

BUILD READING FLUENCY

*Second
Edition*

Practice and Performance
with Reader's Theater
and More

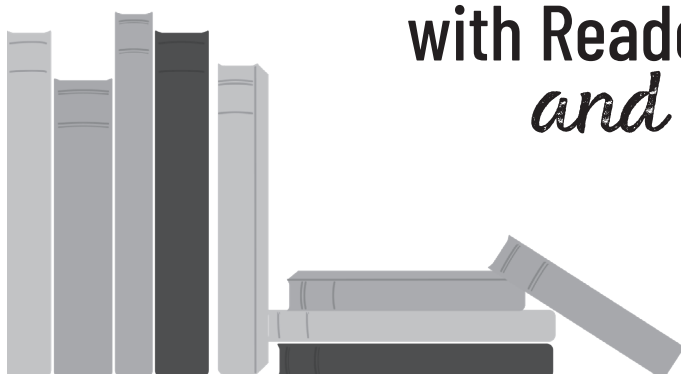
Timothy Rasinski ~ Chase Young



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To all teachers of reading who view reading
as an art and a science and are willing
to take the risk to teach reading fluency
in an artful manner—through authentic
practice and performance aimed ultimately
at making meaning and growing joyful and
lifelong readers.

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FOREWORD

Fluent reading opens new worlds of learning opportunities, perhaps more than any other facet of literacy. With the copious amounts of distractions available today to youth in schools across the globe, reading instruction must be attractive, engaging, and draw learners to the activities. Thankfully, this text offers best practices for achieving just that through both evidence-based research and performance-related strategies for experiential learning. When reading experiences come alive, they capture the attention of all youth, as they engage learners in collective literacy practices toward both content learning and reading improvement. Tim Rasinski and Chase Young draw from their wealth of expertise and personal teaching experiences to first reconceptualize and define reading fluency before teaching the fundamentals of fluency, performance-related strategies for classroom level implementation, coaching, and providing assessment and intervention across all grade levels.

Why is this text needed? Put simply, there is no comprehensive guide for the ins and outs of everything fluency related. Second, fluency has long been known to be highly correlated to vocabulary knowledge as well as reading comprehension—that is to say that those who read with accuracy, pacing, and pizzazz will learn more efficiently across the disciplines. We aim to help students achieve greater levels of fluency not for just the sake of fluency, but for the multiple, far-reaching positive impacts that fluency brings to reading and learning experiences. Inversely, those who struggle reading at the word level and lack other dimensions of fluency become bogged down by the reading process and inevitably, read less. All educators should take heed of the practical nature of this text, especially as it pertains to reconnecting youth to engaging literacy activities and finding fluency activities that re-engage children and adolescents, forging pathways and possibilities for them to become lifelong learners.

Chapters traverse through challenging topics to consider such as tips on organizing your time when teaching fluency. While most literacy curriculums discuss elements of reading instruction, they do not always include pacing guides for fluency instruction. Chapter three dives deeper into rarely discussed topics of how the gradual release of responsibility framework can be used to structure teacher-facilitated and student-led activities. Moreover, it includes rich discussions on how teachers can model classroom-wide and small-group fluency instruction.

The authors are unquestionably the foremost thinkers and leaders in fluency instruction worldwide; this notion becomes fully evident in their mastery discussion of fluency instruction through reader's theater in chapters 4 and 5. As they explain,

reader's theater has the potential to make significant impacts on students' academic and affective domains, if enacted in ways that optimally support individual and collective literacy improvement. Topics such as text selection are discussed in depth to include songs, speeches, monologues, dialogues, poetry, and even karaoke! I wish that these reading activities permeated my own elementary, middle, and high school classrooms years ago—a far cry from looking words up in the dictionary as the primary driver to literary growth and development.

