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the education blog

How to support reading
at home: A guide for families

nwea

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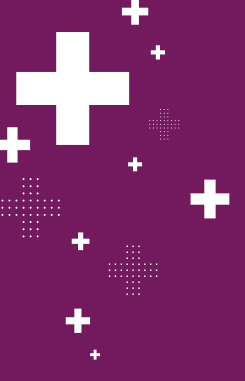
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Literacy can be a big predictor of how a child will do in school—and even whether they’ll graduate. According to a 2011 study by the [American Educational Research Association](#), kids who aren’t reading on grade level by third grade are “[four times less likely to graduate by age 19.](#)” People who don’t graduate from high school are expected to earn less and have a harder time finding a job. Their chances of serving time in prison and living in poverty are higher, too. This is all according to a PBS Frontline film called [Dropout Nation](#).

Whether you’re a parent, grandparent, foster parent, or just a super involved auntie or uncle, there’s a lot you can do to support a young reader at home. This collection of [Teach. Learn. Grow.](#) blog posts by several NWEA® literacy experts will walk you through exactly what to try at home, from reading with your child to finding just the right book and more. The best part? It’s all easier than you might think.

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What families need to know to support their child’s reading

Shiji Matthew

I am the parent of two elementary school children who were mostly learning from home this past school year because of the pandemic. During that time, I often wondered, “How can I help my children with their reading, and how can I best do this with the limited time I have?” If you’re a parent or caregiver who has thought the same, you’re in the right place. (If you’re an educator eager to support families reading at home, please share this e-book with them!)

The good news is that there are ways to make a difference. In fact, you are likely already having a positive impact on your child’s reading by just having conversations with them. Why? Because reading and language are strongly connected. When we read, we are trying to understand language from words that we see, usually on a page or screen. So learning new words through listening and using them when we talk can help us better understand what we read. This is particularly true for children who are just starting to learn to read.

To better understand how to support your reader at home, it helps to learn about areas of reading instruction that have been shown to further reading growth. We’ll explore some of these—and explain how they’re connected—throughout this e-book. But for now, let’s talk about the model many educators base their reading instruction on: the simple view of reading.

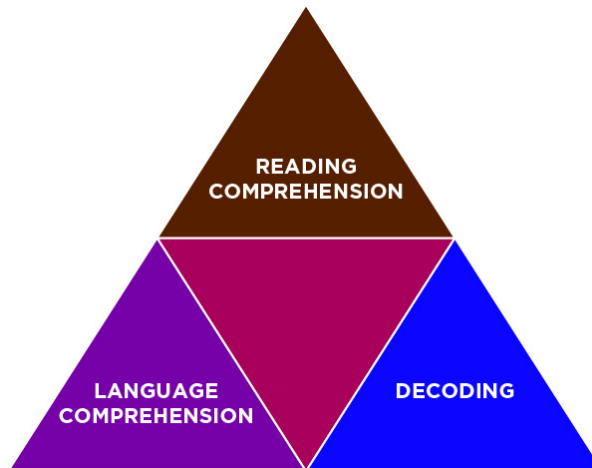
About the simple view of reading

Why do we read? We read for many different reasons, such as enjoyment, learning, and inspiration. But to benefit in these ways, we must first be able to understand what we are reading. As you think about what may help your child make sense of what they read, consider the two main building blocks they’ll need: language comprehension and decoding.

Language comprehension is simply the ability to understand language, whether it is heard or read. When a friend calls to tell you about something funny that happened to them, you understand what they’re saying because you can comprehend language; that is, you understand the string of words your friend is speaking.

Decoding, on the other hand, is the ability to turn sets of letters you see into the sounds they represent and to then blend them together to form words. If that same friend describes the funny situation over a text message, you are able to read the words because you can decode them. To understand the text, you need to be able to decode and understand the language your friend is using.

The idea that both language comprehension and decoding are required to make sense of what we read is the simple view of reading in a nutshell. The simple view of reading is also represented in the graphic below. The top piece of the triangle is reading comprehension, or making sense of what we read. This is a key goal of reading. The two skills needed to reach this goal make up the bottom two pieces of the triangle: language comprehension and decoding.



What can I do now to support reading at home?

So where do you start to help your child? There are lots of things to consider, like phonics, and I promise we'll dig deep into each one of those and give you specific strategies to try in the coming weeks. But for now I encourage you to focus on the following three things, which you're probably already doing to some degree. Remember: you don't need be an expert in reading to try any of these or to support your child in growing as a reader at home.

1. Get to know your reader

Kids are at different places in their reading development, but they can all grow. A good way to find out how your child is reading is to listen to them read out loud, even something short. Doing this can provide you with information about how they are doing. Maybe your child needs help knowing how to pause at periods, or maybe they read smoothly and with the right expression.

It's equally valuable to talk to your child about how they feel about reading. Do they like to read? Are there topics they especially like? What are their favorite books or stories? How is reading going at school? Understanding where they are can help you be better prepared to support them.

2. Give kids access to age-appropriate texts

Make sure your child has access to reading material that's right for their age. Educators call these age-appropriate texts grade-level texts. They include vocabulary, sentence length, and topics appropriate for students at their age. Reading grade-level texts helps students meet their grade's learning goals for the year because they're getting enough—and the right kind of—practice to develop the skills they need to succeed. If your child struggles with reading texts for their grade, talk to their teacher about ways you can help them, and follow the suggestions in this e-book when working with your child at home.

Think about whether the subject matter is interesting to your child, too. If they're big science fans, for example, they'll likely be extra motivated to work hard on understanding the text of *Ada Twist, Scientist*.

For more on the importance of grade-level texts, read [“Let's talk equity: Reading levels, scaffolds, and grade-level text”](#) by Cindy Jiban. For help finding grade-level texts for your child, talk to their teacher or a local librarian. You can also browse the Mississippi Department of Education's [“Equipped book list: Lists by grade level.”](#)



3. Read together

Find something enjoyable to read with your child and take turns reading out loud: a picture book, a chapter from a novel, a graphic novel, a comic book, or even a news or magazine article. Your child will benefit from hearing you read because your reading demonstrates skills for your child, such as how to pronounce words, pace themselves, and add emotion to their reading.

Not sure where to find something to read? Your local library probably has a great selection, and a librarian can help you find just the right book. If you would rather research on your own, take a look at lists of award winners. The [University of Nevada, Las Vegas' library](#) has an excellent database that will let you search by numerous awards. I recommend books that have won the Batchelder Award, Caldecott Medal, Coretta Scott King Book Award, Geisel Award, Newbery Medal, Pura Belpré Award, or Sibert Medal. (UNLV also has a [handy page](#) with details on the history and focus of each of these awards.)

