Fluency in Focus

Comprehension Strategies for All Young Readers

Mary Lee Prescott-Griffin
and Nancy L. Witherell

Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH
To my sons,
Ransom and Winward,
with love.
—MLPG

With love to the men in my life:
my husband, Peter, and my sons,
Paul, Jonathan, and TC.
—NLW
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Acknowledgments

Beginning with our earliest conversations about fluency and its connections to reading comprehension, our thinking has been nudged and supported by many people.

We thank Mary Lee’s colleagues at the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, most notably Charlotte Diffendale and her “request” for teacher workshops on fluency. Research in preparation for these workshops—part of the Rhode Island Reading Excellence Grant initiative—sent Mary Lee back to the literature to take a fresh look at fluency.

Grateful thanks and sincere admiration go to teachers Sharon Roberts, Kristin Vito, Christine Wiltshire, Sarah Rich, Joy Richardson, and Jenny Baumeister for sharing their expertise and their classrooms. And special thanks to the students and administrators of the L. G. Nourse School, in Norton, Massachusetts; the Fairlawn Early Learning Center, in Lincoln, Rhode Island; the Paul Cuffee Charter School, in Providence, Rhode Island; the Hugh Cole School, in Warren, Rhode Island; and the Mills Pond School, in Smithtown, New York. As always, the students taught us the most—in this case, about what it means to be truly fluent.

We have had the good fortune and great pleasure of working with Kate Montgomery, our editor at Heinemann. We are indebted to her for “redirecting” our proposal, for offering incredibly helpful suggestions, for skillfully editing the manuscript, and for approaching this project with warmth and enthusiasm. Thanks also to Alan Huisman, Sonja Chapman and all at Heinemann who have shepherded our work with care and attention.

Finally, and most especially, we want to thank our families for their support, encouragement, and love.
Fluency in Focus: Comprehension Strategies for All Young Readers offers educators the theoretical background as well as the practical tools to help students become fluent, confident readers. To us, disfluency is a little like those annoying cell phone conversations where technical problems, frequent interruptions, and halting repetitions cause us to hang up in exasperation. We do not want children of any age to hang up on reading. Instead, we want them to sing stories and ideas to all who will listen. The tools and strategies outlined here are designed to help them to do just that.

Where does meaning begin for readers? With pictures? With words? With simply picking up a book? Strong readers are continually constructing meaning, accessing prior knowledge, drawing upon literate backgrounds, and attending to semantic, structural, and orthographic cues in order to understand. As readers gain control of letters, sounds, and words, we say they have “broken the code”: they are fluent.

The ability to read fluently is one of five component skills of a balanced reading program as recognized by the National Reading Panel (2000), but what do we really mean when we say readers are fluent? Is fluency automatic, accurate reading of text? Or is fluency the very center of meaning? If fluency involves not only speed, accuracy, and automaticity but also the use of appropriate phrasing, intonation, and expression to convey an author’s intentions and to demonstrate understanding, then fluency, indeed, lies at the heart of reading comprehension. Fluency, in effect, pulls together all of a developing reader’s skills.
When teachers assess children’s reading, fluency is often neglected (Allington 1983). When disfluency is identified, it is frequently equated with poor word-solving skills, to be remedied by more teaching of letters, sounds, phonics strategies, and vocabulary in isolation.

This book broadens the definition of fluency. It outlines many instructional and assessment strategies that go beyond letter, sound, and word work to build readers’ meaning-making skills, thus enabling them to read with deeper fluency than merely saying the words. Besides examining reading rate and accuracy, it also explores phrasing and the use of such elements as pitch, stress, pauses, tone, and expression (Dowhower 1987; Herman 1985).

In the primary grades, fluency (or disfluency) is readily apparent, because children often read aloud. However, as children move into silent reading, fluency (or disfluency) often becomes invisible: disfluent habits such as reading slowly or using halting, choppy phrasing are hidden. Such disfluent behavior severely limits older readers’ comprehension of the ideas in the text. As a consequence, when text length and complexity increase, disfluent readers are left behind.

This book provides fluency-building strategies appropriate for both primary and intermediate students. To help you get the lay of the land, here’s a brief logistical outline.

The six chapters in Section 1 zero in on theories related to fluency and explain what fluency is. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the historical trajectory from the round-robin oral reading with which many of us began our careers as readers and reading educators to the idea of “guided oral rereading” and the rationale for its place in a comprehensive reading program. Chapter 3 deals with assessing reading rate: awareness of students’ reading rate enables you to plan instruction that moves them beyond the laborious, word-by-word reading so defeating to intermediate readers. Chapters 4 and 5 outline the critical roles of independent reading and teacher “reading prompts” in strengthening readers’ fluency. Chapter 6 discusses assessment and how you can use rubrics and fluency checks to monitor readers’ fluency and expression.

