

# Intervention Activities for Letter Naming Fluency (LNF)



## Overview on Letter Recognition and Naming Skills

### Why Letter Naming Is Important

English has an alphabetic writing system; letters in written words represent sounds in spoken words. The awareness that letters represent the sounds in spoken words is called the alphabetic principle. One of the basic steps in learning the alphabetic principle is recognizing and naming the letters of the alphabet. Children will also have to learn the sounds in words (phonemic awareness) and the letters that represent those sounds. Most strong readers acquire a working knowledge of the alphabetic principle by the middle of first grade. It is also helpful for children to learn to sequence the letters from A to Z because alphabetical order is the way we organize our letters.

Not all researchers agree on the importance of learning the names of the letters in learning to read. The DIBELS research team believes that teaching letter knowledge is not an important instructional goal. It's not that instructing in letter knowledge is harmful, but rather that it may not be an important goal in teaching reading. They believe that children need to associate the sounds with letters, and may not need to know the letter names, for reading.

Other researchers believe that letter knowledge plays a more significant role in the realm of language arts—enough to make it an instructional goal even if it is not the most important goal. Why might learning the names of the letters be helpful in learning to read? Two of the researchers who work in this area found that children who did not know letter names had more difficulty learning letter sounds (Ehri & Wilce 1979). Letter names are closely related to the letter-sound relationships, and knowing the letter names helps children associate sound with many of the letters. It seems obvious that children who can easily recall the letter names instantly on sight, to an extent that we might say is “automatic,” can easily form an association between a symbol and its name.

Letter naming knowledge has long been recognized as a potent predictor of later reading ability. Some studies suggest that although letter naming predicts the ability to read later on, it does not cause a child to learn more readily. Ehri and Wilce, however, suggested that letter name knowledge may be inseparable from letter-sound knowledge because so many letter names sound a great deal like the sound that is associated with them (for example, /m/ for the letter m). Gail Gillon describes a “bi-directional” relationship between letter-name and phoneme awareness, where knowledge of one enhances knowledge of the other (Gillon 2003).

For some children, knowledge of the alphabetic principle develops almost naturally as they interact with books, observe signs in the grocery store and labels on products, etc. These children begin to ask questions about letters, sounds, and words, and with exposure to a few examples, their brains start to connect which letters represent which sounds. But for many other children, those connections are learned primarily through instruction and sufficient practice with many examples.

Over the past few years, kindergarten teachers in schools serving families from all socioeconomic levels are reporting that more of their students are entering kindergarten knowing less about the alphabet, with many children unable to name even five letters. While teachers in urban schools who serve families with little print material at home have faced these problems for years, kindergarten teachers in affluent suburbs are attributing children’s lack of alphabet knowledge to the increasingly busy lifestyle of many American families and the time children spend on electronic and computer games. This trend toward students entering kindergarten with lower alphabet and book knowledge means that more of the kindergarten curriculum must be devoted to teaching the alphabet.

### **Importance of Teaching Early Reading Skills in Kindergarten**

Because the topic of this chapter is teaching letter naming and since basic alphabetic instruction usually begins in kindergarten, it is imperative to discuss the kindergarten curriculum at this point. Kindergarten teachers have often expressed concerns about the pressure to shift their curriculum from social to academic goals. These teachers wonder whether it is advisable to be teaching kindergartners pre-reading and early reading skills, when those children seem immature and unready to learn. My view, which is based on many studies of early reading development, is that children at the kindergarten level need to attain the following minimum goals because they strongly predict later reading success.

- A strong sense of phonemic awareness
- Fluency in naming uppercase and lowercase letters
- Knowledge of how a book is read
- Realization that reading is comprehending (taught through read-alouds)
- Strong oral language skills
- An expansive vocabulary

With the increased emphasis on reading instruction in kindergarten, many children are learning to read by the end of their kindergarten year. However, whether children actually learn to read in kindergarten is less important than their preparedness to read in first grade. Children must learn to read by the end of first grade or their entire academic career may be jeopardized. What children learn in kindergarten does significantly affect how well children will read and spell in first grade. The more kindergarteners know about phonemic awareness and the alphabet, and the stronger their oral language skills, the more easily they will learn to read from systematic and explicit instruction in first grade. The minimum mandatory goal for the kindergarten year must be to prepare *all* students to learn to read.

### **When Letter Naming Isn't Mastered in the Early Grades**

Although letter naming and alphabetical order are skills that are generally mastered at least by the middle of first grade, many children reach the upper elementary grades without being able to fluently and automatically name and alphabetize the letters. Children who experience reading difficulties in first grade and beyond are commonly found to lack secure skills with letter naming and alphabetizing. These problems can be discovered by giving the LNF measure to older students. If they cannot name 40 randomly arranged letters in a minute, they may need additional instruction and practice on their letters.

### **Do I Teach Uppercase or Lowercase First?**

Teachers often ask if they should teach uppercase or lowercase letters first. My recommendation is to teach uppercase first because fewer uppercase letters are confusable. Most children easily make the transition from uppercase to lowercase. It is not necessary to repeat the entire instructional approach to teach the lowercase letters, once the uppercase is known. Rather, children can easily learn to match uppercase and lowercase once the uppercase is known.

## Overview of Types of Intervention Activities

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The instructional strategies and activities to learn the alphabet in this manual are playful, fun, engaging, and active. They should be taught in short, ten to fifteen minute increments as part of intervention instruction for students of any age who need to improve their letter naming and alphabetizing skills. These activities can also be integrated into the core curriculum as supplemental strategies.