Many forms of coaching are also included to demonstrate that the role of a teacher is also that of a model and timely facilitator—that explicit and prompt feedback can lead to immediate growth and development. Putting on grand performances permits entire communities to come together in an effort to celebrate literacy; after all, as the authors suggest, a focus on fluency includes a focus on community development and widespread literacy engagement.

Chapter 8 discusses where educators can find scripts and other performative texts; these resources are not always easily accessible to the public at large, but thanks to these authors' comprehensive tutorials on how and where to find text sets, readers can glean from their unmatched insight as well as position their own students to write scripts themselves.

While some might be surprised to see reading fluency intervention strategies included in this text, they will be thankful for their inclusion. Academic texts on reading intervention and others on fluency don't always talk to one another, but Rasinski and Young provide a seamless integration into using fluency assessment practices that position teachers to be equipped with the necessary data to make prudent decisions regarding strategy implementation for reading fluency intervention.

Finally, the authors project forward in an effort to connect the art and science of reading instruction. Just as learners are incredibly diverse with their own strengths and unique needs, instruction and interventions should be matched at the individual level. These human beings deserve to receive instruction that can bolster their fluency development, that can position them to thrive across the disciplines, and that can excite them about the reading process. Developing avid readers who look forward to English/Language Arts is perhaps the single greatest challenge for teachers today; robust fluency instruction through practice and performance is the missing ingredient that can unlock these opportunities, lead students to mastery of standards, and position them as successful and able readers today and for the future.

—Evan Ortlieb, Ph.D.
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INTRODUCTION

Think of someone you know who is a fluent speaker or reader. What does that person do that makes them fluent? Fluent speakers and readers use their voices to enhance the meaning of what is being said or read. They raise and lower the volume and pitch of their voices, speed up and slow down, pause at appropriate places, and emphasize particular words and phrases for the purpose of making the listening experience more satisfying and understandable for the listener. Fluency is integrally associated with comprehension or meaning.

Research from the 1980s through the present has discovered a remarkably strong link between reading fluency, comprehension, and overall reading proficiency. Readers who read with greater oral fluency tend to have better comprehension when reading silently. And so, with the report of the National Reading Panel (2000) and the more recent focus on the science of reading, reading fluency is recognized as critical to reading success.

Although fluency has become a major player in reading education, the way that fluency has come to be defined and taught in some classrooms is a great concern. Because reading fluency is commonly assessed by measuring the number of words read per minute, faster reading has become associated with more fluent reading. Reading fluency instruction has mistakenly evolved into encouraging students to read faster and faster, often with little regard for meaning. We now see students practicing oral reading by trying to beat their previous day's reading rate. Reading fluency instruction has turned into something akin to a NASCAR race.

”
The essential ingredient in all texts meant to be practiced and performed as reader's theater is that they lend themselves to expressive oral reading.

We are convinced that this is the wrong approach to fluency. Can you imagine an adult reader reading as fast as possible? Would you call such reading fluent? *Fast*, maybe, but certainly not fluent, clearly not satisfying, and absolutely not meaningful. We fear that this trend toward speed reading may lead to a generation of readers who may be able to read quickly but who find very little satisfaction or meaning in reading. We want students to increase their reading rates and overall reading fluency in ways that are artful and authentic as well as science based.

It is against this backdrop that we wrote the first, and now the second, edition of this book. Reading fluency is only important to the extent that it fosters comprehension. Let's go back to that initial example of a fluent reader—someone who makes meaning with their voice while reading orally. Although such a reader could very likely read fast if they chose to do so, a truly fluent reader uses their voice to make or enhance meaning. This is most commonly found in performances for an audience—plays, poetry, speeches, jokes, diaries, teacher and parent read-alouds, and so on. In many cases, the material has to be rehearsed or practiced repeatedly in order for the reader to develop their oral reading to the point where it can communicate the meaning of the passage adequately. That is essentially the approach to fluency and fluency instruction that we take in our own classrooms and clinical experiences, and it is this approach that we wish to share with you in this book. We call oral reading practice or rehearsal followed by an oral reading performance *reader's theater*. The text could be a script, a poem, a song lyric, a speech, a monologue or dialogue, a joke, or even a selection taken from a story. The essential ingredient in all texts meant to be practiced and performed as reader's theater is that they lend themselves to expressive oral reading.

