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## Fluency Instruction

by Jan Hasbrouck  
and Martha C. Hougen

*"I don't get it. Sam knows all his letters and sounds and can read most any word in the second-grade books. But he doesn't seem to understand what he reads, though his listening comprehension is on grade level. I have noticed that he reads very slowly, probably because he wants to be accurate. It seems to take forever for him to finish one sentence! How can I help Sam?"*

"There is no comprehension strategy that compensates for difficulty reading words accurately and fluently."<sup>1</sup>

This teacher has aptly described a student, Sam, who may have problems with his reading fluency: the ability to read accurately yet quickly, with expression and comprehension. Sam may have other reading challenges that the teacher will want to investigate, but lack of reading fluency appears to be Sam's biggest obstacle. This chapter will provide an overview of fluency and how you can help students like Sam.

**Objectives:** After studying this chapter you will be able to do the following:

1. Identify and define the three primary components of reading fluency.
2. Explain why it is important for students to become fluent readers.
3. Explain the difference between fast reading and fluent reading.
4. Explain the role that both accuracy and rate play in text comprehension.
5. Explain how the statement, "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer," relates to reading fluency.
6. Describe the different levels of text: independent, instructional, and frustrational.
7. Explain how curriculum-based measures of oral reading fluency can be used to identify students who might need help with reading and to evaluate or monitor their progress in reading.
8. Identify the differences between benchmark/screening and progress monitoring assessments.
9. Identify and explain four instructional strategies to improve students' reading fluency.
10. Explain this statement: "Teaching students to read faster is not the answer."

## READING FLUENCY: WHAT IS IT? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Reading fluency has long been considered an essential skill that must be developed by readers to facilitate the comprehension of what has been read and to motivate engagement in the act of reading. The concept of reading fluency has been discussed in professional literacy circles since 1886.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1970s, there has been a flurry of research about fluency and its relationship to comprehension.<sup>3</sup> It has been confirmed that the human brain has the capacity to perform tasks such as reading at an automatic, nearly unconscious level, once sufficient learning has occurred. Readers who have achieved automaticity, immediately and effortlessly recognizing words in print, can allocate their cognitive processes (thinking) to the meaning of what is being read, rather than thinking about how to decode the words. When readers have to devote a significant amount of their cognitive resources to simply decoding and recognizing words, the cognitive resources available for paying attention and for processing information are limited, resulting in impaired comprehension. Therefore, it is important that students become fluent readers, reading text with minimal effort so that they can concentrate on the meaning of the text.

Many reading professionals refer to the Report of the National Reading Panel as being a modern watershed in terms of reading fluency. In the section on fluency in the summary document, it was stated: "Fluency is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension. Despite its importance as a component of skilled reading, fluency is often neglected in the classroom."<sup>4</sup> This strongly worded proclamation was a wake-up call to educators to learn more about the importance of fluency and how to provide instruction in the classroom.

### Defining Reading Fluency

Even though reading fluency has been a topic of discussion for more than a century, there are still many questions surrounding the definition of the term, in part because fluency has many subtle components that are interdependent and, therefore, difficult to separate.<sup>5</sup> Although there may not be a firm consensus on a single definition of reading fluency, most definitions include three components: rate, accuracy, and prosody.

**Rate.** Reading rate is sometimes mistakenly used as a synonym for fluency, but rate technically refers only to the speed with which students read text. Most teachers have had experience with students who read quickly but still may not have good comprehension. Speed alone is not sufficient to facilitate comprehension, and a fast reader is not necessarily a fluent reader. In fact, fast readers may be reading inaccurately, or perhaps are reading too quickly to think about what they are reading. The rate or speed at which text is decoded and identified is clearly one aspect of fluency. However, reading fast is not the same as reading fluently. Some teachers encourage their students to "read as fast as they can"—this is *not* good practice. Rather, students should do their "best reading." This will be addressed further when the instructional strategies to improve fluency are discussed.

**Accuracy.** A second essential component of fluent reading is accuracy. In fact, accuracy may be considered to be the foundation of fluency. In order for a reader to understand what is being read, the text must be read with a certain level of accuracy; that is, reading words correctly. It is not known exactly how accurate a reader must read to obtain adequate or even minimal comprehension. However, there seems to be general consensus that comprehension is impaired when text is read with less than 95% accuracy. This means students should be able to correctly read at least 95 out of every 100 words.<sup>6</sup> Fluent readers should read text at an appropriate rate for the task while maintaining a reasonable level of accuracy.

Fluency is reading at an appropriate rate, with accuracy and prosody.

**Prosody.** There is one additional component that is commonly considered a characteristic of a fluent reader: the ability to read with good expression. The technical term for this is *prosody*. Prosody refers to the pitch, tone, volume, emphasis, and rhythm in speech or oral reading. Teachers also talk about "chunking" words together into appropriate phrases as being another element of good expression. There is far less research on the contributions of prosody to comprehension than has been conducted on rate and accuracy, but emerging findings suggest there is some relationship. At this point, it is unclear whether prosody is a cause or an outcome of comprehension or if the relationship is in fact reciprocal. However, the extent to which a student uses correct expression while reading orally can indicate how well a reader comprehends the text being read.<sup>7</sup> If the reader does not know what he is reading about, it is difficult to phrase the words appropriately and to emphasize the correct words to obtain meaning.

### What Research Says about the Role of Reading Fluency

As the National Reading Panel report made clear, reading fluency is an essential component of reading because it is necessary for comprehension. The ultimate goal of reading is to understand what has been read. To understand the role that fluency plays in reading comprehension, it is helpful to know how the brain processes information.