The activities are organized under four categories, as follows:

- Learning the Alphabet With Songs
- Matching Letter Shapes to Letter Names
- Letter Sequencing (Alphabetizing)
- Building Fluency in Letter Recognition and Naming

## Intervention Activities

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### Learning the Alphabet With Songs

#### *8-1: Singing the Alphabet Song With Varying Pace and Rhythm*

##### **Brief Description**

Children sing the alphabet song at various paces, from very slow to very fast. A very slow pace is most important so that children are forced to articulate the letters LMNOP, which are often run together when the song is sung at its normal tempo.

##### **Materials Needed**

Three pictures for the teacher: a turtle, a person walking, and a rocket or jet.

Alphabet strip with uppercase letters for each student.

##### **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. The teacher holds up one of the pictures to indicate the pace at which the song is to be sung (turtle = very slow; walking person = normal; rocket or jet = fast).
2. The students sing the song at the appropriate pace.
3. The teacher holds up the turtle picture for the LMNOP letters so that the students realize these are separate letters.

4. VERY IMPORTANT: As students begin matching letters with letter names, and the students can sing the song at the slow or normal pace, they should touch each letter as they sing the song.

### **Additional Information**

Many children learn the letter names before the shapes of the letters by singing the alphabet. When children know how to say the alphabet before they learn the names for each symbol, they can anchor the name to the visual representation of the letter.

### ***8-2: Singing Only Part of the Alphabet Song***

#### **Brief Description**

Children sing only part of the alphabet song, starting and ending at given letters..

#### **Materials Needed**

Pocket chart, a magnetic board, or some other way to display letters.

Letter cards or magnetic letters.

Three pictures: a turtle, a person walking, and a rocket or jet.

Alphabet strip with uppercase letters for each student.

#### **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. The teacher places the start and stop letters in the pocket chart or the magnetic board.
2. The teacher holds up one of the pictures to indicate the pace at which the song is to be sung (turtle = very slow; walking person = normal; jet or rocket = fast).
3. The students sing the song at the indicated pace from the starting letter to the stopping letter.
4. Students touch each letter as they sing the song.

### ***8-3: Singing the Alphabet Song to Other Tunes<sup>1</sup>***

#### **Brief Description**

Sing the alphabet song to other common tunes to help students realize that LMNOP are five separate letters.

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<sup>1</sup> Neuhaus Education Center 2002, 4.

## Materials Needed

Large cards with the letters displayed for the songs (see examples below).

## Detailed Description

Make a large song card that students will be able to see. This song card shows the letters arranged as they will be sung to match the tunes. Table 8.1 shows two examples that are provided in the Neuhaus Education Center's publication called *Reading Readiness Manual*. This manual is an excellent resource, and other activities from it will be included in later chapters.

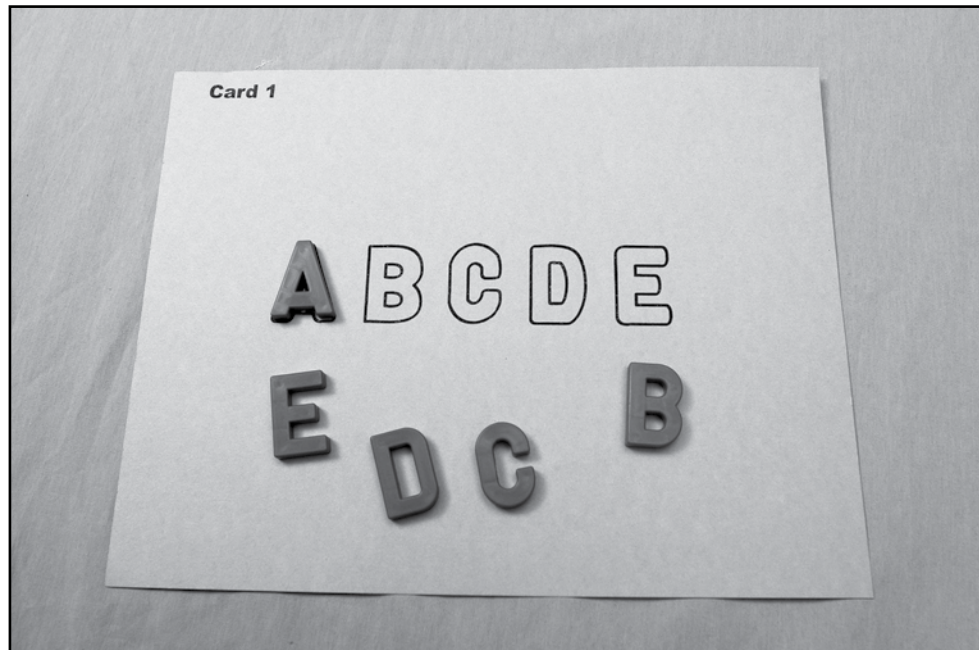
Table 8.1

### Singing the Alphabet Song to Other Tunes

Mary Had a Little Lamb A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z	Old McDonald Had a Farm A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
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## Matching Letter Shapes to Letter Names

### 8-4: Pre-Arc Cards<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Neuhaus Education Center 2002, 1.

## **Brief Description**

Teach the alphabet to students who have little knowledge of the letters using cards containing five letters at a time and plastic letters that match the size of the letters on the cards.

## **Materials Needed**

For each student:

Five cards, with the following letters on them, in a size that matches the plastic letters (use cardstock and laminate, if possible):

ABCDE    FGHIJ    KLMNO    PQRST    UVWXYZ

Individual plastic letters (all 26 letters).

