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**BUILD**

Second  
Edition

**READING  
FLUENCY**

Practice and Performance  
with Reader's Theater  
*and More*

Timothy Rasinski ~ Chase Young



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# CHAPTER 1

## RECONCEPTUALIZING READING FLUENCY

Reading fluency, the ability to read the words on the printed page accurately and effortlessly—with appropriate and meaningful expression and phrasing—was largely a forgotten element of the reading curriculum during the second half of the twentieth century. Reading scholars thought of fluency as nothing more than oral reading and, of course, everyone knows that most reading is done silently. So why teach fluency if it is nothing more than efficient oral reading?

In fact, fluency has been a neglected goal of the reading program. Indeed, that is just what Richard Allington claimed in his seminal article from *The Reading Teacher* (1983). Allington argued that it was a big mistake to neglect fluency in the classroom. He pointed to some early research that indicated that many struggling readers are not sufficiently fluent and that specific instruction in this area not only tended to help with fluency, it also improved other key aspects of reading, including comprehension.

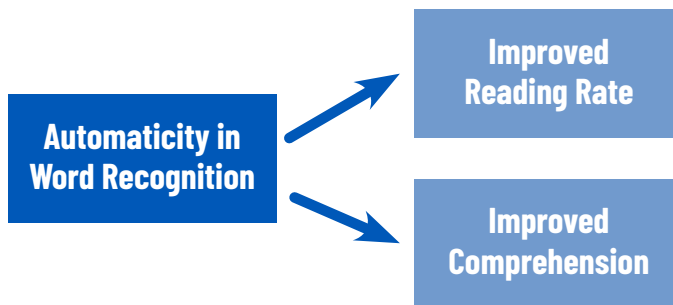
Following Allington’s research, it took nearly twenty years for fluency to appear back on the radar screen. Thanks to the review conducted by the National Reading Panel and the recognition of the importance of the science of reading, fluency has again been recognized as a key element in effective reading instruction (National Reading Panel 2000; Paige et al. 2021). In its review of the research, the panel concluded that there was sufficient empirical evidence to indicate that instruction in fluency leads to improved reading proficiency in students, especially with readers who struggle in achieving their full literacy potential. More recently, scholars and

More recently, scholars and practitioners who advocate the science of reading have also acknowledged the importance of reading fluency.

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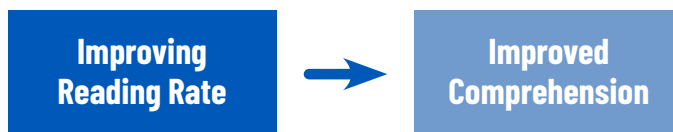
However, fluency continues to be equated with reading rate. Let's consider why this is the case. Research finds that reading rate, a measure of effortless and automatic word recognition—one aspect of fluency—is highly correlated with reading comprehension. Students who are automatic in their word recognition can focus on meaning rather than on the laborious decoding of the words in the passage. Hence, comprehension improves. Students who are automatic in word recognition tend also to be faster readers. Automaticity improves both rate and comprehension (see Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1 Automaticity Improves Rate and Comprehension**



Somehow, over time, this model of reading fluency got a bit distorted. Automaticity disappeared from the picture and reading rate was viewed as the direct link to reading comprehension. Essentially, the model of reading fluency evolved into improving reading rate, which, it was believed, would lead to improved comprehension (see Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2 The Incorrect Focus on Reading Rate**



Students (and teachers) were given specific reading-rate goals by school administrators. They were informed that these goals needed to be achieved by the end of the school year. Well-meaning teachers thus designed fluency lessons and activities that were

aimed primarily at improving reading speed. We have seen this in our own work with students in our reading clinics. When we have asked students to read a passage aloud in order to observe and assess their reading, they often ask if they should read the passage “as fast as I can.”

Although we understand how this notion about fluency has evolved, it is simply wrong. We know of no compelling research that shows that when students are taught explicitly to read faster, they improve their reading comprehension or overall reading achievement. Indeed, we know of classrooms where teachers have given additional focus on reading rate; yet when their students took the end-of-the-year reading assessment, they did worse than students in other classrooms in the same school where the focus was not nearly so speed-centered.

Still, this notion of reading fluency has found its way into our profession. Definitions of reading fluency more often than not include “speed,” “reading rate,” “reading quickly,” or “reading words at a fast pace.” While reading at a conversational and appropriate rate is important, overemphasis on speed can take attention away from other aspects of fluency—expressive and meaningful reading. Many teachers and scholars know that reading fast is *not* fluent reading, and this has resulted in an avoidance of fluency instruction in some classrooms. We fear that this unfortunate misunderstanding about reading fluency may once again lead it back into being a neglected reading goal. Fluency will be reduced in importance within the reading curricula and removed from reading methods textbooks for pre- and in-service teachers, and as a result, many children will remain struggling readers because effective fluency instruction will not have been provided to them despite its recognition as a component of the science of reading.