The human brain processes information (such as the visual images of printed text) using a complex, interconnected system that begins with working memory.<sup>8</sup> The working memory of the brain temporarily stores and manages information that will be used to complete the complex cognitive tasks involved in learning, reasoning, and comprehending. Scientists acknowledge that, although individual brains differ in their function and capacity, the models of working memory embrace the idea that, in order to function, all brains need to process information in a manner that is manageable. If too much information comes into the brain at once, the working memory becomes overloaded, and comprehension is impaired. Conversely, if information comes into the brain too slowly, the working memory cannot devote sufficient attention to the information to identify a pattern or see a relationship to previous learning. Because of this, a rate of reading that is appropriate to the task (neither too fast nor too slow) must be utilized by the reader in order for comprehension to be facilitated. Of course, the brain must process information that is reasonably accurate in order for comprehension to occur. Thus, comprehension is impaired or limited by reading too fast, too slowly, or inaccurately and is facilitated by reading at an appropriate rate for the task with reasonable accuracy. In other words, fluent reading assists comprehension.

Reading at a rate appropriate to the task acknowledges that different types of material are read at different rates. Think of how quickly you read a novel with a great story. Compare that to how you read a physics text. Most of us read the novel quickly and accurately, without thinking about decoding individual words. In contrast, if you are not knowledgeable about physics and you are reading a physics textbook, you are likely to read much slower, taking time to decode difficult words and to contemplate their meaning.

Levels of text difficulty for individual students are often described as being at an instructional level, an independent level, or frustrational level. When you are working with students on building fluency, the text should be at the instructional level. When the students are working independently, the text should be at the independent or instruction level; the student should be able to read the text with no support (Table 8.1).

Another way that poor fluency skills can impede comprehension has to do with what Dr. Keith Stanovich famously referred to as the "Matthew effect."<sup>9</sup> The term is taken from the Biblical passage describing the phenomenon in which it seems that in life the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Stanovich applied this concept to struggling readers, who early on in the process of learning to read begin to lag behind their peers, and throughout the subsequent years often fall even further behind, in part because they simply are reading far less text.

**Table 8.1.** Levels of text difficulty

Independent-level text	The reader makes no more than one error in 20 words (95% and higher accuracy) and shows good comprehension.
Instructional-level text	The reader has 90%–94% accuracy and satisfactory comprehension. This type of text is used with teacher or peer support and is appropriate for fluency practice.
Frustrational-level text	The reader makes more than one error per 10 words, less than 90% accuracy, and shows poor comprehension. Do not require students to read at this level.

From Betts, E.A. (1946). *Foundations of Reading Instruction, With Emphasis on Differentiated Guidance*. New York: American Book Company.

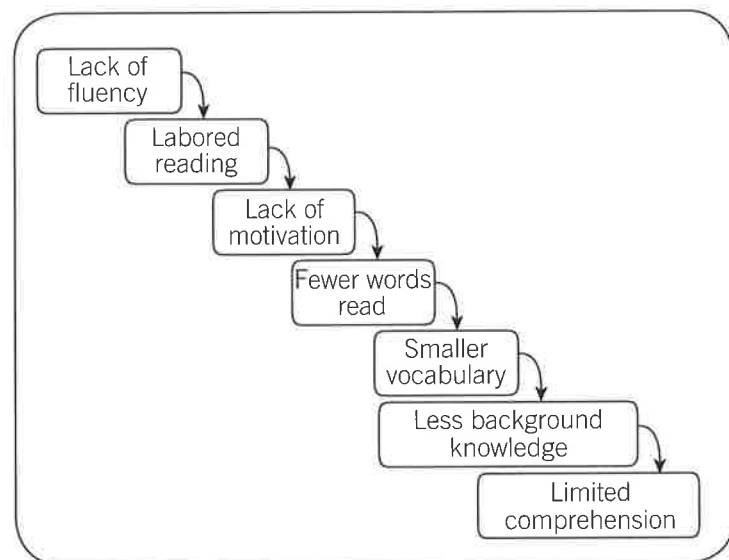
The good readers get “richer” because they are reading significantly more text than their less capable peers and, thus, deepening their decoding and word-recognition skills and increasing their vocabulary.<sup>10</sup> These same researchers also found that the act of reading helps create motivated or “avid” readers, and they even go so far as to state that their data indicate that those who read a lot enhance their verbal intelligence—that is, reading actually makes them smarter!

Figure 8.1 illustrates the vicious cycle that occurs when students struggle with fluency.

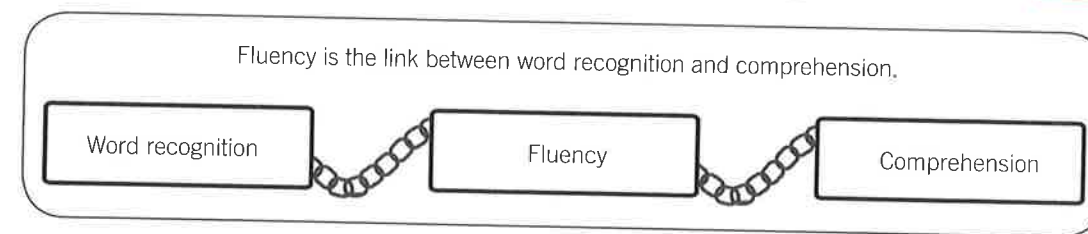
It is helpful to think of fluency as a link in a chain connecting beginning decoding skills and comprehension skills. Fluent reading enables students to link from word-by-word decoding to being able to read with automaticity and to concentrate on the meaning of the text.

