



# Considering the Context and Texts for Fluency: Performance, Readers Theater, and Poetry

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## **Abstract**

This article describes the importance of teaching reading fluency and all of its components, including automaticity and prosody. The authors explain how teachers can create a context for reading fluency instruction by engaging students in reading performance activities. To support the instructional contexts, the authors suggest particular text-types that are well-suited for reading fluency activities.

**Keywords:** Reading fluency, Text selection, Performance reading

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## **Introduction**

Manny (pseudonym) jokes with some of the cast members backstage. In a few minutes, he and some of his classmates will be performing a Readers Theatre piece for their fifth grade class. He's nervous but not overly so. Less than a year ago reading aloud in front of people would have been the last thing he wanted to do. The way he plodded word for word through text was as painful for others to listen to as it was for him to undertake. Today, he looks forward to it. What's happened in the meantime could be telling for schools across the country.

Manny was a struggling reader. Specifically he struggled reading in making sense of what he read. Measures of oral reading fluency and comprehension put him nearly a two years behind his peers. Interventions included practicing word lists, vocabulary worksheets, and drilling in phonics. Then at the urging of a friend, he joined the drama club because, as he put it, "you got to like act like different people and stuff. It's really cool!" As acting exercises progressed and morphed from physical expression to oral interpretation to full integration, scripts were added into the mix.

Initially, he would be given a scene to read and prepare. When it came time for the group to decide on a play to perform, their coach offered up several possibilities and gave them

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opportunities to take the scripts home and decide whether or not they saw a character for themselves to portray. Rehearsing the scene at home would entail reading the scene numerous times to understand the situation and the character. The result? More reading. Importantly, more reading that is akin to what is known as “close reading”.

Decades of research have shown us that reading the same text several times, or repeated reading, improves reading comprehension (Dowhower, 1987; Faver, 2008; Herman, 1985; LeVasseur, Macaruso, & Shankweiler, 2008; Musti-Rao, Hawkins, & Barkley, 2009; Rasinski, 1990; Samuels, 1979) . Close reading is a more focused form of repeated reading that involves “an intensive analysis of a text in order to come to terms with what it says, how it says it, and what it means” (Shanahan, 2012, para. 5). In close reading the reader is given purposes for reading, text dependent questions to guide their thinking, and opportunities to interact with others about the content (Fisher & Frey, 2012). In order to understand a character he is considering portraying, Manny has to read close for deeper meaning. His purposes for reading and guiding questions from the text are inherent in his efforts to develop a character. All scripts, including monologues are dialogic in nature and meaning is shaped by interaction with other actors and the audience.

For most kids, especially those who struggle with reading, getting them to read anything more than once can be difficult, especially when they have essentially given up on reading as a source of enjoyment. Although Manny’s involvement in a school theatre program was not intended to bolster his reading achievement, there is reason to believe it did. He not only found a source of compelling literature, and an avenue of expression, but he was developing important higher level thinking skills in the process (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; McMaster, 1998) . In addition, the confidence he gained in the theatre program led him to volunteer for the Readers Theatre performance his class was presenting. Manny is becoming a fluent reader.

In order to appreciate that important role that reading fluency plays in overall reading proficiency, we urge you to consider the broad definition and its constituents. Reading researchers typically define reading fluency as smooth, effortless reading (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003) . More specifically, fluent readers recognize words automatically, read at an adequate pace, and with appropriate expression. When we consider all of components in the definition, reading fluency serves as foundational skill that promotes reading comprehension, the goal of reading.

According to automaticity theory, when students begin to recognize words automatically, cognition is freed to focus on higher order process such as reading comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) . Whitaker (1983) described the development of automaticity on a continuum. In the beginning, learners engaged in an effortful and laborious process to complete a given task. Though, as the processes became more automatic, the act eventually occurred on an unconscious level. As readers became more automatic and accurate in word recognition, reading rate generally increased (Samuels, 1979). Rasinski (2000) asserted that it was important for students to read at an appropriate pace. However, reading at an “appropriate rate” has several implications.

Reading is not a race, but speed does matter if for no reason other than efficiency. A student that can read and comprehend at a faster rate will acquire more new information in less time (Rasinski, 2000). But comprehension is the operative word here. Rate is often dependent on the context. For example, when we read nonfiction, it is important adjust the rate for optimal learning, often achieved by slowing down. Other forms of reading require rate adjustments, such as dramatic oral readings, including plays, poetry, or speeches. Dramatic oral readings also require appropriate expression, or prosody (Tyler & Chard, 2000).

