

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342048935>

# Defining fluency: Finding the missing pieces for reading fluency.

Article · June 2020

CITATIONS

0

READS

168

## 4 authors:



**Chase Young**

Sam Houston State University

40 PUBLICATIONS 210 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



**Timothy Rasinski**

Kent State University

181 PUBLICATIONS 2,960 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



**David D. Paige**

Northern Illinois University

57 PUBLICATIONS 328 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



**William H. Rupley**

Texas A&M University

125 PUBLICATIONS 907 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



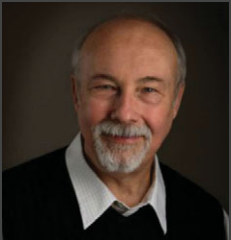
Preservice Teachers' Knowledge and Perceptions of Handwriting Instruction [View project](#)



Combining phonics and fluency instruction [View project](#)



**Chase Young** (cxy010@shsu.edu), an ILA member since 2008, is an associate professor at Sam Houston State University in Texas.



**Timothy Rasinski** (trasinsk@kent.edu), a longtime member of ILA, is a professor at Kent State University in Ohio.



**David Paige** (dpaige715@gmail.com), an ILA member since 2004, is an associate professor at Bellarmine University in Kentucky.



**William Rupley** (w-rupley@tamu.edu) is a professor at Texas A&M University.



# DEFINING **FLUENCY**

## Finding the missing pieces for reading fluency

By **Chase Young, Timothy Rasinski, David Paige, & William Rupley**

*f*ar too many students in the United States struggle with learning to read. The sad reality is that many will never achieve proficiency. Proficient readers advance in their reading capabilities, whereas struggling students continue to fall further behind their advancing peers.

At the turn of the 21st century, researchers determined that “below basic” readers more often than not experience difficulties in one or more components of reading fluency. The latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress offer strong support for the importance of fluent reading, with findings that noted 40% of fourth graders assessed with the oral reading fluency rubric were “nonfluent.”

None of this is good news, especially because of the strong relationship between fluency and comprehension. Moreover, many of the salvos in the media coverage of the reading crisis in the U.S. fail to acknowledge fluency as a contributing problem for students who struggle in reading.

So what does it mean to be fluent?

## Searching for a common definition

Reading fluency is made up of three subcompetencies: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody.

Reading with feeling to understand and capture meaning, whether silently or orally, is a simple yet accurate concept of fluency. This outcome comprises reading words accurately, with little cognitive effort (automaticity), and with prosody or expression that reflects the meaning of the text.

Although the word identification accuracy component of fluency is often mentioned in media coverage, the automaticity and prosody components are more often missing.

Fluency has experienced an ebb and flow journey from being neglected to becoming an integral component of reading instruction. Because of this all-or-nothing role, we wanted to determine if fluency's definition was now widely accepted and understood. Saying that you teach fluency if you do not fully recognize the nature of fluency is problematic.

We recently invited 168 educators to share their understanding of fluency by answering two questions:

1. In your words, what is fluency?
2. Is reading fluency important in reading? Why or why not?

Participants included teachers at all levels, literacy coaches, administrators, and university/college faculty. The respondents' experience ranged from one year to 49 years in education and the average was 24 years.

The answers were not promising. When asked to define fluency, 43% of the respondents included accuracy in their definition, and only 30% included automaticity. Interestingly, 65% included prosody or reading expression in their definitions.

In the early 1990s, reading educator and researcher Sarah Dowhower remarked that prosody was fluency's "unattended bedfellow," which apparently is no longer true. Indeed, not everyone included prosody, but at

least it was more than half. Still, none of this is uplifting news to support knowledge of fluency in reading. In fact, only four respondents named all three components of reading fluency. As we mentioned, teaching something effectively if you are not fully aware of what it is you are supposed to be teaching is impossible.

## What fluency is and is not

On with the bad news: The most frequently used word in the definitions of fluency was *rate*. It appears that the majority of educators viewed reading fluency as how fast a student reads.

Let's be clear: Reading fluency is not rate. Rate is sometimes used as an indicator of automaticity, but it is not a component. We know good readers' rates vary for the purposes of their reading. All proficient readers sometimes need to slow down or speed up and reread for meaning.

How would you interpret the goal of reading if you were told to keep reading as fast as possible even when meaning breaks down? This sends a message that constructing meaning is not the main goal of reading. The communication is that the student who finishes first is the "good reader."

The worst news is that we are facing a large number of students who are not fluent readers, and we are not exactly sure what fluency is. We perceive this as an epidemic, that the construct of fluency is without an agreed-upon scientific definition.

Reading fluency is the ability to read with accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. We can use these principles to develop and implement effective reading fluency instruction.

## Fluency lays the foundation

Now all is not doom and gloom. We were delighted at the answers to the second question on the survey. We asked respondents whether they thought reading fluency was important for reading success and

why. One hundred percent agreed that fluency was necessary for success, and the most common reason was for comprehension. *Comprehension* was the most frequently used term when describing why fluency was an important part of the reading process.

So we know reading fluency is important for reading comprehension. We know that many students in the U.S. struggle with reading and are considered disfluent. We know that there is a mountain of scientific research supporting effective methods for developing fluent readers. Proficiency in fluency lays the foundation for competent, successful reading for all, and it is far too important to have incomplete understandings of what constitutes reading fluency.

All of this is good news. Now all we have to do is get the message out that fluency is critically important and that it is more than rate: It is accuracy, automaticity, and prosody, and proficiency in fluency lays the foundation for proficient reading for all. ■

## ILA'S LITERACY GLOSSARY

Our Literacy Glossary contains fundamental terms necessary to critical discussions on literacy research and instruction. The glossary defines fluency as: *The ability to act (speak, read, write) with ease and accuracy. Research indicates that oral reading fluency is the ability to read text accurately, with sufficient speed, prosody, and expression. It is an essential component of reading because it permits the reader to focus on constructing meaning from the text rather than on decoding words.* For more terms and definitions, visit [literacyworldwide.org/glossary](http://literacyworldwide.org/glossary).