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Fluency Practice

Read-Aloud Plays

GRADES 3-4

BY KATHLEEN M. HOLLENBECK



NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • AUCKLAND • SYDNEY
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Teaching
Resources

To the patient

and dedicated teachers

who guide

and encourage students

on the path toward fluency.



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Cover design by Brian LaRossa

Interior design by Kathy Massaro

Interior art by Delana Bettoli, Michelle Dorenkamp, Mike Gordon, Mike Moran, and Bari Weissman

ISBN-13: 978-0-439-55420-6

ISBN-10: 0-439-55420-9

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Printed in the U.S.A.



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INTRODUCTION

Fluency, the ability to decode words quickly and accurately, is more than just a buzzword in education. It is a fundamental skill that must be achieved in order for readers to find meaning in words.

Oral reading offers tremendous insight into a student's level of fluency. The fluent reader glides through text almost effortlessly, reading with meaning, expression, and appropriate pacing. A struggling reader labors over words, deciphering them in a slow, halting manner that hinders comprehension.

Training and practice are essential to achieving reading fluency, and oral reading offers an unmatched opportunity for both. *Read-Aloud Plays for Building Fluency: Grades 3–4* includes 14 oral reading opportunities that make reading practice easy, entertaining, and rewarding. The plays explore topics from core-curricular areas and adhere to national standards for third and fourth grades.

In addition to the plays, inside this book you'll find activities to strengthen skills in fluency, phonics, and oral reading; a section devoted to enhancing the Readers Theater experience (see Using Readers Theater, page 14); and tools for assessment, including a teacher rubric and a checklist students can use to guide and monitor their own reading progress (see Assessing Fluency, page 8). The plays and activities target specific skills designed to increase word recognition, decoding accuracy, use of expression, and ultimately, comprehension—the primary goal of reading instruction.

The text of each play has been leveled using readability scores from the Lexile Framework for Reading (see chart, page 13). These scores offer guidelines to help you select the scripts that best match the needs and reading levels of each student. The plays are ready for use to practice, strengthen, and assess skills in reading fluency. And they all share the same objective: to give students practice reading comfortably, confidently, and with enthusiasm, helping to build an ever-growing flock of fluent readers within the walls of your classroom.



Fluency: An Overview

What Is Fluency?

Fluency is the mark of a proficient reader. When a student reads text quickly, gets most of the words right, and uses appropriate expression and phrasing, we say that he or she has achieved fluency. Fluency frees readers from the struggle that slows them down. Hence, they are able to read for meaning and to understand. They can attend to the details of text, pausing as indicated and varying tone and pace to enhance comprehension for both themselves and potential listeners.

How Does Fluency Develop?

As with every skill worth developing, fluency sharpens with experience. Exposure to print, immersion in a rich linguistic environment, and practice, practice, practice all lead to fluent reading.

From the emergent on up, readers must learn and apply tools to help them advance. The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) speaks of fluency as a skill in flux.

“Fluency is not a stage of development at which readers can read all words quickly and easily. Fluency changes, depending on what readers are reading, their familiarity with the words, and the amount of their practice with reading text. Even very skilled readers may read in a slow, labored manner when reading texts with many unfamiliar words or topics.” (NIFL, 2001)

Readers are most comfortable (and most fluent) when reading what they have seen before or what they know most about. When venturing beyond these areas, they must rely on word attack skills, prior knowledge, and the host of tools that have helped them advance to this point.

Ways to Build Fluency

Two words encompass what readers require for the development of fluency: *exposure* and *practice*. To foster fluent reading using the plays in this book:

- * **MODEL FLUENT READING.** Do an interactive read-aloud. As you read, model (and point out) aspects of fluent reading such as phrasing, pacing, and expression. Help students understand that people aren't born knowing how to do this; they learn it by hearing it and trying it themselves. Also ask open-ended questions before, during, and after the reading,

“Fluent readers read aloud effortlessly and with expression. Their reading sounds natural, as if they are speaking. Readers who have not yet developed fluency read slowly, word by word. Their oral reading is choppy and plodding.”

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
LITERACY, 2001





soliciting students' prior knowledge and extending their understanding, comprehension, and connection with the topic. This connection can advance student interaction with the text and promote optimal conditions for fluency.