If readers do not develop adequate levels of fluency, the chain link will break, and the student may not be able to decode accurately and quickly enough to adequately understand what they are reading (Figure 8.2). These students typically become our reluctant readers, often with dire consequences for themselves, their future families, and society.<sup>11</sup>

Researchers have noted that the role of fluency changes across the developmental stages of reading. For emergent readers, the accuracy of reading, rather than the rate, should be the focus. Accuracy plays the most important role in comprehending in kindergarten and early first grade. Once students are reading connected text with reasonable accuracy—typically by the middle of first grade—the rate and accuracy of their reading is strongly tied to their overall reading skill, including comprehension.<sup>12</sup> Some researchers have noted that, once a student’s reading level is around the sixth-grade level, factors other than fluency become more important in the overall reading process, including vocabulary and background knowledge.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 8.1.** The vicious cycle.



**Figure 8.2.** Links to comprehension.

### WHAT SHOULD STUDENTS KNOW AND BE ABLE TO DO AT SPECIFIC GRADE LEVELS, Pre-K–6?

General guidelines for the number of words students are expected to read correctly in 1 minute are in Tables 8.2 and 8.3. These numbers represent what typical students should be reading when they are on track in reading. More detailed norms are provided in Table 8.2. Note that the assessment of students’ oral reading fluency of connected text does not generally start before second semester of first grade.

If students can read the expected words per minute fluently (accurately, with comprehension), they should learn to read as expected. However, if they struggle reaching these expectations, they may have a problem with fluency or some other reading difficulty. Poor fluency tells us there may be a problem, but what is causing the problem cannot be known until further diagnostics are done.

### HOW DO YOU ASSESS READING FLUENCY?

It should be clear from the information presented so far that assisting students to become fluent readers also plays an important role in helping them become motivated readers who enjoy the process of reading and who can understand and learn from what they read. The process of assisting all students to become fluent readers logically starts with identifying which students are already sufficiently fluent and which students would benefit from fluency instruction or intervention.<sup>14</sup> Stahl and Kuhn suggest that when fluent readers read aloud, their reading sounds like normal speech.<sup>15</sup> This implies that simply listening to students read text aloud might be a way to start the process of identifying fluent and dysfluent students.

**Table 8.2.** National oral reading fluency norms

Grade	50th Percentiles		
	Fall WCPM	Winter WCPM	Spring WCPM
1		23	53
2	51	72	89
3	71	92	107
4	94	112	123
5	110	127	139
6	127	140	150
7	128	136	150
8	133	146	151

GREEN Zone ≥10 to -4; YELLOW Zone -5 to -10; RED Zone >10 below

From Hasbrouck, J., & Tindal, G. (2006). ORF norms: A valuable assessment tool for reading teachers. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(7), 636–644; reprinted by permission.

Key: WCPM, words correct per minute.

**Table 8.3.** National oral reading fluency norms

Grade	Percentile	Fall WCPM	Winter WCPM	Spring WCPM
1	90		81	111
	75		47	82
	50		23	53
	25		12	28
	10		6	15
2	90	106	125	142
	75	79	100	117
	50	51	72	89
	25	25	42	81
	10	11	18	31
3	90	128	146	162
	75	99	120	137
	50	71	92	107
	25	44	62	78
	10	21	36	48
4	90	145	166	180
	75	119	139	152
	50	94	112	123
	25	68	87	98
	10	45	61	72
5	90	166	182	194
	75	139	156	168
	50	110	127	139
	25	85	99	109
	10	61	74	83
6	90	177	195	204
	75	153	167	177
	50	127	140	150
	25	98	111	122
	10	68	82	93
7	90	180	192	202
	75	156	165	177
	50	128	136	150
	25	102	109	123
	10	79	88	98
8	90	185	199	199
	75	161	173	177
	50	133	146	151
	25	106	115	124
	10	77	84	97

From Hasbrouck, J., & Tindal, G. (2006). ORF norms: A valuable assessment tool for reading teachers. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(7), 636-644; reprinted by permission.

Key: WCPM, words correct per minute.

In addition to this initial and informal assessment, there are tools available to teachers to systematically and objectively identify students at various levels of need for assistance with reading fluency. Teachers who are responsible for teaching students to become successful readers should know about these assessments and how to use them appropriately to both identify students who might need special assistance with fluency, and then assess their progress—or lack of progress—once instruction has started. There are reliable, valid, and classroom-useful assessments that help teachers accomplish these important tasks by targeting the three primary components of fluency: rate, accuracy, and prosody. Here, they will be discussed in reverse order.

**Assessing reading prosody.** Researchers, including Ron Cole and his colleagues at Boulder Language Technologies in Boulder, Colorado, have developed voice recognition and evaluation software that may someday allow teachers to objectively and precisely rate a student's oral reading expression and eventually be able to compare it with some normative standards or expectations.<sup>16</sup> However, at the present time, there are no tools available to classroom teachers to objectively score for students' expression or prosody. Instead, qualitative rubrics or rating scales developed by researchers to guide the assessment process are commonly used to evaluate expression and assign a grade or performance level. A widely used rubric is the four-level scale from the National Assessment of Educational Progress that ranges from well-phrased, expressive reading at Level 4 to word-by-word, monotonic reading at Level 1 (Figure 8.3).<sup>17</sup> Other scales have been created for assessing prosody that allow teachers to rate a student's pace, smoothness, phrasing, expression, and intonation.<sup>18</sup>

Level 4: Reads with expressive interpretation

Level 3: Reads primarily in three- or four-word phrase groups

Level 2: Reads primarily in two-word phrases that are awkward and haphazardly grouped

Level 1: Reads primarily word-by-word

**Figure 8.3.** National Assessment of Educational Progress descriptors of prosody. (From Institute of Education Sciences, 2002.)

