

Developing Reading Fluency

Fluent reading is reading in which words are recognized automatically. With automatic word recognition, reading becomes faster, smoother, and more expressive, and students can begin to read silently, which is roughly twice as fast as oral reading. But beginning readers usually do not read fluently; reading is often a word-by-word struggle.

How do we help children struggling with slow, painstaking sounding out and blending? Support and encourage them. Effortful decoding is a necessary step to sight recognition. You can say, "I know reading is tough right now, but this is how you learn new words." Ask students to reread each sentence that requires unusual decoding effort.

In general, the fluency formula is this: Read and reread decodable words in connected text. Decode unknown words rather than guessing from context. Reread to master texts. Use text with words children can decode using known correspondences. Use whole, engaging texts to sustain interest.

There are two general approaches to improving fluency. The **direct approach** involves modeling and practice with repeated reading under time pressure. The **indirect approach** involves encouraging children to read voluntarily in their free time.

The direct approach: Repeated readings. We often restrict reading lessons to "sight reading." Who could learn a musical instrument by only sight-reading music and never repeating pieces until they could be played in rhythm, up to tempo, with musical expression? In repeated reading, children work on reading as they would work at making music: They continue working with each text until it is fluent. Repeated reading works best with readers who are full alphabetic, i.e., who know how to decode some words. Use a passage of 100 words or so at the instructional level. The text should be [decodable](#), not predictable. The reader might select a favorite from among familiar books.

Here are two ways to frame repeated reading.



1. Graph how fast students read with a "one-minute read." Graphing is motivating because it makes progress evident. The basic procedure is to have your student read for one minute, count the number of words read, and graph the result with a child-friendly graph, e.g., moving a basketball player closer to a slam dunk.





Aim for speed, not accuracy. Time each reading with a stopwatch—if available, use the countdown timer, with its quiet beeping signal, rather than saying "stop," which can be startling. It is important in one-minute reads to emphasize speed rather than accuracy. Over repeated readings, speed in WPM will increase and errors will decrease. If you emphasize accuracy, speed falls off.

I recommend you get a baseline reading first. A realistic average goal for a first grade reader is 60 WPM, but adjust the goal to your student's level—30 WPM may be plenty for very slow readers, and 120 WPM may be an appropriate challenge for others. Laminate your chart, and place a scale in erasable marker to the right. When the goal is reached, raise the bar 5 WPM for the next book, which requires a new scale on your graph.

To speed up the word count, mark off every 10 words in light pencil so that you can count by tens. Subtract a word for each miscue so accuracy is not totally abandoned. Continue to support reading in ordinary ways: Ask a question or make a comment about story events after each reading to keep a meaning focus. Collect miscue notes to analyze for missing correspondences. Children enjoy one-minute reads because their success is evident. They will *ask* you if they can read the passage again!

2. Use check sheets for partner readings. With a class of children, pair up readers to respond to one another. Begin by explaining what you'll be listening for. Model fluent and non-fluent reading. For example, show the difference

I noticed that my partner . . .

| After 2nd | After 3rd reading | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Remembered more words  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Read faster  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Read smoother  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Read with expression  |

between smooth and choppy reading. Show how expressive readers make their voices go higher and lower, faster and slower, louder and softer.

In each pair, students take turns being the reader and the listener. The reader reads a selection three times. The listener gives a report after the second and third readings. All reports are complimentary. No criticism or advice is allowed.

The indirect approach: Voluntary reading.

Sustained silent reading (SSR, a.k.a. DEAR, "drop everything and read") gives children a daily opportunity to read and discover the pleasure of reading. Each student chooses a book or magazine, and the entire class reads for a set period of time each day. SSR has been shown to lead to more positive attitudes toward reading and to gains in reading achievement when peer discussion groups discuss the books they read. When students share their reactions to books with classmates, they get recommendations from peers they take seriously.

Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, in *Reading Strategies and Practices* (Allyn & Bacon, 1990, pp. 461-462) list three "cardinal rules" for SSR:

- a. Everybody reads. Both students and teacher will read something of their own choosing. Any text that keeps the reader interested is acceptable. The teacher reads too. Completing homework assignments, grading papers, and similar activities are discouraged. I recommend teachers read children's books so they can participate in discussions and give booktalks for their students.
- b. There are to be no interruptions during USSR. The word *uninterrupted* is an essential part of the technique. Interruptions result in loss of comprehension and loss of interest by many students; therefore, questions and comments should be held until the silent reading period has concluded.
- c. No one will be asked to report what they have read. It is essential that students recognize SSR is a period of free reading, with the emphasis on reading for enjoyment. Teachers should not require book reports, journal entries, or anything other than free reading. Do not give grades for SSR.

One landmark study of SSR* showed that reading gains from SSR depend on setting up discussion groups and other peer interactions around texts. In other words, students need to talk with one another about the books they are reading to motivate a significant increase in reading. With regular opportunities to discuss books, students learn about good books and read more because they want to read what their peers are reading. They usually experience peer pressure to read in

order to be able to have something to say to their friends. In this way, reading becomes part of the culture of the classroom.

*Manning, C. L., & Manning, M. (1984). What models of recreational reading make a difference? *Reading World*, 23, 375-380.

Other essentials for encouraging voluntary reading include a plentiful library of books and frequent opportunities to choose. Children should be allowed and encouraged to read page turners (e.g., easy series books) rather than the classics for their independent reading. For gaining fluency, quantity is more important than quality.

Book introductions help children make informed decisions about what they want to read. For an effective booktalk, choose a book you like. Show the illustrations to the students. Give a brief talk, hitting the high points: the setting, characters, and the inciting incident leading to the problem or goal. Do not get into the plot, and especially not the resolution! If there is no clear plot, ask a have-you-ever question (e.g., Have you ever been afraid of the dark?) and relate the question to the book. Good booktalks often feature some oral reading, e.g., of a suspenseful part.

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