ELAN / *Monograph*

Focus on Fluency

Using Evidence-Based Practices to Support Fluency

Curriculum connections

- Foundations of language
- Assessment
- Comprehension
- Prosody

Contents

What it is

The Ontario Curriculum for Grades 1-8 Language and Grade 9 English (2023) is grounded in scientific, evidence-based approaches to reading as a response to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Right to Read* inquiry in 2022.

Recommendations of this report include the explicit teaching of reading skills in each of these five key areas, or pillars, of reading: "phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p.25). These skills are featured in Strand B, Foundations of Language but interconnect in meaningful ways across all four strands.

While each component is crucial and requires explicit instruction, let's take a closer look at building fluency as an integral step in the student journey toward reading proficiency.

The 2023 Ontario Language curriculum defines **fluency** as "the ability to identify words accurately and to read text quickly with ease, pace, automaticity, and expression." These same components can be categorized under the simplified headings of **accuracy, rate** and **prosody.**

Each of these components is interconnected with the other pillars of reading. To read **accurately,** students rely on their decoding skills and draw on their existing vocabulary and morphological knowledge (understanding of prefixes, suffixes, and base words), to read with accuracy. Vocabulary instruction is an essential support so that students can connect new words to their existing knowledge.

A fluent reader reads with **automaticity,** meaning they recognize words quickly without needing to decode them, so they can focus on text comprehension (Beers, 2003). As students become more automatic in their reading, they read at an appropriate pace,

generally in a conversational pace or **rate,** and match their tone and expression to the ideas in a text.

In this way, fluency is the link between decoding and comprehension (Cunningham et al., 2024). When a student understands the text, they can read with **prosody,** meaning they read with expression, including the appropriate rhythm, tone, and pitch for the text, and with phrasing that links to changes of tone and acknowledges syntax and punctuation. Readers with both skilled fluency and comprehension can make these adjustments while reading a text, even on the very first read.
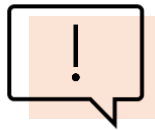
Why it matters

As students move from primary through to intermediate grades, they encounter increasingly complex texts. For example, in Grade 3, students are asked to "read words, complex sentences, and paragraphs in a variety of texts fluently," whereas by Grade 4, they are asked to "read a variety of texts fluently." By Grade 9, they are asked to "read a variety of complex texts fluently."

This gradual increase in text complexity should follow a natural continuum of development, with Grade 4 beginning a noticeable shift. **Research identifies Grade 3 as the last year students primarily learn to read before transitioning to reading to learn** (Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2010). Typically Grade 4 is a critical period, often referred to as the 'fourth-grade slump,' where many students experience a decline in reading progress (Walpole et al., 2020).

While the updated Ontario Language Grades 1-8 and English Grade 9 curriculum, along with many reading research and support programs, provides strategies to help address these challenges, it is essential for teachers of all students — not just those in Primary grades — to have a strong understanding of the five pillars of reading. Focusing on explicit fluency instruction while integrating the other pillars helps

students at all grade levels — from Junior to Intermediate — develop into stronger readers. Monitoring reading fluency helps determine areas of need and supports continued growth in fluency and the related comprehension skills. Further, improving fluency boosts self-efficacy and motivation, creating a positive cycle of reading improvement (Mehigan, 2020).
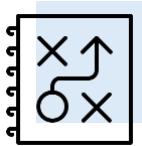
How it works

Determining areas of strength and need

The first step in supporting students in continued fluency development is to determine their starting point.

This can be done with or without formal reading diagnostics. Cunningham et al. (2024) note that oral reading is a gauge, giving us insight into how silent reading is "sounding" inside kids' heads. Thus, though students may be reading silently more often in older grades, it is also important that teachers hear students read, so they can offer differentiated and explicit instruction based on student needs. A simple rubric, like the Fluency rubric, allows teachers to track student progress and can also be used by students to track their reading progress.

Fluency rubric

Aspect	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Accuracy	Frequently makes errors in word recognition and decoding; struggles to pronounce words correctly.	Experiences occasional errors in word recognition and decoding; some mispronunciations.	Generally, reads accurately with minor errors; occasional mispronunciations do not disrupt comprehension.	Reads with high accuracy; rare or no errors in word recognition and decoding.
Rate	Reads slowly and laboriously, often requiring pauses and effort to decode words.	Reads at a moderately slow pace; occasionally struggles with maintaining a steady rhythm.	Reads with a generally consistent pace, though there may be occasional variations.	Reads at a conversational pace; maintains a smooth and consistent rate throughout the passage.
Prosody	Reads in a monotone voice with little expression or variation; voice volume is often too quiet.	Begins to use some expression and variation in voice, but inconsistently; voice volume may still be low.	Reads with appropriate expression and volume, occasionally slipping into a less expressive style.	Reads with rich expression and enthusiasm, varying volume and intonation to enhance interpretation of the text.

