

READING FLUENCY
Ideas for Parents
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Good reading is essentially translating print to speech. Therefore, the best measure of reading fluency is when a student can read as if talking—with appropriate speed, voice inflection, phrasing and rhythm. When the words come easily to the student’s mind, the cognitive portions of the brain are freed to focus on comprehension—structuring the information accurately in his mind, relating it to his own experiences and previous knowledge, organizing the information, thus extracting meaning and storing it accurately.

Learning the alphabet-sound linkage (phonics) is an essential skill in becoming a reader. It is the beginning step, with English being about 75% predictive. However, it’s not long until students encounter “sight words” such as “the,” “they,” “of,” “said,” “one,” “two,” “love” and the list goes on and on. Additionally, the English language is filled with various ways to spell the same sound, especially vowels. Thus, sell, sail, sale and cell must be learned based on their connection to meaning. They simply have to be committed to memory, and it’s usually at this point when teachers and parents notice that things are not going well for a novice reader.

For a skilled reader, exposure to sight words, as well as predictable phonics patterns, up to 25 times is sufficient for the student to accurately store the word or pattern into long-term memory. The process is similar to memory for faces and forms. Having perceived and stored the information accurately, a student efficiently retrieves the information. The process thus becomes automatic and, with very little struggle, the student becomes a fluent reader.

When this process does not occur automatically, the student often struggles in the following ways:

- often can’t remember the simplest words regardless of the number of exposures
- can’t remember the same word from page to page
- miscalls words (e.g., was for saw or red for read)
- starts, hesitates, repeats, getting stuck on a word again and again
- reads slowly, labored, haltingly, word by word
- has little understanding of what was read

Our challenge is clear—assist the student in developing the underlying visual-memory skills that lead to reading fluency. The following ideas are focused on this goal. They are not presented in any priority order and can be incorporated as teachers and parents see the need.

1. Flash cards. Generally, flash cards are standard fare for beginning readers. However, effective practice involves the following steps.

2. Never work with more than 12 to 20 cards at a time (increasing the number with the age and efficiency of the reader). It is very discouraging to a student to face the daunting task of a tall stack of cards! About 1/3 of the cards in the working deck should be well known, 1/3 fairly sure and 1/3 difficult. As words become well known, replace them with other cards so that you have a rotating deck. After about 20 words are learned, combine words into phrases and add those cards into the practice deck. (Fluency is gauged by how well a student can grasp a phrase as a whole unit; therefore, it's wise to start this process as early as possible. It's easy to make your own phrase cards, or order them on-line.)
3. The name "flash" card has a meaning. Hold up the card about two seconds for student to grasp into his mind—he doesn't speak until the card has been turned down. If he looks at you blankly, gain eye contact and show the card again. If he still doesn't know it, ask what he remembers seeing. Let him answer as much as possible then encourage him to look for more the next time. Show the card again for two seconds and put it down. If he gets it, compliment him and move on. If he doesn't get it, show it and say it with him then remove the card from the deck (it is too hard for now), put it back with the stored cards and proceed with a card that he likely knows. The point is simply that he must work from inside his mind to remember the word; he cannot work off the surface of the card. By the way, this is also true for working on math facts—another arena where fluency may be an issue.
4. Separate word-recognition skills from reading comprehension. The reason is simple: the brain does only one focused/ concentrated task at a time. When word recognition is difficult, it becomes the focused task and a student cannot simultaneously focus on comprehension of the material read. Therefore, a parent can pre-read a book that is within the range of the student's ability. Knowing the student well, the parent can choose up to 12 words that the student might struggle with then print these on a card (5 by 8 inches works best and can be saved as a marker for the book). If there are more than 12 words, the book is too hard for his current level; choose another book. Play games with these words until the student has good familiarity with them. For example:
 - a. Show me "Mr. Nosebody." Will the word be short or long? Isn't that a funny name? Show me your nose. How would you spell "nose"?
 - b. Show me "garden." What will it start with? You have another word that starts with that sound, right? So, what other sounds do you hear?
 - c. What is the other word that starts with "g". How can you know which word is which? Garden has two parts (syllables) and "grow" only one.

- d. I see a word that starts and ends with the same sound. Which do you think it is? (spaces) What's the difference with "surprise"? (Last sound is more like /z/ (voiced s).
- e. I see a long word that has a small word inside. That word is something on your foot. (toes). The first part of the word is a boy's name. (Tom). What's the word? (tomatoes)
- f. Etc.

