



Typical Reading Development

Learn about the typical stages we see in children as they become readers, from pre-K through high school. Literacy begins with a strong foundation in oral language comprehension and word recognition (decoding).

Reading is not a natural ability, but a complex skill that we are taught over time. Children learn to read through a combination of explicit instruction, practice, seeing models, and exposure to a rich variety of print. This section explores what reading looks like from its beginnings before pre-K to skilled reading in high school and beyond.

At the onset, children begin with the alphabet: letter names, sounds, and formation alongside language play that fosters awareness of speech sounds. Children apply this knowledge to read printed words. With instruction and practice, they become more fluent and develop a corps of sight words, and a lexicon of sounds, patterns and morphemes needed to unlock unfamiliar words and texts.

Reading development is also influenced by other factors, such as motivation, background knowledge, vocabulary, and cognitive skills. By the end of high school, typical students are capable of complex reading, spelling, and writing skills.



Typical stages of reading development

Word recognition and oral language comprehension are not equally important at all stages of reading development. For typical readers, word recognition tends to be especially important in the early stages of learning to read, when children learn the alphabet and begin to develop phonemic awareness, phonics and sight words. Word-recognition skills tend to set a limit on reading comprehension in these early grades, because even if children have strong oral language comprehension skills, those skills cannot come into play while reading if they are unable to read many words.

Once children become proficient at word recognition, their further growth as readers tends to revolve more around language comprehension than word reading. For typical readers, this shift usually occurs around fourth grade, when typical readers have developed accurate and relatively automatic word recognition. At this point, children can focus more of their attention on reading for meaning. They can begin to use reading as a tool for learning in content-area subjects such as

history and science. Further growth in reading becomes more about developing higher-level comprehension abilities than about improving word recognition, although some growth in word reading still occurs. Jeanne Chall (1983) referred to this shift as the one from “learning to read” (in K to 3) to “reading to learn” (in Grades 4 and up). Of course, struggling readers may continue to have difficulties with word recognition well beyond third grade.

Reading experts like Linnea Ehri (1991, 2005), have identified the typical stages of reading development. These phases are briefly described below, in the context of typical expectations for reading by grade. Also see Spear-Swerling (2015) for a detailed discussion of a typical continuum in learning to read.

Keep in mind that the grade levels do not represent a series of “lock-step” stages or phases. Rather an educator might use these as waypoints to gauge the progress and pinpoint where a student’s assessed strengths and weaknesses might fall as they learn how to read, write, and spell.

Struggling readers will require more support (time, repetition, and exposures to explicit instruction) in order to make progress within a literacy continuum.



Pre-K

At this stage, many children do not grasp the alphabetic principle and do not understand that printed words need to be “decoded” with attention to letters and letter patterns. For example, a typical four-year-old might recognize the word *stop* on a stop sign because of the red octagonal shape of the sign, but would not recognize the word *stop* printed on an index card. Ehri (2005) referred to this stage of word reading as **pre-alphabetic**.

Many preschoolers do recognize some letters, such as those in their names, and they may grasp certain important print concepts, such as being able to identify the front and back of a book, or the fact that it is the print, not the pictures, that is “read.” These important print concepts are more likely to be found in older preschoolers (ages 3 to 5) and in those who have had ample exposure to literacy — for instance, from frequent parental or teacher read-alouds. Also, children at this stage usually do have a rudimentary level of phonological awareness, such as the ability to rhyme or appreciate tongue-twisters.



End of kindergarten

By the end of kindergarten, typical children recognize all or nearly all letters, both upper case and lower case; they can name and give sounds for single letters, especially consonants. They may also know some short vowel sounds, particularly if those are taught as part of the kindergarten

curriculum, and they may be starting to decode simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words (e.g., *man*, *sit*, *hop*) — again, especially if these skills are explicitly taught.

However, even when they have received some decoding instruction, typical children at this stage of development lack knowledge of sounds for many common letter patterns (e.g., *ar*, *ee*, *oo*, *oa*, *igh*, *tch*). They may confuse similarly-spelled words such as *boat* and *boot* or *meet* and *met*. Often they rely heavily on the first and last letters of a word rather than looking carefully at all letters in a word to decode it. Ehri (2005) refers to this stage of word reading as **partial alphabetic**, because children rely only on partial phonics cues in reading words.

These characteristics are reflected in children’s spelling. Spelling errors may involve omissions of or incorrect sequencing of sounds, for example, especially in the middle of words. Because of their limitations in decoding, children tend to be very dependent on picture or sentence context to help read words at this stage. Also, their oral language comprehension far exceeds their reading comprehension; they can comprehend much more sophisticated texts in listening than in reading, because of their limited word-recognition skills.

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End of grade 1

Typical readers at the end of Grade 1 can decode a wide variety of unfamiliar one-syllable, phonetically regular words, including words with closed syllable patterns (e.g., *man*, *fish*, *block*, *stamp*), silent e (e.g., *like*, *same*, *spoke*), open (e.g., *no*, *go*, *be*, *cry*, *by*), vowel r (e.g., *car*, *star*, *her*, *shirt*), and vowel combinations (e.g., *tree*, *stay*, *broom*). Although at this stage typical readers do recognize some common words automatically, without the need for “sounding out,” they still need to apply their decoding skills to many words, especially less common or long words. Ehri (2005) refers to this phase as **full alphabetic**, because children typically attend to all the phonetic cues in a word.