## **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. Teacher gives each student the individual letters A, B, C, D, and E and the card with ABCDE on it.
2. Teacher introduces each letter by holding up the letter and pointing to it on the card.
  - a. Teacher says, “This is the letter A. Touch the letter A on your card and say A.”
  - b. Students touch the letter and say, “A.”
  - c. Teacher says, “Find the plastic letter A and put it on top of the A on your card.” Students find the individual letter and put it on the correction position on their cards.
  - d. Repeat steps a-c for all five letters.
3. Teacher then asks students to scramble the letters, and arrange them on the mat as they say the name of each letter.
4. After students have mastered the first five letters, teacher repeats the exercise with the next five letters.
5. When students have learned more than one card, they can review all the letters they know.

## **Additional Information**

This activity is a precursor to one of my favorite activities for improving letter recognition skills, the Alphabet Arc. Alphabet Arc activities, developed at the Neuhaus Center in Houston, Texas, involve naming each letter and placing a plastic letter over the spot where the letter is outlined on a mat. The 11 × 17-

inch mat has the traced letters arranged in an arc from the lower left corner of the page to the lower right corner.

In spite of the fact that the letters appear on the arc in alphabetical order, this arc can be overwhelming for some children who enter kindergarten knowing fewer than 10 letters of the alphabet. They need to work with a smaller group of letters to master a few at a time before working with all 26 letters.

For these students, the first step is to work with the blue plastic letters, five at a time per card. I call these cards “pre-arc cards”; the master for these five cards (there are six letters on the last card) is in the Neuhaus Center’s *Reading Readiness Manual*. Try copying these cards on different colors of cardstock so when children move from one card to the next, you can celebrate moving to the “blue card.” Blue plastic letters that exactly fit the letters on the arc are available from a company called Abecedarian for \$1 per set. (Teachers can also make their own materials if they prefer.)

Make this as multisensory as you can. Ask the children to feel the plastic letters and tell you about which ones have straight lines, curvy lines, circles, or a combination. Also, always remember to review after the children have learned two or more cards. Check for mastery by playing a game with all ten letters. For this activity, be sure to review the letter names and not the sounds.

### 8-5: Alphabet Arc Side I<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Neuhaus Education Center 2002, 2.



### **Brief Description**

Students learn to name and identify each letter by placing a plastic letter over the matching letter on an arc.

### **Materials Needed**

Alphabet Arc, preferably copied on yellow 11 × 17-inch cardstock.  
Uppercase letters to match the letters on the Alphabet Arc.

### **Detailed Description**

After the children in the intervention group have mastered all five pre-arc cards, introduce the Alphabet Arc Side I. This is the side of the Alphabet Arc mat where all the letters are traced on the arc, in contrast to Side II where only the A, M, N, and Z appear on the arc. Generally, the Side I mat is copied on yellow cardstock and Side II on blue cardstock. The blackline master for these mats is in the *Reading Readiness Manual*, and the blue plastic letters that exactly fit the letters on the arc are available from a company called Abecedarian for \$1 per set. (See Table 8.2 at the end of this chapter for contact information.) These materials are so inexpensive that teachers can feel comfortable sending sets home with children. When first introducing the Arc Side I, it's best to start with five or ten letters and let the student become familiar with using the same blue plastic letters on a new format. When a student can say the names of all the letters and place them on the mat in two minutes, he has reached the goal. Don't be surprised if it takes several months for some kindergarten intervention students to reach this goal. Some teachers ask the children to time themselves with a timer and chart their progress in reducing their own "personal best" time.

## ***8-6: Matching Letters Game***

### **Brief Description**

Children use movable alphabet letters to match uppercase and lowercase letters.

### **Materials Needed**

One set of uppercase letter cards or tiles for each student.  
One set of lowercase letter cards or tiles for each student.

### **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. The teacher gives one student (the moderator) a set of uppercase letters in a paper bag. The rest of the students (contestants) get a set of lowercase letters. Use only the letters that have been or are being taught.

2. The contestants place the letters face up in front of them.
3. Moderator reaches into the bag, holds up a letter and says its name.
4. One contestant is “on the spot” and the other contestants are the “checkers.”
5. All contestants say the name of the letter and find the matching lowercase letter, hiding it in their hand.
6. The “on the spot” contestant shows his letter. He gets one point if he is correct.
7. The “checkers” show their letters. If the “on the spot” contestant is incorrect, all the checkers who have the right answer get a point.

### ***8-7: Matching Uppercase and Lowercase Letters***

#### **Brief Description**

Students arrange movable alphabet letters on top of a template that has the opposite case of letters.

#### **Materials Needed**

- One set of uppercase letter cards or tiles for each student.
- One set of lowercase letter cards or tiles for each student.
- One template with the uppercase letters on it.
- One template with lowercase letters on it.