When the student is comfortable with naming each word, go to reading the book. You are now focused on comprehension. If the student stumbles over a word, just whisper it and proceed to the end. Ask questions (all the WH questions) and discuss the ideas read: why they were funny/interesting, what was learned, what he thinks will happen next, etc. When finished, go back to the word/s missed and discuss how to recognize that word next time. If it is one of the words previously studied, go back to the card to review it. After the student is successful with reading the book, be sure he reads it several more times—to another parent, sibling, grandparent, on a recording, etc.

- 5. It is extremely important to practice fluency with material that is well within students' ability level—usually several months below their instructional level. Because we do not want to insult their intelligence, we look for material that is of high interest but low readability. Often called "Hi-Lo" readers, they include age-appropriate biographies, sports, mysteries, etc., but a controlled reading level matched to the fluency level of a student. Check on-line resources such as Remedia.com, etc., if you want to purchase materials, or check with your local library, which generally has an extended collection arranged by difficulty level. The more students read at the level of ease (rather than frustration), the better readers they will become.
- 6. After a student has fair word-recognition skills, let her practice reading simultaneously with you and matching you speed, rhythm, voice inflection, etc. Gradually, reduce your voice to a whisper. You can also read a sentence and let the student read it in the same way. Or, you can read one sentence and the student the next then every other paragraph or page.
- 7. Don't hesitate to use recorded books, especially for material at or above the student's grade level. However, the student's eyes must be following the text as he reads simultaneously with the recording. It's fine to track with two fingers or use a marker. With the popularity of computers, the resources are endless in accessing such materials. For example, the addition of software such as "Speak It" or "Natural Soft Reader"; whatever is on the computer screen can be read orally. Use a variable speed to match to the student's comfortable rate. Later, you can gradually increase the speed as students become more fluent.

8. Speed of reading is linked to grade levels as words per minute: first-53, second-89, third-107, fourth-123 (Harbach and Tyndal, 2005). The length of passages to read also systematically increases across the grades: first, 53 to 6 words; second, 89 to 111 words; third, 107 to 133 words; and fourth, 123 to 153 words. Try to have a reasonable expectation for your student's performance.
9. Of interest, students who struggle with phonics often have less difficulty with longer/ harder words. These students need exposure to lots of print, not just the words that fit their current phonics instruction. A couple of easy ways to increase this exposure are as follows:
 - a. For young children, label an area of the house and play games by finding and identifying the labels. For example, in the kitchen: "I'm thinking of something that keeps food very cold." Child finds the label and uses a magnet to attach it to the refrigerator door. She can call out the letters as time is available. You can call out the letters or flash a second printed card for the student to find the item in the kitchen.
 - b. Put in a plastic bag about 12 to 15 cards with pictures of things in the kitchen (use photos, pictures from magazines, or purchase picture packs). The name of each object is printed on the back of each card. Make a second card with only the printed name. Keep the bags near the kitchen counter. The student can empty the cards and separate then space out pictures. His task is then to lay a word card on each picture. When complete, he can self-check by matching the print to the back of the card. Later, you can add other bags: clothing names, people's names, actions, emotions, places to go, foods, etc.
10. Let the student use a chalkboard to copy or spell words. The chalkboard provides physical resistance, thus creating a deeper/ stronger memory trace. Using color also enhances visual memory. Use any of the cards you have made for student to write the word and draw the picture.
11. When a student gets stuck on a word, try some alternate strategies to starting with the first sound, adding the next, then the next, etc.
 - a. Allow the student to substitute a short hum for the word and keep on reading. Often, the context of the whole sentence will spark his memory for the word.
 - b. Cover the beginning of the word and start with the ending sound (reverse chaining), then move backward to the vowel and ending, then add the first sound. For example: sport = rt then ort then port then sport.

- c. Identify the part/ syllables. Thankfulness = ness then fullness then thankfulness.
 - d. Relate harder words to easier words with the same root meaning (morpheme). Example: motivate from motion from move; exposition from position from pose; or restructured from structure from struct (meaning to build as in construction).
 - e. Group and practice lists of words with similar structure. Example: motion, action, option, addition, subtraction, exception, etc.
12. Allow a student to dictate a story to you, which you print/ write for him. He can then practice reading back his story to others. For the more computer savvy, add software such as Dragon Naturally that translates voice to print. The student can then speak words or a story that becomes print. Editing then printing out the story and adding pictures makes the student a proud author.

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