If you prefer e-books and your library doesn't offer them, try the free or low-cost options on [Story Mentors](#), for kindergarten and first grade, or [Open Library's Student Library](#), for kids in preschool through sixth grade. **TLG**

[B]oth language comprehension and decoding are required to make sense of what we read.

All about language comprehension: What it is and how it can help your child read

Toni Gibbs

Children know a lot about language before they even learn to read. From the moment they are born, kids are exposed to all kinds of spoken language that helps them understand and make connections to written language years later. All that language—spoken to them, sung to them, read to them—becomes deposits in their language bank that they can use as they grow.

My daughter is a great example of how children bank language. She loved to have stories read to her before she learned to read. Her dad and I started reading to her not long after we brought her home from the hospital. After several years of picture books, we also began to read her our favorite chapter books, such as *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *Charlotte's Web*, for as long as she would sit still and was interested. Sometimes we read just five or 10 minutes, but other times, during exciting parts, she would sit for an entire chapter.

I knew my daughter understood these longer stories because she would ask questions about the characters. It was clear she was taking the ideas we read to her and creating the stories in her mind. One day in particular, after something in her four-year-old life had not gone right for her, she came to me upset and said, “Will you comfort me?” I was so surprised to hear her ask for a hug that way, in such an unusual but completely appropriate way. It reminded me of a book we had been reading together. She had taken language she had heard and applied it to solve a problem she was experiencing. And of course, she got a hug!

My daughter was exhibiting language comprehension, something you may have heard your child’s teachers talk about. Although it may seem like a simple concept on the surface, I’d like to explore it and why it is important for reading more deeply. I’ll begin by defining the term and close with some tips on how you can support language comprehension at home.

What is language comprehension?

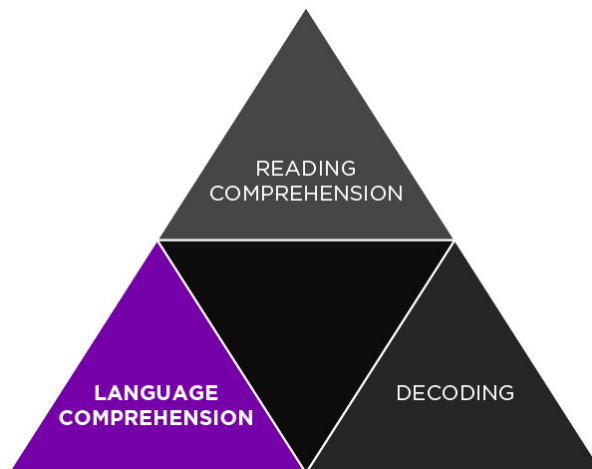
Language comprehension is the ability to understand the different elements of spoken or written language, like the meaning of words and how words are put together to form sentences. Language comprehension is one of the building blocks of reading comprehension.

Why is language comprehension important for reading?

Imagine that a child's language bank is full of vocabulary, knowledge of how words make sentences, and information about the world. When the child begins to read, they will be better able to connect the words on the page to all these things. If a child's language bank contains more than one language, there are even more opportunities for connection. (My colleague Teresa Krastel wrote a [post to teachers](#) about how students who grow up using multiple languages bring a great wealth of language knowledge and cultural experience that can help them make those connections and become strong readers.)

Imagine the ability to read as a pyramid, as illustrated below. Reading comprehension, or being able to understand what you read, is the topmost block, and language comprehension is one of the blocks underneath it that supports reading comprehension. Decoding, which we explain later in this e-book, is the other block that supports reading comprehension. Together, reading comprehension, language comprehension, and decoding make up the simple view of reading.

Without language comprehension and decoding, reading comprehension is more difficult. Another colleague, Cindy Jiban, talks more about how important language comprehension is in helping children become good readers in her blog post "[Oral language matters: Disrupting the phonics monopoly.](#)"



When do kids start developing language comprehension?

From birth to about age 6, children are considered pre-readers. They are learning sounds, letters, words, phrases, and what all those things mean. They begin to learn about books, too: how to hold one the right way and how to turn the pages. They go places with adults and experience new things. Even commonplace things, such as shopping or taking the bus, provide new experiences for children, especially if the adults talk with the children about what



is going on. For example, talking about what you have to do to take the bus, the colors of the packages at the store, or how you pay for something provides new information for children to deposit in their language bank.

By listening, children also learn about grammar, or how to put words together correctly into sentences, and vocabulary. They then bring what they know about the world, including topics like science or history, and use that information to make connections and understand what they read.

What does language comprehension look like in action?

Let's say that a child, Anna, has been learning English as a first or additional language. One day, when she is in first grade, her older sister reads these sentences to Anna, which are at a grade 3-5 level: "The sky lit up with color as the sun descended below the horizon. A soft breeze drifted through the trees as day turned to night. The four friends were ready to embark on a new adventure."

Although these sentences might have been written for an older student to read independently, Anna can understand their meaning when her sister reads them to her. Anna knows about sunsets because she and her grandfather like to watch the sky change colors when the sun sets. That experience helps Anna understand that the first sentence is talking about a sunset, and she might guess that the word "descended" means that the sun is sinking below the skyline. In other words, Anna's knowledge helps her make meaning of the story and of new vocabulary she hears. The more knowledge and vocabulary students like Anna gain through interacting with adults and the world around them, the stronger the building blocks they have for reading.

From the moment they are born, kids are exposed to all kinds of spoken language that helps them understand and make connections to written language years later.

Listening to these sentences also helps Anna understand how sentences work. Each sentence has a subject (“sky,” “breeze,” “friends”) followed by an action (“lit up,” “drifted,” “were ready”). Even though young readers might not be able to independently read long or hard sentences, they are developing the building blocks they need to do that eventually by listening to others and matching those sentence structures when speaking themselves. Even toddlers pick up on this sentence structure when they say things like “No, I don’t want that.”

What can I do to support reading at home?

Here are three simple things you can do to support your child in developing language comprehension.

1. Interact with your child—about everything

Just as Anna’s grandfather helped her learn about sunsets, you are a great source of knowledge and language for your children. Find opportunities to interact with them and use language together every day. Read to them. Talk to them about what you do during the day or how your favorite sports teams are doing. Go for a walk around your neighborhood and talk about what you see. Take them on your errands and explain what you are doing and why.

You have so much experience to share, and kids have so much to learn about everything.

2. Help children find books they are interested in

Talk to your children, at any age, about what they are interested in and help them find books to read or be read to about those topics. Not sure where to start your book search? Try the [Yale University Haskins Global Literacy Hub curated book list](#) for suggestions on high-quality books you can look for at your local library. This website makes it easy to find books by age group. Read [“7 websites with free audiobooks for kids \(and where to start\)”](#) for information on getting free audiobooks.