**Assessing rate and accuracy.** One of the procedures for assessing students' rate and accuracy is based on a body of research conducted over the past 25 years called curriculum-based measurement (CBM). Numerous CBM studies have used measures of rate and accuracy to assess students' skill development and progress in reading, math, writing, and spelling.<sup>19</sup> The CBM assessment process for oral reading fluency (ORF) assessments requires using standardized procedures that involve having a student read aloud from unpracticed, grade-level passages or lists of letters, letter sounds, or words for 1 minute, while an examiner identifies errors. At the end of 1 minute, a score of words correct per minute (or letters or sounds correct) is calculated. That score can then be compared with an established benchmark that indicates proficiency. Students at or above the designated benchmark are considered at low risk (or are likely on track with their skill development); students below benchmark are considered possibly at risk (if they are slightly below the benchmark) or likely at risk (if significantly below benchmark).

**Norms for ORF.** In 2006, Jan Hasbrouck and Jerry Tindal published a set of national norms for oral reading fluency.<sup>20</sup> These norms were created to provide educators with guidelines for what reading fluency scores would be appropriate for students in grades 1–8 across the school year. A student's score from a 60-second assessment on an unpracticed, grade-level passage would be compared to the Hasbrouck and Tindal chart for his or her grade level and the time of the school year in which the assessment was administered. They recommend that if a student's ORF score is more than 10 words below the 50th percentile, the teacher can flag that student as one who might need some additional instructional support. The percentile number indicates the percentage of scores that fell at or below that score. In other words, the 20th percentile is the score below which 20% of all the scores from the assessment can be found.

Researchers generally agree that performance at the 50th percentile serves as a reasonable benchmark for fluency performance. However, some states and districts across the country have set their state standards for reading fluency at the 75th percentile or even higher. This decision possibly comes from the belief that it is better to set higher standards for students' performance or perhaps from the notion that "our state's students are all above average, so everyone else's average is not good enough for us." Although setting high standards for our students is usually a good thing to do, in this case, it is a mistake. There is absolutely no research or theory to support this idea. There is ample empirical evidence that it is essential for students to read fluently at least at the 50th percentile, but there is no research to suggest that pushing students to read above the 50th percentile has any benefit. Very few students will be able to achieve such levels, so they and their teachers may become frustrated with the attempt. More importantly, there is no research to indicate there is a significant benefit to their reading if they do achieve this higher fluency level. In other words, students need not read as fast as possible to become good readers. Students who read in the average range are on target to become effective readers.

**Using ORF as benchmark/screening assessments.** Curriculum-based measurements of oral reading fluency may be used as benchmark or screening assessments. Benchmark assessments are widely used these days, especially in elementary schools, and are often administered three times each year to all students in a school, a process referred to as universal screening.

**Table 8.4.** Expected fluency gains

Words correct per minute gains per week	
Grade 1:	2–3 words
Grade 2:	1.5–2 words
Grade 3:	1–1.5 words
Grade 4:	0.85–1.1 words
Grade 5:	0.5–0.8 words
Grade 6:	0.3–0.65 words

Source: Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, Walz, & Germann (1993).

Well-known examples of benchmark/screening assessments include DIBELS, DIBELS-Next, AimsWEB, the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), and the Reading Fluency Benchmark Assessor (RFBA).<sup>21</sup> Although the reliability and validity of these assessments have been well-documented, teachers should be cautioned to use results from benchmark/screening assessments as only one indicator or snapshot of a student's performance. Teachers should always consider other relevant sources of evidence about a student's reading ability, including daily performance in class work, language proficiency levels, and other assessment results.

Table 8.4 is a research-based guide to the expected word gains for students reading at various grade levels.<sup>22</sup> Teachers can use this chart to help set fluency goals for students. You will note that students reading at the first-grade level make more gains per week than older students. As students reach their optimum fluency rate, the number of words gained levels off.

### Confusion about ORF Assessments

The labeling of these CBM measures as ORF implies these assessments measure the complete skill of reading fluency, and that has led to a lot of confusion in the ranks of educators.<sup>23</sup> Some think that ORF is a measure of rate only or that using CBM benchmark/screening measures implies that fluency is the only reading skill that needs to be assessed and considered for making instructional decisions about students. Many mistakenly conclude that students who read fast are good readers and that if students who read slowly are simply taught how to read faster, they will become better readers overall!

