# What You Need to Know: Fluency

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# What Is Fluency

Fluency is a skill that strong readers have. However, fluency is not actually a reading skill by itself. Instead, it is a combination of three other reading components: phonics, comprehension, and oral language.

***Definition***

The ability to read aloud accurately with appropriate expression and pace.

Reading aloud accurately means a student speaks the actual words in the text. The student does not say a different word, does not say the word incorrectly, does not skip words, and neither adds nor subtracts from the written word. For example, if the word in text is "bountiful," the student does not say "beautiful," "bounty," and etc. A student must accurately decode or recognize the word to say it aloud accurately—i.e., phonics.

Reading aloud with appropriate expression means the student modifies his or her tone of voice, volume, pausing, etc. to match the context of the text. The context of the text is important here because it reflects the intention of the author or characters. One way to think about this is to ask, "How would the author or character say this?" Expression relates to both fiction and nonfiction texts, but it is fairly subjective. Regardless, a student must understand the text to say it aloud with appropriate expression—i.e., comprehension.

Reading aloud with appropriate pace means the student reads at a generally acceptable pace based on both the content of the text and the norms of his or her culture. It also means that the listener can understand the words being spoken. A student must have good understanding of those norms and expectations to determine the appropriate pace for reading aloud—i.e., oral language.

Fluency does not have specific sub-skills, unlike the other reading components. This is mainly because fluency is not a separate reading skill. As you can see, each part of the definition of fluency relates to other reading components, and a reader with good fluency has skills in those other components.

## Three Types of Oral Readers

There are three broad types of oral readers: too slow, too fast, and just right.

The "too slow" readers generally are trying to decode each word as they read aloud, and they may need to try more than once to read some of the words. "Too slow" readers focus on decoding skills. "Too fast" readers are trying to show you how quickly they can decode and speak the words. They may skip or incorrectly decode some words, but they keep racing along. Their focus, too, is reading aloud individual words.

If you ask either type of reader to explain or interpret what they have just read, very likely they will not be able to tell you. They have focused on individual words and not what those words mean when you put them all together. The "too slow" reader probably needs a lot of help with

decoding skills. The "too fast" reader probably needs a lot of help with comprehension and pacing. Regardless, neither one is fluent. They have not read aloud accurately and with correct expression and with correct pacing. To be fluent, a reader needs to do all three.

The "just right" reader does all three. Strong readers read aloud "just right." If you ask the "just right" reader to explain or interpret the text, he or she will likely be able to do it. At a minimum, the "just right" reader will be able to ask questions about the text that indicate he or she has a basic understanding of the content, though the concepts or information may yet be confusing.

With well-designed fluency activities that address decoding, comprehension, and oral language skills, the "too slow" and "too fast" readers can become "just right" readers.

When the National Reading Panel discussed fluency, they noted that it is something that strong readers can do as a result of having strong skills in other areas. So, if fluency is only a combination of other skills and is not a specific skill by itself, why teach it?

# Why Teach Fluency

You do not actually "teach" fluency: you teach students skills in those other three areas. When you do fluency activities, you are teaching skills in phonics, comprehension, and oral language. "Teaching fluency" means activities that allow students to practice and demonstrate their skills in phonics, comprehension, and oral language by reading aloud.

As it turns out, there are several excellent reasons for specifically including fluency activities in your reading instruction.

1. As noted, fluency activities give students opportunities to practice their decoding/word recognition skills, comprehension strategies, and oral language using meaningful text. I will describe effective fluency activities below: they are very good for practice. They help students strengthen their existing skills and provide opportunities to expand on those skills.

2. Also as noted, fluency activities give students the opportunity to demonstrate their skills in decoding, comprehension, and oral language. This means that you, the teacher, can gauge how well students are decoding and interpreting the text. Fluency activities are a natural assessment, and you can use that information to make instructional plans.

# Three Misconceptions about Fluency Instruction

1. *Flash cards help with fluency.* Often, what is described as fluency instruction is actually word recognition, which is phonics. Reading individual words on flash cards accurately is not fluency. You cannot become or demonstrate fluency unless you are reading actual text as opposed to sample phrases or single words. To be fluent, you need to demonstrate all three parts of the definition: accuracy, expression, and pace. You need to read meaningful text.