## Teaching Fluency through Practice and Performance

Fluency is too important to ignore or teach ineffectively. Fluency in reading, speaking, or anything else does not mean simply doing the task quickly. In the case of oral speech, fluency is associated with the ability to speak at an appropriate rate and with appropriate expression that reflects the meaning of what is being said. Fluency is inexorably involved in doing a task well. A fluent speaker constructs meaning with their voice in such a way that a listener can take in the vocal input of the speaker and reconstruct and even elaborate on the literal or textual meaning. A fluent driver is not a fast driver. A fluent driver drives safely and efficiently to achieve the functional and

meaningful goal of moving from one place to another. This may mean driving fast in some places of the trip, but also slowing down and even stopping at other places. It means signaling turns and lane changes. It means obeying the rules of the road—attending to those signs along the way that direct the driver of a car to stop, watch for children, get into the appropriate lane for turning, and drive at the indicated speed. A fluent cook or chef is able to construct a satisfying meal in an accurate and efficient manner with the appropriate flourishes that define the dish as uniquely theirs. In a similar way, you can see that fluency is much more than reading quickly. Being fluent means the construction of something meaningful in an efficient but always functional way. Fluency is meaning.

One of the best ways to become fluent at anything is through practice or rehearsal. One becomes fluent at writing by writing a lot. One becomes fluent at public speaking by speaking in public venues often. One becomes fluent at cooking through cooking often. How many of us know people who, when asked about a particular favorite recipe, struggle to actually articulate the specific elements of the recipe? They have created that particular dish so often that it has become automatized—they know it “by heart.” When asked to actually think through the specific ingredients and amounts, they have difficulty because they no longer process the recipe in a highly conscious step-by-step manner. The recipe has become internalized and can now be prepared in a fluent manner.

It is the same with driving. Do you recall how difficult it was to master the various controls, levers, knobs, and pedals when you first learned to drive? Driving was not an automatic task for you, and you weren’t fluent at it. Yet, with practice—meaningful and motivated practice with the goal of getting your driver’s license—you not only became accurate in your driving (you were able to go from here to there without bumping into anything, knocking into the curb, or scraping another car), you also

became automatic in your driving. Indeed, through lots and lots of practice you are able to operate multiple controls at the same time, almost without giving conscious attention to operating them and drive with a high degree of accuracy. That’s fluency. It allows people to perform tasks so efficiently or automatically that they are able to go beyond the basic task to a deeper, more meaningful level.



By reading widely (lots of different texts) and deeply (reading one text repeatedly or more than once), we develop not just accuracy but also efficiency or automaticity in our basic word decoding skills.



In reading, the same is true. We become fluent in reading by practicing. By reading widely (lots of different texts) and deeply (reading one text repeatedly or more than once), we develop not just accuracy but also efficiency or automaticity in our basic word decoding skills. When word decoding becomes automatized, we are able to turn our attention from decoding to comprehension—deriving meaning from the written text. When word decoding is automatized, we are able to consider another aspect of reading fluency—*prosody*, or expressive reading. When we are automatic in our word recognition, we can attend to punctuation, read with appropriate phrasing, and give emphasis to different portions of the text in order to take meaning to a deeper level. In other words, rehearsal creates automatization of word recognition, which allows for the reader to express and comprehend text at various levels—literal, inferential, and critical.

Rehearsal in reading means rereading a text multiple times to get to deeper levels of expression and meaning. This deeper, or repeated, reading is especially important for struggling readers. But how can we make wide and deep reading an authentic and genuine task in our classrooms? How can we make rehearsal aimed not at speed but expressive and meaningful interpretation of texts?

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## Enter Reader's Theater

We know that fluency is important, and we want it to be taught in ways that are authentic, meaningful, engaging, and enjoyable for students and teachers. From our experience, the key to practice—especially deep practice, repeated practice, or rehearsal—is performance. When students know that they will have the opportunity to read and perform a text for an audience, they will have an authentic and motivating reason to practice. That is reader's theater.

That is the essential reason for writing this book: to explore with you the nature of teaching reading and reading fluency through practice aimed at an eventual performance. We know that this approach works because we have seen it work in classrooms and clinical settings—our own classrooms as well as the classrooms of teachers from kindergarten through high school who have wanted to make reading fluency a key part of their reading curriculum, and who also want to make reading

fluency as authentic and engaging as possible. We invite you to join us on this journey. Perhaps it will bring back some fond memories of how you learned to read. Hopefully, it will give you inspiration and permission to try the reader's theater approach to authentic fluency instruction in your own classroom tomorrow.

