

**Alphabetics and Fluency:
Strengthening the Foundations of Reading Comprehension**
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In your work with adult learners at the GED®-preparation level, you probably don't focus on all the components of reading. Since this is the most able group in a basic skills program, one tends to assume they don't need reading instruction. The *GED as Project, Language Arts, Reading* materials provide a solid framework for instruction but do not include specifics about all of the reading components. This article focuses on two components in particular, offering a rationale for identifying and addressing learners' needs in these areas and specific suggestions for instruction. The activities suggested should be appropriate for use in the *GED as Project* framework and may be adapted as appropriate for different groups and individuals.

What are the components of reading?

Alphabetics

This term refers to the skills and abilities used in identifying words: phonemic awareness and decoding skills. In other words, readers use their awareness of individual speech sounds and their knowledge of the English spelling-sound correspondences to identify words on the printed page. Phonics instruction builds readers' decoding skills. The term "decoding" also may refer to the recognition of words by sight. Some words are originally learned as sight words; others become immediately recognizable after several exposures.

Fluency

Fluent reading requires (1) accurate decoding/word identification, (2) a reasonably rapid rate, and (3) appropriate phrasing and expression. All three aspects of fluency are vital contributors to reading comprehension.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to understanding the meaning of words (and multi-word terms, like "public opinion," "money management," and "child development"). Vocabulary is essential to reading comprehension.

Comprehension

Comprehension is obviously "what reading is all about," and there are a number of research-based strategies learners can use to improve their comprehension.

However, if a reader has limited abilities in any of the other reading components, comprehension often is affected. All of the components are important!

What do we know about the reading fluency and word identification skills of adult learners at the GED-preparation level?

The Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS) (Strucker & Davidson, 2003) was designed to describe readers enrolled in adult education programs. The 955 randomly selected adult learners who participated in the study included 676 native English speakers in ABE classes and 279

learners who were studying English in classes for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Each of the students was given a battery of 11 reading and language assessments to identify their needs in the reading component skills. The researchers also interviewed the students to learn about their educational histories and reading habits.

The ARCS identified three groups of readers: (1) GED / Pre-GED (34%), (2) Intermediate (56%), and (3) Lower Level / Beginners (11%). Although one would expect the beginners to have limited skills in any or all of the components, many educators were no doubt surprised to learn that the intermediate and GED-level learners also had limitations.

For example, the GED / Pre-GED group had scores ranging from 9th to 12th grade equivalent (GE) on a silent reading comprehension test, but this test did not reveal their other needs. In fact, using the results of the specific assessments administered, three clusters within the group were identified: (1) Strong GED, (2) Pre-GED with vocabulary / background information needs, and (3) Pre-GED with vocabulary / spelling / rate (fluency) needs.

The study revealed (among many other findings) that about 40% of this group were in “Cluster 3,” with limitations in oral reading rate (an aspect of fluency) and word recognition. In fact, although their average score on a silent reading comprehension test was 10.9 GE, the average word recognition score for the adults in Cluster 3 was only 6.9 GE.

Of course, one cannot help but be impressed that many people with limited word identification skills and fairly slow reading rates are able to achieve relatively high comprehension-test scores. That’s the good news: they are able to use other abilities to compensate for their limitations. Maybe they worked hard on the test and they’ve developed the ability to make good guesses based on context clues. However, one also wonders if they will be able to *improve* their reading with such weak foundational skills and whether these difficulties will limit their chances of success in postsecondary education or training.

It does seem clear that a silent reading comprehension test, like the TABE or CASAS, does not give teachers enough information about learners’ reading strengths and needs. You can’t assume that pre-GED and GED-level students are competent readers, although they may think they are.

How can we learn about readers’ strengths and needs?

Formal testing in the component areas is an option, but if this is not realistic right now, you can learn a lot about learners’ alphabetic skills and fluency by listening to them read aloud. You can intentionally provide opportunities for reading aloud.

For example, as you work with a group on literature, science, or social studies texts, you might add reading-aloud activities to your regular routine as you discuss features of the text, needed background knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. You may find that not everyone volunteers to read aloud, but after it becomes a part of your regular practice, more of the learners may be willing to do so.

Afterward, be sure to make notes for yourself about the kinds of texts and words that learners have trouble with and the specific fluency problems that individuals demonstrate. You may discover that some people misread words and don't notice it, and that others read in a word-by-word fashion, without proper phrasing and expression. This kind of informal assessment will suggest who needs to work on specific aspects of decoding skills or fluency.

If you learn that some or all of the adults need work on alphabetic skills or fluency, how do you get them to “buy in” to this kind of instruction?

Adults who are studying for the GED Tests may want to focus on math and / or writing skills. They may not see reading as one of their primary needs. But because reading comprehension is so important, you must help them to understand their needs and work to improve their skills.

