



Reading Fluency: The Path to Comprehension

Practise until reading is smooth, fast, and full of meaning.

WHERE THIS FITS

The Building Blocks journey to reading

These guides build on each other, step by step. You are on Building Blocks 3 - the final building blocks.



BUILDING BLOCKS 1

Phonological awareness

Hearing and playing with sounds by ear - rhythm, rhyme, first and last sounds.

✓ Done



BUILDING BLOCKS 2

Orthographic patterns & sight words

Connecting those sounds to the letters on the page - patterns and words that reach automatic recognition.

✓ Done



BUILDING BLOCKS 3

Reading fluency

Practising until reading is smooth, fast, and full of meaning - the bridge to comprehension.

★ This guide · YOU ARE HERE

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Accurate, quick and expressive



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QUICK RECAP

How we got here

Two building blocks are already in place. Here is what children can do.

Building Blocks 1 ✓

Phonological awareness

- ✓ Hear first, middle, and final sounds
- ✓ Feel rhythm and rhyme
- ✓ Tell English sounds apart - all by ear

Building Blocks 2 ✓

Patterns & sight words

- ✓ Match sounds to letters
- ✓ Read spelling patterns and longer words
- ✓ Know common sight words automatically

→ Now (Building Blocks 3): children can decode words. The last job is to make reading fast, smooth, and expressive.

Where Building Blocks 3 fits: the reading rope

Both strands become automatic and weave into skilled reading (Scarborough, 2001). Building Blocks 3 tightens the rope. Keep feeding the upper strand too - so fluent decoding turns into real understanding.

Word recognition

Now automatic

 Phonological awareness

S1

 Decoding

S2

 Sight recognition

S2

Language comprehension

Keep feeding this strand

 Background knowledge

 Vocabulary

 Language structures

 Verbal reasoning

 Literacy knowledge

 Woven together = skilled, fluent reading. This is Building Blocks 3.

THE GOAL

What is reading fluency?



Accurate

reads the words right



Quick

reads at a good pace



Expressive

reads with feeling

Fluency is the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression... it provides a bridge between word recognition and comprehension.

- Shanahan, T. · The National Reading Panel Report (2000)

The path to comprehension begins even earlier - with language knowledge. Fluent decoding turns into meaning only when it lands on language the child already knows by ear. Keep building oral vocabulary alongside every fluency step.

A1 can-do statements

Overall: students can understand stories and short texts on familiar topics (e.g. sports, music or travel), in level-appropriate language and supported by illustrations, re-reading as required.

- ✓ Understand short, simple messages in notes, social media or email.
- ✓ Understand a simple school timetable of days and class times.
- ✓ Differentiate main ideas from unimportant information in factual texts.
- ✓ Follow basic written instructions for classroom activities.
- ✓ Understand illustrated creative texts in level-appropriate language.
- ✓ Recognise key words and phrases in short, simple cartoon stories.
- ✓ Find key information in adverts, programs, leaflets and brochures.
- ✓ Form an idea of simple informational material and short descriptions.
- ✓ Follow basic picture-supported instructions for making something.
- ✓ Follow short, simple written directions (e.g. to go from X to Y).
- ✓ Understand simple stories with the help of pictures and drawings.
- ✓ Follow simple dialogues in short, illustrated stories.

Ten steps to practise fluency

The whole set at a glance - we look at each in turn.

1

Model fluent reading

2

**Pre-teach new
vocabulary**

3

Word investigation

4

**Sentence
investigation**

5

Repeated reading

6

Multi-modal reading

7

Provide feedback

8

Spelling

9

Theatrical reading

10

Distancing



Direct instruction followed by plenty of practice leads to superior outcomes. (Graham & Santangelo, 2015)

Model, then pre-teach



1 • Model fluent reading

Begin each lesson by naming the goal, defining fluent reading, and modeling in short, targeted bursts. Make a chart from students ideas, then demonstrate both weak and strong reading so they hear the difference.



2 • Pre-teach vocabulary

Choose texts students will initially struggle with (about 10 mistakes per 100 words). Extract unfamiliar words, decode them together, and teach their meaning in context.

big = the same as large · water = we drink it and swim in it.

Words & sentences



3 • Word investigation

When students understand parts of words, it is easier to recognise them while reading. Break a word into its root, prefix, or suffix, or analyse number and tense.

cat / cats · run / running · unhappy (un- = not).



4 • Sentence investigation

Help students see how a text is organised so they can follow it. Examine how sentences are built to show relationships, such as cause and effect.

The sun is hot, so I am hot. (so connects two ideas)

Repeated & multi-modal reading



5 • Repeated reading

Build automaticity and increase pace. Students read the same short passage two or three times until they can read it well.

I see a red bird. x5 until fast • ► Watch: repeated reading



6 • Multi-modal reading

Read the same text multiple times, in different ways.

► Choral

► Shared

► Shadowed

► Boom

💡 A slow, disfluent reader is so busy figuring out the words that there is no space left to think about meaning. - Shanahan on Literacy (2017)

Feedback & spelling



7 • Provide feedback

Read a challenging sentence, then have the student immediately try it again. Whole-text modeling is usually not helpful.

Try again and scoop the words so it sounds like talking to a friend. • ► Watch



8 • Spelling

Familiarise students with orthographic patterns and word recognition. Use spelling clips, games and activities to recognise common patterns and letter combinations.

cat · cake (final e changes the a) · fish (sh sound). • ► Watch

Theatrical reading & distancing



9 • Theatrical reading

Focus: improve prosody (intonation and expression). Read a script, dialogue or story with direct speech as if performing it for an audience.