3. Do language comprehension activities with your children

The following sites from Haskins can help you find activities to help your child with language comprehension: [“Building vocabulary knowledge”](#) and [“Building background knowledge.”](#) The [Institute of Education Sciences](#) also has a helpful handout titled [“Talking and writing in the kitchen.”](#) **TLG**

Language comprehension is the ability to understand the different elements of spoken or written language, like the meaning of words and how words are put together to form sentences.

To support reading at home, turn up the sound

Lauren Bardwell

I don't know about your childhood TV viewing preferences, but for me, there was no greater pleasure than my local PBS lineup: *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, *Reading Rainbow*, Bob Ross's *The Joy of Painting*, and my all-time favorite, *Sesame Street*. Remember this [rhyming game](#) with those lovable monsters? You may have played it with your family at dinner or with your friends on the playground. As an adult, you might have played a similar game with your own child. What you may think of as a fun or even silly game with a preschooler is actually an important foundation of learning to read: listening to and making sense of the sounds of spoken words.

Reading is a complex process and, perhaps surprisingly, much of the process takes place outside of the written page and in the world of sound. In this chapter, we dig into how activities using sounds can help your child be a better reader. (If you're an educator who is eager to support families reading at home, please share this e-book with them!)

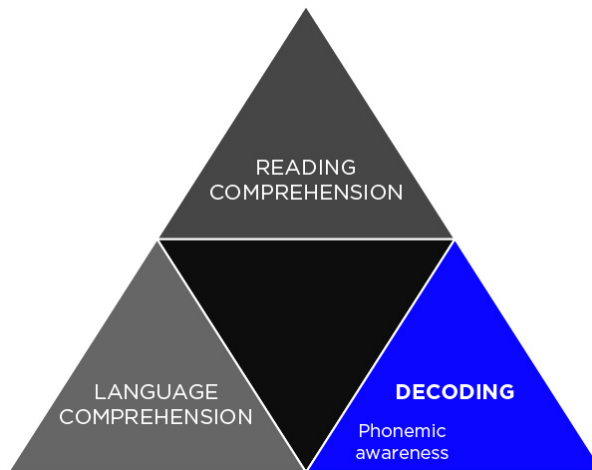
What is phonemic awareness and why is it important for reading?

I'm about to use some technical literacy language, so bear with me. A *phoneme* is the smallest unit of sound in a word. So, in the word "sun," there are three sounds or phonemes: /s/ /u/ /n/. The word "night" also has three phonemes, even though it has five letters, because the /igh/ makes one sound. So, it's /n/ /igh/ /t/.

Phonemes are about the sounds in words, not about the written letters. *Phonemic awareness* is the ability to hear, recognize, and manipulate or change the sounds (phonemes) in a word. Why is phonemic awareness important for reading? As my colleague Cindy Jiban wrote in a [recent post directed at teachers](#), "our word brains love sounds."

Before children ever begin learning to read written words, they are paying attention to and using spoken language. Learning the individual sounds in spoken words is important so that our brains can later connect those sounds to letters, letter patterns, and then whole words when we begin learning to read written words.

You might remember this triangle graphic from earlier in this e-book. It's a way to visualize what it takes to be a good reader. The top piece of the triangle, reading comprehension, is the key goal of the reading process. The two skills needed to reach this goal, and that make up the bottom two pieces of the triangle, are language comprehension and decoding. Phonemic awareness is essential for learning how to decode or turning sets of letters on the page into the sounds they represent.



While phonemic awareness might seem obvious to us as adult readers, it isn't something that develops automatically in children. It's a skill that requires special instruction from teachers—and families.

How do children show they have phonemic awareness?

Children can show their phonemic awareness through several activities. As an adult reader, the key thing for you to remember is that when you're working on phonemic awareness, your child should be listening to and pronouncing phonemes based on what they *hear*, not based on the letters they see on a page.

Try out the activities below with your child. I adapted them from [Reading Rockets](#) and our reading assessment, [MAP® Reading Fluency™](#). Feel free to replace the provided examples with different or more challenging words. Doing these activities together will give you a good sense of where your child is and where you might start in working on phonemic awareness at home.

- **Recognize which words in a set of words begin with the same sound.**
Say something like this: “Listen to me say the words ‘sit,’ ‘sun,’ and ‘soft.’ Now you say them. What sound do they all share at the beginning?”
(Answer: /s/)

- **Isolate and say the first or last sound in a word.** Try something like, “Say the word ‘dog.’ What is the beginning sound of ‘dog’?” (Answer: /d/) Then try, “Say the word ‘book.’ What is the ending sound of ‘book’?” (Answer: /k/)
- **Combine or blend separate sounds in a word to say the word.** Try this: “Say the sounds /s/ /u/ /n/. What word do they make when you combine them?” (Answer: “sun”) “Now say the sounds: /n/ /igh/ /t/. What word do they make when you combine them?” (Answer: “night”)
- **Break or segment a word into its separate sounds.** Say something like, “Listen to the word ‘cat.’ What sounds are in the word ‘cat’?” (Answer: /c/ /a/ /t/)
- **Substitute sounds in a word.** Revisit some of the words you’ve explored together already, and try something like this: “Say the word ‘night.’ Instead of the /n/ sound, say an /l/ sound. What word is it?” (Answer: “light”) “Now say the word ‘lit.’ Instead of the /i/ sound say an /o/ sound. What word is it?” (Answer: “lot”) “Last one! Say the word ‘sun.’ Instead of the sound /n/, say the sound /b/. What word is it?” (Answer: “sub”) This is a harder skill, so it’s okay to be working toward this goal.



How can I help my child who is learning to read?

If your child is learning to read in grades pre-K through 3, there are things you can do at home to support their development of phonemic awareness. Two websites, [Reading Rockets](#) and the [Regional Educational Laboratory at Florida State University](#), have a lot of good information about phonemic awareness and activities you can do at home, all supported by research. Reading Rockets has phonemic awareness tips for kids, parents, and teachers. The Regional Educational Laboratory has videos of families and students practicing some of the activities. Just click on your student's grade level and "Recommendation 2: Linking Sounds to Letters."

If your child is in grade 4 or above, a different approach might be better. There are several reasons why an older kid may have trouble with reading. Some have difficulty hearing the individual sounds in a word, so a good place to start is seeing where they are with phonemic awareness, using the activities listed earlier.

To make the activities more meaningful and relevant for an older kid, you might focus on words from their favorite songs. Remember, with phonemic awareness, the focus is on recognizing sounds within words, and song lyrics provide a perfect opportunity to examine sounds the singers and rappers use.