Because rate and accuracy are used in ORF measures, and because rate and accuracy are two key components of the skill of reading fluency, this confusion is understandable. However, when used for benchmark/screening decisions, CBM assessments are not simply measures of fluency skill levels and were never intended to be interpreted that way. Instead, the assessments must be used as highly efficient and reasonably accurate indicators of general reading ability. Numerous studies conducted over the past several decades have clearly established that these fluency-based measures are strongly correlated with measures of reading comprehension and overall reading proficiency.<sup>24</sup>

It is most accurate and appropriate to think of these benchmark/screening measures as "thermometers" that help determine students' general academic (reading) health or wellness. They cannot provide a specific diagnosis or imply an appropriate treatment plan, but scores can be used to raise a red flag of concern about a student. Once a student has been identified as

**BOX 8.1.** Measures of rate and accuracy have been identified as strongly predictive indicators of overall reading performance, including comprehension.

possibly or likely at risk of reading difficulty, a teacher should next look at another category of assessments that will help diagnose specific skill deficits in all the key areas of reading including oral language development, phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension.<sup>25</sup>

### Monitoring Students' Progress in Fluency

The purpose of progress monitoring is to help teachers determine if their students are benefitting sufficiently from instruction or intervention and when that instruction should be adjusted. CBM assessments can be used to help provide this important information for students who are receiving on-level instruction in Tier 1 programs, as well as those students receiving extra assistance in Tier 2 or Tier 3.<sup>26</sup> Because they involve the assessment of rate and accuracy, these assessments are also useful to monitor the progress of students' fluency skill development.

*Tier 1 progress monitoring.* For students who are on level or above and appear to be succeeding with their Tier 1 classroom instruction, systematic progress monitoring involves simply repeating the CBM benchmark/screening assessments that were conducted in the beginning of the school year. These assessments should be administered three to four times a year for all students, at least in the primary and intermediate levels of elementary schools. Results can then be routinely analyzed each time they are administered across a single school year and from grade to grade to help make sure that no student falls behind in those early, critical years of reading instruction. Because these measures do involve assessing rate and accuracy, when students continue to perform at the 50th percentile or higher on fluency norms, a teacher can also safely assume that their fluency skill progress is adequate. Additional checks of prosody should also be taken periodically as a more complete assessment of fluency skill development. For students above a sixth-grade reading level, using assessments other than ORF including the multiple choice cloze or maze may be more appropriate.<sup>27</sup> A maze assessment utilizes a variation of the cloze format. Every fifth or sixth word in the text is omitted. Students are given a choice of three words to replace the omitted word: the original word and two other words that do not fit in the sentence. The reader selects which of the three options makes the sentence meaningful.

*Tier 2 and Tier 3 progress monitoring.* Students receiving Tier 2 (supplementary instruction) or Tier 3 (more intensive intervention) assistance should also participate in the repeated benchmark/screening assessments conducted across the school year along with their classmates. And, of course, their teachers will also be carefully observing them during their daily instruction and will administer appropriate in-program assessments and quizzes. However, for students who are struggling and/or receiving extra instruction or intervention, additional data will need to be collected to monitor their progress on a more frequent basis. This is because of the fact that, even when academically challenged students are making progress, gains can be small and difficult to detect. Teachers responsible for teaching these students simply cannot afford to wait to determine if their students are benefitting from their Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction. For students at these levels, many educators find that the progress monitoring assessments based on the previously discussed CBM research can yield valuable useful information for making key instructional decisions.

### CBM for Progress Monitoring Versus Benchmark Assessments

CBM assessments utilized for monitoring students' progress use most of the same standardized procedures that are used with benchmark/screening assessments, but with four differences. 1) Perhaps the most significant variation between the two types of assessment is that, for progress monitoring, students' performances are compared with individually set goals and previous performance, rather than being compared with a set of grade-level norms and benchmarks. 2) A second difference is that progress monitoring is conducted at more frequent intervals than benchmark/screening. Depending on the severity of student need,

**Table 8.5.** Differences between curriculum-based measurement benchmark/screening assessments and progress monitoring assessments

Benchmark/screening	Progress monitoring
Scores compared to established norms or <i>benchmarks</i> . Administered <i>three or four times per year</i> .	Scores compared to individually set <i>performance goals</i> . Administered as often as <i>two times per week, once per week, bimonthly, or monthly</i> depending on services student is receiving.
Scores recorded as <i>numbers</i> .	Scores recorded on individual student <i>graphs</i> for visual analysis of data trends.
Assessment passages are always at the student's <i>current grade level</i> (e.g., all second-grade students read second-grade passages).	Assessment passages are either at the student's <i>current instructional level or one level above</i> (goal level; e.g., a fourth grader reading at the second-grade level uses either second-grade or third-grade passages).

current recommendations suggest that assessments can be administered once or twice a month, or as often as once a week. However, newer emerging research suggests that less frequent monitoring, perhaps using two passages every 3 weeks, may be the most appropriate.<sup>28</sup> More research in this area is needed so that more precise guidance can be provided.

3) The third difference between the benchmark and progress monitoring assessments is that a student's results from progress monitoring assessments are recorded on graphs so that teachers and specialists can easily evaluate an individual's progress—or lack of progress—over time (Table 8.6). These graphs provide easy-to-interpret visual displays of student progress when compared with a predetermined individual performance goal. Most important, when a graph indicates less than expected progress, immediate adjustments can be made in the student's instruction. Students can be taught to graph their own progress, a highly motivating activity.

4) The final difference between CBM benchmark/screening and progress monitoring assessments is the level of difficulty of the passages. The passages used for benchmark/screening are always at the student's grade placement level, even when it is clear the student is reading well above or well below their current grade, while the level of the passages for progress monitoring varies. When progress monitoring, students can be assessed using passages that are easier or more difficult than their current instructional level or one level above their current instructional level, also called "goal level," and the technical adequacy of the measures is not affected.<sup>29</sup> For example, if an eighth-grade student is currently reading at about the third-grade level, she can have her progress monitored using either third-grade passages (instructional level) or fourth-grade passages (goal level).

