

# Do's and don'ts for teaching reading fluency

by Anna Geiger, M.Ed.



Read this blogpost on [themeasuredmom.com](https://www.themeasuredmom.com):

<https://www.themeasuredmom.com/dos-and-donts-for-teaching-reading-fluency/>

Have you been following along with our series about the Big 5? So far we've tackled phonemic awareness and phonics. Now it's time to discuss the do's and don'ts for **teaching reading fluency**.

As I look back on my years as a balanced literacy teacher, I realize that I misunderstood fluency and its place in the big picture. I was opposed to decodable books because I thought that leveled books, with their predictable language, helped students become fluent readers. Since my students could "read" those predictable sentences quickly and easily, I thought this was building their fluency.

In contrast, I was troubled when I heard students slooowwly sound out words in decodable books. I felt that it negatively impacted fluency and comprehension. I felt the same concern that Margaret Goldberg wrote about in her blog post, [The Drudgery \(and Beauty\) of Decodable Texts](#).

"Sounding out each word took so long that by the time they got to the end of a sentence, students didn't know what they had read. I worried that I was creating 'word callers' (and they weren't even calling the words very well!)"

As Goldberg studied the science of reading, she learned the same thing that I did: students have to do the hard work of sounding out words to become proficient readers.

Fluency **will not happen right away**. While they can learn comprehension through whole class read alouds, **comprehension of the texts they read themselves will not happen right away**.

## › DO understand fluency's role in the big picture of learning to read.

In my course, [Reach All Readers](#), I explain how fluency is the **bridge to comprehension**. When students first learn how to sound out words, their reading is veerrrrrryyyyy sssssllllllloooow. Their working memory is so taxed with figuring out what the words are, that there is very little left for focusing on comprehension.

As students increase their automaticity with word reading, they start to get over that bridge. When reading becomes fluent, their brain space is freed up to focus on comprehension – the main goal of reading! Fluency links the early stages of reading to the later stages of reading:



In the book, [Reading Fluency](#), by Hasbrouck and Glaser, they say, "If readers do not develop adequate levels of fluency, they can become stuck in the middle of the bridge, able to decode words, but with insufficient automaticity to facilitate comprehension. These students typically become our reluctant readers, often with dire consequences for themselves."

Without fluency, comprehension suffers and the joy of reading diminishes.

› **DO assess oral reading fluency.**

It's easy to go overboard with fluency assessments, or to feel so overwhelmed that you're not sure where to start.

Good news! Assessing oral reading fluency can be quick and simple.

What gets confusing is all the acronyms and abbreviations. Let's get those straight first.

- **ORF:** Oral reading fluency; it's a combination of reading rate and accuracy.
- **CBM:** Curriculum based measurement; it's the assessment tool that is most commonly used for measuring ORF.
- **WCPM:** Words correct per minute; it's how we measure ORF.

To conduct an ORF CBM assessment, listen to a student read aloud from an unpracticed, grade level passage for one minute. Follow along with a copy of the passage and mark any errors.

At the end of the one minute, determine the student's ORF score by subtracting the number of errors from the total number of words word. The score is expressed as WCPM.

How often should you assess students' oral reading fluency? Here's a good plan:

- Assess first graders' fluency in the winter and spring.
- For second grade and up, assess oral reading fluency in the fall, winter and spring.

After assessing, be sure to compare student scores to the fluency norms as compiled by Jan Hasbrouck and Gerald Tindal. (See the chart on the right.)

If a child's fluency is not within ten WCPM of the 50th percentile on the table, you should assess more often and keep track of the child's progress on a chart.

**Hasbrouck-Tindal oral reading fluency chart\***

Grade	Percentile	Fall WCPM	Winter WCPM	Spring WCPM	Average weekly improvement
1	90	-	97	116	1.2
	75	-	59	91	2.0
	50	-	29	60	1.9
	25	-	16	34	1.1
	10	-	9	18	0.5
2	90	111	131	148	1.2
	75	84	109	124	1.3
	50	50	84	100	1.6
	25	36	59	72	1.1
	10	23	35	43	0.6
3	90	134	161	166	1.0
	75	104	137	139	1.1
	50	83	97	112	0.9
	25	59	79	91	1.0
	10	40	62	63	0.7
4	90	153	168	184	1.0
	75	125	143	160	1.1
	50	94	120	133	1.2
	25	75	95	105	0.9
	10	60	71	83	0.7
5	90	179	183	195	0.5
	75	153	160	169	0.5
	50	121	133	146	0.8
	25	87	109	119	1.0
	10	64	84	102	1.9
6	90	185	195	204	0.6
	75	159	166	173	0.4
	50	132	145	146	0.3
	25	112	116	122	0.3
	10	89	91	91	0.1

This 2017 chart shows oral reading fluency norms for students as determined by data collected by Jan Hasbrouck and Gerald Tindal.

## › **DON'T** focus only on reading rate.

With all that talk about assessing oral reading fluency, it's important to remember that we do this to assess only one aspect of fluency.

As Jan Hasbrouck and Deborah Glaser write in their handbook, [Reading Fluency](#), "ORF assessments yield results that can be interpreted and used for making decisions, yet provide only 'one piece of the puzzle' when determining overall wellness."

