

SAMPLE CHAPTER

The Reading Fluency Handbook

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CHAPTER 2

What is fluency

Two children who can both read

Priya is one of our most enthusiastic readers. She reads at home because she wants to. She'll tell you what she's halfway through without being asked, and she's quick. We sat down together with one of our Mystery Club stories and she read at a rate I ended up asking her to slow down for. I don't ask that of many children (most of them need speeding up, not slowing down!).

Then I asked her what had happened. She couldn't tell me much. She remembered the coins, and that they had gone missing, but not whose they were or why anybody in the story minded. There was a dog, she said. There is no dog in that story (there was in the poem we had covered the day previously).

The speed had cost her more than the meaning. She'd misread a handful of words she can read perfectly well when she isn't racing. I remember 'stumbled' became 'stumbled over' and she never corrected it. She didn't even pause. She didn't mark a single full stop. She read the page the way you read a list.

Felix works harder at reading than Priya does, because he badly wants to get it right. And he does get it right. He can be word perfect. But he gets there by sounding almost every word out, a few aloud and most somewhere behind his eyes. You can watch him do it. He finishes each

word as a small separate job, then starts the next one, and by the end of the paragraph he's spent everything he has on the words and has nothing left for what they said.

Both of these children met the phonics check threshold last year. Ask either family and you'll be told their child can read.

And they can in one sense. They are six.

And if we are not careful, both of them get filed under comprehension and handed the same worksheet. From the outside that's exactly what it looks like they need: two children who read the words and didn't understand the story.

But this is NOT a matter of comprehension.

It is a matter of *fluency*.

What fluency is

Reading fluency is the ability to read words correctly, to recognise them without effort, and to say them in the groupings and with the emphasis that carry the sense. **Accuracy, automaticity, prosody**. Get those three working together and the child can understand what they've read. They are three of the four components which support comprehension (the other is **vocabulary**, to which we shall return later).

Three fluency pillars, one vocabulary pillar and the roof of comprehension (Figure 2.1): take a pillar away and the roof comes down, and admiring the roof won't put the pillar back.

Those three fluency components have been the settled definition since the National Reading Panel gathered up the evidence at the turn of the century (NICHD, 2000), and almost nobody serious has argued with them since. Almost none of that ever reached a timetable. The part that comes after decoding, where the words get easy enough to think with, sat in the literature and rarely made it into anybody's week.

So let's take the three of them one at a time, with Priya and Felix still in the room.

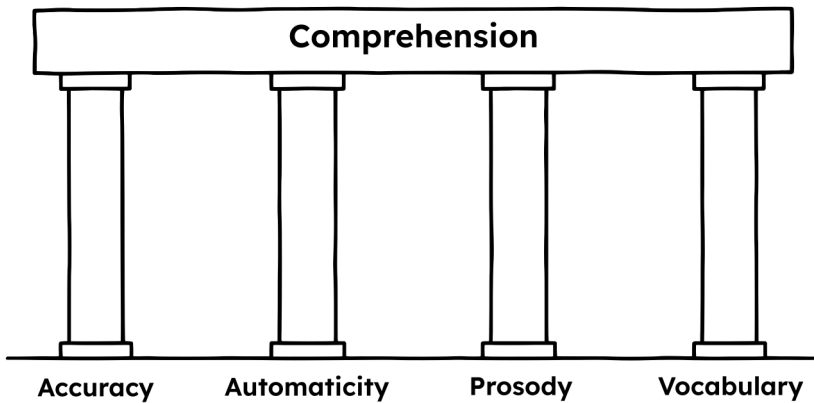


Figure 2.1

Accuracy is the part we already teach

The child reads the words on the page: not a word that starts the same way, not a good guess from the picture. The word.

We're better at this than we've ever been. A well-taught systematic phonics programme delivers accuracy to the great majority of children.

The working threshold is around 95 per cent on a given text, which is roughly one error in every twenty words. Below about 90 per cent the errors start changing what the sentences mean, and no child can understand a passage they're partly rewriting as they go. Between those two numbers is where most useful teaching sits (Rasinski, 2004).

Felix has accuracy in full. If the only instrument I point at him asks whether he can decode, he comes back clean every time while I carry on wondering why he can't answer a question about the passage. You'll know the sentence that gets said about children like him at parents' evening, because most staffrooms say it: he can read, he just doesn't understand it. It's half right, and the half it gets wrong is the half you can teach.