### HOW DO YOU TEACH THIS COMPONENT EFFECTIVELY, EFFICIENTLY, AND IN A MANNER APPROPRIATE TO THE AGE/GRADE LEVEL OF YOUR STUDENTS?

It is well established that readers with inadequate fluency skills often struggle with comprehension, and it is rare that students with poorly developed fluency are highly motivated readers who eagerly look forward to opportunities to read. However, simply increasing a student's levels of rate and accuracy and improving their prosody cannot guarantee that the student's comprehension will also increase. In other words: Fluency is necessary but not sufficient for reading comprehension. Teachers must keep this concept in mind when designing appropriate fluency instruction or interventions for students. As Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, and Meisinger state: "It is critical that we establish...instruction that assist(s) learners in becoming truly fluent readers rather than just fast ones."<sup>30</sup> Other researchers have also warned teachers not to expect that if students simply read more, they will achieve adequate levels of fluency.<sup>31</sup> They point out that research and theory strongly suggest that at least some students will require systematic instruction and teacher guidance in order to become skillful and motivated fluent readers.

### Findings from Fluency Research

From the numerous studies that have been conducted over recent decades, some key points should be considered when one is designing fluency instruction and intervention for students.<sup>32</sup> Below are some of these key findings from fluency studies:

- The National Reading Panel reported that guided, oral reading practice improves fluency for typically developing students, but that silent reading and independent practice is likely not sufficient to improve students' fluency skill.<sup>33</sup>
- Repeated reading remains the "gold standard" of fluency interventions, but providing feedback or having the student reading along with a model as part of repeated reading is more effective than independent repeated reading.<sup>34</sup>
- For some students, the same amount of time spent engaged in "wide reading" (sustained reading of a variety of texts) has as much positive impact on fluency as rereading a single piece of text,<sup>35</sup> but other researchers found that wide reading must be monitored and students held accountable for attending to what they read.<sup>36</sup>
- Structured partner reading can improve reading fluency.<sup>37</sup>
- Cueing students to attend to their accuracy and rate while reading can increase students' fluency.<sup>38</sup>
- Students can improve their fluency when the passages used for instruction are very challenging, even at a frustration level of 85% accuracy (15 out of 100 words are unknown or read incorrectly), if teachers monitor the process closely and provide sufficient support including feedback.<sup>39</sup>
- Instructional strategies that combine 1) reading with a model of skillful reading, 2) repeated reading of a single text, and 3) providing progress monitoring feedback before and after practice can improve students' fluency and comprehension and has a positive impact on motivation to read.<sup>40</sup>
- Although there has been little research specifically focused on improving prosody, some researchers have concluded that prosody develops from acquiring efficient word and text reading skills<sup>41</sup> and that it is likely improved by guided and assisted reading activities where feedback on expression is provided.<sup>42</sup>

### Research Applied to Classroom Settings

The type and amount of instruction that students will need to become fluent readers will of course vary depending on their general reading skill level. For students who are receiving instruction solely in the general education classroom (Tier 1) and successfully making progress in reading, there are some techniques that a teacher can use to support the development of fluency. For those students who can read grade-level text with sufficient accuracy (91% to 97% or higher words read correctly) and generally understand what they are reading but whose fluency rates are below expected levels, more systematic and explicit fluency instruction should be provided, perhaps as part of a Tier 2 intervention. For students whose fluency levels are low and they also struggle with deficits in phonics and decoding, word recognition, vocabulary, or other skill areas, a more comprehensive intervention will likely need to be developed and provided in a Tier 2 or Tier 3 setting. In these cases, explicit and systematic fluency instruction should be provided as one component of a more multifaceted instructional program.

*Tier 1 fluency instruction.* Research is clear that many—if not most—students will develop adequate fluency levels by simply engaging in reading, especially if they also hear models of fluent reading and receive feedback about their reading rate, accuracy, and prosody. Two commonly implemented but less effective ways teachers try to encourage reading are round robin reading and silent sustained reading; neither is an effective method to increase comprehension.

In round robin reading, students take turns reading aloud from unpracticed text, often in a whole-class, large-group setting. Teachers use this technique with varieties of text genres including novels, social studies, or science texts. Note only one student is reading at a time while the others are typically losing interest and not paying attention. Sustained silent reading (SSR), sometimes called drop everything and read (DEAR), requires students to read silently in self-selected texts for a designated period of time, sometimes up to 20 or 30 minutes or more daily. Often, students choose books that are either too easy or much too difficult for them, so they are not improving their reading skills. Also, too much time can be wasted as students choose their books, and typically students are not accountable for what they are reading. Although some students might benefit from these activities, neither of these methods provides the amount of practice that at-risk or struggling readers will need to develop their fluency, and both activities limit the amount of modeling and opportunities for specific feedback that are also critical.

Teachers can consider replacing round robin reading with choral reading or cloze reading.<sup>43</sup> In choral reading, students read text aloud in unison along with the teacher—all students are participating. Cloze reading involves having the teacher read text aloud while students follow along silently in their own copies of the text or from a shared text such as on an overhead or whiteboard. From time to time, the teacher randomly pauses before reading a word, and the students read that “omitted” word aloud in unison.