2. *Fluent readers read fast.* Being able to read aloud fast, even if accurately, is not fluency. Being able to read quickly might be a sign of good word recognition and decoding, but

that is only part of the definition for fluency. Additionally, it can promote the idea that the point of reading is to get through it as quickly as possible. It isn't. The point of reading is to understand and make use of what we read.

3. *Fluency requires 100% accuracy.* It is possible to be fluent and still not have 100% accuracy in reading aloud, particularly if you are reading a sample of text for the first time. With practice on a single piece of text, you can attain 100% accuracy, but you might not have perfect accuracy when you first read aloud a new piece of text. Measuring a student's accuracy on the first attempt, or giving students only one chance, sets up that student for failure. A better expectation is improvement over time.

# Principles for Fluency Instruction

The way you go about helping students to develop their fluency skills will determine whether students become more confident about reading or less. Many people are nervous about speaking in front of groups, and asking students to read aloud in front of their peers can provoke the same feelings of dread. This is especially true for students who are already struggling to read and who do not want to be perceived as stupid by their classmates. Students may be confident to read aloud solo later after they have practiced within a small group.

Conversely, if you follow these principles for instruction, you will mitigate the emotional barriers that can prevent students from progressing, and you can help students become stronger, more confident readers.

We will look at instructional strategies next, but all effective strategies and instructional activities are based on the same four principles, as follows.

- Instruction needs to allow multiple attempts.
- Instruction needs to focus on small-group participation.
- Instruction needs to use high-interest text.
- Instruction needs to include feedback and correction.

**Multiple Attempts**

Providing multiple attempts means letting the student read the same piece of text aloud multiple times. It generally looks like this: read aloud, get correction, focus on fixing any issues, and read aloud again. Repeat as necessary. (You might recognize this as guided oral reading.)

Most students will make mistakes the first time they try to read something out loud. If they get only one chance, they will learn that (a) they are not good at reading aloud, (b) the teacher is more interested in finding faults than in helping them improve, and (c) only perfection is rewarded.

On the other hand, if students understand that they are expected to make mistakes the first time,

then they do not have to worry about appearing incompetent. Any errors will not be held against them because they are going to get another chance. Each time a student reads the same piece of text aloud, he or she will get better at it. The student will build his or her skills, develop more confidence, and feel the pride of accomplishing something difficult. So many benefits!

**Small-Group Participation**

When students read aloud together, they feel safer, they can hear how their fellow students pronounce words, and they have an inherent desire to perform their best. They hear other students make mistakes and recognize that they are not alone in having difficulty. It promotes the ideas that the goal is improvement and that participation leads to learning. This mitigates nervousness, avoidance, and indifference to the task. It is also more fun.

Having students read together as a small group still allows you to provide individual feedback, and the group members can help point out words or phrases that were difficult. They will learn to assess themselves. Students can help one another work through those challenges and can make decisions about expression and pacing. They will work towards a group goal rather than simply trying to get it over with.

Rather than single out students to perform, have students work together. Students will make better progress in phonics, comprehension, and oral language.

**High-interest Text**

Using interesting text has several benefits. First, students will be interested in what they are reading, and they will want to know the content of the text. This gives them motivation to participate. Second, students are likely to have read something about the topic or other text in the genre. This means they will be more likely to know the vocabulary and recognize the words. Third, students will be more willing to read the text aloud multiple times.

**Feedback and Correction**

Generally, during the first oral reading of a text, students will make mistakes with decoding, expression, or pacing. They need someone to help them identify the challenging parts and to ask questions about the meaning of the text. They need someone to say, “Let’s try this again.” Most students will want to know how they did, which means you or other students tell them what went well and what needs improvement. That is feedback.

Once students receive feedback, they need help making corrections. This may be in the form of helping them sound out words or modeling how to read the text aloud. It may include assistance in understanding the content or help understanding how to modify the verbal expression. Basically, the teacher or other students help figure out how to decode the text correctly, how to provide appropriate expression, and how to modify the pacing.

Feedback and correction lead to improvement, and you provide both after each attempt at reading text aloud. Students will also appreciate knowing how they are improving.

