

The Fast ForWord® to Reading Series: Content and Instructional Strategies for Reading

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Overview

The Fast ForWord® to Reading product series was designed to incorporate findings from decades of scientific research and to follow the recommendations of the National Reading Panel. Exercises within the Fast ForWord® to Reading products utilize a repertoire of instructional approaches consistent with educational best practice – for example, tasks and content are organized to follow a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence. The exercises are delivered through the use of computers, with technology that automatically makes data-based decisions about students' needs and acts accordingly. This adaptivity gives the Fast ForWord® to Reading series the flexibility needed to reach individual students and to work within their individual strengths and weaknesses.

The five sections that follow summarize the instructional strategies and content of the six products in the Fast ForWord® to Reading series, as they pertain to the five key reading skills identified by the National Reading Panel.

General References and Resources:

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Phonemic Awareness

As discussed by Moats, Adams, Liberman and others, phonemic awareness consists of several underlying skills. As these skills develop, the following, increasingly difficult phonemic awareness tasks can be mastered: isolation, identification, categorization, blending, segmentation, and substitution. Products in the Fast ForWord® to Reading series use many of these tasks to progressively build phonemic awareness skills, making care to link the skills to the learning of grapheme-phoneme associations and the decoding and spelling of words. Linking phoneme awareness training to reading and spelling is the instructional strategy most favored by research (for example, see Foorman et al, 2003).

The greatest emphasis on phonemic awareness is seen in the first three products in the Fast ForWord® to Reading series: Reading Prep, Reading 1, and Reading 2. The exercises within these products are designed to move progressively through the content in a manner motivated by linguistic theory and cognitive research. In general, each of the phonemic awareness exercises progresses from initial consonants, to final consonants, and then to vowels. They also progress from sounds that are easy to discriminate to sounds that are more confusable. All of these exercises rely on highly familiar, concrete vocabulary to allow students to focus on the words' phonemic structure.

While Reading 3, Reading 4, and Reading 5 put less emphasis on building phonemic awareness, these products continue to build phonemic awareness skills in the context of word analysis, decoding, and spelling exercises. These exercises help develop flexibility in targeting units that differ in size and in spelling pattern. They help students become sensitive to the complex relationship between phonology and spelling, so that they can overcome such reading challenges as homographs, homophones, and pronouncing words for the first time. These exercises move beyond familiar, concrete vocabulary to introduce more advanced, academic vocabulary.

The typical phoneme awareness exercise involves sorting words according to some aspect of phonemic structure. For example, in Reading 1 the student might hear the word “bear” and categorize it as a word that starts with /b/. Across the first three products, stimulus words for the phonemic awareness exercises are always presented aurally. In Reading Prep and part of Reading 1, the aural stimuli are often paired with pictures, which serve as a support for memory and as an aid to children with limited vocabulary. In the later part of Reading 1 and all of Reading 2, pictures are phased out, and the aural stimuli are paired with text. In Reading 3-Reading 5 the aural stimuli are phased out and only text is presented. Thus, the student moves more and more into the realm of reading and of recovering the spoken words that printed words stand for.

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Phonics, Decoding, and Spelling

Phonics is the understanding of the alphabetic principle, namely that letters stand for phonemes. To learn phonics is to learn the relationship between the letters and spelling patterns of a written language, and the sounds of the spoken language that they represent. As Stanovich, Ehri, the Libermans, Moats, Foorman, McCandliss and many others have cogently shown, it is extremely important for students to be clued-in to the alphabetic principle, in order to achieve reading success.

There are various ways to teach phonics, as Moats has shown. For example, decoding tasks require translating a written word into a spoken one, and spelling tasks require translating a spoken word into a written one, but both kinds of task rely on phonics knowledge. The exercises in the Fast ForWord® to Reading series make use of many phonics approaches, while following a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence.

Letter names are learned and practiced, in Reading Prep, and students are familiarized with the idea that letters can stand for sounds. In Reading 1, the focus shifts to mastering the most common letter-sound mappings for single consonants and short vowels. Students learn to decode more complex spelling patterns such as two-consonant clusters and long vowels with silent-e, in Reading 2, and they practice working with word families. Reading 3 increases the complexity further, with three-consonant clusters, consonant- and vowel-digraphs, and the introduction of multi-syllabic words and words with suffixes. Reading 4 helps students learn to read and spell words with more complex rule-governed spellings as well as irregular spellings. Finally, in Reading 5 students get concentrated practice in reading and spelling words that use different

spellings for the same sound (e.g. foci, hydrogen, tide and delightful all have different ways of achieving the long 'i' sound).