If you discover that your child is really struggling with phonemic awareness, reach out to their teacher and school for a more in-depth assessment of your child's reading skills. **TLG**

While phonemic awareness might seem obvious to us as adult readers, it isn't something that develops automatically in children. It's a skill that requires special instruction from teachers—and families.

Mystery solved: How to help your child crack the written code using phonics

Leslie Yudman

I loved the TV show *The Electric Company* as a kid. [One of my favorite segments](#) was when they showed two shadowed heads in profile. Each would take turns reading the beginning and ending of words, slowly blending them together. I'd go around the house putting on my own show of sorts. Sh-oe, shoe! Sp-oon, spoon! Once I could read, I also loved mysteries. I wasn't always good at figuring out whodunit, but I sure loved the build-up and seeing how all the pieces of the puzzle came together in the end.

It's a good thing I liked mysteries, because the very first one I ever solved was reading. Learning to read is a lot like solving a mystery, with its complicated code to crack. Phonics is an important tool we use to crack the code.

What is phonics?

Imagine coming across a word you've never seen before. How do you know what to do to read it? Whether you are aware of it or not, you use your phonics knowledge and decoding every time you encounter a word that's new to you. Let's take a crack at it. Try reading this made-up word: "jime."

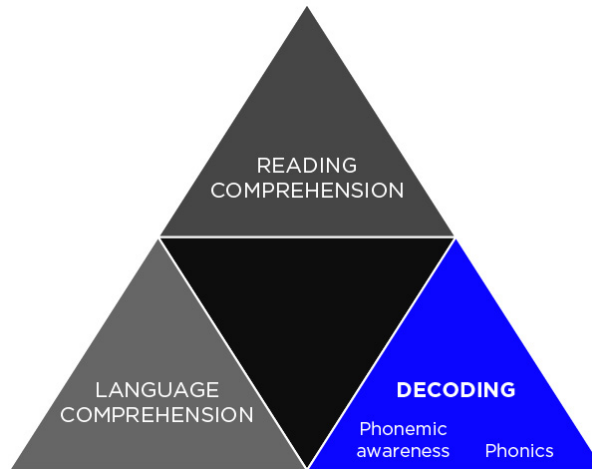
If what you read rhymes with the word "dime," you read it correctly. But if I asked you *how* you read it, you probably couldn't tell me. I'm guessing you either noticed that it looks like "dime" or you unconsciously used the knowledge that when words in English have one vowel followed by a consonant and then an e (*jime*, in this example), the e is silent and the vowel has a long sound (it says its name). In other words, you used phonics and decoding knowledge to read the word without even realizing you were doing it.

Phonics is about the relationship between written letters and sounds. The basic concept underlying phonics is the [alphabetic principle](#), the idea that the sounds of spoken language are represented by specific letters or letter patterns (spellings).

Phonics is also a method of instruction that teaches those letter-sound correspondences, that is, the connection between the written letter and the sound or sounds it makes. For example, teaching that the letter M says "mmm" or the letter X says "ks" is an example of how phonics is a method of instruction.

What is decoding?

In the first article in this e-book, my colleague Shiji Mathew explained the simple view of reading. Essentially, reading comprehension (understanding what you read) is supported by two main building blocks: language comprehension and decoding. In the graphic below, reading comprehension is the topmost block, language comprehension is on the bottom left, and decoding is on the bottom right. Decoding is made up of phonemic awareness and phonics.



If you read that first blog, you may recall that Shiji defined decoding as “the ability to turn sets of letters you see into the sounds they represent and to then blend them together to form words.” In [Speech to Print](#), literacy expert Louisa Moats explains that decoding is also the process we use to sound out a new word.

Clear as mud? An example might help. Knowing the sounds the letters *C*, *A*, and *T* make individually is phonics; putting them all together and reading the word “cat” is decoding.

Why are phonics and decoding important for reading?

Once a reader learns how to crack the code, it empowers them to read new words for the rest of their life, which is a hallmark of independent reading. This is a complicated code to crack, however. To connect sounds with printed letters, children must be taught the code through systematic, explicit phonics instruction. This is where the teacher follows a program and directly teaches letter-sound correspondences and introduces them in a specific order.

The more practice children have decoding words, the easier it is for them to recognize words without having to re-decode them each time. Some words in English are not decodable, though. Because why should it be easy, right? Some words don’t follow predictable spelling patterns and we just need to memorize

them. Words such as “have,” “said,” and “two” are examples. Children are often assigned memorizing words like these as part of reading and spelling homework.

If children need to spend a lot of time sounding out every word they come to, they don’t have enough brain space to make meaning of what they read. We want children to be able to focus on meaning when they read. This is the reason phonics instruction and learning how to decode are so important. If the goal of reading is making meaning (reading comprehension), the less a reader has to focus on sounding out new words, the better. Their attention isn’t split between decoding and making meaning.

How to help younger readers

Two of the important types of texts that young children, in grades K–3, encounter are decodable texts and complex, grade-level texts. Decodable texts have sentences that tend to stick to letter patterns students are learning or have already learned. These kinds of texts help children practice applying the phonics rules they are learning. Complex, grade-level texts are key for building knowledge and comprehension skills. These texts have vocabulary, sentence structures, and subject matter that are appropriate for a child’s grade level but may be beyond their independent decoding abilities. A teacher or family member might read this type of text aloud and have a discussion about it with the child. My colleague Cindy Jiban talks more about these two types of texts in her post [“‘Grade-level’ text for kindergarten and first grade: More on how reading is a team sport.”](#)

If your child is learning to read and is in third grade or below, here are some things you can do at home to support their phonics development.

- **Have your child read decodable books** so they can practice the phonics they are learning in school. You can access decodable texts for free in a [Bubluroll](#) created by [educator Lisa Meechan](#).
- **If your child can decode, have them read grade-level texts** to build knowledge, comprehension, and vocabulary. If those grade-level texts are too difficult, read the books with your child, taking turns or even reading the entire story aloud to your child. The [Mississippi Department of Education](#) has a terrific website that can help you find books by grade level.
- **When your child comes across a word they don’t know, resist the temptation to jump in and pronounce it for them.** Encourage them to use what they’ve learned in school and phonics instruction to sound out the word. In the article [“When young readers get stuck.”](#) Nell Duke, a professor at the University of Michigan, offers a few suggestions of what you can say to encourage your child when they are held up by a word: [“Look at the word.”](#) [“Slide through each sound.”](#) [“Try a different sound.”](#) [“Break the word into parts.”](#)

For general information about phonics and decoding, I recommend [Reading Rockets](#) and [“15 phonics rules for reading and spelling.”](#) For more ideas on activities for younger children, visit the website for the [Regional Educational Laboratory at Florida State University](#).

