

Reading Fluency

Many students with dyslexia do not read fluently. Specifically, they do not read as quickly, as accurately, and with as much expression (also called *prosody*) compared to their grade-level peers. Consequently, these students have trouble understanding what they read. To read fluently, students must be skilled in applying phonic decoding and structural analysis. (Structural analysis refers to the ways in which a reader breaks apart longer words to make them easier to pronounce [e.g., separates the syllables or meaningful units within words].) These skills allow readers to read words with automaticity or to decode them efficiently, which frees up their attention and memory for comprehension and enhances their ability to read with expression. In fact, some experts call fluency the bridge between decoding and comprehension. To read fluently, those with dyslexia must engage in extensive practice; there is no shortcut!

As a teacher of students with dyslexia, you must select effective strategies for building fluency. Fluency instruction is more effective for students who read slowly but are typically accurate than for those who are still learning basic word-reading skills. For students who struggle to efficiently read individual words at their grade level, refer to these two sections in the appendix: (a) Orthographic Mapping and Sight Words and (b) Phonics and Structural Analysis.

Assessing Fluency

To determine the appropriate reading level for fluency instruction and progress monitoring, you need to obtain a baseline measure of the student's current reading fluency. You may wish to determine how quickly the student can read grade-level text, as well as how quickly they can read text at the current instructional level.

Instructional Level

To do this, select three different graded passages at their grade level and have the student read each one aloud for 1 minute. Record the number of words read and the number of errors. Subtract the number of errors from the total words read to determine the number of words correct per minute (WCPM).

Use the median score of the three readings as the baseline WCPM starting point for instruction and progress monitoring. For example, Sami read three Grade 2 passages, earning these WCPM scores: 49, 61, 57. Sami's median score is 57 WCPM on Grade 2 passages. Table A.1 shows oral reading fluency (ORF) norms as a general guide for approximate reading fluency levels by grade (Johnson, 2016).

Table A.1. Approximate Grade-Level Fluency Norms

Grade	WCPM
1	53
2	89
3	107
4	123
5	139
6	150
7	150
8	151

Note that the instructional level for word recognition is typically set at around 90–95% accuracy. For students who do not achieve that level of accuracy, select passages at the next lower grade level of difficulty. Repeat this if necessary until you identify the level at which the student can read with 90–95% accuracy. Many schools use commercially or publicly available ORF assessments in a multi-tiered system of support or response to intervention (RTI) procedures. These assessments typically provide WCPM and recommended reading passage levels for progress monitoring and instruction.

Although the assessment of reading rate (WCPM) and the percentage of accuracy are common, they do not provide information about the student's ability to read with expression, another element of fluency. Consequently, approaches that assess only rate and accuracy are more appropriately called measures of oral reading *efficiency* (Hasbrouck, 2020). Helping students improve fluency requires extensive practice at the appropriate instructional level with monitoring of their progress.

Progress Monitoring

Using the baseline WCPM score, establish an aim line (expected growth in a certain number of weeks) for the student and create a behavioral objective to monitor progress: In [#] weeks, the student will read [#] WCPM from randomly selected Grade [#] passages. Create realistic progress monitoring goals. In Grades 1–6, realistic goals of gain in WCPM range from between less than one word to about two words per week. Special education students may gain less than one word per week.

Strategies to Increase Reading Fluency

Teachers who provide opportunities for students to read and reread orally while providing monitoring and feedback help improve their students' reading fluency. Students need a lot of time to practice reading books that they can read without much difficulty but that are not too easy. Provide short, frequent periods of fluency practice each day with concrete measures of progress.

Partner/Paired Reading

Pair the student with a more proficient reader. Have the partners take turns reading a passage aloud for a specified amount of text (or time). Encourage the partners to focus on both rate and expression. Have the partners discuss what each notices about the other's reading as it relates to rate and expression. One variation is called whisper reading: (1) Pair the student with a partner who is a slightly better reader. Make two copies of a reading passage that is at an appropriate level for the better reader. Have the partners read in concert at a whisper for 1 minute. (2) After 1 minute, have them draw a line after the last word read. (3) Then, have the less-proficient reader reread the passage once more and mark the place after 1 minute.

Another variation is echo reading. You read one to two sentences aloud while the student follows along. Then the student reads the same section back to you. Continue this back-and-forth exchange until the passage is complete, providing error correction and practice of missed words.

You may also use a three-step process of choral reading to help increase fluency: (1) Read the passage aloud and ask the student to follow along.

(2) Read a sentence, stop, and ask the student to read it back to you. (3) Ask the student to read the entire passage aloud to you. Provide immediate feedback on any errors.

Recorded (Audio) Books and Text-to-Speech Software

Have the student listen to an audiobook and follow along with the printed book or follow along on the computer screen using text-to-speech software. Adjust the rate of reading to ensure comprehension. The student can repeatedly listen to a short book until the book can be read independently.

Computer-Based Reading Instruction

Consider using computer-based instruction such as MindPlay Virtual Reading Coaching (MVRC) to increase fluency (Sutherland, 2023). MVRC contains explicit, responsive, and computer-adaptive instruction in (a) phonemic awareness, (b) phonics, (c) fluency, (d) vocabulary, (e) grammar for meaning, and (f) reading comprehension. MVRC is a highly explicit reading intervention; the software provides engaging lessons that are targeted to each student's individual needs. While using the program, students receive immediate corrective feedback. Read Naturally also provides a computer-based intervention for fluency (Read Naturally, 2022), and Great Leaps (n.d.) provides online tutoring and interventions for fluency.

Repeated Reading

Repeated reading is the most researched method for improving reading fluency. Using this procedure, the student rereads a text to meet a set standard of accuracy and graphs the results to show improvement. Alternatively, have the student read the same passage 4–5 times until the passage can be read with ease. Research suggests that before a student reads a passage, performance improves if you do a listening preview and first read the passage to the student, who follows along in the text. Then have the student read the passage several times and record the time for each reading.

When the student engages in repeated reading, you may want to conduct an intervention between readings. For example, you can have the student review any errors they make on the passage, practice the

passage with a peer, listen to a recorded passage, or reread the passage with the student. If the student ignores punctuation or reads without expression, point out the punctuation and then model and practice reading a sentence or two with appropriate inflection. For students still struggling with mastery of phonics skills, use decodable text when practicing repeated reading. (Decodable text is reading material that includes words with regular sound–symbol correspondences and that is used to practice the application of common phonic elements.)

Building Prosody

Encourage the student to use a finger to follow the text being read by a proficient reader who uses appropriate expression and attends to punctuation. Model reading with expression and then have the student repeat the same reading. Readers' theater can provide the student with authentic practice in reading with expression in a group setting. Another strategy is to use song lyrics to enhance prosody. Lyrics to songs are often characterized by expression, an important element of prosody; in addition, singing promotes repeated exposures to text and can be motivational for many students.