Priya's errors weren't decoding errors. She can read every word she got wrong, and would read all of them correctly on a slower day. But she got them wrong because she was travelling too fast to look properly. So a fall in accuracy doesn't always mean a child needs more phonics.

Sometimes it means they've found a speed the rest of their reading can't match.

Automaticity is recognition

Automaticity is recognition that happens on its own, before the child has decided to do anything about it. You didn't choose to read this sentence. You looked at it and couldn't help it.

Attention is finite and it doesn't stretch on request (Figure 2.2). Everything a child spends on getting a word off the page is unavailable for everything else the sentence is asking of them: holding its beginning in mind while they reach its end, noticing that a name has come round for the second time, wondering why the coins matter. A child who's still decoding hasn't chosen to think less about the story. There's just nothing left with which to *think*.

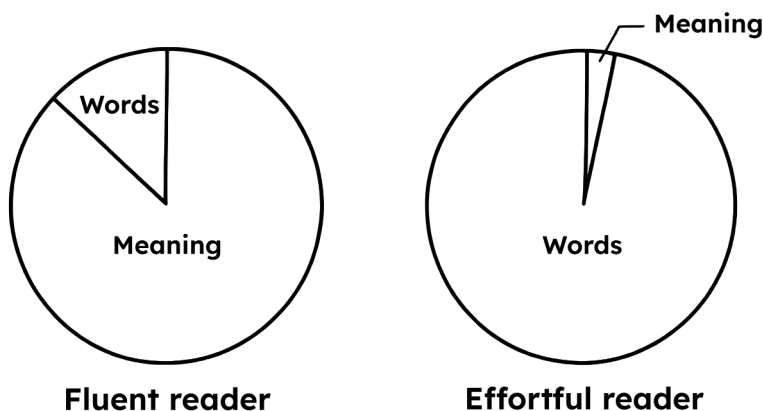


Figure 2.2

A decent comparison might be learning to drive. I remember in my first lessons making sure I was steering straight, checking the mirror, finding (or crunching!) the gear. And each of those things took my whole attention. You can't hold a conversation while you do them, at least not at first. Conversation became available when the steering stopped demanding anything. The sentence a child can't think about is usually the sentence they're still steering.

Felix is that child. He's accurate and he's slow, and the slowness isn't a character trait or a shortage of effort, because he brings a *lot* of effort to reading. Every word is a small act of construction, and thirty of those in a row will exhaust anybody. Asking him then about the text is asking him to spend again what the words already cost him.

Automaticity has nowhere to live. Accuracy has phonics. Comprehension has an entire industry of questions and worksheets and records. Automaticity has never been anybody's job, partly because it leaves nothing behind, and partly because we've quietly assumed it arrives by itself once decoding is secure. For some children it does. For Felix, and for a great many others, it doesn't, it won't, and nothing on most schools' timetables this term is pointed at it.

How many Felixes have you got on a comprehension intervention right now?

Prosody is the sound the words make

Prosody is the music of reading: where the voice rises and falls, which words take the weight, where the reader breathes, how words gather into groups before they're said.

Written English leaves out almost everything speech carries for free, and the reader has to put it back to understand the sentence at all. Deciding that *into the garden* belongs together as one piece is understanding, performed. A child who reads a sentence with the right shape is showing me they've worked out its structure. A child who reads it flat, or breaks it in the wrong places, is showing me they haven't.

So many children read a page perfectly well and tell you nothing about it, because they've turned print into sound without ever turning it into shape. So teach expression directly, and teach it out loud.

Priya's punctuation is one example. She didn't pause at the full stops, so one sentence ran into the next and the next, and the moment the story turned on went past inside a paragraph that never changed pace or pitch. She had automaticity in abundance and she used it to get to the end.

Fluency is not simply a property of the child

Fluency isn't a fixed attribute a child has or lacks. It's what happens between a particular child and a particular text. Hand any adult in your staffroom a page of case law or the service manual for a boiler and their reading will slow, flatten and lose its shape inside a paragraph. They won't have become a poor reader on the way to the photocopier. Hand them a picture book or a novel and they're fluent again. The text moved. They didn't.

That changes how we talk about children in meetings. "Felix is a dysfluent reader" is a shorthand, but not a terribly useful one. The useful sentence is that Felix isn't yet automatic on texts at this level, and that one tells me what to do on Monday.

It also means fluency is never finished. It gets rebuilt at every jump in text difficulty, which is why a child who looks secure in Year 2 can look laboured in Year 5 in front of a science text carrying three unfamiliar nouns in its first paragraph, and why fluency teaching belongs in both the infant classroom and a long way beyond.