The remainder of the book provides practical applications (grouped into categories) for dealing with everyday fluency problems—nineteen different techniques, along with numerous variations, that when used correctly over time will increase students’ reading fluency. Each strategy includes ways to connect the work with students’ life outside school and offers practical suggestions for using it with English language learners. Because it is important that students read authentically and attend to meaning in the process of becoming fluent readers, we also suggest appropriate literature to use with each strategy.

x  INTRODUCTION
Although each of the techniques has been used successfully in classrooms, you don’t need to use each one in yours. The weaknesses and strengths of your students dictate which techniques will be effective. (Figure 6–3 on page 43 and inside front cover, is a quick reference for matching a fluency problem with a recommended technique.)

Section 2 focuses on collaboration and the social aspects of reading that help to build fluency and increase comprehension. Echo reading and shared reading are appropriate for students who need confidence and recognize few words. In both techniques the teacher has a great deal of input and the students are more dependent. When students are able to recognize more words within chosen texts, it is time for collaborative and choral reading. In these two techniques, students are more independent, helping one another through collaboration.

Section 3 focuses on performance. The techniques offered here build confidence as well as fluency, helping students with their expression and rate of reading. Lack of confidence is evidenced in many ways: being unwilling to attempt to decode unknown words, never volunteering to read, or reading so softly we struggle to hear. Fluency flexors involve a great amount of teacher direction and are most appropriate for the more disfluent students. Poetry and readers theatre let students who are getting better at word recognition practice reading smoothly, with greater expression and more confidence. Getting into character, readers theatre, and plays support students’ expressive reading. When this expression extends into portraying a character’s feelings, it also helps develop inferential skills.

The strategies in Section 4 propel students further in their journey toward independent, fluent reading, although each strategy begins with teacher–student collaboration. Environmental print, although practiced independently, is most effective when created by teacher and students together. Text signals must be explicitly discussed and modeled before students use them independently. Although writing may begin with a teacher-presented minilesson, word walls and print-rich environments support students’ independent writing. Repeated readings focus on reading rate but should be explained first and then closely monitored. Children’s literature/series books and humorous texts motivate and engage students in their reading. You can hook your students on this kind of material through read-alouds, guided reading, and book talks.

The techniques in Section 5 strengthen students’ ability to recognize words rapidly, decode unknown words encountered in context, and more clearly grasp the meanings of individual words. The ideas offered here benefit students far more than a “word drill”: they motivate student learning and help them make connections that will increase their comprehension. Sorting words and
chunking words support students who need more practice in recognizing words quickly and knowing what they mean. Chunking phrases, like fluency flexors, helps students increase their reading rate by helping them move beyond word-by-word reading. Reading the phrases expressively also deepens comprehension.
Implications for English Language Learners

In proposing a framework for language acquisition, Cummins (2001) outlines three areas on which to focus: meaning, language, and use. For English language learners this means:

1. What they are hearing and reading must be understandable.

2. They must be aware of language forms (semantics, syntax, and orthographic cueing systems) and how they are used.

3. They must be aware of how to use these language forms to create meaning and interpretively read and reread text.

McCauley and McCauley (1992) identify four important elements that help learners acquire a second language. They are (1) a low-anxiety environment, (2) repeated opportunities to practice, (3) comprehensible input, and (4) activities involving drama.

All learners need and deserve an environment characterized by trust and respect. Repeated practice gives learners the time and experience they need to be successful. All learners, but especially those learning English, must be able to understand instruction—what the teacher says and what she expects. Teachers of English language learners speak carefully, clearly, and specifically, checking frequently to make sure students understand. They present material in a number of ways and accompany oral directions with visual supports whenever possible. Introducing drama activities “enables the learner to use language in a social setting . . . (and to) make connections between speech and actions” (Opitz & Rasinski
Providing time for things like choral reading, readers theatre, and plays enables English language readers, through practice and rehearsal, to present performances that are fluent, expressive, and successful.

Text structures are unfamiliar territory for many readers, especially those who are learning to think, read, and write in English as their second language. When first faced with a textbook, many learners have no background or experience with the context or the content, whether it be history, science, or another subject. Helping English language learners—and all students—build background knowledge through discussion, read-alouds, and actual experiences allows all readers to participate fully in all literate pursuits. Giving English language learners opportunities to “preread” a text by discussing concepts, ideas, and structures such as signal words and topic sentences helps build a background of subject matter, syntax, and vocabulary. Experiencing words, phrases, and language structures in a variety of contexts also helps strengthen English language learners’ reading comprehension.
Getting into Character

■ What Is It, Why Use It?