#### **Step-by-Step Directions**

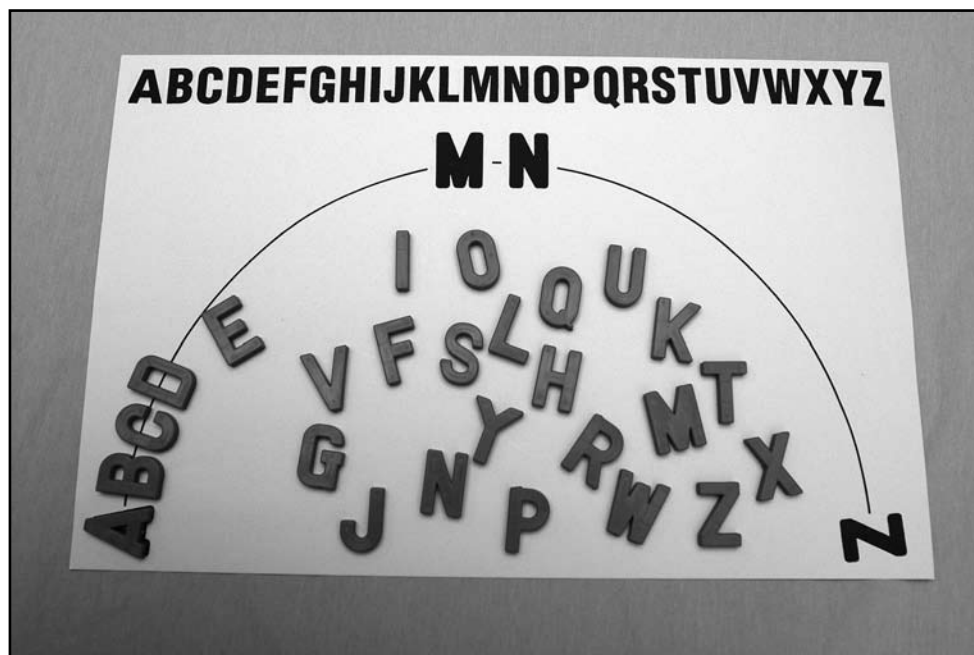
1. The teacher gives each student a template with the uppercase or lowercase letters on it and a set of movable alphabet letters that is the opposite case.
2. The teacher times the students as they place the movable alphabet letters on top of the corresponding letters on the template.

#### **Additional Information**

This activity works especially well with magnetic letter tiles because the letters don’t move after the student places them on the template. Also, the students can hold up their whiteboard with the tiles on it when they finish, enabling the teacher to check their answers. They are also good for activity centers because children can create their answers and carry their “answer sheet” (the whiteboard with magnetic letter tiles on it) to the teacher to be checked.

## Letter Sequencing (Alphabetizing)

### 8-8: *Alphabet Arc Side II*<sup>4</sup>



#### **Brief Description**

Practice in sequencing the letters in alphabetical order on an arc that has only the beginning, middle, and end of the alphabet provided.

#### **Materials Needed**

Alphabet Arc Side II, preferably copied on blue 11 × 17-inch cardstock.  
Uppercase letters.

#### **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. Ask the student to find the A and place it on the arc.
2. Then find the Z and place it, and finally the M and N and place them.
3. The student continues by placing all the letters in the correct alphabetical order while naming them.
4. When the child has finished placing all her letters, ask her to check the order by touching and naming each letter, starting with A and moving to Z.

<sup>4</sup> Neuhaus Education Center 2002, 5.

5. Repeat this activity frequently until the child can consistently place all the letters in the proper order within two minutes.

### **Additional Information**

The purpose of this arc, which is slightly more challenging than Side I, is to learn to sequence the alphabet. Only four letters appear on the arc: A, M, N, and Z. A and Z anchor the two ends of the arc, and M and N anchor the middle. When a student places letters on this arc, he is forced to know the order of the alphabet, not just match the plastic letters to the traced letters. To provide extra support the letters appear in a straight line at the top of the page.

### ***8-9: Other Games With the Alphabet Arc***

In the *Reading Readiness Manual* there are at least a dozen other games to play with the arcs and plastic letters. These can be found in the first section of the manual. In one of these games, two students in the intervention group can play, or the teacher and student can play. Each player places all his letters in a brown paper bag. The players reach in their own bags, grab a letter, slap it down on the mat, and try to be the first to move it to its proper place on the arc. The player who gets his letter on the mat first gets to keep the letter on the arc and the other player returns the letter to his bag. The game is over when one player has all his letters properly placed on the mat.

## **Building Fluency in Letter Recognition and Naming**

### ***8-10: Instant Letter Recognition Charts***

#### **Brief Description**

Use chart with random arrangement of letters to build fluency in identifying and naming letters.

#### **Materials Needed**

Set of cards with rows of letters arranged in random order.

#### **Detailed Description**

Another activity for building fluency in letter naming is to read letters on a chart as quickly as possible. The *Reading Readiness Manual* provides blackline masters of over ten pages of letter charts at the end of the first section of the manual. Letters are arranged ten to a line on these charts, in either uppercase or lowercase. If you wish to make a chart with a different font or one that mixes uppercase and lowercase, there is a blank chart at the end of the masters.

## ***8-11: Letter Naming Flash Cards***

### **Brief Description**

Student reads letter names as teacher (or another student) flips a deck of cards with letters on them.

### **Materials Needed**

Cards with letters on them (these can come from a kit or the teacher can make them).

Decks can include duplicates of some or all of the letters.

### **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. Teacher shuffles the deck.
2. Teacher flips a card and student names the letter.
3. Teacher continues flipping cards as fast as student names the letter.
4. Correctly named letters are placed in one pile.
5. Misnamed letters are placed in a different pile to be reviewed later.

Note: Students can work in pairs for this activity. This activity can be timed.

## ***8-12: Closer to Z<sup>5</sup>***

### **Brief Description**

Students practice alphabetic order by identifying whose letter is closer to Z.

### **Materials Needed**

One set of plastic letters.

Brown paper bag.

### **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. Each student works from one set of letters in a brown paper bag.
2. Both students choose a letter without looking and simultaneously place the letters on a desk.
3. Each student names his letter.