How to help older readers

If your child is in grade 4 or above, two areas of phonics instruction that may help the most are multisyllabic word reading and structural analysis. Understanding syllabication rules and word structures can help students break words into more manageable parts, which will help them decode. Christine Pitts, former research scientist and policy advisor at NWEA, explains both in [“How to reach older struggling readers.”](#)

The more practice children have decoding words, the easier it is for them to recognize words without having to re-decode them each time.

- **When reading multisyllabic words, break words into syllables.** A syllable is a word or part of a word that has a vowel. For example, the word “bark” has one syllable, and the word “table” has two syllables, ta- and -ble. Understanding the [six syllable types](#) can help older kids learn how to do this.
- **When doing structural analysis, the focus is on understanding word parts,** like prefixes and suffixes. [“Root words, roots, and affixes.”](#) by Reading Rockets, lists some of the most common Latin and Greek roots. As with [“15 phonics rules for reading and spelling.”](#) you can use these to give your child clues for figuring out new words if they get stuck.

If you need some help finding books for your child, [The Literacy Nest](#), [Reading Rockets](#), and the [Mississippi Department of Education](#) website I mentioned earlier have texts for readers of all ages. You can also speak to your child’s teacher or a school or local librarian to find books that are right for them. **TLG**



6 ways to help your child read fluently, cover to cover

Lauren Bardwell

You know his voice. It's deep, soothing, trustworthy. [Fans have described it](#) as “running your hand across expensive velvet” or “drinking a rich creamy coffee with your ears.”

His voice is everywhere: [movies](#), commercials, audiobooks, video games, even traffic apps. But what is it about Morgan Freeman that makes him such an in-demand narrator, one who captivates our ears and hearts? Why would I gladly listen to him [recite lyrics to a Justin Bieber song](#)? (The Internet is a strange place.) Well, part of his magic as a narrator begins with his reading fluency skills.

What is reading fluency?

As children gain skills in reading individual words, they begin to work with connected text: sentences, paragraphs, and pages of text. As adult readers, we're mostly reading silently in our heads. But when children learn to read, they read out loud. This allows teachers and families to observe the three important ingredients of reading fluency: rate, accuracy, and expression.

Let's look at each of these ingredients in action with Morgan Freeman. When he narrates a film, he reads his lines at a speed, or rate, that is comfortable for the audience to follow along with: not too fast, not too slow, but at just the right pace based on what he's reading. His rate is also smooth, not choppy. He pronounces the words accurately. He shows expression by pausing when making an important point or raising the pitch of his voice when asking a question. Of course, he is a paid actor who gets to read a script in advance, but still. His expert reading fluency is one of the reasons for his success as a professional narrator.

When a child is reading fluently, they are able to pronounce the words accurately with relative speed. However, it's important to note that reading words correctly and quickly doesn't always mean children have understood what they've read. We've all probably experienced listening to a child—or even an adult—read a text at a fast rate but with a monotone voice. It's not a pleasant experience. (Remember this [funny but headache-causing commercial from the '80s](#)?) It's also a sign that a child may not be understanding what they are reading.

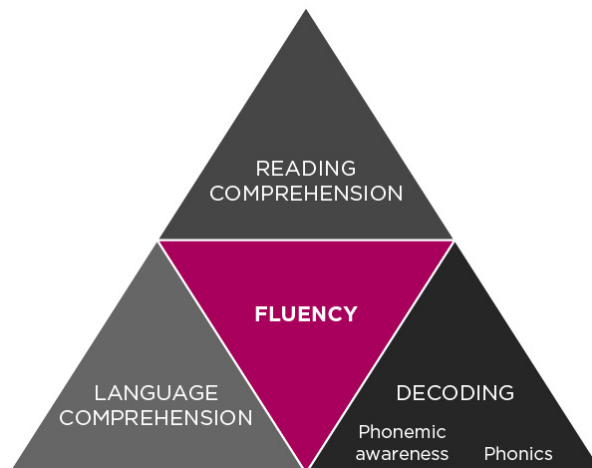
We want children to read with an appropriate rate, accuracy, *and* expression, just like Morgan Freeman. If a child is reading so fast that they are not pausing at appropriate places or changing the tone of their voice, then they are likely

not understanding what they are reading. This is why expression is key. Understanding appropriate phrasing and punctuation supports meaning making.

Why is fluency important for reading?

Fluency is really important for reading because children who read fluently recognize more words automatically and spend less time sounding them out (also called decoding). This frees up their brain to focus on making meaning of the words they are reading. They are able to more quickly draw on their vocabulary and background knowledge, which means reading comprehension can occur more easily. Indeed, reading fluency strongly predicts reading comprehension.

In the pyramid graphic below, you can think of fluency, the center triangle, as the bridge that helps readers combine their language comprehension (bottom left triangle) with their decoding skills (bottom right triangle) to achieve reading comprehension (top triangle).



There is huge and important growth in reading fluency for kids in first and second grade. A typical reader progresses from reading aloud about 30 words correct per minute in the middle of grade 1 to reading aloud about 100 words correct per minute by the end of grade 2. This growth opens the doors for readers to comprehend and explore a whole new world of ideas!

Children who struggle with fluency may avoid opportunities in class where they are asked to read aloud out of fear of embarrassment or feelings of frustration. They might show little interest in reading books for pleasure. When children don't participate in reading activities, they miss important chances to further develop their reading skills. It's important that students are given time and support to work on their reading fluency skills.

What can you do to help support your child's reading fluency at home?

There's a lot you can do to help your child strengthen their reading skills. Here are a few suggestions for things to try that will support their fluency. They are great for kids of all ages.

1. Listen to your child read aloud

The first step in helping your child with fluency is to listen to them read aloud a page or so of grade-appropriate text. Listening to your child read will help you better understand where they might need the most support.

Fluency work typically begins around the middle of first grade. Children have begun learning to decode individual words and are now reading those words in connected sentences. As a result, they can begin practicing reading with accuracy, rate, and expression. Children continue to develop their fluency skills in grades 2-12 as they encounter texts with longer sentences and more challenging vocabulary.

If your child still sounds out a lot of words, they might need more help with decoding before focusing on fluency.

2. Start a family band

Just kidding. Well, sort of. One fun way to help your child develop reading fluency is to do something called choral reading. Using that strategy, you and your child (and whoever else wants to join in!) read a story out loud together and at the same rate. It might sound odd, but it's a [common classroom practice](#). The video "[Choral reading](#)" on YouTube will give you a good feel for what it looks like. (It's directed at teachers, but stick with it. Hop ahead to minute 3:33 if you're pressed for time.)