(Scale adapted from Zutell & Rasinski (1991))

Formal screeners and diagnostics are also valuable in developing detailed reading assessments, such as Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) assessment or the Multiple-Choice Cloze (MAZE) passage. These provide insights into reading accuracy and fluency, helping teachers tailor instruction to student needs. Consider the chart below to determine possible areas for targeted focus. A more detailed version can be found in [ONlit (external link)](#).

Responding to instructional needs in fluency

Group of Readers	Characteristics	Instructional Focus
Low Accuracy	Struggle with foundational literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary, which limits comprehension.	Build orthographic maps through phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary instruction; provide explicit fluency instruction; improve reading rate without sacrificing comprehension
High Accuracy, Low Reading Rate	Accurate but slow readers who take time and read at a slow pace	Provide explicit fluency and vocabulary instruction; improve reading ease and pace; use repeated reading and stretch texts
High Fluency (including prosody) and Accuracy	Accurate readers who read at an appropriate pace and who can handle complex texts independently and with expression	Continue fluency instruction; engage with more complex texts; use repeated reading with increasing variety of texts and text forms

Fluency in reading is not just about a fast pace; rather, it involves reading at an appropriate speed for the text and the ability to sustain reading for longer periods without experiencing cognitive fatigue. This is where listening to students' reading can provide insightful data on the student as a reader beyond screening data on its own.

Working with repeated reading

Repeated reading is one of the most effective ways to improve reading fluency (Stollar, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2024) Educators should be responsive when selecting texts for fluency practice, incorporating a mix that includes both manageable and more challenging passages. **Beginning with texts that students feel confident in can help build their confidence before progressing to more difficult material.** In general, it is important to choose texts that students can engage with, including in interest. If students are interested, they will often be more willing to try more challenging texts. For repeated reading practice, select short passages between 50 and 250 words. These should range in difficulty from "challenging but manageable" to "difficult," ensuring that scaffolding is provided where needed, including providing some background and, if needed for some students, modeling reading or supporting with decoding challenging words. Purposeful selection of texts supports student engagement and fosters improvement in reading fluency (Stollar, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2024).

The components of effective repeated reading instruction are outlined below:

Components of repeated reading

Component	Description
Difficulty of Text	Consider the difficulty of the text based on the purpose for reading. Progressively more difficult texts over time can improve fluency.
Model	Students perform better when they hear a skilled reader (teacher, peer, or audio) before rereading.
Rereading	Students benefit from rereading the same section 3-5 times
Set a Goal	Encourage students to set a goal (e.g., increase accuracy by 10% from the first to the third read)
Corrective Feedback	Provide immediate feedback by supplying the correct word after an error or hesitation and practice decoding incorrect words. Determine possible common errors to support with explicit decoding practice.

(Adapted from Stollar, 2020)

A version of repeated reading is repeated partner reading. Students can practice and track their reading progress with a partner by doing timed partner reading.

Four-step repeated partner reading

Step	Activity	Teacher action
1	**Choose a Passage**	Use a passage closer to a student's independent reading rate. Consider partners based on texts.
2	**Supply/Gather Materials**	Provide two copies of passage (one for each student), a stopwatch and pencil.
3	**Time Reading**	The student reads the passage for 1 minute. The partner counts the number of words read correctly (WCPM).
4	**Repeated Reading**	The student reads the same passage 3-5 times. The partner tracks and records the progress.

(Adapted from Reading Rockets)

Letting prosody flow

Although automaticity and accuracy are important features of fluency, prosody adds the dimension of expression to reading and speaking. Reading and speaking with expression means using phrasing, pacing and pausing, stress and intonation that often come from understanding an underlying intent or purpose in a text. For example, a slower reading pace might reflect a tone or mood, stresses on particular words might reinforce significance, and variations in intonation might suggest a particular emotion.

An aspect of prosody is to help students to pause and adjust their intonation based on punctuation marks, helping them to read with natural expression and to think about the ways in which punctuation informs meaning (Cunningham et al.). However, prosody is not simply

dictated by how punctuation is used to structure lines and sentences. Prosody offers readers to make decisions about how a text sounds, what words to stress, and what elements fit an interpretation or purpose of a text. This provides opportunities for students to experiment with the elements of prosody.

Strategies that focus on prosody include choral reading, reading passages together in a shared voice, focusing on matching accuracy, rate, and intonation (Cunningham et al., 2024), and echo reading, where students listen to a passage and then repeat it, mimicking the teacher's or recording's expression and pace (Cunningham et al., 2024). Prosody can also take on a more performance-based demonstration through reader's theatre where students can make decisions about how particular lines of a poem are read or how the words of a character in a story might be said to capture a particular quality.

Opportunities for students to use and experiment with prosody out loud also helps them internalize the kinds of phrasing, pace and intonation when they read silently, thereby enhancing their comprehension of and engagement with a text.

Resources

Links found in the document

[ONlit (external link)](#) outlines a path for assessing students' reading, including where fluency fits in that screening.

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Updates

When updates are made to this document, they are tracked below with date and description of update.

- February 2025: initial release