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<sup>5</sup> Neuhaus Education Center 2002, 9.

4. The player with the letter closer to Z wins and picks up both letters.
5. The winner says, “I win because \_\_\_ is closer to Z than \_\_\_.”

### **8-13: Missing Letter Decks<sup>6</sup>**

#### **Brief Description**

Cards with a sequence of two to five letters in alphabetical order, in which one or two letters are missing; students name the missing letter(s).

#### **Materials Needed**

Four decks of index cards with letters missing from the sequence (see detailed description below).

#### **Detailed Description**

The activity for developing fluency with letter naming is called the “Missing Letter Deck.” It can start with the simpler task and then increase in difficulty. Students see cards with two letters plus a line to indicate a letter is missing. As the cards in the deck are flipped, students name the missing letter on each card. Teachers can make these cards by using 3 × 5-inch cards. When working on the early part of the alphabet, the cards might look like this:

Set 1:



Make a deck for the entire alphabet and practice it in order first before shuffling the deck. Then increase the difficulty. Set 2 and Set 3 each are more difficult than Set 1 and also provide variety for this activity.

Set 2:



Set 3:



As the student becomes more proficient working with the cards in Sets 1–3, he is ready for Set 4, in which one middle letter is provided between lines for letters missing before and after the target letter. Set 4 cards would look like this:

<sup>6</sup> Birsh 1999, 100.

Set 4:



For a Friday game, cards from all four sets can be mixed. This activity, along with over a dozen others, is described in the fourth chapter of a book called *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills* (Birsh 1999). The chapter on letter recognition was written by Kay Allen and Marilyn Beckwith from the Neuhaus Education Center.

### Commercially Available Products for Developing Letter Naming Fluency (LNF)

All the activities described in this chapter can be made with minimal expense. A list of commercially available products is included for two reasons. Many times teachers prefer to purchase rather than make materials. Additionally, interventionists like to vary their routines for lesson plans. The Alphabet Arc, which is emphasized in this chapter, is well-liked by both students and teachers. It can serve as the primary activity for building letter naming fluency. It is helpful to have some other materials that can be used to bring variety to the intervention sessions.

The first place to check for additional materials is your core reading curriculum. Many core reading programs (also called basals) have an audiotape with a song for each letter of the alphabet and letter cards that can be used for teaching the alphabet. It is best to check the kindergarten materials because they most often have the letter cards that contain only the uppercase and lowercase letters. At this point, since we are not yet teaching letter-sound associations, it is best to find the cards with only the letter and not the keyword picture. A list of some commercially available products is included in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2

**Recommended  
Commercially  
Available  
Materials for  
Letter  
Naming  
Intervention**

Name	Description	Contact Information*
<b>Alphabet Songs &amp; Books</b>		
	Audiotape with songs about each letter of the alphabet.	ABC Sing-Along Flip Chart and Audiotape www.etacuisenaire.com IN61894 \$24.95
	Collection of 26 alliterative stories—one for each letter of the alphabet.	AlphaTales www.etacuisenaire.com IN62140

Table 8.2

*continued*

<b>Teaching Letter Names</b>		
Alphabet Arcs	Master for Arc in <i>Reading Readiness Manual</i> (Neuhaus Education Center 2002).	Neuhaus Education Center www.neuhaus.org \$35
Alphabet Arc Letters	Set of 26 plastic alphabet letters in self-sealing plastic bag. Blue uppercase and red lowercase. English and Spanish.	Abecedarian www.alphabetletter.com Uppercase English alphabet letters \$1 per set plus shipping
Paper for Alphabet Arcs	11 x 17" —67 lb. Wausau Exact Vellum Bristol	Available at paper, art, and office supply stores
<b>Developing Fluency in Letter Recognition</b>		
Tactile Letters Sorting Set	Set with divided plastic trays containing letters. Cards for uppercase and lowercase, and plastic letters to match.	www.etacuisenaire.com IN61753 \$64.95
Clever Catch ABC Ball	24" inflatable vinyl ball with letter and keyword pictures.	www.etacuisenaire.com IN61674 \$10.95
Lakeshore Alphabet & Number Beads	Brightly colored plastic beads with alphabet letters to use to string.	www.lakeshorelearning.com LA11 \$29.95
Hands On Literacy Phonics Cubes	Color-coded soft cubes that are like medium size dice with letters on all sides.	www.etacuisenaire.com IN62726—uppercase IN61109—lowercase \$12.95 for set of 6
Hands-On Soft Alphabet Dice	Small alphabet dice that are foam so they are quiet.	www.etacuisenaire.com IN62740 \$7.50
Toss 'N' Play Alphabet Bean Bags	Beanbags that are 4½ inches square in assorted colors. Upper and lowercase on same bag.	www.etacuisenaire.com IN61709 \$37.95
Alphabet Sorting Kits Lakeshore Learning	Vinyl mat with colored dots with alphabet letters. Includes chunky plastic letter that match.	www.lakeshorelearning.com TT845—upper \$24.95 TT846—lower \$24.95

Note: Prices at time of printing. Please contact vendor for current information.



## Intervention Activities for Oral Reading Fluency (ORF)



### Overview on Fluency

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#### Why Fluency Is Important

Reading fluency has sometimes been called the “neglected” component of reading. Until recently core reading curricula gave little attention to the need to build passage fluency. This all is changing now. Fluency is gaining attention and is receiving additional research funding. According to the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report, 44% of the fourth graders were not fluent in their reading. This finding came from a component of the NAEP assessment in which examiners listened to students read passages orally and rated their reading on a scale. The examiners described the 44% of readers who were not fluent as reading in a slow and choppy manner.