Early research on eye tracking revealed that good readers move their eyes forward and backward over the page, jumping ahead and slowing down both within and between sentences (Huey, 1908). Later research confirmed that good readers make meaning of text by adjusting rate, parsing complex sentences into meaningful phases (Schreiber, 1991; (Rasinski, 1989) , and applying emphasis even when reading silently (Kentner, 2012) . (2009) did work showing that the audio imaging experiences that occur during silent reading allow a reader to experience the prosody of an already familiar character. In a recent study, Petkov & Belin (2013) using neuroimaging and neuronal recording work confirmed that inner processes at play during reading involve experiencing voices, and that voice-sensitive brain regions can be activated even when the quotation is from a fictional person and the voice is unknown.

Research has indicated that appropriate prosodic reading is a good predictor of overall reading proficiency (Daane, National Assessment of Educational Progress, & National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) . Daane et al. revealed a strong correlation between prosodic reading an overall reading achievement. In another study, Miller and Schwanenflugel (2008) corroborated this finding and reported that students who read with “adult-like” prosody in first and second graders are more likely to competently comprehend text by the end of third-grade.

Because we are aware of prosody’s important role in the reading process (Schrieber, 1991), we suggest that reading fluency activities should possess both a practice component that builds automaticity and a prosodic component that encourages expression. We believe that both of these components occur in performance activities. Thus, we recommend teachers include a performance element in reading fluency instruction.

#### *Performance Activities*

The minute a teacher stands in front of their class, the performance begins. We know the feeling. It is a wonderful, thrilling rush that we cannot achieve anywhere else. There is nothing quite like a five-star teaching performance. Which makes our request even more difficult to stomach: Teachers— share the stage. I know you think we are traitors. We are not; we are reading fluency researchers carrying out our life’s mission to create a global society of fluent readers. In order to do that, you must invite and encourage student performances of text.

There are many different instructional activities that call for performance. We would like to focus on a couple research-based strategies that can increase your students’ reading fluency. First, we will discuss Readers Theatre, an activity that is similar to a putting on a play, but simplified in order to focus on fluency instruction. The next, Poetry Café, is similar to Readers Theatre, but the students perform poetry. Finally, we discuss other texts that students can perform to increase reading fluency.

The following examples are from particular classrooms, which are always unique by nature. We encourage you to consider the protocols carefully; perhaps modifications are necessary to meet the needs of your students. However, when modifying, we recommend that you keep the most important element—consistency. The research supporting these strategies all came from classrooms that committed reading fluency instruction throughout the school-year. Therefore, to increase the likelihood of positive results, you should consider making fluency instruction a part of your daily routine.

### *Readers Theatre*

Readers Theatre is an educational activity that requires students to perform a text. These texts can be from existing literature, nonfiction, poetry, parodies, or student generated. Readers Theater requires no props, no memorization, and no costumes. Students entertain audiences with their expressive oral reading (prosody), while the prior rehearsal gives a purpose for repeated readings, a well-research method for increasing reading fluency (Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008; Vaughn, Chard, Bryant, Coleman, & Kouzekanani, 2000. Research (Griffith & Rasinski; 2004; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Young & Rasinski; 2009) suggests that Readers Theater, in particular, is an effective means of enhancing students' reading fluency and is a motivational reading activity (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998).

First, the teacher selects a variety of scripts (see figure 1 for suggested resources). The scripts can be trade books, poetry, fiction, newspaper articles, or just about any other text that lends itself to performance. Student generated texts can also be used as scripts (Young & Rasinski, 2011). You can even script excerpts from movies or television. Then again, expressive oral readings can turn almost any text into an exciting performance (even standardized tests!).

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[www.thebestclass.org/rtscripts.html](http://www.thebestclass.org/rtscripts.html)

[www.timrasinski.com](http://www.timrasinski.com)

<http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

<http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/RTE.html>

<http://www.storiestogrowby.com/script.html>

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### **Figure 1.** *Sources for Readers Theater Scripts*

Because the text selection is in the teacher's control, teachers can easily differentiate Readers Theatre for a variety of students. For students that struggle, you can select easier or more familiar texts. Conversely, for advanced students, you can increase the text difficulty. Because any text can potentially become a script, the text can be in any language. So whether you are performing the Three Little Pigs in English, German (Die drei kleinen Schweinchen), French (Les Trois Petit Cochons), or Spanish (Lost Tres Cerditos), the procedure is still the same.