Which makes choosing the text important. There's a chapter coming on that later.

Fluency + vocabulary = comprehension

Fluency is absolutely necessary for comprehension. If you are teaching in primary school, you should be teaching fluency. It will make your children understand more of what they read.

But it is not sufficient on its own.

You can't teach comprehension. What you teach is fluency and vocabulary. Comprehension is an outcome, not a subject: you can teach the things that produce it, but not the understanding itself, and what most schools do instead is test it weekly with a worksheet and call that teaching.

A child can read a passage beautifully aloud without knowing all of what it means, and a child who knows little of the world a passage assumes will understand less of it than we would want, however well they read it. This is why **vocabulary** matters. Background knowledge

matters *enormously*, and it matters more the older children get. García and Cain (2014) found that word reading becomes less predictive of comprehension around the age of ten. That is the reason why you can read a letter from the doctor – the kind you really focus on – perfectly and still be none the wiser, or why children baulk the first time they read Shakespeare.

What fluency does is clear the obstacle that no amount of vocabulary teaching can get around. It makes understanding possible. And for a great many of the children we currently worry about, it's the only thing in the way.

One sentence, four ways

Take one sentence.

When the door finally opened, the dog shot past her legs and into the garden.

1. **Accuracy missing.** It arrives as something close to *when the door found opened, the dog shut past her legs and in the garden*. Near enough to sound like reading, wrong enough to mean nothing in particular. The child isn't being careless. They're reading what they got.
2. **Automaticity missing.** Every word right, every word separate, and the pauses falling between the words instead of between the ideas. By the time the child reaches *garden* the door has gone. Felix reads like this, and the giveaway is that he can often answer a question about the end of a sentence.
3. **Prosody missing.** Quick and flat: one continuous line at one volume, with a small breath near the middle for reasons unconnected to the comma. The comma does no work. The full stop does no work. This is the one most easily mistaken for good reading.

4. **Fluent.** It arrives in pieces that mean something. *When the door finally opened / the dog shot past her legs / and into the garden.* The word *finally* takes a little weight, because somebody has been waiting. The pace lifts on *shot past her legs*. You can hear that the reader knows what happened, because the reading is the knowing.

Those slashes are the notation we use for marking the chunked phrases. I'll explain this properly later, with a technique for teaching it.

Now, real children are less tidy than four clean examples. Priya was losing accuracy and prosody at once, from a single cause. I've separated the four so you can learn the sounds, not because children turn up one fault at a time.

And here I go back to my old headteacher, Jane. I can hear echoes of her as I say this.

You have to listen to your children read to know how good a reader they are.

And I make no apology for telling you that this takes time. But I *promise* you that you can do it in less time than you think. I have checked a whole class in an afternoon at Fetcham. Find out which of the three fluency elements your children are weakest at. Then teach. Later on in this book, I will show you how.

Four things fluency is not

ONE

Fluency isn't speed. Speed is a symptom of automaticity, which is why we measure it, and a measurable symptom is worth having. Pursued for its own sake, though, speed does more than fail to deliver comprehension. It takes the other two components down with it. Priya lost accuracy she already had and abandoned punctuation she can use perfectly well, and she did both by going faster. A child whose rate climbs while their accuracy falls isn't improving. Watch that pair together, because the rate on its own will tell you the opposite.

TWO

Accurate decoding doesn't deliver comprehension by itself. This belief is why so many schools treat the reading job as finished when the phonics job is finished. Decoding gets the words right. Something else has to make them cheap.

THREE

Silent independent reading doesn't build fluency. Not reliably, and least of all in the children who most need it built. A child who's dysfluent and left alone with a book practises being dysfluent, or holds the page open and thinks about something else, and no adult in the room finds out which. The relationship runs the other way round: fluent reading aloud feeds fluent silent reading (Pinnell et al., 1995, cited in Rasinski, 2004). Defend independent reading time if you like. There are some good reasons. Just don't count it as fluency teaching.

FOUR

Reading round the class builds little. Going round the table, or picking children at random to read a paragraph aloud with no warning, gives the child performing no chance to prepare and hands every child listening a halting model of the thing you want them to hear. Some of them are even counting ahead to work out which paragraph will be theirs. Whatever they're learning in that lesson, it isn't reading.

Where this leaves Priya and Felix

Felix needs the words to cost him less, so there's something left to think with. Priya needs to slow down enough for the words to be worth having. Both are teachable, both can be taught daily and neither is a worksheet.

That's the rest of this book.

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