When young children read in a monotone, their voices devoid of expression or inflection, they may be problem solving. Wading through unfamiliar text, they put intense effort into saying the words, with little left over for expression or interpretation. If readers are allowed to continue reading this way, there is a good chance that their understanding will be compromised. On the opposite side of the coin are the proficient word callers who skim the surface of reading, merely saying the words. Again, understanding is compromised.

Getting-into-character activities (Opitz & Rasinski 1998; Allington 2001; Johns & Berglund 2002) pull both these types of readers deeply into text, helping them plunge beneath the surface as they interact in substantive ways with meaning and content. Such strategies promote reader engagement through active involvement. As the name implies, students assume character roles as they read and reread text. First they read the text aloud or silently. They then reread it focusing on interpretation, attending to how characters might say or feel the words.

■ Using It in the Classroom

The three strategies described in this chapter are easily adapted for readers K–5. The latter two extend the model to interpreting a character’s feelings and behaviors.
Assuming a Character in a Nutshell

As the name implies, assuming a character involves reading a character’s dialogue confidently and expressively. Here are the steps:

1. Select a story made up almost entirely of dialogue.

2. Divide children into groups that match the number of characters in the story. (Include a separate narrator if necessary; if there is little narration, the children playing the characters can double up on the narrative sections as well.) With young children, two or three parts works best.

3. Have the groups read, reread, and discuss the text and perhaps complete an extension activity.

4. Have the groups share parts of their reading with the whole class.

5. Ask the class to discuss each “performance,” saying what they understood and what meaning they took away from it.

Here’s a classroom example. Sharon Roberts gives her first-grade partner teams the following directions as they prepare to reread *The Chick and the Duckling* (Ginsberg 1972): “Each take a part and read the story, then switch parts and read it again. After two readings, retell the story using your paper-and-Popsicle-stick puppets.” She then lets the pairs of children structure their own partnership, together deciding which part they will read and who will begin.

Eddie and Patrick sit at a table, each holding a copy of the book, puppets of the chick and duckling on the table beside them. Eddie says, “What do you wanna be?” Patrick responds by saying, “I want to be squawk—squawk—squawk!” Eddie squawks in response, and the boys spend a minute playing with the puppets, making them dance, the popsicle sticks rapping a steady beat on the table. Finally Patrick says, “I read chick, you read duck,” to which Eddie replies, “Okay. The first part is the chick part.” He points to the floor. “We have to use this as water.”

The boys read through the story, each taking his character’s part. This is a familiar, patterned story, and they read it without miscues, using high, squeaky voices and putting their puppets through animated paces. At one point, Patrick’s chick taps hard on the table and he cries, “Ow, I broke my leg,” but otherwise they do not diverge from the words on the page.

Switching parts, they begin again, reading animatedly until the end of the story. They are preparing to switch parts and begin a third reading when Sharon reminds them that they should now retell the story. Patrick says, “I’ll talk about
the beginning. You’ll talk about the middle. I’ll talk about the end. Okay?” Then they begin, using puppets to reenact the story.

Assuming a character is particularly appealing to young readers like Eddie and Patrick. It can also be incorporated into intermediate readers’ literature circles or other small-group reading activities.

**Saying It Like the Character in a Nutshell**

As students mature and move into silent reading, they often continue to read in a monotone. This hinders deep or thoughtful engagement in narrative, and readers “fail to understand that as plot develops, so do the characters” (Optiz & Rasinski 1998; Johns & Berglund 2002). Asking students to “say it like the character” prompts them to make inferences about characters’ feelings and voices and to bring these inferences to bear on interpretive readings of text, incorporating intonation, inflection, and expression. In the process, they develop a feel for prosody, the rhythm and intonation of language. Here’s how it works:

1. Have students choose a passage written from a particular character’s point of view.
2. Ask them to reread the identified passage silently, focusing on how they think the character might say it.
3. Let students practice reading the passage aloud.
4. Ask students to read the passage orally, as they think the character would say and feel it, to their group or to the class.
5. Prompt the group or class to discuss what emotions readers were trying to show by asking such questions as:
   - Why are these feelings appropriate to this character?
   - How did the reader’s voice and expression reveal meaning, character, and feeling?

Saying it like the character is similar to reading sentences as the author intended (see Chapter 11). Teaching these parallel activities in succession supports and reinforces spirited and expressive reading of text.

**Being the Character in a Nutshell**

Being the character (Allington 2001, p. 83) is a strategy in which readers select a character from a story or a biography and present a short solo performance as
that character. Because they are pretending to be the character, they will need to adapt narrative text into dialogue. In preparing, students might use the character share sheet in Appendix F to collect background information and organize their thinking. They may also enhance their portrayal by using simple props or costumes. By the numbers:

1. Ask the students to choose a character to portray.
2. Have the students select segments of text on which to base a script.
3. Let students practice the script aloud.
4. Have students present their performance to the class, then share how they arrived at their interpretation.
5. Have the class react to the performance, giving their impression of the character and telling how they thought the interpretation was appropriate.

