

What is Reading?

by Diane Henry Leipzig

Reading is making meaning from print. It requires that we

- identify the words in print—a process called word recognition
- construct an understanding from them—a process called comprehension
- coordinate identifying words and making meaning so that reading is automatic and accurate—an achievement called fluency

Sometimes you can make meaning from print without being able to identify all the words. Remember the last time you got a note in messy handwriting? You may have understood it, even though you couldn't decipher all the scribbles.

Sometimes you can identify words without being able to construct much meaning from them. Read the opening lines of Lewis Carroll's poem, "Jabberwocky," and you'll see what I mean.

Finally, sometimes you can identify words and comprehend them, but if the processes don't come together smoothly, reading will still be a labored process. For example, try reading the following sentence:

It isn't as if the words
are difficult to identify or
understand, but the spaces
make you pause between
words, which means your
reading is less fluent.

Jabberwocky

'Twas brillig, and
the slithy toves
Did gyre and
gimble in the
wabe:
All mimsy were the
borogoves,
And the mome
raths outgrabe.

Reading in its fullest sense involves weaving together word recognition and comprehension in a fluent manner. These three processes are complex, and each is important. How complex? Here goes...

To develop word recognition, children need to learn:

- how to break apart and manipulate the sounds in words...this is **phonemic awareness**
example: feet has three sounds: /f/, /e/, and /t/
- certain letters are used to represent certain sounds...this is the **alphabetic principle**
example: s and h make the /sh/ sound
- how to apply their knowledge of letter-sound relationships to sound out words that are new to them...this is **decoding**
example: ssssspppooooon-spoon!

- how to analyze words and spelling patterns in order to become more efficient at reading words...this is **word study**
example: bookworm has two words I know: book and worm.
- to expand the number of words they can identify automatically, called their **sight vocabulary**
example: oh, I know that word—the!

To develop comprehension, children need to develop:

- **background knowledge** about many topics
example: this book is about zoos—that's where lots of animals live
- extensive **oral and print vocabularies**
example: look at my trucks—I have a tractor, and a fire engine, and a bulldozer...
- understandings about **how the English language works**
example: we say she went home, not she goed home
- understandings about **how print works**
example: reading goes from left to right
- knowledge of **various kinds of texts**
example: I bet they live happily ever after
- **various purposes for reading**
example: I want to know what ladybugs eat
- **strategies for constructing meaning** from text, and for problem solving when meaning breaks own
example: this isn't making sense—let me go back and reread it

To develop fluency, children need to:

- develop a high level of **accuracy** in word recognition
- maintain a **rate** of reading brisk enough to facilitate comprehension
- use **phrasing and expression** so that oral reading sounds like speech
- transform deliberate strategies for word recognition and comprehension into **automatic skills**

But if reading isn't pleasurable or fulfilling, children won't choose to read, and they won't get the practice they need to become fluent readers.

Therefore, **reading also means developing and maintaining the motivation to read**. Reading is an active process of constructing meaning—the key word here is active.

To develop and maintain the motivation to read, children need to:

- appreciate the **pleasures** of reading
- view reading as a **social** act, to be shared with others
- see reading as an opportunity to explore their **interests**
- read widely for a variety of **purposes**, from enjoyment to gathering information
- become comfortable with a variety of different written forms and **genres**

So...what is reading?

Reading is the motivated and fluent coordination of word recognition and comprehension.

Quite an achievement for a six year old!

Leipzig, D. H. (January, 2001). What is reading? WETA.

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Funded by a grant from the [U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs](#)