You might begin by introducing the components of reading. Ask learners to consider why and how each component is vital to comprehension. You might use the following examples:

- If you don't read the words correctly, you might miss the point or get the wrong idea. Even one or two mistakes—if they're important words—can have a big effect on your comprehension.
- If you read too slowly, you might not remember the beginning of a long sentence or paragraph by the time you get to the end.
- If you don't group words into phrases correctly, you might find a sentence hard to understand. The same thing can happen if you don't emphasize the right words or recognize the feelings being expressed. (Explain that this happens to everybody once in a while. You can demonstrate how you then re-read the sentence with attention to punctuation and different phrasing, emphasis, or tone. These aspects of fluency are especially important when reading literature.)
- It's also important to understand the words. Although you don't have to be able to define every word, you should have a reasonably accurate sense of the meaning of most of them.
- Paying attention to meaning—monitoring comprehension—makes it less likely that you'll get to the end of the story or article and realize you missed the point or you don't know what happened.

You also might present a brief overview of the ARCS project to assure the learners that lots of people need to work on specific reading skills and strategies. Then offer opportunities for them to experience the difference that repeated reading practice can make.

- Have learners read a poem with a partner and then share with each other and the group any improvements they noticed after the second or third reading.
- They also might do the same thing with a selection from a play. Everyone knows you have to rehearse, so repeated reading only makes sense.

After they have considered the components and become aware of their own and others' strengths and needs through various opportunities to read aloud, you might next ask the learners to develop or revise their Reading Action Plans to include specific decoding skills or fluency development, as appropriate.

You could add a few open-ended questions about specific reading components to the Reading Action Plan activity (Inquiry Activity #2), perhaps in the first step, identifying the problem.

Examples:

- What would improve my comprehension of difficult material?
- Would I like to read more quickly?
- Do I need to read more smoothly?
- Do I need strategies for identifying unfamiliar words?

How can we strengthen learners' alphabetic skills?

Based on informal assessments (oral reading) and learners' individual plans, you will have some idea of learners' specific needs. Some may need practice with three-letter consonant blends, for example. But (even more likely) you will discover that many of your students could use some work with multisyllabic words. You might try teaching these decoding strategies:

- Teach or review prefixes and suffixes. Some words can be easily divided by removing these affixes.
- Teach rules for dividing words into syllables, and then have learners practice "sounding out" the syllables and blending them together.¹ *Remind them that guessing is only the last resort.* Lots of people just look at the first few letters and then guess. They should try to sound out the whole word.
- Remind them that an important step in the decoding process is to be sure that the word they have identified makes sense in the context. They should be monitoring their comprehension. If it doesn't make sense, have they identified it correctly? Could they try a different vowel sound in one or more syllables or perhaps stress a different syllable? If the word still doesn't make sense, it's possible they have run into a word that is not in their vocabulary. Maybe at that point it would help to ask someone or check the dictionary.

¹ *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists* (Fry & Kress, 2006) is one place you can find the phonics rules, including those related to dividing words into syllables.

Be sure to demonstrate the decoding process explicitly with several examples for each of the strategies as you introduce them. Then have learners practice the process with a partner, reading a text with a few difficult words and applying what they've learned to identify them.

How can learners improve their reading fluency?

Based on informal assessments and learners' individual plans, you will know the appropriate focus areas for individuals. The research says that *guided repeated oral reading* may lead to improvement in all three aspects of fluency: rate, accuracy, and phrasing and expression. Following are a few ways for learners to get this kind of guided practice:

- Individuals may practice with a book on tape: listening, reading aloud, and timing themselves. If they keep track of the time, after two or three repetitions they should see clear evidence of increasing speed. This is, of course, only one aspect of fluency, but it's concrete and easily documented. An excellent, free resource for this kind of practice is *Reading Skills for Today's Adults*, on the website of the Marshall, Minnesota, Adult Basic Education program (www.marshalladulthoodeducation.org). The site allows learners to hear each selection being read aloud and to download a timer for their use as they read the passages. Unfortunately, the most difficult passages are only written at the eighth-grade level and you might think they are too simple. However, because the passages are very interesting, you may find this resource useful for many of your students.
- Learners also might work in pairs, reading to each other and modeling phrasing and expression for each other.
- Another possibility, mentioned previously, is to have learners practice and then present a poem or drama selection (or perhaps a humorous article or opinion piece) to the class. Let them choose selections they find somewhat challenging. They can share their experiences in identifying or defining words and making decisions about phrasing and expression.

Some GED-level learners may benefit from instruction in specific components of reading. Even adults who believe they are good readers may discover that learning specific strategies improves their comprehension. By helping them to understand the reading process and identify their own needs, you will have taken an important first step toward strengthening their reading. Teaching them specific strategies to address their needs may increase the likelihood that they will earn higher scores on the GED Tests and perhaps be more successful in their "next steps"—on the job or in further education and training.

References

Fry, E.B., & Kress, J.E. (2006). *The reading teacher's book of lists*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Strucker, J., & Davidson, R. (2003). *NCSALL research brief: Adult reading components study (ARCS)*. Boston, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.