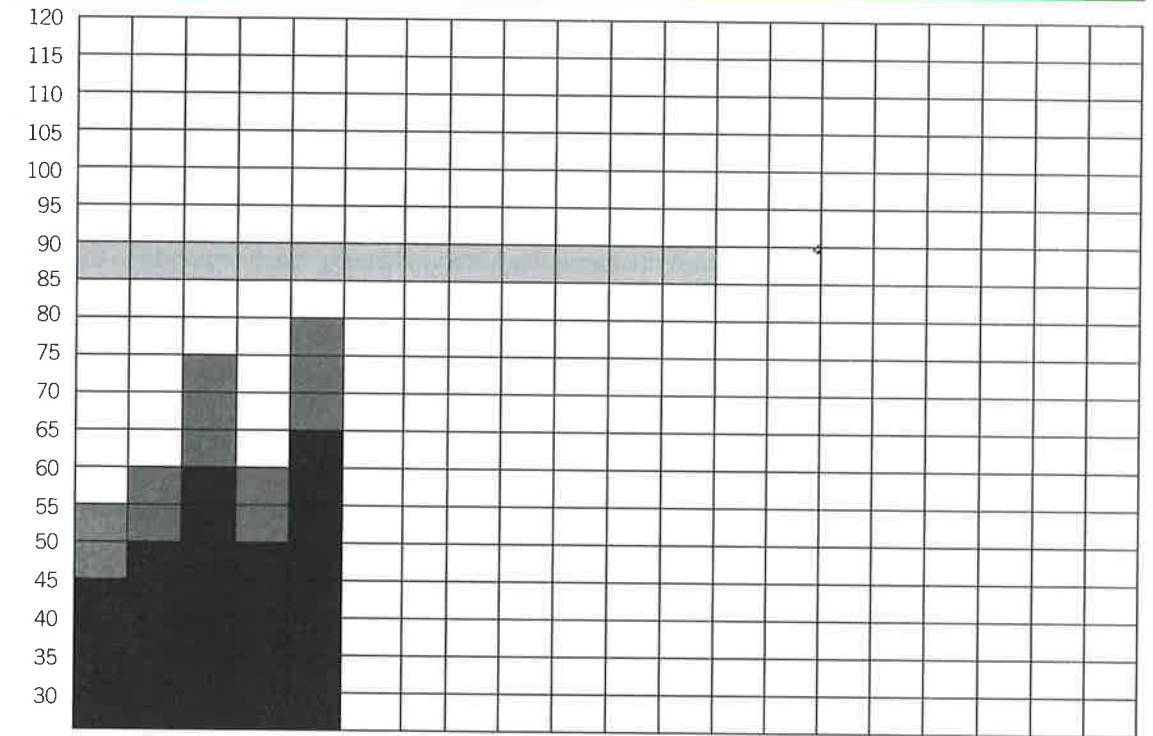
Another alternative to SSR or DEAR is structured partner reading where assigned partners read together and provide each other feedback including pointing out errors and supporting the correct pronunciation and decoding of words. Structured partner reading can take several forms, including simultaneous oral reading, taking turns reading a sentence, paragraph, or page aloud, sharing one book, or each student having his or her own copy of the text.<sup>44</sup> Students can be taught even more explicit feedback techniques that extend the practice to vocabulary and comprehension development.

*Tier 2 or 3 fluency instruction.* For students who need a more targeted intervention to improve their fluency skills, the three-component strategy developed by Candyce Ihnot known as Read Naturally (RN)<sup>45</sup> has been shown to be successful.<sup>46</sup> In this strategy, students are first assessed to determine an appropriate level of text in which to receive instruction. Using the RN placement guidelines, students will typically be placed in text that is at or close to their frustration level (below 90% accuracy). The placement guidelines also help a teacher establish a specific fluency goal for each student, which is usually set at 30 words above the assessed baseline ORF score for students in grades 1–4 and 40 words above the ORF baseline for grades 5 and higher.

The RN intervention itself begins with having a student complete a 60-second “cold read” of a self-selected passage at his or her designated skill level. The purpose of this step is to establish a score that the student can use as an indicator of his or her unpracticed score. This serves as a motivator for the student to try to increase that score by practicing. During this cold read, the student marks words that cause him or her to “stop, stumble, or skip” and then calculates a score of words correct per minute. This score is recorded on the student’s graph.

The next step involves having the student quietly read the same passage again from the beginning, but this time reading aloud along with a narrator (on a CD or computer) or a skilled reader. The purpose of this step is to help the student learn how to identify and correctly pronounce all the words of the passage and also provides a model of appropriate prosody. Students typically read the entire passage (from 80 to 350 words in length, depending on the grade level of the passage) three times with the skilled reader or narrator. Once the student feels he or she knows all the words, he or she next engages in repeated reading practice by reading aloud from the practiced text for 60-second intervals until his or her designated ORF goal has been achieved. For each practice, the student returns to the start of the passage. This step often takes three to 10 attempts. This step helps build the student’s reading rate while maintaining accuracy.

Table 8.6. Reading fluency WPM.



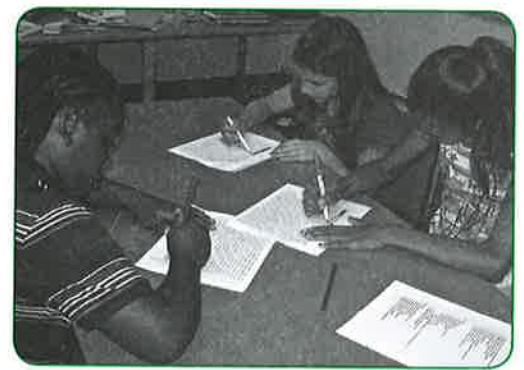
Story	1	2	4	6	7														
Page#	9	5	8	11	15														

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date \_\_\_\_\_

Key: WPM, words per minute.