The exercises within Reading Prep-Reading 2 require students to match, sort, and manipulate letter tiles and short words. The exercises within Reading 3-Reading 5 require students to complete partial spellings, spell words to dictation, or categorize words according to their phonemes, morphemes, or spelling patterns. Within each of the exercises the student must choose the correct letter or word from among a carefully constructed set of foils. Initially, the foils are highly differentiated from the target; however, as the student progresses, the similarity between target and foils increases along both the auditory and visual dimensions. This progression allows students to hone their knowledge of how letters map onto sounds.

Across the products in the Fast ForWord® to Reading series, the pool of words used in the phonics and spelling exercises systematically changes to increase the level of challenge. The earliest products emphasize short, familiar, concrete words with highly regular spellings. However, as students progress through the product series, they are presented with words of increasing length and morphological complexity, spelling patterns that proceed from very regular letter-to-sound correspondences to more and more abstract relations between letters and sound, and vocabulary that are more abstract and academic. However, to accommodate students of varying skill levels, each product includes easier and more challenging words, in addition to words appropriate to the level at hand.

For the beginning reader, one of the most challenging features of written English is its depth of transcription (Mann, 2000). English has a deep, morpho-phonological spelling system, which encodes not only the phonemes of a word, but also the word's morphology (e.g., root, prefixes, suffixes). As word pronunciations have shifted over time, retaining the spelling of morphological units has sometimes come at the cost of losing simple transparent spellings. This can be seen with some of the most frequent words in English like "one" and "have" which appear to contradict the alphabetic principle because they violate the expected letter-to-sound correspondences. In Reading Prep-Reading 2, such words are only presented in exercises designed to build sight recognition rather than those designed to build phonics. Morphological spelling presents its greatest challenge in the grade three and beyond, when students are learning to read multi-syllable words. Thus, Reading 3-Reading 5 put greater emphasis morphological spellings and bring less-regular spellings into the phonics exercises.

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Fluency

As Wolf et al. point out, fluency can be conceptualized as both a goal of reading instruction and as a developmental process. The process of developing fluency relates to gaining efficiency and integration of the many subcomponents of reading. Attaining the goal of reading fluency relates to crossing a bridge from “learning to read” to simply reading with comprehension and enjoyment. This transition occurs because fluent readers no longer need to devote substantial effort and attention to recognizing letters, retrieving word meanings, or parsing sentences; rather, they can apply their mental energies to engage with the writer’s ideas, arguments, images, characters, or themes.

The gold standard of reading fluency is effortless and expressive oral reading. Indeed, some research suggests that oral reading fluency is the best single measure of overall reading ability. Yet before the reader can successfully read even simple texts aloud, they must attain some degree of automaticity and accuracy in various component skills. These two aspects of fluency are developed across the Fast ForWord® to Reading series. Automaticity is facilitated by delivering high numbers of learning trials within each session, requiring repetitive practice, and encouraging rapid (but still accurate) responses. Accuracy is facilitated by providing immediate feedback after every learning trial and by the application of reward and progression rules designed to discourage guessing and impulsive responses.

Within exercises, students often have to repeat the same set of items several times with a high degree of accuracy, before they can progress to another content set. Within and across exercises, students are often required to work with the same phonemes, letters, words, or passages in multiple ways. For example, across exercises, a student may be required to spell a word, to identify its function in a sentence, and to understand its meaning in a paragraph.

Some exercises provide practice with the same content in two modes. The standard mode is designed to help students focus on a specific stimulus set until a high level of accuracy is reached. After students demonstrate mastery for a given content set, the same content will be presented in a speeded mode. In this mode, extra points and other motivational devices encourage students to respond rapidly, further building their automaticity. In both the speeded and the standard exercise modes, making an error will lead to a brief time-out. Though brief, these delays prevent the student from earning as many points as they would like. For this reason, students quickly learn that going as fast as they can without sacrificing accuracy for speed is the most successful strategy.

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Vocabulary

Phonics skills will help a student learn to recognize the spoken word represented by a string of letters, reading clearly involves more than relating printed words to sounds. The ultimate goal is to relate printed words to meaning. Successful readers must be able to relate written words to known oral vocabulary in order to create meaning from a text. In addition, successful students must become skilled at going beyond their known oral vocabulary and acquiring new terms. For instance, when reading a word like 'transpire' for the first time, a student with strong vocabulary skills may be able to infer the word's meaning by integrating morphological, syntactic, and contextual cues. Beginning readers learn how to read the words that they know, but ultimately they will learn new words through their reading experiences. Thus, vocabulary is an end product of the reading process as well as a necessary starting point for reading.