■ Connecting It to Independent Reading

All three getting-into-character strategies incorporate independent reading. Additionally, during reading workshop or sustained silent reading, children can be asked to search for interesting character dialogue and select a sentence or two to practice, share with the group, and explain what feeling they were showing and why.

Once students are familiar with any or all of the getting-into-character routines, they can pursue them in the fluency center. Provide a file of scripts and texts with strong character parts.

■ Bringing It Home

A simple and engaging assignment for readers of any age is to search texts at home (comic strips, cartoons, newspapers, magazines, books) for a snippet of dialogue to read, practice, and share. After they share it with the class, they can describe the text from which the snippet came and tell why they choose to read it as they did.

■ Using It with English Language Learners

Getting-into-character activities give English language learners a chance to hear, feel, and experience the interpretive readings of others as well as practice and...
rehearse their own. The sentences or short passages they read, reread, and share may be in English or in their first language. In the latter case, English speakers will get the opportunity to hear the rhythms and cadence of other languages.

What to Read

Any text, whether or not it contains dialogue, may be used to help readers get into character. Base your choices on your readers’ needs and interests.

Primary Titles

Abigail Takes the Wheel (Avi 1999)

The Chick and the Duckling (Ginsberg 1972)

Days with Frog and Toad (Lobel 1979), and other titles in this series

Fables (Lobel 1980)

Good Night, Good Knight (Thomas 2000)

Nate the Great series (Sharmat various dates)

Small Pig (Lobel 1969)

Intermediate Titles

Children of the Gold Rush (Murphy & Haigh 2001)

Junie B. Jones series (Park various dates)

Kids of Polk Street School series (Giff various dates)

Magic Tree House series (Osborne various dates)

Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing (Blume 1972)

The Great Brain series (Fitzgerald various dates)

Zack Files series (Greenberg various dates)

Because of Winn Dixie (DiCamillo 2000)
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| K     | • Reread favorite or familiar stories with expression and appropriate phrasing.  
• Point to text, indicating their understanding that print determines what is said (read). | • Simple story lines.  
• Single concept or idea explored.  
• Relate to children's personal experiences.  
• One to three lines to a page (one or two sentences).  
• Print large, clear, and separated by ample white space (for pointing and word-by-word matching).  
• Text supported by pictures. |
| 1     | • Independently read (aloud or silently) grade-level texts that have been introduced or previewed for them with expression.  
• Use appropriate phrasing, pauses, and emphasis.  
• Attend to text signals such as punctuation (commas, periods, question marks) in order to read with meaning and intonation. | • Stories more complex, with several episodes and more sophisticated plot.  
• Present opportunities for readers to explore new ideas, themes, concepts, and points of view.  
• Provide sufficient structure and content to make comparisons with other texts.  
• More pages, more sentences per page, and more unusual, specialized vocabulary.  
• Unfamiliar or multisyllablic words that challenge their problem-solving abilities.  
• Simple chapter books such as the Frog and Toad (Lobel) Henry and Mudge (Rylant) series, with full-page illustrations to support text. |
| 2     | • Independently read (aloud or silently) grade-level texts that have been introduced or previewed for them with expression.  
• Use appropriate phrasing, pauses, and emphasis.  
• Attend to text signals such as punctuation (commas, periods, question marks) in order to read with meaning and intonation. | • Longer chapter books, with fewer illustrations that provide less support for readers.  
• More complex plots, with multiple characters and well-developed setting, events, and points of view.  
• Sophisticated language and challenging vocabulary.  
• Demand deeper level of thinking and reader engagement than lower-level texts.  
• Require greater inferencing and “reading between the lines” than lower-level texts. |
| 3–5   | • Independently read (aloud or silently) grade-level texts that have been introduced or previewed for them with expression, intonation, and phrasing that indicate the meaning of text.  
• Easily read words with irregular affixes and morphemes (such as ex, ous, ion, ive).  
• Use text signals and cues (punctuation, sentence structure) to assist meaning making in increasingly more complex texts.  
• Use appropriate expression to signify meaning when reading aloud. | • Longer chapter books, novels, informational texts, and textbooks.  
• Fiction with sophisticated plots that allow readers to explore unfamiliar concepts, ideas, setting, and characters.  
• Fiction and nonfiction that allow more in-depth reader focus on craft and genre.  
• Nonfiction texts with more detailed, more sophisticated information—historical, scientific, mathematical, etc.—of which readers may or may not possess background knowledge.  
• Nonfiction texts with complex and varied structures (compare/contrast, cause and effect, chronological, persuasive, etc.).  
• Textbooks with many new text signals and structures requiring specialized teaching and study-skills practice. |
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