Finally, the teacher listens to the student read aloud for 60 seconds from the now well-practiced passage. If the student is able to read the passage with no more than three errors, reads with appropriate expression, and reaches his or her designated goal, he or she is allowed to record the practiced score on his or her graph, alongside the original cold read score. Comparing the original “cold” score to the usually much-higher practiced score is clear proof that practice makes a difference! This process is repeated with the next passage. The RN strategy also incorporates prediction, retell, and question answering to hold students accountable for comprehending the content of the passages used for practice (Table 8.6).

There are many other commercially available programs and materials that address reading fluency. Matching the materials to the student’s reading level is the biggest challenge for teachers, so you should carefully examine the various materials and determine which would be best for your students.



## Examples of Fluency-Building Activities for Grades K–3<sup>47</sup>

Kindergarten and beginning of first grade: Students improve their speed and accuracy of letter names and sounds through the following activities:

- Alphabet arc: Students place plastic letters on top of the written letters. Gradually, the written letters are removed, and students put the plastic letters in alphabetical order within 2 minutes.
- Letter recognition: Students point to the letter the teacher names.
- Letter naming: Students name the letters when the teacher points to them.
- Letter–sound correspondence: Students name and provide the sounds of the letters.
- Reading high-frequency words: Students read a list of 50 high-frequency words.
- Reading words: Students read lists of decodable and high-frequency irregular words.
- Phrase reading: Students read short phrases.
- Chunking phrases: Students read chunks of text with prosody.

Second semester first grade through third grade: Students gain speed and accuracy reading connected text.

- Repeated reading: Students read and re-read text at their independent or instructional level.
- Partner reading: Students read and re-read text with a partner. Words correct per minute are charted.
- Prosody: Students read connected text with appropriate expression and phrasing.

### SUMMARY

Reading fluency is a skill that must be adequately developed in order for a reader to be able to comprehend what he or she has read and to enjoy and benefit from the act of reading. But, like other reading skills—including phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, word recognition, and vocabulary knowledge—fluency alone is not sufficient to help students comprehend. Teaching students to read faster is not the answer. Fluency is a complex and interrelated set of skills that includes rate but also involves accuracy and expression. Reading well includes reading fluently—with appropriate rate, accuracy, and prosody. Teachers must assess students to determine who might need assistance in becoming fluent readers and then effectively provide the instruction and intervention necessary to help everyone achieve success. For students who are already sufficiently fluent, pushing them to read ever faster and faster is a futile effort and has no instructional value. As Marilyn Adams said, “If we want to induce children to read lots, we must teach them to read well.”<sup>48</sup>

## APPLICATION ASSIGNMENTS

### In-Class Assignments

1. As a class, practice a strategy to improve reading fluency. The strategy is repeated reading. Follow the directions below.
  - a. Choose two pages of this text or another adult-level text. It should be a text that is unfamiliar to you and challenging.
  - b. Pair up with a partner. Decide who will be Partner A and who will be Partner B.
  - c. Your instructor or a classmate should be the timer and time the first reading for 1 minute.
  - d. When given the signal, Partner A begins to read the text aloud. Partner B follows along. When the timer goes off, Partner A marks the last word read.

- e. When given the signal to begin, Partner B reads the same material. Partner A follows along. When the timer goes off, Partner B marks the last word read.
- f. Both partners count the number of words they read, including prepositions, etc. On the line graph, color in the line with a blue pencil or marker up to the number of words read correctly.
- g. Now, both partners take turns again, each reading the same material for 2 minutes. You should be able to read much further.
- h. It is time for the “hot” reading. Again, Partner A reads for 1 minute while being timed. When the timer goes off, mark the last word read.
- i. Partner B reads for 1 minute and, at the end, marks the last word read.
- j. Both partners count the words read and chart the totals on the graph, using a red pen or marker, directly on top of the blue line. This system will clearly indicate how much growth you made.
- k. Did you increase the number of words you read per minute? You will learn that students typically will increase about 25%–40%, and they will feel great about their progress!

Note: When using partner reading with your students, obtain materials with the word totals already counted out and the number of words indicated in the margins. There are many sources for such materials, as listed in the appendixes.

### Tutoring Assignments

1. Partner read with your student. The material should be at your student’s instructional level, meaning your student can read at least 95% of the words. You be Partner A, reading first while your student follows along. Then your student reads it “cold” and graphs the number of words read correctly using a blue marker. Allow your student to practice reading the passage, untimed, about two or three times. Assist your student as needed. Finally, your student reads the passage again for the “hot” reading score and graphs those results with a red marker. Celebrate the progress made!

A reminder: Do NOT encourage your student to read as quickly as possible. Do NOT tell him or her to begin with a phrase such as, “get ready, set, go!” Rather, calmly ask your student to do his or her best reading. Then calmly set the timer and say, “Begin.”

2. Implement another fluency-building activity with your student. You may choose which one. It could be as easy as asking your student to select a favorite page or a favorite sentence and reading it several times with prosody, like an actor would practice reading lines for a movie.

### Homework Assignments

1. Read *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Reading Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do*, by Louisa Moats, 1999, available to download from <http://www.readingrockets.org/guides/teaching-reading-rocket-science>.

Write a one-page essay discussing the major points of the article, what you have learned about those points, and topics about which you need additional information.