Fluency is embedded in the oral performance of a text. Readers demonstrate their fluency by the manner in which they are able to create meaning through their oral interpretation of the words of a passage. And a meaningful oral performance is developed and perfected through practice or rehearsal. Hence, practice and performance are natural keys to teaching and developing fluency in students.

Additionally, meaningful practice followed by authentic performance is a naturally

engaging and motivating activity that nearly every student can find satisfying and enjoyable.

Moreover, through texts that are meant to be rehearsed and performed, students have alternative ways to learn about and appreciate language in its various forms and through various content areas such as social studies, science, art, or music.



Readers demonstrate their fluency by the manner in which they are able to create meaning through their oral interpretation of the words of a passage.

We have learned about the power and potential of rehearsal and performance through our own work with readers—from young children to adults—and from readers who struggle to those who are advanced. In this book, we share with you our own journeys to fluency through rehearsal and performance. We examine why fluency is important for oral and silent reading proficiency. We share how we teach fluency through

modeling fluent reading, guided practice in reading, coaching students to develop their fluency, and of course, showcasing students' fluency through performance. We provide models of how to organize and manage your classroom for reader's theater. We also consider which texts and textual features lend themselves to rehearsal and performance, as well as explore methods for assessing the various dimensions of fluency.

If you are looking to make an impact on your students' growth as readers, then you need to look at fluency. And, if you are interested in teaching reading fluency in authentic ways that have been proven effective and engaging for students, then you need to consider reader's theater as an integral part of your reading and overall classroom curricula. This book will help you negotiate your way to developing fluency instruction through practice and performance.

In this new edition, we expand on the concept of reader's theater, and we provide even more ways to foster and develop your students' reading fluency and overall reading achievement. Because students may need additional support when using whole-group approaches such as reader's theater, poetry slams, and choral reading, we offer several evidence-based interventions that can help all students participate successfully. We also share extension ideas, such as students authoring scripts, and recommendations for more resources to use in your classroom.

We want to acknowledge the work of our colleague Lorraine Griffith who collaborated on the first edition of this book. Thank you, Lorraine, for your continued contributions and support of authentic and engaging reading instruction that is both scientific and artful.

—Tim and Chase

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.

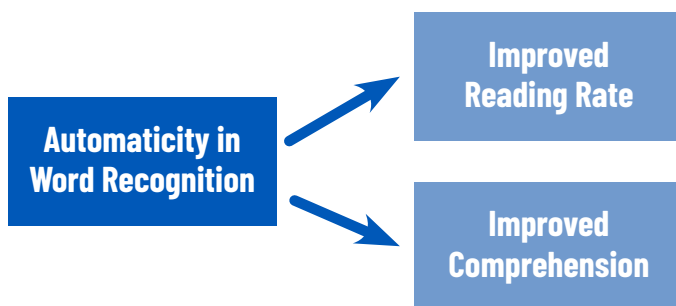
Following Allington's research, it took nearly twenty years for fluency to appear back on the radar screen. Thanks to the review conducted by the National Reading Panel and the recognition of the importance of the science of reading, fluency has again been recognized as a key element in effective reading 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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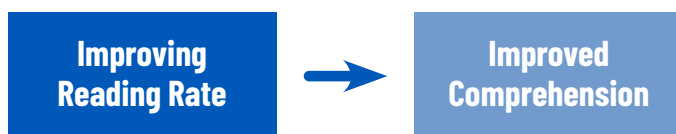
However, fluency continues to be equated with reading rate. Let's consider why this is the case. Research finds that reading rate, a measure of effortless and automatic word recognition—one aspect of fluency—is highly correlated with reading comprehension. Students who are automatic in their word recognition 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