In spite of the increasing recognition of the importance of fluency in reading instruction, there is no universally accepted definition for it. Some educators and researchers emphasize that fluency is accuracy and automaticity in recognizing words while reading. Others assert that fluency is best described as occurring when a reader reads so rapidly and effortlessly that he pays little attention to mechanics such as decoding. Still others focus on the appropriate use of prosody, or the expressiveness of the reader who reads fluently. A description of fluency from *Put Reading First* follows:

*Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly. When fluent readers read silently, they recognize words automatically. They group words quickly in ways that help them gain meaning from what they read. Fluent readers read aloud effortlessly and with expression. Their reading sounds natural, as if they are speaking. (Armbruster et al. 2001, 22)*

Fluent reading sounds natural because it is divided into meaningful chunks, with appropriate pauses at the end of phrases, clauses, and sentences. One reason

skilled readers achieve this prosody is that they recognize a high percentage of words automatically. Automaticity is a term used to describe how a skill can be applied without having to devote attention to it. Fluency requires automaticity, although more than automaticity is required to achieve prosody and expression.

Many times automaticity and speed are connected with regard to fluency. Indeed, speed when reading is important, but extreme speed is not necessary to be an excellent reader. In order to read fluently, the reader must be able to read rapidly enough to hold the meaning until the end of the sentence. Yet if the speed is too fast, meaning can suffer. So reading must be automatic, and at a pace that is above some minimum level in order to process meaning and below an overly speedy level in order not to lose meaning.

### **Importance of Rapid and Automatic Word Recognition**

Instant word recognition has long been recognized as a critical task in efficient reading. There are at least two tasks that compete for the emerging reader's attention—word recognition and comprehension. Achieving accurate and automatic reading at the word level is a skill needed to be able to devote adequate attention to making meaning (comprehension). Readers who are accurate at reading words can devote attention to making connections between what they read and their background knowledge, as well as to other ideas in the passage.

### **What Causes Dysfluent Reading?**

There are a variety of problems that can cause students to lack fluency. Readers who read dysfluently often lack underlying skills, such as phonemic awareness or an understanding of phonics. It is important to understand why a student isn't reading fluently in order to figure out which problem to address. According to Louisa Moats in Module 5 of the *LETRS* curriculum (Moats 2002, Book 2, 71), some possible underlying problems that can cause a lack of fluency include:

- Low proportion of words recognized “by sight”
- Variations in processing speed of known words
- Low speed when reading unfamiliar words
- Using context to identify words
- Low speed when identifying word meanings

As discussed earlier in this book, intervention begins at the lowest point of failure. If a student is not reading fluently, then it is critical to understand which early reading skills are missing so that intervention instruction can

be provided at the appropriate level. Too often teachers assume that a second grader knows the skills that have been taught, such as that a silent e assists a vowel to have its long sound, or even a skill as basic as being able to name the letters quickly and automatically. When these skills are missing and they are not taught, the student will never catch up.

### **When Is a Student Ready for Fluency Building?**

Students are not ready for activities or strategies to build fluency with text reading until they can read words accurately. In other words, the other lower level skills have to be in place before it is time to begin building fluency at the passage level. Once a student has a sufficient level of phonemic awareness and letter knowledge, the alphabetic principle, where the letters and sounds can be connected, develops. Then from this base, the student is ready to learn phonics. Once he has learned the basic phonic relationships and can read word lists, it's time to build fluency at the word level. Learning how to blend at a sound-by-sound level precedes learning to identify an unknown word in "chunks" such as syllables, prefixes, suffixes, base words, and common letter combinations. Once rapid and accurate word decoding skills develop, then it's time to work at the sentence level. At this point, if the student has all these underlying skills in place, then it's time to build fluency in connected text or passages.

When a student cannot read words accurately, there is no point in beginning fluency activities at the passage level. It's like trying to work on speed in bike riding before the child has his balance completely coordinated or his pedaling skills mastered. Children who stumble over every few words and aren't able to bring a variety of skills together to decode unknown words are not ready for working on fluency at the passage level. In order to build fluency at the passage level, the student needs to be able to decode the passage fairly accurately, yet is not able to read it rapidly enough.

Students who are ready for fluency building activities read accurately, but haltingly or very slowly. They don't get stuck a long time on unknown words; they just go at a slow pace. Fluency activities are to improve speed, rhythm, and smoothness when reading, not to improve word reading accuracy.

### **Research-Based Interventions for Acquiring Passage Fluency Skills**

One of the strongest research findings is the positive relationship between fluency and comprehension. Children who read fluently also comprehend well. That is because it is necessary to read fluently to have attention to dedicate to comprehension. While reading fluently doesn't automatically guarantee

comprehension for every reader, only a few students can decode well and with appropriate speed but not comprehend as they read.

Studies have also demonstrated that measuring oral reading fluency can serve as a proxy for measuring overall proficiency in reading. One minute measures of oral reading fluency are known to be the best measures of reading ability.

The primary technique for building fluency is repeated readings, where the student reads the same passage aloud with an adult or a student partner who can provide guidance. A substantial amount of research supports that rereading the same passage helps build fluency not only in that passage, but other passages as well.

