

A Reading Expert's Case for Rethinking Fluency

| Q&A: Dr. Tim Rasinski



Reading fluency — the ability to read accurately, automatically and with appropriate expression — remains a critical yet often overlooked component of literacy development. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 68 percent of U.S. students [are not reading at proficient levels](#). By fourth grade, students transition from learning

to read to reading to learn. Research shows that approximately 1.27 million public school students perform below NAEP Basic and [struggle with fluency in reading connected text](#). Understanding and addressing fluency has become increasingly urgent for educators, administrators and parents alike.

Recently, EdSurge spoke with [Dr. Timothy Rasinski](#), professor emeritus of literacy education at Kent State University, where he has directed a reading clinic for struggling readers for over 20 years. With over 200 published

articles and more than 50 books on reading education, Rasinski has dedicated nearly 40 years to studying reading fluency and helping struggling readers become proficient. Stanford University studies in 2021 and 2023 identified him as being [among the top 2 percent of scientists in the world](#).

EdSurge: Can you elaborate on why reading fluency is such a critical component of overall reading proficiency?

Rasinski: Reading fluency is a critical bridge linking word study to comprehension, comprising two major competencies: phonics (decoding words) and comprehension (making meaning from text). It develops through extensive practice and consists of two key aspects:

- **Automaticity:** The ability to recognize words effortlessly, allowing focus on comprehension. The problem is we have students who learn phonics but don't develop it to that next level where it becomes automatic recognition.
- **Prosody:** The ability to read with an expression that reflects the text's meaning. We often don't think of it as important in reading because we associate it with oral reading, but most readers will tell you that when they read, they hear that inner voice. We need to develop in our students this ability to read expressively, not only orally but with that internal voice when they read silently.



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Both automaticity and prosody are developed through intentional practice, much like an athlete or musician would develop fluency in their own realm.

What got me into the notion of fluency was an article written by Richard Allington in 1983 called [“Fluency: The Neglected Reading Goal.”](#) He wrote that we all know what fluency is — you can tell whether it’s a problem just by listening to kids read for a minute. The problem, he said, is what do we do about it? In 1983, the answer was not much. It had been neglected. My argument is that we’ve put so much effort into phonics and comprehension instruction that fluency has been left behind. Over the last 40-plus years, my work has been trying to make fluency a more central element of our reading curriculum.

Connie Juel conducted research years ago that found that if children are not proficient readers by the end of first grade, there is an [88 percent chance they’ll remain poor readers by the end of fourth grade](#). When we look at models of reading, such as the one by Jeanne Chall, we see that [second and third grade are identified as the ages when children begin developing fluency](#). If fluency isn’t taught or is neglected in second and third grade, many children may fail to cross that bridge to comprehension.



How does fluency fit into current reading instruction, and what misconceptions exist?

Reading fluency fits into the model as the conceptual bridge from phonics to comprehension, and the science of reading acknowledges its importance. In 2000, the National Reading Panel, a group of experts assembled by Congress to explore the scientific basis for teaching reading, [identified reading fluency as essential for teaching reading](#).

We need to give our teachers permission to be artistic, creative, authentic and aesthetic in their instruction — not just in reading but in everything they teach.
— Rasinski

One common way we measure fluency is through reading speed: how many words a child can read correctly in a minute. While this is a good measure of automaticity, it has unfortunately become the defining characteristic of reading fluency for many well-meaning teachers, who define their fluency curriculum as simply working on increasing children's reading speed.

However, merely getting kids to read faster doesn't necessarily improve their overall reading ability. We want children to become fast readers the way proficient adult readers have — through reading a lot. But for struggling readers, this extensive reading needs to be done in intentional ways.

The science of teaching reading is less clear than the science of reading itself. The challenge lies in how we make these scientific competencies engaging and authentic for children while remaining science-based. That's where the artfulness of teaching reading comes into play.

What strategies can teachers use to develop reading fluency?

I'd like to share five basic strategies we can use to develop fluency:

1. **Modeling fluent reading:** Teachers and parents should read to kids regularly, demonstrating fluent reading.
2. **Assisted reading:** This can involve reading with audio, a partner or in a group. Keith Topping's "Paired Reading" program showed [significant improvements in overall reading proficiency](#).
3. **Wide reading:** We want to encourage kids to read as much as possible.
4. **Repeated reading:** This helps improve fluency in the practiced text and generalizes it to other passages.
5. **Phrasing:** We want to help kids learn to read in meaningful chunks rather than word-by-word.

The artful aspect of fluency instruction lies in how teachers combine these elements. These five strategies are like colors on a palette. The teacher's art is in choosing the elements that will have the greatest impact on their students and meet their specific needs.

How can teachers make fluency instruction engaging and authentic?

Integrating fluency instruction across the curriculum can be effective. For example, we've used historical speeches, like Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" and John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, to create reader's theater scripts. This approach can be integrated into other subjects too. In mathematics, teachers can have written poetry or scripts featuring dialogues between geometric shapes.

Research by my colleague Lorraine Griffith found that [struggling readers in her class made nearly two years' progress in reading in just one year](#) using these methods. Considering that struggling readers typically make less than a year's progress for a year's instruction, this approach shows significant potential.

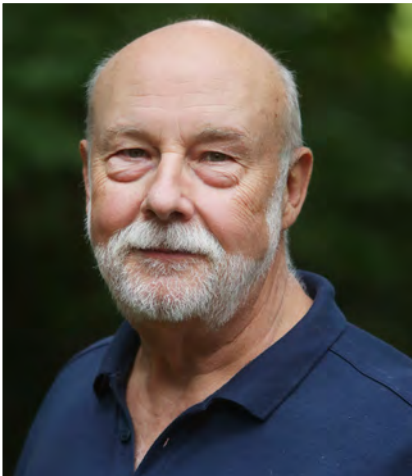
What approaches work for early identification and intervention?

Early identification and intervention are crucial. By mid-first grade, average students should be reading about 30 words correctly per minute. If a student is well below this, that's when intervention should begin.

Artful instruction in reading should be creative, authentic and aesthetic. This approach can transform reluctant readers into enthusiastic learners. In our reading clinic, a boy went from disliking reading to eagerly writing and performing his own poetry after experiencing this approach.

John Dewey advocated for school activities to reflect real-life experiences. We need to find ways to bring that authentic nature into the classroom. It shouldn't just be a matter of completing one worksheet after another, which unfortunately happens in some classrooms.

The key to effective fluency instruction is balancing the science of reading with the art of teaching, providing intentional and intensive support while making the learning experience authentic and enjoyable for students. We need to give our teachers permission to be artistic, creative, authentic and aesthetic in their instruction — not just in reading but in everything they teach.



Want to learn more about the critical role of fluency?

Dr. Rasinski shares insights and strategies in this [on-demand webinar](#).

Dr. Timothy Rasinski

Professor Emeritus of Literacy Education at Kent State University

