

The Five Essential Components of Reading - K12 Reader

Reading is an astoundingly complex cognitive process. While we often think of reading as one singular act, our brains are actually engaging in a number of tasks simultaneously each time we sit down with a book. There are five aspects to the process of reading: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension and fluency. These five aspects work together to create the reading experience. As children learn to read they must develop skills in all five of these areas in order to become successful readers.

Phonics ([view articles about Phonics](#))

Phonics is the connection between sounds and letter symbols. It is also the combination of these sound-symbol connections to create words. Without phonics, words are simply a bunch of squiggles and lines on a page. If you think about it, letters are arbitrary. There is nothing innately bed-like about the written word “bed”. It is simply the collection of letters and corresponding sounds that we agree constitute the word “bed”. Learning to make that connection between the individual sounds that each letter represents and then putting those together is essential to understanding what that funny squiggle means.

There are a number of ways that phonics can be taught because there is a variety of ways to apply this aspect when reading. Each approach allows the reader to use phonics to read and learn new words in a different way. Synthetic phonics builds words from the ground up. In this approach readers are taught to first connect letters to their corresponding phonemes (sound units) and then to blend those together to create a word. Analytic phonics, on the other hand, approaches words from the top down. A word is identified as a whole unit and then its letter-sound connections are parsed out. Analogy phonics uses familiar parts of words to discover new words. Finally, phonics through spelling focuses on connecting sounds with letters in writing. All of these approaches can be taught and used independently or in combination to help young readers learn to identify new words.

Phonemic Awareness ([view articles about Phonemic Awareness](#))

Phonemic awareness is closely related to phonics because both involve the connection between sounds and words. While phonics is the connection between sounds and letters, phonemic awareness is the understanding that words are created from phonemes (small units of sound in language). These may seem like the same thing, but there is a subtle difference in the two. Phonics is used only in written language because it involves letters. Phonemes are sounds only. While they can be represented using letters, they can also be simply the auditory sounds of words. Phonemes are most often learned before a child begins to read because they are centered on the sounds of language rather than written words.

Just like phonics, phonemic awareness can be taught and used in a number of ways. Phoneme isolation involves the reader parsing out the individual sounds in a word in order to determine its meaning. Similarly, phoneme segmentation asks the reader to break words into their corresponding phonemes (which may involve one or more individual sounds) to figure out the new word. Both of these approaches are very similar to synthetic phonics. Phoneme identification relies on the reader's general knowledge of phonemes (usually developed through speaking) to identify sound patterns in words. For example a reader would identify the phoneme /d/ he knows from the words "dog" and "dad" to help him learn how to read a new word "doctor". Finally, phoneme blending requires the reader to connect a series of phonemes together to create a word. This strategy is always used in conjunction with one of the others.

Vocabulary ([view articles about Vocabulary](#))

In order to read words we must first know them. Imagine how frustrating and fruitless it would be to read this article if all of the words were unfamiliar to you. As children become stronger, more advanced readers they not only learn to connect their oral vocabularies (the words we know when they are spoken) to their reading vocabularies (the words we know when they are used in print) they also strengthen each of these areas by adding new words to their repertoires. Vocabulary development is an ongoing process that continues throughout one's "reading life".

There are two primary ways of teaching and learning new vocabulary words. The first is explicit instruction. This involves someone telling you how a word is pronounced and what its meaning is. That "someone" might be a teacher, a dictionary, a vocabulary guide or any other resource offering definitions and pronunciations. Context clues provide another method for discovering new words. Context clues are the "hints" contained in a text that help a reader figure out the meaning of an unfamiliar word. They include other words in a sentence or paragraph, text features (ie. bold print, italics), illustrations, graphs and charts. Context clues are basically any item in the text that points to the definition of a new word.

Fluency ([view articles about Fluency](#))

Fluency is a reader's ability to read with speed, accuracy and expression. Thus it requires him to combine and use multiple reading skills at the same time. While fluency is most often measured through oral readings, good readers also exhibit this skill when they are reading silently. Think about the way a book "sounds" in your mind when you are reading silently. You "hear" the characters "speak" with expression. Even passages that are not written in dialogue "sound" as if the words fit the meaning. A particularly suspenseful action sequence moves quickly through your mind creating a palpable sense of tension. Your ability to move through a piece of text at a fluid pace while evoking the meaning and feeling of it demonstrates your fluency.

Fluency is intimately tied to comprehension. A reader must be able to move quickly enough through a text to develop meaning. If he is bogged down reading each individual word, he is not

able to create an overall picture in his mind of what the text is saying. Even if the reader is able to move rapidly through a text, if she cannot master the expression associated with the words, the meaning of it will be lost.

Reading Comprehension ([view articles about Reading Comprehension](#))

Comprehension is what most people think reading is. This is because comprehension is the main reason why we read. It is the aspect of reading that all of the others serve to create. Reading comprehension is understanding what a text is all about. It is more than just understanding words in isolation. It is putting them together and using prior knowledge to develop meaning.

Reading comprehension is the most complex aspect of reading. It not only involves all of the other four aspects of reading, it also requires the reader to draw upon general thinking skills. When a reader is actively engaged with a text, she is asking and answering questions about the story and summarizing what she has read. Like vocabulary, reading comprehension skills develop and improve over time through instruction and practice.

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