## **Our Own Experiences with Reader's Theater**

Reader's theater plays an important role in the Kent State University summer reading clinic, where Tim formerly served as director. The children who come to the clinic (known as Camp Read-A-Lot) are struggling readers who are not simply well behind in their reading development, they also tend to find reading an onerous task. The authentic practice and performance in which students engage at Camp Read-A-Lot becomes transformative as students see that they can master reading texts, read with expression and meaning, and find reading a fun and enjoyable activity. Most students who participate in the reading clinic—normally four to six weeks in duration—make significantly more than a month's progress in reading. We have seen many students make as much as one to two years' progress!

The clinic adopted the Fluency Development Lesson (see chapter 5), a lesson that incorporates reader's theater as the core intervention for students. Each day students had the goal of learning to read something well by the end of the ninety-minute period. Students were given a poem, a song lyric, or another short text. They would go through the process of listening to the text read to them by the teacher, reading it multiple times with teacher and classmates, practicing on their own or with partners a few more times, and eventually performing the text for an audience of one—a parent stationed outside the classroom whose only job was to listen to each student read and lavish the child with praise for their fluent reading. Parents were then encouraged to listen to their child read the text at home for more practice. The mini reader's theater performances in the clinic and at home were the key to the program. Students had an authentic reason to engage in all that practice—they could be the stars for the parent in the hallway and for their families at home. This lesson occurred daily during the course of the clinical program.

Students were pre- and post-tested on various measures of their reading development to determine the impact of Camp Read-A-Lot. The gains exhibited by most students were so significant that we published studies in scientific publications on the impact

the clinic had on students' reading development (Zimmerman, Rasinski, and Melewski 2013; Zimmerman et al. 2019).

But it wasn't just the students' reading that improved. The daily feeling of success as they conquered a new text every day resulted in improved feelings of confidence and better attitudes toward reading by most students.

On the final day of the reading clinic, students were allowed to choose texts from the previous weeks' work and perform for an audience of teachers, family members, and classmates. These grand performances were a very appropriate way to end each year's Camp Read-A-Lot as students were bathed in the well-deserved applause of audience members.

”  
When students know that they will have the opportunity to read and perform a text for an audience, they will have an authentic and motivating reason to practice. That is reader's theater.

Tim still remembers Addy, a shy young girl who had just completed first grade but easily classified as a beginning reader. She was in tears, hiding behind her mother as they went into the classroom to meet her teacher and fellow students. Day by day as she experienced success and her confidence grew, Addy began to embrace Camp Read-A-Lot for what it was—a fun way to learn to read. At the end of the clinic, Addy performed several poems she had mastered during the previous weeks and was a cast member in a reader's theater performance of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff with Attitude*. As she left the auditorium for the last time, Addy was in tears once again. However, they were tears of reluctance to leave something that had made such a mark on her view of herself as a reader. From tears to triumph—that is what authentic performance preceded by focused rehearsal can do!

Chase started consistently using reader's theater in his third year of teaching. He fell in love with it, and his students did too. When he asked for feedback from students, they often reported that reader's theater was their favorite time of day. In fact, Chase would consider skipping reader's theater during short weeks, but the students would not let him. He remembers one student, known to be a bit of a tough guy, who said, “Mr. Young, reader's theater rules.” Teachers sometimes ask about shy kids and students with disabilities; Chase found that in all his years of using reader's theater, every student who participated was successful.

Throughout this book, you'll hear about the experiences of our colleague Lorraine Griffith. When Lorraine was teaching fourth grade, she decided to try the reader's theater routine in her own classroom. Students rehearsed a script or other text during

the early part of the week and performed it for classmates and others at the end of the week. Over the course of three years, Lorraine was struck by the impact reader's theater had on her struggling readers. The average yearly reading level gain for struggling readers was over 2.8 years, and 93 percent of her at-risk students ended fourth grade reading at or above a fifth grade level (Griffith and Rasinski 2004).



Through empirical research, we have found that reader's theater can significantly improve reading comprehension in addition to fluency. Reader's theater also develops decoding skills and word knowledge similar to other programs available.

Because of the excellent reading growth we saw when using reader's theater, we wanted to study it more scientifically and validate what we were seeing in the classroom and the clinic. In 2009, we published our first study together on reader's theater, showing that it can improve reading fluency (Young and Rasinski 2009). Since then, we have conducted numerous studies that further explore the usability and impact of

reader's theater. Through empirical research, we have found that reader's theater can significantly improve reading comprehension in addition to fluency. Reader's theater also develops decoding skills and word knowledge similar to other programs available (Young et al. 2019). In another series of studies, we found that reader's theater gives boys a nice boost in reading and that they really enjoy participating (Young, Mohr, and Landreth 2020; Young et al. 2021). When examining our work and the work of others, the science is clear—reader's theater works, and kids like it. For a more detailed look at additional research studies that show the powerful impact of reader's theater, see appendix A on pages 137–139.

## Conclusion

Fluency, the ability to read with accuracy and with meaningful expression, can be taught through authentic practice. We've found the key is performance, which is where reader's theater comes in. Reader's theater focuses students on expressive and meaningful interpretations of texts, increases overall reading ability, and engages and motivates students.