# What Works for Fluency Instruction

With the instructional principles just described, you can use a variety of strategies to help students develop their fluency. Any strategies you use need to address all three skill sets to meet the definition of fluency. Four proven strategies are listed below. Each of them will help students strengthen and combine their phonics, comprehension, and oral language skills, which means they are effective at helping develop fluency.

## Four Sample Strategies for Teaching Fluency

- Guided oral reading
- Choral reading
- Echo reading
- Plays and skits

***Guided oral reading:*** This is the top strategy for helping students develop fluency. It works very well for helping students improve their decoding skills, increase comprehension of the text, and understand how to express the text appropriately.

I described guided oral reading already in the "What Works for Phonics Instruction" section of the previous chapter, but here it is again, with a few additional comments that help tailor this strategy to fluency.

1. The student reads aloud to the teacher (or another student), who is listening and reading along silently.
2. The teacher makes note of any words on which the student stumbles or demonstrates difficulty with decoding.
3. Once the student finishes reading the passage, the teacher helps the student sound out the troublesome words, and together they study those words.
4. New for Fluency: The teacher and student discuss the meanings of new words or words that the author may be using in an unfamiliar way. They also discuss the content using higher level questions.
5. The teacher and student may read the passage aloud together a few times, which may be followed by more discussion and questions about the content.
6. Once the student can correctly decode the troublesome words and demonstrate understanding of the content, the student attempts to read the passage aloud again. This is step one again, and the entire process may be repeated as needed.

As you can see, guided oral reading is a fairly comprehensive strategy that comprises many skills and activities. It is a top recommended strategy for helping students learn to read well.

***Choral reading:*** Choral reading refers to students reading aloud in unison. In many ways, choral

reading includes the same steps as guided oral reading, although the attention to individual student errors and the discussion steps may be more limited. However, the major difference between choral reading and guided oral reading is that choral reading is, by definition, a group strategy whereas guided oral reading can be either an individual or small group strategy. You can use choral reading with fiction or nonfiction text, prose or poetry, and dramatic or narrative content.

Choral reading provides three advantages that are not included in "normal" guided oral reading.

1. Students can participate in larger groups, even entire classrooms at once.
2. With larger groups, you can assign parts to groups of students (but never to individual students). For example, if you have students chorally read a play, several students together can read the words of various characters. For another example, you can have students "dramatically" read alternating lines in a poem.
3. Students can incorporate movement into the dramatic expression of the text, which not only increases participation but also gives students another way to analyze and demonstrate their understanding of the text.

For one more advantage, choral reading is useful for second-language learners to understand pacing, expression, and standard pronunciation of words in a safe, fun environment.

At the school where I used to teach many years ago, we held an annual choral reading competition among classrooms. These types of competitions are fairly common. Search YouTube for "Choral Reading Competition," and you will find some really great examples of what this can look like with your students.

***Echo reading:*** As the name implies, first person reads the text aloud, and then a student reads the same text aloud. The first person can be the teacher or a student. Just make sure that the first person has good fluency. For the student, the value of echo reading is that the student has a role model for what the text should sound like when read aloud.

Many teachers combine echo reading with guided oral reading. As the first step of guided oral reading, the model for reading aloud gives students an understanding of what they are attempting to reproduce.

***Plays and skits:*** Plays and skits have several benefits. They can involve larger groups of students. They require a good understanding of the content, especially character purpose and expression, and they require correct decoding in order to say the lines correctly. One recommendation: if you use plays and skits, make sure you have an audience other than the teacher. This way, it will be more meaningful and provide better motivation for participation and learning.

Using plays and skits to help students develop their fluency works well, but it can be quite time consuming, even if you do not have students try to memorize their parts.

