the script. They learn to read with expression and accuracy. Students (and parents) enjoy this activity.

### *Tier 2 or 3 Fluency Instruction*

Another effective activity for students who need a more targeted intervention to improve their fluency skills is a strategy known as Read Naturally (RN) (Hasbrouck et al., 1999). In this strategy, students are first assessed to determine an appropriate level of text in which to receive instruction. Using the RN placement guidelines, students are placed in text that is at or close to their frustration level (less than 90% accuracy). For example, the RN placement guidelines help a teacher establish a specific fluency goal. The goal for each student is usually set at 30 words above the assessed baseline ORF score for students in Grades 1–4, and 40 words above the ORF baseline for Grade 5 and higher.

The RN intervention consists of several steps:

1. Begin with having a student complete a 60-second cold read of a self-selected passage at their current skill level. A “cold read” is when students read a text they have not read before. The passage should be from 80 to 350 words in length, depending on the grade level of the passage. The purpose of this step is to establish a score that the student can use as an indicator of their unpracticed WCPM. Students are then motivated to practice so they can increase this score.
2. During this cold read, the student marks words that cause her to “stop, stumble, or skip.” The student then calculates a score of WCPM and records this score on her graph (see Figure 11.5).
3. Have the student read the same passage again from the beginning, but this time reading aloud *with a narrator* (on a CD or computer or with a skilled reader). The purpose of this step is to help the student learn how to identify and correctly pronounce all the words of the passage to provide a model of appropriate expression. Students typically read the entire passage three times with the skilled reader or narrator.

4. Once the student knows all the words, she engages in repeated reading practice by reading aloud from the practiced text for 60-second intervals until the student's designated ORF goal has been achieved. For each practice, the student returns to the start of the passage. This step often takes 3–10 attempts, and it helps build the student's reading rate while maintaining accuracy.
5. Finally, the teacher listens to the student read aloud for 60 seconds from the now well-practiced passage. If the student is able to read the passage with no more than three errors, reads with appropriate expression, and reaches her designated goal, she is allowed to record the practiced score on her graph alongside the original cold-read score. Review Figure 11.4; comparing the original cold score to the usually much higher practiced score is clear proof that practice makes a difference!
6. This process is repeated with the next passage. The RN strategy also incorporates prediction, retell, and comprehension questions to hold students accountable for comprehending the content of the passages.

Other commercially available programs and materials that address reading fluency are available. It is important for you as the teacher to select materials that are best for your students and that have a strong research base. Matching the materials to the student's reading level is the biggest challenge for teachers, so you should carefully examine the various materials and determine which would be best for your students.

See Box 11.2 for researched-based instructional activities from the FCRR, organized by grade level.

### Box 11.2. Student Center Activities from the Florida Center for Reading Research (2008)

**Kindergarten and beginning first-grade students** can improve their speed and accuracy of letter names and sounds through the following activities:

- Alphabet arc: Students place plastic letters on top of the written letters. Gradually, the printed letters are removed and students put the plastic letters, with no printed letters to guide them, in alphabetical order within 2 minutes (see Chapter 8).
- Letter recognition: Students point to the letter the teacher names.
- Letter naming: Students name the letters when the teacher points to them.
- Letter–sound correspondence: Students name and provide the sound of each letter.

To improve students' automaticity in reading words, consider the following activities:

- Reading high-frequency words: Students read a list of high-frequency words.
- Reading words: Students read lists of decodable and high-frequency irregular words.
- Phrase reading: Students read short phrases.
- Chunking phrases: Students read chunks of text with expression.

**Second semester first-grade through third-grade students** gain speed and accuracy reading connected text.

- Repeated reading: Students read and reread text at their independent or instructional level.
- Partner reading: Students read and reread text with a partner. WCPM are charted.
- Expression: Students read connected text with appropriate pitch, tone, emphasis, and phrasing.

**Fourth-grade through sixth-grade students** read increasingly complex text with accuracy, expression, and comprehension. This activity encourages close reading of text.

Visit the Florida Center for Reading Research to learn more about the activities listed here ([https://fcrr.org/resources/resources\\_sca.html](https://fcrr.org/resources/resources_sca.html)).

## CONCLUSION

Reading fluency is a skill that must be adequately developed in order for readers to comprehend what they have read and to enjoy and benefit from reading. However, like other reading skills—including phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, word recognition, and vocabulary knowledge—fluency alone is not sufficient to help students comprehend.

Just teaching students to read faster is not the answer! Fluency is a complex and interrelated set of skills that includes rate but also involves accuracy and expression. Reading well includes reading fluently—with appropriate accuracy, rate, and expression. Teachers must assess students to determine who might need assistance in becoming fluent readers and then effectively provide the instruction and intervention necessary to help each student achieve success. For students who are already sufficiently fluent, pushing them to read ever faster and faster is a futile effort and has no instructional value. As Marilyn Adams said, “If we want to induce children to read lots, we must teach them to read well” (Adams, 1990, p. 5).

## KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT

- Which is not a goal of reading fluency instruction?
  - To enable students to read a text with automaticity
  - To increase student motivation to read
  - To encourage students to read faster than a peer
  - To increase comprehension of text
- When students monitor their own progress in reading fluency, they:
  - Are likely to win a free pizza
  - Are motivated to increase the words per minute they read correctly
  - Are most concerned about winning the words-correct-per-minute race, reading more words faster than their peers
  - Tend to hide their progress charts from their parents or caregivers
- Which of the following is not a difference between using CBM for benchmark/screening versus progress monitoring?
  - Progress monitoring is conducted more often than benchmark/screening.
  - In progress monitoring, students’ performance is compared to their own goals and previous performance. In benchmarking, student performance is compared against norms.
  - Benchmark/screening is conducted more frequently than progress monitoring.
  - Benchmark/screening passages are always at the student’s grade level, whereas progress monitoring uses passages that are adapted to their instructional level.
- Research finds that which of the following strategies can improve fluency?
  - Cueing to accuracy and rate
  - Repeated reading
  - Structured partner reading
  - All of the above
- When working with a student to build fluency, the text used should be at his or her:
  - Frustration level with support from a teacher
  - Instructional level if aligned with student interests
  - Independent level with a partner or an adult
  - Assistance level with a teaching assistant

## APPLICATION ACTIVITIES

### With a Colleague

- As a class, practice a strategy to improve reading fluency. The strategy is repeated reading. Follow the directions given here:
  - Choose two pages of this text or another adult-level text. It should be a text that is unfamiliar challenging.
  - Pair with a partner. Decide who is Partner A and who is Partner B.

- c. The instructor or a classmate should be the timer and time the first oral reading for 1 minute.
- d. When given the signal, Partner A begins to read the text aloud. Partner B follows along. When the timer goes off, Partner A marks the last word read.
- e. When given the signal to begin, Partner B reads the same material that Partner A just read. Partner A follows along. When the timer goes off, Partner B marks the last word read.
- f. Both partners count the total number of words they read, including prepositions, and so forth. On the line graph, color in the line with a blue pencil or marker up to the number of words read correctly (see Figure 11.6 for an example of a completed graph).
- g. Now both partners take turns again, each reading the same material for 2 minutes. They should be able to read much further.
- h. It is time for the timed “hot” reading, reading the practiced text aloud. Again, Partner A reads aloud for 1 minute while being timed. When the timer goes off, mark the last word read.
- i. Partner B reads aloud for 1 minute and, at the end, marks the last word read.
- j. Both partners count the words read and chart the totals on the graph, using a red pen or marker, directly on top of the blue line. This system will clearly indicate how much growth was made.
- k. Was there an increase the number of words read per minute? You will learn that students typically will increase about 25%–40%, and they will feel great about their progress!

*Note:* When using partner reading with your students, it is helpful to use materials with the number of words indicated in the margins for each line. Also, use graph paper with large cells so students can easily graph the number of words read correctly per minute.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

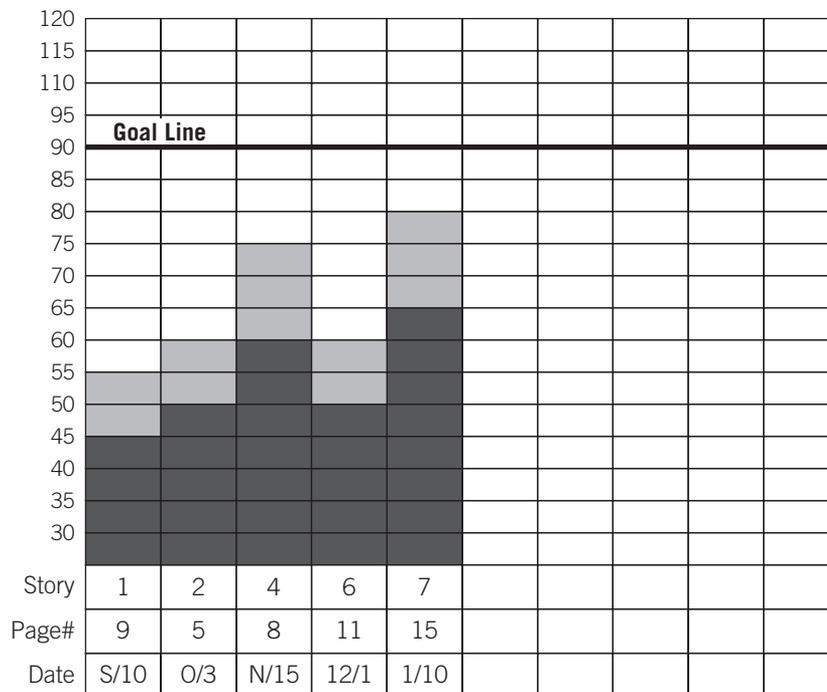


Figure 11.6. Charting/graphing progress monitoring oral reading fluency: words correct per minute (WCPM).