Choral reading is a great exercise to repeat more than once. Children benefit from repeated reads of the same text. We all benefit from practice, and repeated readings give children more opportunities to hone their accuracy, rate, and expression. You can bet that as a professional narrator, Morgan Freeman reads and rereads his script so he, too, can practice his fluency before speaking into a microphone.

Repeated reads also allow children to dig deeper into the texts and strengthen their understanding of what they are reading. If you've ever had to reread directions when putting together a piece of furniture, then you know the benefit that a second (or maybe even third) read can bring to a situation. You catch details that you didn't notice the first time.

[R]eading words correctly and quickly doesn't always mean children have understood what they've read.



3. Model, model, model

Read aloud to your child and model fluent reading with appropriate rate, accuracy, and expression. This can be from a picture book, a chapter book, an interesting article in a newspaper or magazine, or somewhere else altogether. The Mississippi Department of Education has some great [book recommendations for each grade level](#).

For longer texts, don't worry. You don't have to model fluency with the entire thing! You can use chunks of 100 words or so. You can even pair books with their audio versions so your child can follow along with an expert fluent reader. [Storyline Online](#) and [PBS Kids Read-Alongs](#) are two free online resources that feature celebrities reading children's books aloud.

For older readers, talk to your school or local librarian about pairing a printed version of a book with its audio version. [There are also several websites and apps](#) that offer free audiobooks.

**[R]eading fluency
strongly predicts reading
comprehension.**

4. Practice, practice, practice

Children learn by doing. After listening to you read aloud a section of text, your child can practice by trying to read it aloud to you.

If your child struggles, try not to jump in right away to help them. A valuable model to remember is [pause-prompt-praise](#). Pause to give them time to try to determine how to pronounce a word or to self-correct an error. If your child is stuck, prompt them by offering some suggestions to get back on track. (One helpful tip for fluency practice is for children to physically track the words as they read. This may be with their finger or even a paintbrush.) Then comes the easiest part: offering praise. Let your child know when they've demonstrated strong effort and success.

5. Focus on a topic or text they love

Don't make reading a task they dread. You want your child to enjoy reading! Find books on topics they love. Your local librarian is sure to be eager to help you find plenty of options.

If your child isn't into anything in particular right now, reread some of their favorites. (Remember, repetition is good for kids who are learning to read.) Ask them what they love about those books, and consider trying to find others that touch on similar themes or have the same author or illustrator.

6. Stay connected with their teacher

If you notice your child is struggling to read with fluency once they begin to read longer texts, talk to their teacher to learn what they are noticing at school. Ask them if additional support or evaluation is warranted.

If your child has excellent reading fluency with longer books, they might be ready for more challenging texts. Staying in touch with your child's teacher will help you feel confident you're meeting your child where they are. **TLG**

Reading and vocabulary: Why your kids can never have too much of either

Toni Gibbs

My daughter, who is in middle school, has dreams of being a veterinarian. One night, while looking for a program to watch, she found *Dr. Oakley, Yukon Vet* on Disney+. It's a series about a veterinarian who helps all kinds of animals—from pets to farm animals to rescued wildlife—in the Yukon and Alaska. In each episode, viewers follow the vet as she treats different animals, describing procedures using both simple language and medical terms.

After a few episodes, my daughter began to pick out some of the medical terms and ask me what they meant. “What is a hematoma, Mom?” I know about many things, but medicine is not one of them. “Let’s look that one up!” I suggested, and we did a quick search online. (A hematoma is a collection of clotted blood in the body, for those who are wondering.) Then, the other day, she told me her class was reading *The Red Pony* by John Steinbeck. She and her peers were asked to debate whether the pony had been well taken care of, and my daughter used some of what she learned from Dr. Oakley to win her arguments.

My daughter’s experience is an example of how the vocabulary children learn helps them interact with and understand text. Here I’ll explain what it means to “know” vocabulary, how it helps us read and understand what we are reading, and how families can help their children build their vocabulary.

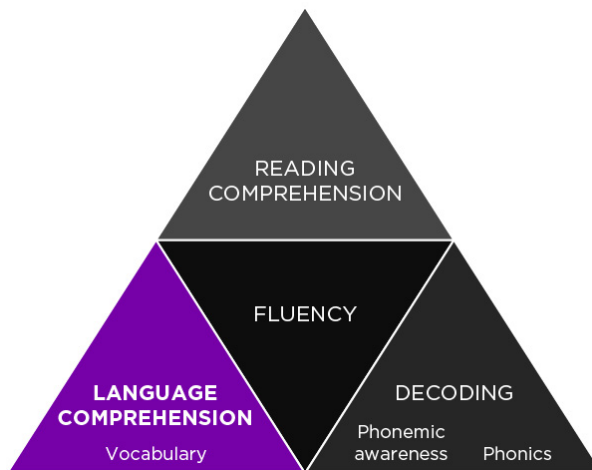
What is vocabulary and why is it important for reading?

If you ask someone if they know a particular word, they might respond by telling you what it means. But most people don’t realize that to “know” a word means so much more than just knowing its definition.

Vocabulary is *all* the knowledge a person has about a word, which includes knowing what it means, when it is used, how to say it, and how to use it in a sentence. This knowledge also includes all the other ideas and terms connected with the word. For example, if you know the word “dog,” you probably also know that dogs can have a variety of relationships with people, such as being family pets, guiding the visually impaired, and working for the police and military. You might be able to picture different breeds of dogs, and you probably understand that certain words, such as “collar,” “leash,” and “fetch,” are associated with dogs. All that information helps you understand the word “dog” and know how to use and interpret the meaning of the word in text.

Having a large bank of vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important elements that can help a child make sense of text. The more vocabulary a child knows about what they are reading, the more they are able to comprehend, or make sense of, the text.

Here's a graphic that shows how vocabulary helps support reading comprehension. The top piece of the triangle is reading comprehension, or how we make sense of what we read. This is the key goal of reading. The two skills needed to reach this goal make up the bottom two pieces of the triangle: language comprehension and decoding, which includes phonemic awareness and phonics.



Vocabulary knowledge is part of language comprehension, but it also contributes directly to word recognition, which helps with fluency, shown in the center of the pyramid. Fluency, or the ability to read with an appropriate rate, accuracy, and expression, affects how well a person reads and understands what they read.

The power of knowing many words

Let me give you an example of how a rich, deep knowledge of vocabulary helps reading comprehension. Let's take the word "close."

Depending on what the sentence is about (the context) and where "close" is positioned in the sentence (what part of speech it is), "close" could be an adjective and mean "nearby" ("The store is close to my house") or it could be a verb and mean "to shut" ("Please close the door").

