

## Speed Reading: A Technique for Developing Fluent Readers

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Fluent oral reading is an important skill because it aids the comprehension of both readers and listeners. The speed reading technique described here can develop fluent readers. It is a simple technique that is extremely effective with reluctant readers—those who read in an awkward or stilted way and need to learn to read in a natural, spontaneous manner. The speed reading activities require only a few minutes a day and are used as a supplementary reading tactic to build fluency, not to replace other reading programs. The technique uses a 1-minute timed probe that can occur during any part of the school day. Timings can be repeated several times a day with different reading materials, including reading in content areas as well as with basal reading materials.

In addition to increasing fluency, this technique heightens the motivation of students. In fact, one of the most exciting features of the technique is that students like it. They frequently ask for an opportunity to repeat speed reading activities.

### *Materials*

One of the nice things about the speed reading technique is that it can be used with practically any reading material. The only requirement is that there be two identical copies of whatever reading material is used: one for the student and one for the teacher. If a teacher is using a basal reading program, the student can use a copy of the reader while the teacher reads from the teacher's edition. If the teacher is working from another book, a sheet of acetate can be placed over the passage being read, and the teacher can mark on it how far the student reads, all reading errors and omissions, and any passages or phrases with which the student is having difficulty. The same procedure can

be used with text from any content area in which the student is working.

In my class, I have used the Merrill Skilltext readers. This is a set of spirit duplicating masters for a series of reading passages. The passages are ideal for building fluency and improving comprehension. Each passage is approximately one-half grade level above the previous passage. In addition to copies for the students, I run off one copy for myself, which is laminated to allow me to note errors, omissions, passages a student is having difficulty reading, and the point at which the student finishes a 1-minute timed reading. Each passage has a picture and a title and is about 400 words in length. On the teacher's copy, I mark off the words in 10s up to 250 words. This helps me to determine quickly how many words the student has read in the 1-minute timing.

### *Using the Technique*

The students are given time to look at the passage, chat about the picture and the title, make some predictions about the story, and ask about any unfamiliar words. I start with a passage at a reading level that is below their functional reading level so that decoding is not a problem. I want the students to become fluent on this first passage as quickly as possible. It is important for them to be comfortable with the reading passage and not have to sound out words or struggle with the material. As the students reach the aim (or goal) of 250 correct words read per minute in the 1-minute oral timing, they then move on to the next higher passage in the sequence. The prereading activities take longer on the first presentation of a passage, while subsequent presentations go much faster. At the beginning, it is often desirable to allow

students to have a "dry run" before timing begins; however, this is not necessary if students are familiar with the procedure.

Each student is asked to read the excerpt quickly for 1 minute, without skipping words or making errors. I time the student with a stopwatch, take notes on any reading errors on my copy of the passage, and mark the final word that the student has read at the end of the 1-minute trial. During the reading, I may supply words that are causing difficulty to keep the student moving through the passage.

### *Self-Recording*

Each student has a personal progress chart showing the achievement level (aim) to be reached on a passage before moving on to the next level. Each day, after the 1-minute timing, the students are responsible for recording the number of words read correctly in 1 minute on their charts. (I have asked students to record only the number correct, but the number of errors per minute may also be recorded.) Students continue to read the same passage until they reach the aim of 250 words per minute. Since students frequently want to do more than one 1-minute timing per day, they usually progress quickly toward the aim, reaching it within 1 to 2 school weeks. Students are motivated to see their progress on the chart. A reward system can be built into this procedure, but my experience has shown that reaching the goal has been reward enough for most students.

### *Fluency-Building Strategies*

An important part of this program is discussion with students about the types of strategies they can use to improve their daily performance. For example, looking at the passage before a student reads to pinpoint the difficult words and practice those words ahead of time helps the student feel confident and improves reading fluency. Likewise, if the teacher has noted that a student has had difficulty with certain phrases, the student can practice reading those phrases before taking the timing on the whole passage.

Another strategy that encourages students to succeed is looking at and discussing their progress on their charts. The students'

awareness of the evolving pattern on their charts (i.e., their learning picture) is an important motivation tool. When students see the dots on the charts climbing toward their aim, they become eager to practice. When they hit plateaus, additional practice can get them climbing toward their aim again.

I used this speed reading technique in a self-contained classroom for students with behavior disorders in a regular public school. I had eight students in grades 4 to 6. All of them had learning difficulties in addition to their behavioral problems. Using the speed reading technique, the students improved their reading fluency.

### *Benefits*

I have found the following benefits of using this speed reading technique:

1. Students quickly develop fluency in reading. In fact, they can learn to read orally at a rate of over 250 words per minute. They begin to "chunk" phrases together and start to read ahead in order to speed up their reading.
2. The improvement in speed on each trial increases students' motivation, and they often ask to do two or more trials in a day, which increases their rate of progress even further.
3. This is a short, quick exercise that can fit easily into a teacher's schedule.
4. Students can be taught to do the 1-minute timings with a buddy. This has the added benefit that the partner has to track the reading at a fast rate. Students can then switch roles; the learner becomes the tutor while the second student works on improving reading fluency.
5. As students improve their reading fluency on the timed reading activities, it begins to transfer to their other regular reading activities throughout the school day.

This is a teaching technique that requires little teacher time and places few extra demands on the teacher's work day. Students enjoy it and ask to do it, and it works.

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