



## **Reading Fluency What is it and Why is it Important?**

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

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Reading fluency is composed of 3 main components: **speed**, **accuracy**, and **prosody**. Let's take a look at each of these:

**Speed** – Fluent readers read at an appropriate rate of speed for their age or grade level (usually measured in words per minute or *wpm*). They visually scan 3+ words ahead when reading aloud, and maintain smooth visual tracking line to line.

**Accuracy** – Fluent readers have highly automatic word recognition, and the skills to sound out unfamiliar words; dysfluent readers make frequent mistakes, have poor word recognition, skip words, substitute similar-appearing words, and struggle with unfamiliar words.

**Prosody** – Fluent readers use prosody (pitch, stress, and timing) to convey meaning when they read aloud; dysfluent readers typically use less expression, read word by word instead of in phrases or chunks, and fail to use intonation or pauses to “mark” punctuation (e.g. periods, commas, and question marks).

**When does reading fluency begin?** In 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, the focus is on phonics, learning to sound out words, and increasing sight word recognition. By grades 2-3 these skills have solidified, and reading becomes more effortless and fluent.

**Why is reading fluency important?** Reading fluency is a key measure of overall reading ability. By grades 3-4, the scholastic focus shifts from learning to read to “reading to learn”, and students build vocabulary and knowledge through reading. If reading is less effortful, there are more mental resources available for comprehension, analysis, and critical thinking. When reading fluency is poor, comprehension often suffers. Decoding mistakes can change meaning, and a slow, labored pace can make it more difficult to maintain coherency and meaning. Even when comprehension is good, a slower reading pace may cause fatigue or make it difficult to keep up with the volume of assigned work.

**Why do some children struggle with reading fluency?** Children with poor reading fluency often do not recognize and acquire linguistic patterns with the same ease as others. This is particularly true for children with language-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Typically developing readers need 4-15 exposures to a word to achieve automaticity in word recognition, whereas poor readers need 40+ exposures to achieve the same recognition. Research has also shown that word-retrieval speed is a strong predictor of reading fluency. Children with slow linguistic retrieval take longer to retrieve letter-sound associations, sight vocabulary, and word



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meanings as they read. Reading is a language-based process, and children with early speech or language delays are also at greater risk for later reading difficulties.

**Can poor reading fluency be treated?** Children can improve their reading fluency with explicit, systematic instruction. Treatment should be individually designed to address specific underlying weaknesses, which may include: phonological awareness, phonological memory, word attack skills, vowel patterns, common word parts and patterns, syllabification strategies, and linguistic retrieval. Increasing the automaticity of word recognition and retrieval for high-frequency words and phrases is also critical. Other components of an oral reading fluency program include learning to read with expression and intonation, reading in phrases, and visual scanning while reading. Parents can help by modeling fluent reading, and by engaging in tandem oral reading activities (such as "echo" reading and choral reading). Repeated oral reading of a passage also builds overall reading fluency, by giving repeated practice in phrasing, scanning, prosody, and word recognition.

**When should I seek help?** Many children with reading problems are bright, and able to mask early reading weaknesses by using contextual meaning to guess at unknown words. Reading fluency problems may not become obvious until 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. However, research shows that most children who are reading below grade level in 4<sup>th</sup> grade continue to read below grade level in higher grades. Children who are behind in reading may suffer reduced self-esteem, and are at risk for becoming discouraged learners who underachieve academically. Concerns about reading fluency should be addressed and treated as early as possible.

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*Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP is a literacy and learning specialist and certified state-licensed speech-language pathologist. She is the owner of Bend Language & Learning, a private practice dedicated to the treatment of dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities ([www.bendlanguageandlearning.com](http://www.bendlanguageandlearning.com)).*

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