Because you know that word, you understand that even though the spelling is the same, the meanings are different, the role it plays in the sentence is different (one is an adjective and

The more vocabulary a child knows about what they are reading, the more they are able to comprehend, or make sense of, the text.

the other a verb), and the way you say it is also different. There are so many examples in English of words like this, but your vocabulary knowledge helped you sort it all out.

How kids learn vocabulary

Once kids start school, they will learn vocabulary in the classroom, but that is only one way to build vocabulary. [Research by the National Institute for Literacy](#) has found that children learn most of their vocabulary *outside* the classroom, by reading on their own, listening to books read to them, having conversations with others, or watching something, as my daughter did. New information, experiences, and thinking all combine to build knowledge about words, and this happens throughout a person's life.

The more children learn about the world, in the classroom or out, the more prepared they will be to understand what they are reading because of the knowledge they have. [Research out of Harvard](#) has also shown that the vocabulary development of young children impacts their ability to read and do well in school in later years.

5 tips for home

Families can provide a lot of information to their children, such as word meanings or other details about a word, that can help them build their vocabulary. Here's how.

1. Read to and with your children, as often as you can

Simply reading to children, taking turns reading with them, and having them read to you will help build vocabulary. You can do this with children of any age.

The more variety in what you and your child read, the better. Read about different topics, read fiction and nonfiction, read magazines, chapter books or graphic novels. Each offers different vocabulary, language usage, and information that can help provide meaning later on.

Read a book from the [Llama Llama series](#) by Anna Dewdney to your kindergartener or [Because of Winn-Dixie](#) by Kate DiCamillo to your third-grader, for example. Is your middle-schooler reading a Steinbeck novel? Take turns reading parts! Even 15 minutes of reading together is 15 minutes more than they would have gotten without your support.

2. Get curious about language

Turn your reading time into a word party! Talk to your child about interesting or unknown words you stumble across during your reading. Are there words that sound interesting, funny, or particularly beautiful? Are there words they struggled with or couldn't define? This will give them the opportunity to ask questions and understand how each word fits into the story.

Don't be afraid if you don't know every word you read together. You are setting a great example if your child sees that you are also learning new words.

3. Look for clues to define new words

When your child doesn't know a word, try different strategies to encourage them to determine its meaning:

- **Ask them to read the sentences before and after** the word to look for clues about the meaning of the unknown word. Can they guess what the meaning might be?
- **Talk about the parts of the word**, also referred to as morphology. What part of speech is the new word? Are there prefixes, such as “pre-” or “un-,” or suffixes, such as “-ous” or “-able”? How do they affect the meaning? Is the main part of the word (the root) Greek or Latin? Reading Rockets' [“Root words, roots and affixes”](#) can help.
- **Try to categorize the new word.** Does it seem like it might be an action? A feeling?

Once you're done tackling the word mystery together, see if you were right. Show your child how to look up the meaning of words in a dictionary, and explain how most will include information on the part of speech.

[C]hildren learn most of their vocabulary *outside* the classroom.



4. Play with synonyms and antonyms

Spend some time talking about synonyms, words with the same meaning, and antonyms, words that are opposites. Do this with both the words you got curious about together and the ones you had to investigate.

Connecting new vocabulary to known words can help make it easier to remember. Are there experiences your child has had that can help them connect to the new vocabulary? If you're working with the word "arduous," for example, remind them how "hard" or "difficult" it was to build that LEGO set last weekend. With any luck, they'll reply, "Yeah, that was arduous!"

5. Practice

Just defining a new word isn't usually enough to really learn and remember it. The more your child uses new vocabulary, the more they will remember it. Here are some ways to encourage practice and repeated exposure to new words:

- **Have your child say or write a sentence with the word, or even act it out.** Playing around with putting a word to use can help its meaning stick.
- **Encourage your child to read more than one text about a topic.** This will give them more opportunities to have contact with new vocabulary.
- **Use new words. A lot.** Set a fun goal for yourself to use only a new word, instead of its more familiar synonyms, for a day or even a week. This weekend's family hike won't be hard. It will be arduous! **TLG**

A new spin on playing catch: Helping your child understand what they read

Shiji Mathew

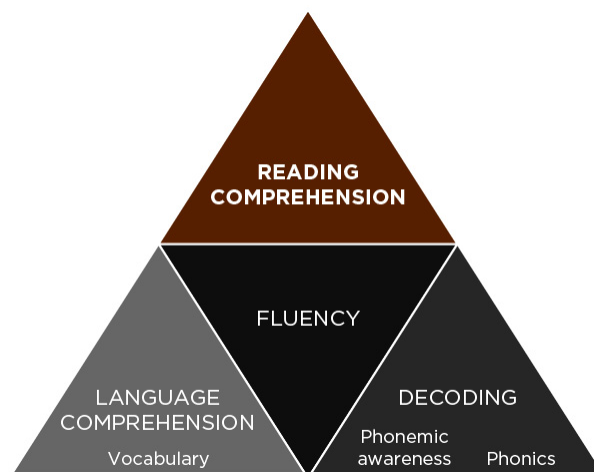
When it is warm enough where I live in the Midwest, my 11-year-old son and I sometimes play catch with a baseball. He is usually the pitcher, winding up and throwing the ball to me. I am usually the catcher, crouching down and catching the ball with a baseball glove.

Reading is like a game of catch. The author is the one who “throws” or writes words on a page, and the reader is the one who tries to “catch” what the author wrote. We know that this game of catch is successful when the reader comprehends what the author said.

What is reading comprehension?

Reading comprehension is the ability to understand and make sense of what you read. How can children achieve it? They need two main ingredients: language comprehension and decoding.

If you remember from earlier in this e-book, language comprehension is the ability to understand the different elements of language: what words mean, how words are arranged, and general information about the ideas in a text. Decoding is the ability to turn the sets of letters you see into the sounds they represent and blend them together to form words.



In the pyramid graphic above, reading comprehension, or making meaning of text (shown in the top triangle), is the key goal of reading. Decoding (shown

in the bottom right) and language comprehension (in the bottom left) are the foundations of reading comprehension. Fluency (in the center) is the ability to read accurately, with proper expression and pace. It is the bridge that leads to reading comprehension.

What else supports reading comprehension?

In addition to the essential pieces from the pyramid above, research has shown us that several other factors support children's reading comprehension. They include active reading, motivation, and volume reading.

Active reading

In [How to Read a Book](#), the educator Mortimer Adler compares reading to reaching out and catching a ball because purposeful action is needed to make sense of what we read. Imagine someone throwing a ball to you. If you don't actively track the ball with your eyes or reach out to catch it, the ball might hit you or drop to the ground with a thud. To catch a text, reading must likewise be active.