In fact, there are four key aspects of teaching reading fluency, which I've described in the infographic on the side:

Did you catch the bullets under AUTOMATICITY? Fluency isn't just about reading words. We need students to be able to quickly identify letters, letter sounds, syllables, and more.

If you're a student of my course, [Reach All Readers](#), you can download resources for building fluency at the letter sound level, word level, and text level.

## › **DO** provide authentic experiences to help students learn to read with expression.

**Prosody** is all about to do with reading the way we speak – it's about reading with phrasing, emotion, and emphasis, and rhythm (even inside our heads).

Teaching students to read with prosody is SUCH an important part of teaching reading fluency.

According to the authors Pamela E. Hook and Sandra D. Jones, in their chapter of the book [Expert Perspectives on Interventions in Reading](#), children must learn to read with expression in order to improve comprehension.

# 4 Elements of Fluency

## ACCURACY

- Accurate reading depends on identifying individual words.
- Accuracy is more important than speed.
- Researchers generally agree that less than 95% accuracy will hurt comprehension.



## RATE

- Rate refers to the speed with which students read.
- Rate is NOT synonymous with fluency.

## EXPRESSION

- Expression includes the pitch, tone, volume, emphasis, and rhythm in speech.
- It also includes the ability to chunk words into phrases.
- Expression includes knowing how to pause appropriately within and at the ends of sentences.



## AUTOMATICITY

- Automaticity includes quick and effortless identification of letter sounds.
- Automaticity includes quick and effortless word recognition or decoding.
- The more students achieve automaticity, the more mental resources can be devoted to comprehension.



These experts tell us that students must transition from decoding text to constructing meaning by reading with prosody. "Making this connection allows a reader to self-monitor and self-correct, which in turn facilitates the comprehension of text."

I can speak to this from my own experience. Of our six kids, one stands out as not being particularly interested in reading. (He'd rather shoot baskets, throw a football, or ride his bike any day!) He often reads aloud in a monotone voice, hardly stopping for punctuation.

When I ask him about what he just read, it's no surprise that he has no idea! In contrast, when he and I read aloud together and I force him to stop and read with expression, his comprehension improves.

### **Use reader's theater to build reading fluency.**

Reader's theater is an authentic way to get students to reread a text with expression – which builds fluency and improves comprehension.

Reader's theater combines reading and performing. It requires no costumes or scenery.

You need a copy of the script for each group of students. As the teacher, you'll assign roles and guide students as they practice reading their scripts. After several days of practice, students can perform their scripts for the class.

I especially love reader's theater scripts in the form of partner plays! Partner plays include only two parts, making them ideal for buddy reading and use at centers.

For an example, check out the audio recording of a partner play I read with my youngest (he just started kindergarten; I taught him to read at home before starting school using a structured literacy approach). You can find it in the blog post [here](#), scroll about halfway down the page.

When you get to the end of the blog post, you're invited to download all three levels of this partner play for FREE!

### **› DON'T forget to make time for daily fluency building.**

Fluency is important, but it's often forgotten in the daily challenge of "fitting it all in."

As tough as it sounds, I recommend incorporating fluency practice every day in grades 1-3.

If this sounds tedious, don't worry. There are countless ways to build fluency!

- Do whole class or small group **echo reading**, in which you model how to read a text, and students "echo" you, matching your phrasing as much as possible as they reread the text. This is not a recitation activity; it is *reading*. Make sure that you gradually increase the amount of text that students echo to prevent them from relying on their memory.
- Do whole group or small group **choral reading**. You and your students will read the text simultaneously; it will give them practice developing automaticity and expression.

- For students who need a fluency intervention, use **timed repeated reading**. This is when a student reads for one minute and tries to beat their rate and accuracy with successive one-minute readings of the same text. But don't use this with everyone. According to the authors of the Core Reading Sourcebook, timed repeated reading is best used "as an intervention strategy that is most appropriate for slow but accurate readers who need intense practice to increase their automaticity in reading connected text."
- **Provide fluency drills at centers** to give students practice naming letters and letter sounds. More advanced readers should practice reading syllables and single words. If you're a member of my online course, Reach All Readers, you can [head to this lesson to grab a big file of fluency drills](#).
- Have students **play word reading games** in pairs or small groups. (My collection of editable reading games is perfect for this.)
- **Spend a week doing partner plays or reader's theater** (zip to the end of this post to download a free script in three levels!).
- **Give students daily time to read text at their independent or instructional level.** Phonics lessons are great, but students must practice what they're learning by reading connected text. I recommend making sure that each student has a bag of decodable texts that s/he can read every day. For students who are ready for leveled books, those should be in the bag as well. Note that I did not say that kids should grab any old book off the shelf and read for fluency practice. Work with your students to choose their books, and hold them accountable. Listen to them read whenever possible.

### › Let's sum up!

- **DO understand the role of fluency** in the big picture of learning to read. Fluency is the bridge to comprehension.
- **DO** assess oral reading fluency at different points of the year for first grade and up.
- **DON'T** focus only on reading rate. Fluency includes accuracy, rate, expression, and automaticity.
- **DO** provide authentic experiences for students to practice reading with expression. Partner plays are my favorite tool for this! Scroll down on the blog post to get a FREE script.
- **DON'T** forget to make time for daily fluency building.

### More resources for you

- Get the book, [Reach All Readers](#)
- Sign up for the [Reach All Readers online course](#)
- Join our [membership for K-3rd grade teachers](#)