There are two common approaches for repeated reading. The first approach is to reread the same passage orally with guidance, individually or in groups. The second approach is to read aloud while listening to a passage on a tape recording for feedback on accurate decoding of the words. Both are described in activities 11-1, 11-2, and 11-3, following. There are other common group activities for developing fluency, including reader's theater, choral reading, and echo reading. Repeated reading and partner reading may be more efficient in improving fluency than reader's theater.

While independent silent reading may be useful for building vocabulary and other skills, at this point there is not adequate research to validate this practice for the purpose of building fluency.

### **Selecting the Appropriate Passage for Building Fluency**

It is important to select appropriate reading materials for fluency activities. When working on fluency activities, the student should be able to read the passage with 95% accuracy (independent reading level). This means that the student only misses one out of every 20 words. To calculate reading level, simply divide the number of words read correctly by the total number of words read and multiply by 100. This gives the accuracy percentage.

For readers who have recently mastered phonics relationships, selecting a highly decodable passage is helpful. Decodable passages have a high percentage of words that follow regular phonics relationships and very few irregular words. Using decodable text in fluency exercises enables the student to practice reading words with sound-symbol correspondences he knows, and to use that knowledge when he encounters words he doesn't recognize automatically "by sight."

While practicing fluency with connected text, it is best to supply the word when a student struggles more than a couple of seconds on any given word.

This is because the purpose of these activities is to build fluency in passages, not to learn how to decode words. If the student is struggling with a few words, particularly frequent nonphonetic words that appear in the passage, it may be helpful to provide an opportunity to practice these words separately from the passage reading. (Remember that if the student cannot read 95% of the words accurately, the passage is too difficult for a fluency activity.) In some curricula, using a word list or a chart of words provides practice reading individual words. Other curricula suggest having the student make index cards to practice difficult words.

## How Fluency Is Calculated

Fluency is generally represented as the number of words read per minute. Teachers have two choices for calculating fluency. They can either have students read a passage for one minute and count the number of words read correctly. The number of words read correctly in this case is also the number of words read per minute.

The second method is to have a student read an entire passage that is fewer or more than 100 words. The teacher records the student's time and calculates the words read correctly per minute using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{words read correctly}}{\text{total reading time in minutes.}}$$

For example, a student who takes 2 minutes and 13 seconds (133 seconds, or 2.22 minutes) to read a passage with 237 words and makes 17 errors (a total of 220 correct words) has a rate of 99 words per minute. (Round a fraction to the nearest whole number.)

$$\begin{aligned} & \frac{220 \text{ correct words}}{2.22 \text{ minutes}} \\ & = 99 \text{ words per minute} \end{aligned}$$

The DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency Measure uses a one-minute timed reading. Words pronounced incorrectly, substitutions, and omissions are all considered errors, and are indicated by marking a slash line through the incorrect word on the examiner's copy of the passage. Self-corrections within three seconds, repetitions, and insertions are not counted as errors, but they do negatively affect the fluency score by taking extra time.

## Fluency Building Programs

Fluency instruction generally should begin once a student knows all the sounds and can accurately decode words with the following patterns:

- One-syllable words with digraphs and blends
- One-syllable CVC words
- The most common nonphonetic sight words

Decodable books are best for fluency work until the student can read this type of text somewhat fluently. After that the student may be ready for other types of fluency instruction.

*Read Naturally* is one of the most widely used fluency building programs. Candyce Ihnot, a former Title I reading specialist, developed this program for students experiencing reading difficulties. The program provides leveled passages and manuals with procedures. Some schools establish *Read Naturally* as a supplemental program that can be part of an intervention program, or used as part of an after-school program.

*Read Naturally* uses a procedure to place students in the appropriate leveled books. After they are placed in the appropriate book, students select a passage and, before they read the passage, write a sentence to predict what the passage may be about based on the title and the pictures. Then the student reads for one minute from a passage without rehearsal and underlines unknown words. After he finishes reading, he uses a blue pencil and graphs the number of words he read correctly in the minute for his “cold read” starting time.

After the initial reading, the student reads the same passage aloud softly while tracking with his finger and listening to a tape-recorded version of the story, timing each practice. After a number of practice readings and once he reaches his goal time, he answers some comprehension questions about the passage. Then the student invites the teacher to listen to him read the passage aloud. He records his score on the graph in red and moves to the next passage.

For more information on *Read Naturally*, see the Web site at [www.readnaturally.com](http://www.readnaturally.com). A paper written by Dr. Marcia Davidson on the research supporting this program can be downloaded from the Web site. The paper also describes the *Reading Fluency Monitor*, which is a fluency assessment that can be used in conjunction with *Read Naturally*.

# Intervention Activities on Fluency

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## Building Fluency With Repeated Oral Readings

### *11-1: Repeated Oral Readings*

#### **Brief Description**

Students read the same story orally several times and chart their times.

#### **Materials Needed**

Passage at the student's independent reading level.

Timer.

Chart.

#### **Step-by-Step Directions**

1. Select a passage at a student's independent reading level and mark an asterisk after word 100.
2. On the first day, time each student individually while the student reads the first 100 words of the story. Record the story title, date, and number of minutes for this reading of 100 words.
3. Optional step—have student practice reading a list of as many as 30 selected words from the passage. These words should be high frequency or nonphonetic words.
4. On days two, three, and four, student rereads the same passage. Record times each day.
5. On the fifth day, student reads the passage again. Record the time and chart the student's progress across the five days. Select a different passage for the next five days.