Active reading is when readers intentionally use their mind to engage in what they read. You may have experienced reading a page in a book and not understanding it because you were distracted; this certainly happens to me. While I'm reading page 26 in a book, I might be thinking of some unfinished tasks I need to complete or about a conversation I recently had. When I re-engage with the book, I wonder how I got to page 27! I realize that I wasn't actively paying attention to what I was reading. Similarly, kids can be distracted from reading by thinking of other things or even by noise, which may be one reason why a library is so quiet.

Active reading is more than just paying attention to each sentence in front of you, however. It is also actively monitoring whether you understand what you are reading, making connections with things you already know, and thinking about how the ideas in a text are connected.

Active reading is more than just paying attention to each sentence [...]. It is also actively monitoring whether you understand what you are reading, making connections with things you already know, and thinking about how the ideas in a text are connected.

Motivation

Motivation also supports reading comprehension. Children who are motivated to read are more likely to be engaged in whatever they are reading. This engagement makes reading more enjoyable and positively affects reading comprehension.

There could be any number of reasons that motivate children to read. Some children are more willing to read after they learn how. Some kids are naturally bookworms. Other kids might need a specific situation or prompt to help motivate them. They might be motivated because they are interested in learning more about a topic. For example, if a child is interested in dinosaurs, they will be more likely to read books about them even though dinosaurs have long names that are difficult to pronounce, like the micropachycephalosaurus.

Children might also be motivated to read if they can read with others or if it is for a relevant purpose, like following instructions to build something. There is also [research](#) to support that children’s motivation to read grows when they are able to successfully read challenging texts since it increases their sense that they are capable readers. By having enjoyable and successful reading experiences, children may feel that reading is worthwhile and be open to reading and understanding other texts, too.

Building your child’s reading comprehension when they’re not at school can be easier than you think.

Volume reading

When my children first learned to play catch, they dropped the ball more than they caught it, which was expected. But the more times they caught the ball, the better they got at it. Not only did their eye-hand coordination improve, but they were also better able to predict where the ball was going so they could position their hands to catch it in time.

Similarly, reading more—with understanding—helps grow the key elements that lead to reading comprehension. By reading more, children learn new vocabulary, gain knowledge about the world, and improve fluency. There are also vocabulary and sentence structures children may only encounter by reading. In one of his books, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, reading researcher Mark Seidenberg uses this sentence from a first-grade read-aloud book as an example: “There were sure to be foxes in the woods or turtles in the water, and she [Mrs. Mallard] was not going to raise a family where there might be foxes or turtles.” Seidenberg suggests that “mallard” (a wild duck) is a word most first-graders would only encounter in a book. He also notes the sentence is longer and structurally more difficult than what first-graders would hear in everyday speech.



Another benefit of reading more is that children can build their reading stamina. The longer they spend on focused reading, the more opportunities they have to grow their knowledge, vocabulary, and fluency. This, in turn, can help children persevere with longer or more challenging texts they encounter in and out of school. Once children can decode fluently (after grade 2 or 3), they can start increasing their reading stamina by gradually reading for longer periods. What they read doesn't necessarily have to have more words. A shorter, more difficult text can also be read for a longer period of time. Remember, reading stamina is about increasing the time that a child can read attentively.

4 ways to help with reading comprehension at home

Building your child's reading comprehension when they're not at school can be easier than you think. Here are four tips to try.

1. Discover what motivates them

Search for books about topics that your child is interested in. Ask them if there is any topic, event, or person they want to learn more about. Ask what type of text they want to read: mystery, poetry, adventure, fantasy, graphic novel, nonfiction. The website [“Literary genres”](#) from the California Department of Education can help.

You can also offer titles and descriptions of different books and let your child choose what they want to read. If you need ideas, ask your local librarian or take a look at Reading Rockets' [“Children's books & authors”](#) to locate books based on topic, theme, awards, and book type. Also find titles from the [Children's](#)

[Choices book list](#). For younger readers in particular, check out "[Selecting books for your child: Finding 'just right' books.](#)"

Children might also be motivated to read if it is with you. Consider having a family reading time, where you take turns reading something interesting out loud for as little as 20 minutes together every couple of weeks. My third-grade daughter and I recently took turns reading poems from Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic*. This time could also be spent reading independently, where everyone reads their own book silently at the same time. Another idea is to read a book together and then watch the movie that it is based on, like Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

2. Read different kinds of material

Just like with volume reading, reading different kinds of materials allows children opportunities to gain knowledge, vocabulary, and exposure to sentences they'll only see in texts. If children mostly read stories, try biographies or nonfiction books focusing on a specific topic. You can even invite your child to read a piece of mail, a recipe, or instructions with you.

3. Ask questions about what they read

While reading with or to your child, ask who, what, when, where, and why questions about the details of the text. For example, ask what they think a book will be about based on its title or illustrations. If you are reading a story, ask about individual characters or the setting while reading. If it is nonfiction, ask how different ideas or events connect. With any type of text, ask about unfamiliar words.

If you are reading a very difficult text with or to your child, stop more frequently to ask questions while reading. Questions are not just for measuring what your child has understood during the reading; they can also be used as a tool to help your child deepen their comprehension and remember what they read.

4. Problem solve together

If you notice that your child is finding comprehension of a text challenging, here are some different solutions to try, depending on the challenge: reread a portion of the text, look up unfamiliar words, try to break down and understand each part of a long sentence, read the text more slowly, look up information they don't know, or make connections to ideas that they already know.

If you find that your child is having difficulty with their comprehension across multiple texts, consider contacting their teacher to ask what they are noticing in class, and find out if they have any other suggestions for supporting your child at home. **TLG**

About the authors



Lauren Bardwell

Like any good book nerd, Lauren Bardwell began her career as a high school English teacher. She earned her BA in English at Millsaps College and her MEd in curriculum and instruction at Middle Tennessee State University. Prior to joining NWEA's Content Advocacy and Design team, Lauren served as the executive director for adolescent literacy for the Tennessee Department of Education and a principal designer for Odell Education's high school literacy program. Lauren is passionate about ensuring students have access to high-quality instructional materials and assessments; teachers have access to ongoing, job-embedded professional development; and leaders have access to meaningful thought partnerships to improve instruction and achieve equitable outcomes for all students. When she's not working, she's busy hiking trails with her dog and attempting overly ambitious recipes in the kitchen, with varying levels of success.



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Toni Gibbs has 20 years of experience in education and assessment and joined NWEA as a senior ELA content specialist in 2020. She began her career as a teacher of English to speakers of other languages, teaching both children and adults in the US and abroad. She is deeply committed to supporting literacy for all people.



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