To truly know a word is to appreciate it as a unit of sound, grammar, and meaning. Because readers need to be familiar with all three of these aspects, the Fast ForWord to Reading series

cross-trains a reader to manipulate words in several ways, using level-appropriate vocabulary in a variety of contexts that can build comprehension and background knowledge as well as flexibility. In the context of a variety of tasks, including sorting, filling in the missing word in a sentence or passage, and answering multiple-choice questions, students are given opportunities to focus on the sound, grammar, or meaning of words. Through structured and repeated practice, students deepen their knowledge and familiarity with words they have learned, while also learning new words.

Reading Prep reinforces basic color, shape, and size concepts while students learn to follow simple commands. Reading 1 and Reading 2 present a wider array of words and concepts, but continue to pair simple, concrete terms with pictures. Repetition and feedback guide students to learn a progressively larger set of words. From concrete words and relations that are clearly depicted to more complex meanings and relationships that are inferred from context, the exercises become more demanding as the pupil achieves greater competence. In Reading 3, students must flexibly attend to various aspects of sound, morphology, syntactic role or meaning to sort words. In Reading 4, they must apply these aspects of vocabulary knowledge to make fine distinctions between similar words to complete partial sentences. In Reading 5, students get extensive practice with a set of key vocabulary words that cover Latin and Greek morphemes widely used in English, as they complete analogies. In addition, Reading 1-Reading 5 provide opportunities for students to practice vocabulary building skills such as using passage context to infer the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary and ambiguous terms.

Most children learn to speak a language before they learn to read it; thus, achieving a strong oral vocabulary is a necessary starting place, especially for students with limited English proficiency. Accordingly, the Fast ForWord to Reading series begins with an emphasis on words with concrete meanings, and words that are frequently used in spoken English. Ultimately, however, the emphasis turns to more abstract and academic words. The choice of words employed in different products is motivated by considerations of readability, as well as word frequency and typical age of mastery. As the vocabulary becomes richer and more academic, and as the task becomes more abstract, the needs of students with limited English proficiency continue to be met, with devices such as built-in glossaries.

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Comprehension

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. In the words of J. Chall; “readers master the medium to achieve the message.” Helping students master the medium of written language is one of the central goals of the Fast ForWord to Reading series; however, it also helps students learn to interpret and analyze linguistic messages. All of the products from Reading 1 through Reading 5 include comprehension exercises. The exercises incorporate such preferred instructional approaches as the use of leveled texts, decodable texts, and repeated reading. In addition, many of the exercises prepare students to answer the kinds of multiple-choice comprehension questions traditionally employed in reading assessments.

The product and exercises follow a developmentally appropriate sequence by controlling the difficulty of both task and text. The exercises present a variety of tasks in order to strengthen different comprehension skills, while building reading flexibility. As students progress, they work with sentences and passages of increasing length, more varied and advanced vocabulary, and more complex grammatical structures. At the earliest levels, students are presented with very short passages and simple, literal comprehension questions. As they progress, they will be presented with passages of increasing difficulty, along with new kinds of question to answer, different ways to think about and work with text, and different varieties of text, such as poems, tables, and graphs.

Work by Yopp has emphasized that early literacy experiences should include both fiction and informational text. In keeping with this, both types of material are included within our products beginning with Reading 1. Spoken language comprehension is the precursor of written language comprehension, thus the comprehension exercises in Reading 1 present all passages and sentences aurally. This permits children who are not yet readers to gain experience in listening for comprehension. Likewise, by using pictures to represent response choices, non-readers can gain experience in answering who, what, where, when, why, and how questions about a passage. The stories and non-fiction passages in Reading 1 and Reading 2 are presented in print as well as aurally, and reading-along is supported by the combination of line-by-line highlighting and a slowed speech rate. Reading 2 moves students toward increased independent reading with decodable sentences and the rereading of familiar passages.

The later products in the Fast ForWord to Reading series emphasize more advanced comprehension and analysis of text. In Reading 3-Reading 5 passages are presented in print only, so independent reading is now required. Literal questions are presented at every level, but an increasing emphasis is placed on questions that require inference, thinking about cause and effect, making predictions, and understanding figurative language and literary devices. In addition to reading and answering comprehension questions, students are given different tasks that require working with text. Some tasks help students attend to structural markers of meaning within text, such as punctuation, word morphology, and sentence structure. Other tasks help students learn strategies for understanding and retaining information such as creating graphic organizers and summaries.

The National Reading Panel has concluded that reading instruction is enhanced when it is combined with writing instruction. Several exercises in Reading 4 and Reading 5 take this combined approach – building writing skills along with reading comprehension. In these exercises, students are challenged to construct well-formed complex sentences, to select one sentence that accurately paraphrases several others, or to effectively order sentences and paragraphs into passages several hundred words long. These, and other tasks in the later products, foster a metacognitive understanding of reading and text by requiring the student to attend to the underlying organization of a text and to think critically about both the message and how it is being delivered.

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