- * **PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH PLENTY OF READING PRACTICE.** Oral reading is highly effective for tracking and strengthening fluency. It enables both the reader and the listener to hear the reader and assess progress, and it allows the listener to provide guidance as needed. Encourage reading practice with any of the following:
 - **Repeated Reading:** Read aloud while a student listens. Then read again while the student follows along. Finally, have the student read the same text aloud alone. This technique is most helpful for struggling readers.
 - **Paired Repeated Reading:** Group students in pairs, matching above-level readers with on-level readers and on-level readers with those below level. Encourage partners to take turns reading aloud to each other, each reading a short passage three times and then getting feedback. This manner of grouping provides every struggling reader with a more proficient reader to model.
 - **Readers Theater:** Students work in groups to rehearse and perform one or more plays from this book. See Using Readers Theater, page 14, for more.
- * **SELECT APPROPRIATE TEXT.** To develop fluency, a student must practice reading text at his or her independent reading level—the level at which he or she is able to accurately decode 96 to 100 percent of the words in a given text. This level varies for every student. By assessing each student's reading level up front, you will be prepared to select appropriate texts and ensure that your students get a lot of practice reading at a level at which they achieve success (Rasinski, 2003; Worthy and Broaddus, 2001/2002). For information about how to use text to assess fluency, see Assessing Fluency, page 8.
- * **GIVE ROOM TO GROW.** To help a student advance in fluency, present text at his or her instructional level. This text can be read with 90 to 95 percent accuracy. With a little help, the student can get almost all the words right (Blevins, 2001; Rasinski, 2003).
- * **PROVIDE DIRECT INSTRUCTION AND FEEDBACK.** Prepare students before they read. First review phonics skills they will need to decode words. Draw attention to sight words, root words, affixes, and word chunks. Preteach difficult or unfamiliar words. Demonstrate the use of intonation, phrasing, and expression, and tell students when they have done these well. Listen to students read, and offer praise as well as helpful tips for the next attempt.

* HIGHLIGHT PHRASING.

One of the most effective ways to help students who are struggling with fluency is to use phrase-cued text. Phrase-cued text is marked by slashes to indicate where readers should pause. One slash indicates a pause or meaningful chunk of text within a sentence. Two slashes indicates a longer pause at the end of a sentence. Ready-made samples of phrase-cued text are available (see Resources for Reading Fluency, Comprehension, and Readers Theater, page 15), but you can also convert any passage of text to phrase-cued text by reading it aloud, listening for pauses and meaningful chunks of text, and drawing slashes in the appropriate places. (See the example, above, from the play “Railroad to Freedom,” page 39.) Model fluent reading with proper phrasing and invite students to practice with the text you have marked.

Narrator 1:	Harriet/ leads the way/ through the woods.// The travelers/ step over logs,/ duck under tree limbs,/ and walk/ all night long.// In time,/ they come to/ a river.//
Harriet:	See that bridge?// When we cross it,/ crawl under the bushes/ and hide.// It’s almost daylight,/ and slave hunters/ will be/ looking for us.// Stay hidden/ until night.

Where Does Vocabulary Fit In?

Stumbling over words constitutes one of the main setbacks on the way to fluency. It remains in your students’ best interest, then, to grow familiar with words they will likely encounter in reading. Cunningham and Allington (2003) urge active use of word walls, inviting student participation in choosing words to put on the walls, eliminating words rarely used, and reviewing the list words daily.

Enhancing Comprehension

In all reading instruction, it is important to remember that reading imparts meaning, and so the fundamental goal of reading is to comprehend. All other instruction—phonics, phonemic awareness, auditory discrimination—is wasted effort if comprehension gets lost in the process. Consequently, those who find no purpose or meaning in the written word will soon lose interest in reading it altogether.

Avoid this by teaching your students strategies to enhance comprehension. Help them learn to question the text they are reading. *What is the message? Does it make sense to them? Do they know what it means?* Find out by asking questions. Ask questions before students read, to prepare them for the play. Ask as they read, to deepen their understanding of the text. Ask additional questions after they read, to clear up any comprehension issues and summarize the play. Teach your students to formulate questions of their own to give them a vested interest in what they are reading.

“As the child approaches a new text he is entitled to an introduction so that when he reads, the gist of the whole or partly revealed story can provide some guide for a fluent reading. He will understand what he reads if it refers to things he knows about, or has read about previously, so that he is familiar with the topic, the vocabulary or the story itself.”

(CLAY, 1991)



“As we read, we know that the text we read should make sense, use an identifiable grammatical structure, and match the anticipated visual patterns of words we know. We notice when things go awry (when we make an error), and we search for ways to work it out. Then we check that our attempts at fixing the error re-establish the meaning of the passage. Searching, noticing, and checking... are problem-solving strategies.”

