

# Word reading in junior secondary

## Word reading

Proficient readers are simultaneously able to decode letters and sounds in words while making sense of the text that they read. Difficulty with word reading is an issue for older readers as much as for beginning readers and affects not only their reading fluency but interferes with their ability to comprehend text (Toste et al 2016).

## Decoding

The decoding step is non-negotiable if students are to become independent readers. Decoding, or phonological recoding, is the full sounding out of a word that is accomplished through matching the correct sound (phoneme) to each of a word's letters (graphemes) and then blending those sounds, left to right, into a complete pronunciation. In fact, it is the repeated decoding and encoding (ie. spelling) of a word that commits it to memory (Hulme et al 2012).

## Orthographic mapping

Decoding rehearsal, or 'sounding out', links the word's spellings (orthography), pronunciations (phonology) and meanings (semantics), and stores them in long-term memory for effortless retrieval. This mental process is known as 'orthographic mapping' and is critical for fluent word reading (Ehri 2014). Orthographic mapping allows readers instantaneous retrieval of a familiar word from their long-term memory allowing them to bypass the phonological or sound route and use a direct and more efficient route from print to meaning (Schmalz 2013).

## Self-teaching mechanism

Along with orthographic mapping, the self-teaching mechanism is an important process enabling fluent word reading. The 'self-teaching hypothesis', was proposed by Share (2004) to account for the vast number of unfamiliar words the developing reader learns. According to the self-teaching hypothesis, each successful decoding experience provides an opportunity to learn a word's specific orthographic (spelling) information and then apply this orthographic knowledge to new words. For struggling adolescent readers, a negative cycle results where the self-teaching mechanism fails as a result of insufficient code knowledge and phonics skills. If decoding is effortful or slow or there are insufficient successful exposures to learning, this self-teaching may not occur.

## Fluency

Difficulties with reading words and text with efficiency are highly common among adolescents with reading difficulties (Brasseur-Hock et al. 2011; Cirino et al. 2013; Clemens et al. 2017). Despite this, word reading fluency is often overlooked by educators who perceive adolescents' reading difficulties as being driven primarily by insufficient skills in higher-order comprehension (Biancarosa and Snow 2004; Meltzer et al. 2002; O'Brien and Moje 1995).

## Next steps

For more information, contact your school speech language pathologist or the Reading and Writing Disorders Advisory Service. The Advisory service may be accessed by telephone or email on weekdays between 8:30am and 4:30pm.

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