At this stage, children’s misspellings become more recognizable as the intended word because all sounds are represented even if a word is not spelled correctly (e.g., *garbij* for *garbage*). By the end of Grade 1, typical readers are much less dependent on pictures or sentence context to read words, because they have increasingly accurate skills for decoding unknown words and do not need to rely on context cues as frequently. However, children’s oral language comprehension still far exceeds their reading comprehension at this stage.

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End of grade 2

Children have an increasing ability to decode unfamiliar long words, including words with consonant-le (e.g., *stable*, *marble*, *needle*), phonetically regular two-syllable words (e.g., *basement*, *invite*, *mistake*), and some multi-syllable words, especially words in their oral vocabularies

(e.g., *butterfly*, *potato*, *remember*). Typical readers at this stage (and continuing into Grade 3) consolidate common letter patterns such as those associated with common prefixes, suffixes, and other word parts, to make word reading faster and more automatic. Ehri refers to this stage of word recognition as **consolidated alphabetic**. This stage tends to be one of rapid fluency development in text reading for typical children. Children's increased knowledge of common letter patterns also is reflected in their improved spelling of words.



Grades 3 and 4

By the end of Grade 3, typical readers have largely mastered basic word decoding skills, including skills for decoding most multisyllabic words, except for unusual words (e.g., words of foreign derivation such as *rendezvous*, or technical words such as *photosynthesis*). Typical readers can decode most unfamiliar words quickly and easily and also recognize most common words automatically ("by sight"). Thus, their reading fluency (i.e., their ability to read text quickly and easily as well as accurately) is generally well-established by this point, at least in grade-appropriate texts.

In Grades 3 and 4, the comprehension and vocabulary demands of texts used in school escalate substantially. Vocabulary and morphemic knowledge become especially important to reading comprehension and also to spelling. For example, if children know the meanings of common morphemes, such as that *geo* means *earth* or *astro* means *star*, they can use this knowledge to help infer the meanings of a variety of semantically related words, such as *geology*, *geologist*, *geological*, *astronomy*, *astronomer*, *astronomical*, and so on. Also, the spelling of morphemes is generally stable across a variety of words, so if children can spell common morphemes, this knowledge will improve their spelling as well as their vocabulary development.

At this stage, children increasingly use strategies to aid reading comprehension. These strategies include summarization, questioning, and inferencing, along with "fix-up" strategies for when comprehension fails, such as rereading or looking a word up in a dictionary. Students also learn to vary their approach to reading depending on the purpose for reading (e.g., studying for a test vs. reading for pleasure) and their knowledge base about the topic (they to read more carefully if the topic is unfamiliar and difficult).

Typical readers also are sensitive to differences in text structure, recognizing that fiction and non-fiction texts are organized differently, and they can use their knowledge about text structure to aid comprehension. For example, in informational text, the key idea of a paragraph often is contained in the first or last sentence; and headings and subheadings may highlight important ideas.

Because typical readers are usually skilled decoders at this point, they can devote more of their mental resources to comprehension. The gap between reading comprehension and oral language comprehension begins to narrow. Limitations on reading comprehension begin to revolve more

around limitations in oral language comprehension, vocabulary, and background knowledge, than around word reading.



Middle and secondary levels

Reading is used as a tool in a wide variety of content area subjects such as science, social studies, and history. Comprehension strategies and speed of reading continue to develop. At this stage, typical readers are developing higher-order comprehension abilities in reading, such as integrating information from a variety of sources, reconciling differences in viewpoints across texts, and appreciation of literary symbolism and theme.

According to Biemiller (1999), even for typical readers, oral language comprehension and reading comprehension do not become fully comparable until about Grades 7 or 8. For adolescents and adults, reading comprehension may sometimes exceed oral language comprehension, as when students are reading complex narratives or dense informational texts, such as a science chapter on DNA. However, oral language remains an important avenue for learning even in the upper grades, particularly for students who have reading problems.

For example, a high-school student with dyslexia may be able to develop content knowledge and advanced comprehension abilities much more easily through listening than through reading, because of ongoing difficulties in decoding or reading fluency.

For typical students at this level, especially those who are avid readers, reading becomes an increasingly important source of new vocabulary and background knowledge. Unusual words are encountered much more commonly in text than in spoken language, even the everyday conversation of college-educated adults. Skilled readers tend to receive more exposure to these unusual words and to new background knowledge, because they usually read much more than do poor readers. In fact, differences in volume of pleasure reading between good and poor readers are massive.

For example, Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) estimated that fifth-graders at the 90th percentile of reading achievement read the same number of words in *two days* of out-of-school pleasure reading, as students at the 10th percentile read in an entire year! These differences in reading volume make an independent contribution to growth in reading and language skills (Mol & Bus, 2011), and can further widen the gap in achievement between good and poor readers. Avoiding this dynamic is one reason why early intervention for reading problems is so important.



Literacy milestones

Developmental Milestones

Literacy Accomplishments: Birth to Three Years Old

Developmental Milestones

Literacy Accomplishments: Three- and Four-Year-Olds

Developmental Milestones

Literacy Accomplishments: Kindergarten

Developmental Milestones

Literacy Accomplishments: Grade 1

Developmental Milestones

Literacy Accomplishments: Grade 2

Developmental Milestones

Literacy Accomplishments: Grade 3

Reading Rockets is made possible with generous support from the National Education Association.



Reading Rockets is grateful for generous support from Boon Philanthropy.

