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5 Surefire Strategies for Developing Reading Fluency

By Lisa Blau

Give students the practice to read with ease and confidence, and watch accuracy and understanding soar.

Grades
1–2, 3–5

Have you ever watched students struggle with what you know to be a great book, just perfect for their age and development? Without fluency, the world of imagination, humor, and drama contained in the finest books is no more than a tangle of words.

One definition of fluency is the ability to read aloud expressively and with understanding. When fluent readers read aloud, the text flows as if strung together like pearls on a necklace, rather than sounding halting and choppy.

Here are some strategies to help second through fifth graders make important gains in this area. Before you use these techniques, however, you should assess your students and determine their needs. If several students need help, you may want to create whole-class lessons based on choral reading or reader's theater. If there are only a few students, you may decide to work with them in small groups.

1. Model Fluent Reading

In order to read fluently, students must first hear and understand what fluent reading sounds like. From there, they will be more likely to transfer those experiences into their own reading. The most powerful way for you to help your students is to read aloud to them, often and with great expression. Choose selections carefully. Expose them to a wide variety of genres including poetry, excerpts from speeches, and folk and fairy tales with rich, lyrical language — texts that will spark your students' interests and draw them into the reading experience.

Following a read-aloud session, ask your students: "After listening to how I read, can you tell me what I did that is like what good readers do?" Encourage students to share their thoughts. Also, ask your students to think about how a fluent reader keeps the listener engaged.

2. Do Repeated Readings in Class

In their landmark book, *Classrooms That Work*, Patricia Cunningham and Richard Allington stress the importance (and I agree) of repeated readings as a way to help students recognize high-frequency words more easily, thereby strengthening their ease of reading. Having students practice reading by rereading short passages aloud is one of the best ways I know of to promote fluency.

For example, choose a short poem to begin with, preferably one that fits into your current unit of study, and transpose it onto an overhead transparency. Make a copy of the poem for each student. Read the poem aloud several times while your students listen and follow along. Take a moment to discuss your reading behaviors such as phrasing (i.e. the ability to read several words together in one breath), rate (the speed at which we read), and intonation (the emphasis we give to particular words or phrases).

Next, ask your students to engage in an "echo reading," in which you read a line and all the students repeat the line back to you. Following the echo reading, have students read the entire poem together as a "choral read." You will find that doing group readings like these can be effective strategies for promoting fluency because all students are actively engaged. As such, they may be less apprehensive about making a mistake because they are part of a community of readers, rather than standing alone.

3. Promote Phrased Reading in Class

Fluency involves reading phrases seamlessly, as opposed to word by word. To help students read phrases better, begin with a terrific poem. Two of my students' favorites are "Something Told the Wild Geese" by Rachel Field, and "Noodles" by Janet Wong. (See resources below.)

After selecting a poem, write its lines onto sentence strips, which serve as cue cards, to show students how good readers cluster portions of text rather than saying each word separately. Hold up strips one at a time and have students read the phrases together. Reinforce phrased reading by using the same poem in guided reading and pointing to passages you read as a class.

4. Enlist Tutors to Help Out

Provide support for your nonfluent readers by asking tutors — instructional aides, parent volunteers, or older students — to help. The tutor and the student can read a preselected text aloud simultaneously. By offering positive feedback when the reader reads well, and by rereading passages when he or she struggles, the tutor provides a helpful kind of one-on-one support. The sessions can be short — 15 minutes at most. Plus, if you provide tutors with the text that you plan to use in an upcoming group lesson, you can give your nonfluent readers a jump start prior to the next lesson.

5. Try a Reader's Theater in Class

Because reader's theater is an oral performance of a script, it is one of the best ways to promote fluency. In the exercise, meaning is conveyed through expression and intonation. The focus thus becomes interpreting the script rather than memorizing it.

Getting started is easy. Simply give each student a copy of the script, and read it aloud as you would any other piece of literature. (See script resources below.) After your read-aloud, do an echo read and a choral read of the script to involve the entire class. Once the class has had enough practice, choose students to read the various parts. Put together a few simple props and costumes, and invite other classes to attend the performance.

For the presentation, have readers stand, or sit on stools, in front of the room and face the audience. Position them in order of each character's importance. Encourage students to make eye contact with the audience and one another before they read. Once they start, they should hold their scripts at chest level to avoid hiding their faces, and look out at the audience periodically.

After the performance, have students state their names and the part that they read. You might also want to videotape the performance so that you can review it with students later. In doing so, you will show them that they are, indeed, fluent readers.

Poetry Books for Repeated and Phrased Readings

- *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children*, selected by Jack Prelutsky
- *Sing a Song of Popcorn: Every Child's Book of Poems*, selected by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers, Eva Moore, Mary M. White, and Jan Carr
- *Treasure Chest of Poetry*, by Bill Martin, Jr., with John Archambault and Peggy Brogan
- *The 20th Century Children's Poetry Treasury*, selected by Jack Prelutsky

Books for Reader's Theater

- *A Reader's Theatre Treasury of Stories*, by Win Braun
- *Presenting Reader's Theatre*, by Caroline Feller Bauer
- *Reader's Theatre for Beginning Readers*, by Suzanne I. Barchers
- *The Best of Reader's Theatre*, Vols. I and II, by Lisa Blau



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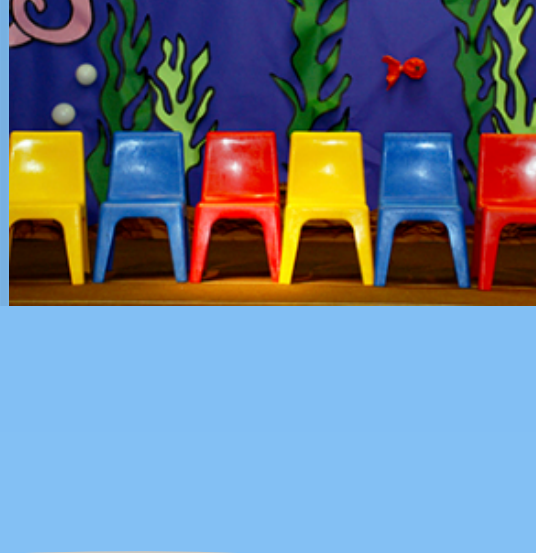


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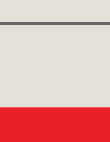
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