#### **Additional Information**

Any set of passages can be used for this activity, yet they must be carefully examined to make sure that they increase in difficulty gradually, and that each student begins with a passage at his independent reading level. A collection of decodable passages is published in a manual distributed by the Neuhaus Education Center called *Practices for Developing Accuracy and Fluency* (2000). There are 30 passages in order of estimated grade level equivalents from first to fourth grade. Each story has an asterisk marked after the 100th word. Rapid Word

Recognition Charts are provided with about 30 words for each story, as well as student charts to record the day one and day five timings for each story. The first page of the manual gives directions on placing students in the appropriate starting passage, and also in how to calculate the student's fluency rate and accuracy.

## ***11-2: Partner Reading***

### **Brief Description**

A stronger reader is paired with a weaker reader. They read a passage aloud together, either at the same time or sequentially (with the stronger reader going first).

### **Materials Needed**

Two copies of a passage for the pair.

### **Step-by-Step Directions**

Pairing students allows the stronger reader to help the weaker reader. A procedure is given below for how to pair students so that the distance between the student's reading skills is about right. You may also want to model how you want them to read and to establish some ground rules about when and how to help when your partner is struggling. Suggest that they wait a short time (five seconds is usually about right) before supplying an unknown word. It is important to discuss expectations with students so that no child feels that their partner is embarrassing them.

Steps for Determining Pairs in a Classroom:

1. On a piece of paper, list all students from highest to lowest reader.
2. Cut the paper in the middle of the list and place the two pieces next to each other.
3. Pair the top reader with the student at the top of the bottom half of the list, and so on.
4. Give both students a copy of a passage and ask the stronger reader to read first.
5. The weaker reader follows along and rereads the same part of the passage.
6. It is best if both students have a copy of the passage so they can follow along. Another possibility is to have the students point to the words as they are reading or listening.



## **Additional Information**

While students are paired they can either alternate reading parts of the passage, such as a paragraph at a time before switching, or they can simultaneously read it orally. When simultaneously reading the passage, typically the stronger reader reads just a slight bit ahead of the weaker reader, almost “pushing” the weaker reader gently to keep up a slightly more appealing pace. The weaker reader can also benefit from hearing the phrasing of the stronger reader.

## **Other Strategies for Building Passage Reading Fluency**

### ***11-3: Audiotaped Stories***

#### **Brief Description**

Student listens to an audiotaped recording of a story, while reading aloud along with the text.

#### **Materials Needed**

Copy of the story for each student.

Audiotape of same story.

#### **Detailed Description**

In order to build fluency with the text, children can listen to a reading of the story on an audiotape while reading along. It is important that the student follows along while listening, so encouraging him to move his finger with the reading while he reads aloud is a good practice. You can purchase audiotaped stories, check them out from the public library, or make tapes by recording the story yourself. Another idea is for older students to make the tapes for younger students. Parents can be encouraged to make tapes for their children who are receiving intervention instruction.

### ***11-4: Echo Reading***

#### **Brief Description**

The teacher reads a section of a passage, accentuating appropriate phrasing and intonation, followed by the students echoing it as they read their own copy of the passage.

#### **Materials Needed**

Copy of the passage for the student and the teacher.

## Detailed Description

Struggling readers need to hear what fluent reading sounds like and then try to imitate it. This activity provides a very structured activity where the teacher reads a short section of the passage with expression and proper phrasing. Then the student immediately reads the same line, following the teacher's example. This echo reading continues for the entire passage.

## Commercially Available Products for Developing Oral Reading Fluency (ORF)

The first place to check for additional materials is your core reading curriculum. Many core reading programs (also called basals) have books that can be used for fluency passages, as well as audiotapes of some of the books. A list of some commercially available products is included in Table 11.1.

Table 11.1

**Recommended  
Commercially  
Available  
Materials for  
Improving  
Fluency**

Name	Description	Contact Information
<b>Fluency Programs</b>		
<i>Read Naturally Master's Edition</i> (Software Edition also available)	Program to develop fluency. Blackline masters for stories in levels 1-8, as well as audio-taped versions.	www.readnaturally.com \$95-\$105 per level, including 24 stories and tapes
<i>Fluency First!: Daily Routines to Develop Fluency</i>	Fluency program developed by Tim Rasinski and Nancy Padak. Each grade level includes passages, word work, a CD-ROM with passages, etc.	Wright Group/McGraw-Hill, 2005 www.wrightgroup.com \$299.97, Complete Kit, Grade 1
<i>Practices for Developing Accuracy and Fluency</i>	Manual with 30 graded passages, high frequency word charts, student timing charts, & CD with taped stories.	Neuhaus Education Center's fluency manual www.neuhaus.org \$35, with CD
<b>Resources for Teachers</b>		
<i>A Focus on Fluency: Research-Based Practices in Early Reading Series</i>	30-page publication about fluency. Followed a summit in the fall of 2002.	Published by the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning; available online. www.prel.org
<i>The Fluent Reader: Oral Reading Strategies for Building Word Recognition, Fluency, and Comprehension</i>	Book by Tim Rasinski with tips on building fluency.	Scholastic Professional Books www.Scholastic.com ISBN 0-439-33208-7
<i>Building Fluency: Lessons and Strategies for Reading Success</i>	Book by Wiley Blevins with background information about fluency, as well as mini-lessons and activities	Scholastic Professional Books www.Scholastic.com ISBN 0-439-28838-X
<b>Books on Tape</b>		
Listening Center B	Books on audiocassette	www.etaquisenaire.com IN62686 \$599.95
Also LeapPad and Quantum-Pad Learning System		Leapfrog www.leapfrog.com

Note: Prices listed are at time of publication. Please contact vendor for current information.