Go away! (loud giant voice) • I am a lion! Roar! • ► Watch



10 • Distancing

Focus: help students apply a skill they just learned to other books or texts. Transfer to a new context ensures they have mastered the skill.

We noticed and in apples and bananas - find a line in this new poem that uses and.

More ways to practise fluency

Fun, low-prep routines for a busy EFL classroom.



Scooping

Draw u-shapes under phrases; read each scoop in one breath.



Partner reading

Stronger + weaker reader take turns; give friendly feedback.



60-second re-read

Read 60s, practise the hard words, read again - get further.



Karaoke cloze

Fill 10% missing song words, read the lyrics, then sing along.



Reading speed-dating

Read the same paragraph to a new partner each round.



Shadowed reading

Read just ahead of the child; they follow your finger and voice.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT IT

In your EFL class

🕒 A1 pacing: 5-10 minutes a day of reading practice - short, repeated bursts across the week beat one long session.



Model first

Start every lesson by showing what fluent reading sounds like.



Just-right texts

A little hard (~10/100). Pre-teach the tricky words.



Re-read, many ways

Choral, partner, shadowed, theatrical - keep it fresh.



Feedback on the spot

Short and specific, then re-read that sentence right away.



Show progress

The 60-second re-read makes gains visible to the child.



Pick what fits

Not all ten steps every lesson - choose what today needs.

Short, repeated periods of sustained, silent reading beat one long session (Therrien, 2004).

Miscue analysis: read the errors

When a child reads aloud, their mistakes (miscues) tell you exactly what to teach - and can flag a reader who needs help early.

How to do it

Listen to a short oral reading; jot the miscues.

Sort them by type - decoding, guessing, or phrasing.

Note self-corrections - a sign the child is tracking meaning.

Miscue → teach

Decoding errors (b/d, vowels) → revisit that pattern (Building Blocks 2).

Guessing from pictures → cover the picture; decode the word.

Flat, run-on reading → phrasing & expression practice.

► Still many decoding errors, very slow, or cannot self-correct after lots of practice? The child may be at risk (e.g. dyslexia or a processing delay). Note it early, add tiered support, and involve the literacy coordinator.

Reaching every learner

Same ten steps, different support. A multi-tier system of support (MTSS) helps you plan for struggling, gifted and multilingual readers.

● TIER 1 • EVERYONE

Model plus repeated and multi-modal reading for the whole class at a just-right text.

↓ Struggling: shorter texts, more repetitions, partner with a stronger reader.

◆ TIER 2 • SOME

Small-group repeated reading of a shorter, easier passage - more modelling, more rounds.

↑ Gifted: richer texts, readers-theatre lead, expression and prosody challenges.

● TIER 3 • A FEW

One-to-one, a decodable text at the child level, slower, short daily practice.

🌐 Many home languages: pre-teach vocabulary and meaning, not just decoding.

THE EVIDENCE

Fluency + language + vocabulary = comprehension

Current research agrees: fluent decoding turns into understanding only when it lands on language the child already knows.

Fluency is the bridge

In the Active View of Reading, fluency is a bridging process - the link that joins word recognition to language comprehension.

Duke & Cartwright (2021)

Language makes meaning

In a six-year study, language comprehension and decoding together explained almost all (99.7%) of the variance in reading comprehension at age seven.

Hjetland et al. (2019)

Vocabulary counts double

Across second-language readers, vocabulary and grammar knowledge are among the strongest correlates of comprehension - ahead of decoding alone.

Jeon & Yamashita (2022)

Interventions that strengthen bridging processes such as fluency show medium-to-large effects ($ES = 0.70$), and vocabulary work shows some of the largest gains of all. (Burns, Duke & Cartwright, 2023)

Reflect & self-assess

Ask yourself

Do I model fluent reading in short, targeted bursts - not by reading whole texts for pupils?

Do I choose texts at the right challenge level (about 10 slips per 100 words)?

Do I build in repeated and multi-modal reading so a passage is read several times?

Is my feedback targeted - one sentence, then an immediate re-read?

Do I grow vocabulary and oral language alongside every fluency step?

Now I can...

- ✓ explain how fluency bridges word recognition and comprehension.
- ✓ model fluent reading and build a class chart of what good reading sounds like.
- ✓ run repeated and multi-modal reading - choral, shared and shadowed.
- ✓ give short, specific feedback and have pupils re-read straight away.
- ✓ use theatrical reading to build prosody and expression.
- ✓ assess fluency by accuracy, rate and expression together.

The whole journey: sound to meaning

Three building blocks that together build a confident reader.



BUILDING BLOCKS 1

Phonological awareness

Hear and play with sounds - rhythm, rhyme, first & last sounds. All by ear.

Builds the ears.



BUILDING BLOCKS 2

Patterns & sight words

Connect sounds to letters - spelling patterns and words known automatically.

Builds the code.



BUILDING BLOCKS 3

Reading fluency

Practise until reading is smooth, fast, and expressive - ten steps.

Builds the bridge.

From hearing a single sound 🗨️ to understanding a whole story 📖 - that is the complete path. When reading flows, the mind is free to focus on meaning.

SOURCES

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BUILDING BLOCKS 3 OF 3 · COMPLETE

The bridge is built!



Model, practise, and repeat in playful ways - and reading becomes smooth, fast, and full of meaning.

1 • Hear it

Building Blocks 1

2 • Decode it

Building Blocks 2

3 • Read it fluently

Building Blocks 3