Young and Rasinski (2009) described a five-day format that worked well in a second grade classroom. Students in Young's classroom participated in Readers Theatre each week for an entire school year (approximately 8 months). Overall, students word recognition accuracy and comprehension increase. In addition, students' prosody increased by 20% and students doubled the expected growth in words read correctly per minute.

The five-day format is easily implemented on a weekly schedule. On Monday, the students choose their scripts after the teacher reads each of them aloud. The students then read over the script for two purposes. First, the students need to comprehend the overall meaning of the texts. Second, students should decide on which parts they might like to play. The following day, students choose and highlight their parts. On Tuesday, the students focus on word identification making sure they know all the words and can pronounce them correctly. Wednesday's goal is to read with appropriate expression. The students focus on matching the meaning of the text with the expressiveness of their voice. While prosody is the key component in the entertainment value of Readers Theatre, it also requires students to deeply analyze the text and calibrate their oral reading based on their reading

comprehension. Students practice their performance on Thursday, and prepare for Friday's big premier. By performance time, each student will have closely read their script over a dozen times.

Performance day serves as an opportunity for students to simultaneously entertain audience and demonstrate how their practice leads to fluent oral readings of text. Thus, it is important to create a context where their hard work is appreciated. Because entertaining an audience is a motivating factor and the reason for rehearsal, locating an audience is imperative. Fortunately, there are many sources for an audience. You can invite parents, administrators, other classes, or other school staff. If audiences are scarce, the students can always perform for their peers.

With the increased availability of technology, there are other ways to procure an audience. The internet is another context for performance. For example, teachers sometimes film performances, so the students can watch themselves. The videos also make great gifts for their families. With permission, you can upload the performances to a private blog, Youtube, or other media sharing sites. In another technological variation, Vasinda and McLeod (2011) described a performance method that required students read their scripts into a microphone and published the recordings as a podcast. These examples only represent two ideas for performance on the Internet, and leave plenty of room for teacher creativity. We invite you to consider how Web 2.0 tools, websites, social media, and other applications could serve as a venue for Readers Theater performances.

### *Poetry*

Jorge Luis Borges once said, "Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently. If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation. Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art." (1972, p. 9). We whole-heartedly believe these words, and concur that poetry is meant to be performed. Indeed, students today may have a different notion of "fine poetry", so if you would allow us to generalize, we suggest that any poetry can be performed. This could include all genres of poetry (e. g. epic, narrative, prose, or humorous) from any era. There are many ways to ask students to recite poetry, but we strongly recommend time for rehearsal and a context for performance.

Wilfong (2008) described a reading program that she called "The Poetry Academy." The teacher selects a poem with each student's reading level in mind. A volunteer reads the poem aloud to the student. Next, the volunteer and the student read the poem together—often referred to as choral reading. The student then reads the poem aloud to the volunteer independently. Essentially, the volunteer gradually releases the responsibility to the student. After the gradual release, the student and volunteer engage in a conversation about the text, the purpose of the dialogue is to identify the meaning of the poem and build identify any troublesome words. The student then takes the poem home and reads the poem to as many human beings as possible, each of which provide a signature as proof of the performance. Upon returning to school, the student reads the poem to the volunteer to demonstrate mastery. The Poetry Academy is a good example of utilizing volunteers and incorporating friends and family into students' learning, but as always, there are several options, and you get to decide what works best for your classroom.

Another option, often dubbed, "Poetry Café", provides a larger venue for performance. After a quick Google search you will find many variations for implementing the activity. We will share a method that is similar to the five-day format used for Readers Theatre.

On Monday the students select a poem. Students can surf the Internet, peruse the classroom, take a trip to the library, or ask the teacher for suggestions. After the students choose a poem, the teacher makes sure the students can identify all of the words. Though not every student will require additional assistance, some might. We caution you to think carefully before determining if a text is too difficult for a student. Often times the answer is to help the student choose an easier text, but you may want to consider providing implementing a fluency intervention as an alternative to switching poems.

Providing a research-based fluency interventions combined with the opportunity for practice could increase the likelihood of a successful performance. If a student is struggling with rapid word recognition, the teacher may want to employ modeled fluent reading, assisted reading, or repeated readings (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000). In the case that the student needs assistance with both word recognition and expression, you might try a method called Reading Together (Mohr, Dixon, & Young, 2012; Young & Mohr, in press; Young, Mohr, Rasinski, in press).