(CHARLTON, 2005)



Assessing Fluency

There are two ways to assess a student's progress in fluency: informally and formally. Informal assessment involves listening to students read aloud, noting how easily, quickly, and accurately they read, and deciding how well they attend to phrasing, expression, and other elements. Formal assessment involves timing a student's oral reading to create a tangible record of his or her progress throughout the school year.

To conduct an informal assessment of students' reading fluency, use the reproducible Teacher Rubric for Oral Reading Fluency on page 9. Have a student read aloud for five to seven minutes while you note on the form the strategies the student uses as well as his or her reading strengths and difficulties.

Students can monitor their own progress using the Student Checklist for Self-Assessment on page 10. Photocopy and laminate this form for each student. Review the checklist components with students many times, until they understand the purpose of the checklist and the meaning of each statement. Encourage students to mentally complete the checklist from time to time to track their own reading fluency.

To carry out what is called timed repeated reading, select a passage of text (150–200 words) that is at the student's independent reading level and that he or she has never read before. Have the student read aloud the passage for one minute. Track your own copy of the text while he or she reads, marking words omitted or pronounced incorrectly. Count the number of words the student read correctly. Then give the student three one-minute opportunities (in separate sessions) to read the same text, and average the scores to obtain his or her oral reading fluency rate.*



IN CONCLUSION

Does fluency instruction work? Research has shown that concentrated reading instruction can dramatically improve reading comprehension and fluency, which in turn affect academic performance, self-esteem, and overall achievement. With this in mind, it is not only helpful to instruct with an eye toward fluency, it is essential.

* For more detailed information on timed reading, consult Blevins (2001, pp. 9–12) and Rasinski (2003, pp. 82–83).

Teacher Rubric for Oral Reading Fluency

Child's Name: _____ Date: _____

Grade: _____ Passage: _____

For each category, circle the number that best describes the student's performance.

Accuracy

4	Recognizes most words; works to pronounce unfamiliar words, repeating them to self-correct if necessary.
3	Recognizes most words; works to pronounce unfamiliar words, self-correcting if necessary; sometimes requires assistance.
2	Struggles to decode and decipher words; hesitates before attempting to pronounce new words; usually requires assistance.
1	Recognizes very few words; makes no attempt to pronounce unfamiliar words.

Expression and Volume

4	Uses expression and volume that is natural to conversational language and that varies according to the content of the text.
3	Uses expression and volume that is appropriate to conversational language and the content of the text; sometimes hesitates when unsure of text.
2	Often speaks softly and in a monotone; pays little attention to expression or volume; focuses on getting through the text.
1	Reads words in a monotone and in a quiet voice.

Phrasing

4	Groups words into meaningful phrases or chunks of text.
3	Usually groups words into meaningful phrases or chunks of text.
2	Reads primarily in groups of two or three words.
1	Reads word by word without meaning.

Pace

4	Reads at a suitable pace and responds to punctuation with appropriate pausing and intonation.
3	Usually reads at a suitable pace and attends to most punctuation with appropriate pausing and intonation; halts at times when unsure.
2	Reads slowly, sometimes two or three words at a time; halts often; pays little attention to punctuation or pacing.
1	Reads words slowly in a string; does not heed punctuation.

Prosody

4	Attends to the rhythm of language, reading comfortably and without hesitating or halting.
3	Occasionally halts or runs sentences together when challenged by words or sentence structure.
2	Reads smoothly at times but most often slowly.
1	Reading sounds stilted and unnatural and lacks meaning.

Source: Adapted from "Training Teachers to Attend to Their Students' Oral Reading Fluency," by J. Zurell and T. V. Rasinski, 1991, *Theory Into Practice*, 30, pp. 211–217. Used with permission of the authors.

Fluency Practice Read-Aloud Plays: Grades 3–4 Scholastic Teaching Resources

Name: _____

How Carefully Do I Read?

	Most of the Time	Sometimes	Hardly Ever
1 I say a word again if it does not sound right.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 I pay attention to punctuation at the end of a sentence.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 I try to read without stopping after every word.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 I read with expression.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 I am ready to speak when it is my turn.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What I Need to Work on:

Adapted from *35 Rubrics & Checklists to Assess Reading and Writing* by Adele Fiderer. Permission to reuse granted by the author.
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