### On Your Own

1. Download the 2017 Institute of Education Sciences practice guide: *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through Third Grade* from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance web site: [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc\\_foundationalreading\\_040717.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_040717.pdf). Read Recommendation 4 about reading connected text to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.
2. Download and read the 2018 practice brief from the ILA, *Reading Fluently Does Not Mean Reading Fast*: [https://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-reading-fluently-does-not-mean-reading-fast.pdf?sfvrsn=fd8ca48e\\_8](https://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-reading-fluently-does-not-mean-reading-fast.pdf?sfvrsn=fd8ca48e_8)
3. Using these two documents and this chapter, write an explanation for parents and teachers detailing what fluency is, why it is important, and how to support students in becoming more fluent.

### With Your Student

1. Partner read with your student using the procedure given here. You and your student may use the chart in Figure 11.6 to graph reading progress. Note: You need a red and blue pencil or crayon.
  - a. Select the material. The material should be at your student’s instructional or frustration level, and it should be challenging for the student. Make two copies so you and your student each have one.
  - b. You, the teacher, be Partner A and read the passage orally first for 1 minute. As you model reading the passage, your student follows along.
  - c. Read the passage together, simultaneously, orally with the student. You, the teacher, model reading fluently, accurately, and with expression.
  - d. Next, your student completes a cold reading for 1 minute, reading the passage aloud independently. Using a blue marker, the student graphs the number of words read correctly.
  - e. Allow your student to practice reading the passage aloud, **untimed**, three or more times (refer to the process outlined previously in this chapter).
  - f. Assist your student as needed, making note of errors you may need to address in your instruction.
  - g. Finally, your student reads the passage again for 1 minute for the “hot” reading score. With a red marker, your student graphs the number of words read correctly. Celebrate the progress made!

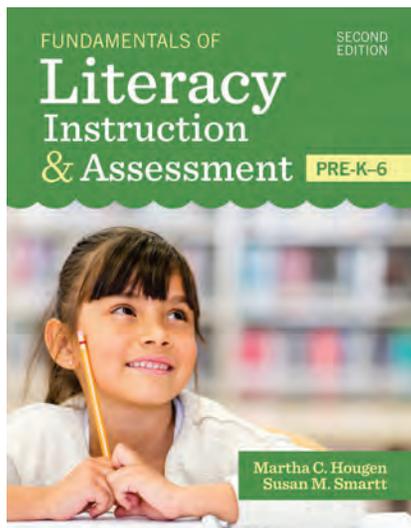
A reminder: Do *not* encourage your student to read as quickly as possible. Do *not* begin with a phrase such as “Get ready, set, go!” Rather, calmly ask your student to do his or her best reading. Then, set the timer and say, “Begin.”

2. Establish a fluency goal for your student. A student’s fluency goal can be set by looking at the 50th percentile of the Hasbrouck and Tindal ORF norms for the grade and time of year that student is reading (see Figure 11.3). It is *not* appropriate to set a goal for ORF higher than the 75th percentile. That could encourage students to simply read fast, not fluently. For students who are not at benchmark on an ORF assessment, you can set goals at 10 words above their current performance on an unpracticed ORF. Once they regularly achieve that goal, increase it by 10 WCPM.
3. If your student is reading above the 50th percentile on grade-level material, you need not focus on increasing the student’s rate of reading. Rather, emphasize wide reading of a variety of texts to increase vocabulary and comprehension.
4. Implement another fluency building activity with your student. It could be as easy as asking your student to select a favorite page or sentence and reading it several times with expression, like an actor would practice reading lines for a movie. This type of practice also helps to build a student’s sight vocabulary, or the number of words the student can read with automaticity.

5. If your student is not able to read connected text, you may use the following activities to practice fluency reading. The materials are available for free at [www.fcrr.org](http://www.fcrr.org)
  - a. Reading high-frequency words: Students read a list of 50 high-frequency words.
  - b. Reading words: Students read lists of decodable and high-frequency irregular words.
  - c. Phrase reading: Students read short phrases.
  - d. Chunking phrases: Students read chunks of text with expression.
6. Students with low fluency skills often have difficulty with the rapid automatized naming of high-frequency words, including words that follow predictable phonic patterns and irregular words that do not conform to an expected pattern (Norton & Wolf, 2012). It is helpful to students if teachers explain why the pronunciation is irregular. For example, *love* does not follow the VCE pattern because it is an Old English word and Old English did not contain any words ending in /v/; thus, the *e* was added and the /o/ remains short. The letter *c* makes the /k/ sound before *a, u, o* (*cat, cut, cot*) and /s/ before *i, e, y* (*city, cent, cyber*).
  - a. Identify several irregular words to discuss with your student, highlighting the unusual spelling pattern.
  - b. Point out to the student which letters make unexpected sounds, and practice pronouncing, finger tapping, and writing the words. Suggested words include *the, said, was, have*.

Please see the [About the Online Materials](#) page at the front of the book for directions on how to access the [Online Resources Appendix](#) for more web sites, readings, and organizations to visit to expand your knowledge on the topic of this chapter.

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