

What Is A Good Reader?

By Carole Richards

Every year the United States spends billions of dollars trying to improve the reading skills of our children. Yet according to our federal government, half of the adult U.S. population is functionally illiterate. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, given to children nationally in grades 4 and 8, statistically shows test results have not changed significantly in decades.

Ohio has now changed its tactics to improve the literacy skills of Ohio's children. Since receiving a federal waiver from No Child Left Behind, Governor Kasich has proposed, and our legislature passed, the Third Grade Reading Guarantee.

We all recognize the importance of good reading skills in order to be successful in school, in work and in life. But what is a good reader, really?

More than twenty years ago, I researched reading tests and determined that there are only two reading components: decoding (*the ability to read individual words effortlessly*) and comprehension (*the ability to understand why you read*). While these components can be broken down into more detailed skills (i.e. story parts, interpretive theme or main idea), decoding and comprehension are the two major reading skills.

Decoding

Yes, there is a system to the English language and the way words are constructed. There are 44 sounds broken into 6 categories: short vowels, long vowels, consonants, digraphs, "r" sounds, and diphthongs. I am sure you have heard of the first three, the second three categories may be less familiar.

Next there are 5 vowel and consonant patterns in virtually every word in the English language. If a word has a vowel – consonant – consonant – vowel pattern or VCCV, the pattern is always broken between the two "C's" or consonants.

Finally there are 7 syllable rules. Syllables are the small pieces in words. Remember clapping syllables in school? For example, "fan – tas – tic." These syllables have rules to explain why a vowel is "short" or "long". What if the vowel has two letters in it? What if the "r" controls the vowel?

Knowing this system dramatically improves a student's ability to read little words as a small child and bigger words as an older learner. Yes, even adults benefit from knowing the system.

So why is this system so important? Most parents think their child has poor comprehension skills when, in fact, they can't read the big words efficiently enough to understand what they read. (*Our schools now call this fluency.*) We find that with most children of average or better intelligence, and not on the Autism spectrum, reading skills are compromised by poor decoding skills and not comprehension skills. So by learning the structure of words, reading comprehension improves as decoding improves.

Comprehension

Books also have three structures: fiction (storybooks), nonfiction (textbooks), and procedural manuals. In school one typically reads fiction and nonfiction. Both fiction and nonfiction have pretty simple structures. Currently under the Common Core Curriculum, Textbooks (nonfiction) is the primary focus in the classroom.

Nonfiction (Textbooks)

Nonfiction textbooks and articles have a simple structure. Textbooks have a subject and title that are connected like an electrical plug and socket. Then each topic has main ideas, supporting details and sub-details. If a student can "outline" the text using this structure, studying for a test becomes much simpler. Less memorization is required because the structure holds the information in a logical format.

The student must also understand the structure of their textbook: table of contents, glossary, and index. They need to know how the charts, graphs, pictures, etc. connect to the text.

Fiction (Literature)

Fictional stories have a setting (where and when), characters (personality and appearance), problem (protagonist and antagonist), rising action and climax. Before a student can understand the higher level components of fiction, they need to be able to visualize the structure. It helps make sense out of the story.

More complex analysis of reading

Often, it appears that reading is much more complex than the two components, decoding and comprehension. There are more facets requiring higher level thinking skills. For example, what is the theme of a story? However, before you can analyze fiction or nonfiction you must be able to “comprehend” the structure of the written material.

So, What Is a Good Reader, Really?

It is really quite simple. If a reader efficiently reads every word in a book, he or she will understand the book much better. And if a reader understands the structure of fiction (literature) and nonfiction (textbook), he or she will be much more able to interpret, analyze and think critically about what is read.

And in turn, those pesky Ohio Achievement and Ohio Graduation Tests, now called the computerized/paper pencil Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC test), will be much easier for students to pass. Our third graders will have a much better chance of passing the Third Grade Reading Assessment if they can decode and comprehend what they are reading.

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