

National Reading Panel Findings on **Fluency**

Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly. When fluent readers read silently, they recognize words automatically. They group words quickly to gain meaning from what they read. Fluent readers read aloud effortlessly and with expression. Their reading sounds natural, as if they are speaking. Readers who have not yet developed fluency read slowly, word by word. Their oral reading is choppy and plodding.

Fluency is important because it bridges word recognition and comprehension. Because fluent readers do not have to concentrate on decoding words, they can focus their attention on what the text means. They can make connections among ideas in the text and between the text and their background knowledge. In other words, fluent readers recognize words and comprehend at the same time. Less fluent readers, however, must focus their attention on figuring out the words, leaving them little attention for understanding the text.

Fluency develops gradually over considerable time and through substantial practice. At the earliest stage of reading development, students' oral reading is slow and labored because students are just learning to "break the code"—to attach sounds to letters and to blend letter sounds into recognizable words.

Even when students recognize many words automatically, their oral reading still may be expressionless, not fluent. To read with expression, readers must be able to divide the text into meaningful chunks that include phrases and clauses. Readers must know to pause appropriately within and at the ends of sentences and when to change emphasis and tone.

Fluency is not a developmental stage at which readers can read all words quickly and easily. Fluency changes, depending on what readers read, their familiarity with the words, and the amount of their practice with reading text. Even skilled readers may read in a slow, labored manner when reading texts with many unfamiliar words or topics. For example, readers who are usually fluent may not read technical material fluently, such as a textbook about nuclear physics or an article in a medical journal.

A recent large-scale study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 44% of a representative sample of the nation's fourth graders were low in fluency. The study also found a close relationship between fluency and reading comprehension. Students who scored lower on measures of fluency also scored lower on measures of comprehension, suggesting that fluency is a neglected reading skill in many American classrooms, affecting many students' reading comprehension.

Although some readers may recognize words automatically in isolation or on a list, they may not read the same words fluently when the words appear in sentences in connected text. Instant or automatic word recognition is a necessary, but not sufficient, reading skill. Students who can read words in isolation quickly may not be able to automatically transfer this "speed and accuracy." It is important to provide students with instruction and practice in fluency as they read connected text.

What does scientifically-based research tell us about fluency instruction?

- ⇒ **Repeated and monitored oral reading improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement.**

Students who read and reread passages orally as they receive guidance and/or feedback become better readers. Repeated oral reading substantially improves word recognition, speed, and accuracy as well as fluency. To a lesser but still considerable extent, repeated oral reading also improves reading comprehension. Repeated oral reading improves all students' reading ability throughout the elementary school years. It also helps struggling readers at higher grade levels.

Researchers have found several effective techniques related to repeated oral reading.

- ***Repeated readings***—rereading a text until a certain level of fluency is reached; monitoring students' fluency is important to ensure students make progress
- ***Student-adult reading***—reading one-on-one with an adult who provides a model of fluent reading, helps with word recognition, and provides feedback
- ***Choral reading***—reading aloud simultaneously in a group
- ***Tape-assisted reading***—reading aloud simultaneously or as an echo with an audiotaped model
- ***Partner reading***—reading aloud with a more fluent partner (or with a partner of equal ability) who provides a model of fluent reading, helps with word recognition, and provides feedback
- ***Readers' theater***—rehearsing and performing a dialogue-rich script derived from a book in front of an audience

Although the terms *automaticity* and *fluency* often are used interchangeably, they are not the same thing. Automaticity is the fast, effortless word recognition that comes with a great deal of reading practice. In the early stages of learning to read, readers may be accurate but slow and inefficient at recognizing words. Continued reading practice helps word recognition become more automatic, rapid, and effortless. Automaticity refers only to accurate, speedy word recognition, not to reading with expression. Therefore, automaticity (or automatic word recognition) is necessary, but not sufficient, for fluency.

- ⇒ **No research evidence is available currently to confirm that instructional time spent on silent, independent reading with minimal guidance and feedback improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement.**

One major difference between good and poor readers is the amount of time they spend reading. Many studies have found a strong relationship between reading ability and how much a student reads. Research, however, has not yet confirmed whether independent silent reading with minimal guidance or feedback improves reading achievement and fluency. Neither has it proven that more silent reading in the classroom cannot work; its effectiveness without guidance or feedback is as yet unproven.