To utilize Reading Together, the teacher first employs the Neurological Impress Method (Heckelman, 1969). The teacher and student read the poem aloud together. However, the teacher stays slightly ahead of the student and reads with appropriate expression while the student “chases” the teacher. Next, similar to repeated readings (Samuels 1979), the student then rereads the poem aloud independently. The teacher carefully listens for accuracy in word recognition and for appropriate expression. Research (Young, Mohr, & Rasinski, in review) suggests that the expression modeled by the teacher can be heard in the student’s rendering of the text. Of course, not all students require such intense interventions.

After the students are comfortable with the poem, the students practice every day until the performance. You can also encourage students to practice at home. Some variations of Poetry Café recommend a week of practice, performing on Fridays. Other research (Young, Valadez, & Power, in revision) suggests that practice of shorter poems can be limited to two days. In this case, students perform twice per week, once on Wednesday and again on Friday. Thus, students select the poem at the beginning of the week and practice on Monday and Tuesday for the performance on Wednesday. After the performance, students select another poem and practice Wednesday Thursday for the performance on Friday.

You can enhance performance days by adding some poetry café elements. Ask the students to dress in black. Dim the lights in the classroom and provide a stool for the young poets. To complete the context for poetry performance, instruct the students to snap instead of clap. Though you may feel as if you are truly sitting in a poetry café, remember that you are still in the classroom building your students’ reading fluency, a foundational component in reading (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000).

#### *Speeches, Monologues, and Presentations*

Finally, we would like to point out a few other types of text that can be performed—speeches, monologues, and other presentations. Although you can apply the following tips to any oral reading, we will use speeches as an example. Speeches are written for the sole purpose of reading aloud. The speaker rehearses pronunciation, timing, pitch, pause, intonation, inflection, with the hope that their rehearsals increase the impact of the speech. Text of famous speeches can be found on the Internet, all the way from Socrates’ “Apology” to “The Gettysburg Address” delivered by Abraham Lincoln. Students can also write their own speeches.

When students rehearse speeches, they need to focus on several different subcategories in prosody. The multidimensional fluency scale (MFS; Zutell & Rasinski, 1991) captures most

of these. Therefore, it is possible to use the MFS rubric (Figure 1) to help students refine their speeches. We can direct students to consider expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace.

In order to infuse expression and volume in a speech, the student must first consider the intended meaning of the speech. Then, the student adjusts his or her expression to match the meaning. Volume in a speech is also very powerful when employed effectively. They should think about the most important or dramatic parts of the speech, and consider adjusting his or her volume while reading aloud. Sometimes speaking in a quieter voice draws the crowd in, and speaking at a higher volume may emphasize the speaker's message.

Phrasing is also important when delivering a speech. Sometimes, to add effect, the speaker reads with intentional phrasing, pausing to add effect. Therefore, students need to consider how to phrase their speeches, and ideal occasions for pause. And with any oral reading, smoothness is also essential. Speeches are typically not read in a choppy and laborious manner. It is crucial, then, that students practice enough to read smoothly and effortlessly.

Finally, the pace of the speech is very important. Sometimes speakers slow down or speed up to increase the impact particulars in their speeches. Students should rehearse their speeches, and analyze the parts for opportunities vary the pace of their reading. If students attend to these dimensions of fluency while rehearsing their speeches, the performance should be a successful one.

#### *Additional Questions*

Although we know that reading fluency is a foundation for comprehension, we are still unsure of the magnitude that performance methods enhance comprehension as opposed to other fluency building activities. It would be interesting to determine what direct effect performance has on comprehension.

In addition, a most of the research on performance methods is conducted in middle-elementary classrooms, and there are fewer studies in first-grade and kindergarten (see Garrett and O'Connor, 2010). Research has also been conducted in secondary classrooms (see Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008), but if we are to promote performance methods for all elementary students, we need to increase the classroom-based research in those grade levels.

#### **Conclusion**

The lights dim, and the small group takes a step downstage. Scripts in hand, they read the name of the play in unison. It is a script the teacher adapted from Will Hobb's *Crossing the Wire* about a boy from Mexico crossing the border seeking work to save his family from starving. Manny follows along, reading in unison, and then alone. He is playing the part of the young boy, one of the only members of the party that understands English. Throughout the play, Manny reads lines in both English and Spanish, his native tongue and feels a pride at being able to read now in both languages. As the group takes a bow after their final line is delivered in unison, applause erupts and Manny beams. He can't wait to see the scripts from next week.



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