# Sample Activities for Fluency

The strategies for fluency already suggest instructional activities that you can use to help students develop their fluency. However, the sample activities listed below provide more detail about what these strategies may look like in action. You may notice that sub-skills are not listed in the following table, which is because fluency does not have sub-skills.

| Strategy | Sample Activity Types |
|---|---|
| Guided Oral Reading | Small group choral reading, with discussion of the content, feedback and correction, etc. |
| | Partner reading, with one partner serving as the "teacher", using a teacher-generated list of questions for discussion |
| | Close reading of brief passages integrated into guided oral reading |
| | Small group oral reading to an audio recorder for the group to analyze, make corrections, and record subsequent attempts |
| Choral Reading | Whole class dramatic oral reading of a poem |
| | Discussion on how to interpret the text, followed by choral reading |
| | Small groups reading aloud a summary they have written about a text |
| | Several small groups reading aloud a section of a larger text following practice (not knowing in advance which sections they will be assigned to read aloud) |
| Echo Reading | Two small groups of students reading aloud to one another, with the second group repeating the same section as the first group, followed by discussion regarding two groups' interpretations |
| | Teacher reading aloud, with all students repeating the text in the same manner; the teacher may intentionally use an inappropriate rate or expression to prompt discussion |
| Plays and Skits | This is self-explanatory. One note: if you use this strategy, let the students practice repeatedly and make sure they have an audience other than the teacher or classmates. Make it real! |

# What Does Not Work for Fluency Instruction

The definition of fluency, the principles for instruction, and the effective instructional strategies are quite clear about what you want students to do and how you can help them do it. The following table describes three types of instructional strategies and activities that either do not align with the definition of fluency and principles or do not align with effective strategies.

| Strategy | Reason Why It Does Not Work |
|---|---|
| Flash Cards | Think about the definition of fluency; it includes appropriate expression and pacing. Students can do neither one if they are looking at individual words or disconnected phrases on flash cards. Flash cards may have some value for word recognition but not for fluency. |
| Speed Drills & Timed Assessments | The point of reading (whether aloud or silently) is not to do it as fast as possible. Similarly, the point of fluency instruction is not to see how many words a student can decode correctly in a minute or two. These types of activities are assessment and not instruction, they only address the phonics component of fluency, and they lead to a misunderstanding of the purpose for reading aloud. |
| Round Robin Reading | Round robin reading is students each taking a turn to read the next section of text, one student after the other. It has four major problems.<br><br>First, it typically does not include instruction, feedback, or correction. Nor does it allow a student multiple attempts to read the same passage. Even when the teacher does intervene to help a student struggling with pronunciation, the student re-attempts the word and then keeps going.<br><br>Second, only one student is participating at a time. The other students are supposed to be reading along silently, but there is no reason for them to do so. Round robin reading is called a group activity, but in reality, it is just one student at a time.<br><br>Third, round robin reading generally does not include discussion about the passage, expression, or pacing. If anything, students will want to get through their section as quickly as possible.<br><br>Fourth, and finally, round robin reading is painful for both the student who is put on the spot to read and for the other students who have to listen and pretend interest even if the student reading has poor fluency. |

# Companion Reading Components

Because fluency is a combination of three reading components, any instruction in fluency has to specifically address those three areas: phonics, comprehension, and oral language. If the instruction does not address those areas, it is not fluency. To assist with these three components, also add vocabulary instruction.

***Phonics:*** Phonics instruction helps students with accurate decoding, the first part of the definition for fluency. As students read aloud, they may struggle with decoding some of the words. As you pair fluency with phonics instruction, choose text that contains words with the target letter–sound associations you are studying with phonics instruction. The fluency activities, therefore, will provide students with practice in those target associations and give you the opportunity to assess whether students are mastering them.

***Comprehension:*** Comprehension instruction helps students with the appropriate oral expression of the text, which is the second part of the definition for fluency. Throughout fluency instruction, have students engage in activities that help them understand the text. The opposite is also true: as students are engaging in comprehension activities, include fluency activities. As noted previously, effective strategies for fluency include analysis and discussion of the text, which leads to comprehension.

***Oral Language:*** Oral language helps students with the pacing for reading aloud and, to some degree, the expression, which is the third part of the definition for fluency. Oral language includes the study of how language is used appropriately, and this includes appropriate expression and pacing. As students are trying to figure out how to speak the text, you are really engaging in oral language.

*Vocabulary:* Vocabulary instruction fits very nicely into fluency activities. You will tie fluency instruction to vocabulary instruction by selecting text that has target words to learn. Also, through the discussion of the text, you will help students figure out what words mean. Ultimately, if students are going to understand what the text means, they have to know what the words mean. As you will see later in the vocabulary chapter, study new words first before students read them in text, whether silently or aloud.