

# FLUENCY IDOL

## Using Pop Culture to Engage Students and Boost Fluency Skills

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As literacy educators, we know that for children to be successful readers, they must be fluent and comprehend a range of texts. A decade ago, the National Reading Panel identified five critical components of reading instruction, yet even today that report guides what occurs in many classrooms. Fluency, one of these core components, has multiple definitions, which include the ability to read at an appropriate pace, with accuracy and automaticity, and with proper prosody or expression (e.g., Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005; Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010; Rasinski, 2004).

According to the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000):

Reading fluency is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension, but is often neglected in the classroom. If children read out loud with speed, accuracy, and proper expression, they are more likely to comprehend and remember the material than if they read with difficulty and in an inefficient way. (What is Fluency section, para. 11)

The report also noted that fluent readers develop over time when given opportunities to practice reading aloud. A decade later, with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), fluency has been again identified as a foundational skill necessary for children to be successful readers.

Research supports that fluency is an essential bridge between word recognition and comprehension (e.g., Rasinski, 2009, 2012). Reading fluently helps free working memory so children can focus on the meaning of text instead of laboriously figuring out individual words. Teaching fluency is important, not because it is an end in itself, but because of its impact on comprehension.

Kuhn and Stahl (2003) found that fluency instruction that includes assisted approaches and attention to rhythm and expression are generally most effective. The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL) format in particular is a promising approach. The FDL is a short 10–15-minute lesson that incorporates teacher modeling, guided practice, and repeated readings (Rasinski, Padak, Linek & Sturtevant, 1994; Rasinski, 2012).

Fluency instruction is most effective, according to Rasinski (2006), when instruction “on accuracy, automaticity and prosodic reading...occur in unison—in an integrated and synergistic manner” (p. 705). Rasinski (2009, 2012) encouraged that

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teachers take an integrated approach by including *modeling* of fluent reading, *assisted reading* in which the child reads along with a fluent model to allow the child to hear and see the words being read, and *practiced readings*.

### **Fluency Idol in Second Grade**

Fluency Idol builds on best practices in fluency instruction. It combines repeated readings, practice, supportive feedback, and oral performance. Coauthor Taylor is a second-grade teacher in a large school district in Maryland. I, Taylor, created Fluency Idol in my second-grade classroom to build on the students’ love of pop culture while looking to encourage oral performance in a new and different way.

Fluency Idol is an exciting part of our Friday afternoons. I send a new poem home each week with the students. Their homework is to practice the poem at home using their family as audience members. We also practice the poem with partners in class so I am able to hear their improvements each week. This practicing encourages repeated reading and allows for feedback and guidance.

Every Friday, three students are chosen to make an appearance on Fluency Idol. They use a toy microphone and love to be in front of the class showing off all their amazing practice. We complete a secret ballot to choose the Fluency Idol for the week. Each of three students receives a certificate for their hard work throughout

the week. I use a flip camera to record students so they can hear their performance and see their ongoing fluency growth. My students love the friendly competition, and every Friday they all look forward to a new and exciting Fluency Idol!

Fluency Idol steps are as follows:

- Selecting the poem—Every Monday the teacher and children select a poem at each child’s independent reading level.
- Practicing the poem—Poems are practiced throughout the week in pairs, at home, and with the teacher.
- Performing the poem—Every Friday, three children perform on Fluency Idol. Performances are recorded to allow each performer and his or her family to see what went well and what he or she needs to work on.
- And the Winner Is...—The class completes secret ballots to select the week’s Fluency Idol based on who made the reading enjoyable to listen to and easy to understand. All of the participants receive a special Fluency Idol certificate for their efforts.

Kristy and Ellen decided that, with all of the success that Taylor was having in her second-grade classroom engaging all readers and tapping into their love of performing, we would use Fluency Idol in a summer intervention program for K–5 students. Our goal was to engage students and motivate them to want to read aloud. We agreed with the premise of Rasinski, Homan, and Biggs (2008) that effective fluency instruction “may be even more of a concern for those students who experience difficulty in learning to read and comprehend what they read” (p. 3).

### **Fluency Idol in a Summer Reading Clinic**

Twenty-three children, ages 5–10, enrolled in our Reading Clinic. All were reading at least one grade level below the district’s benchmark. According to reports by their classroom teachers, most of these children were frustrated at school, lacked motivation, and had a negative attitude about reading.

#### ***Preintervention Data***

The children who attended the clinic participated in testing sessions run by clinicians—graduate students in our college’s Reading Specialist program. As part of a battery of assessments, the children were given an adapted version of the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990). We modified this instrument to include data about children’s perception of their reading fluency, including what they thought about their ability to read quickly, accurately, and with expression,

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and also whether they liked to read aloud to others.

Parents completed a survey that captured their perceptions of their child’s reading fluency and competence as a reader. Clinicians also completed a Multidimensional Fluency Scale (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991) for each child, which on a scale of 1–4 measured the child’s expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace and determined an overall fluency score. These measures were used as baseline data for the fluency intervention.

### ***Kicking Off Fluency Idol***

The children attended clinic for a half day, four days a week for six weeks. They worked in small groups facilitated by the clinicians. Two undergraduate interns focused on the fluency intervention. These interns were taught how to model fluency effectively and how to provide meaningful feedback. The interns used echo and choral reading as fluency-building teaching strategies. They pulled the children for 10 minutes a day. The rest of the time the children worked in groups on literacy-related activities including word study and comprehension strategy instruction. Data were collected weekly using the Multidimensional Fluency Scale (MDFS).

Along with pulling the children for targeted fluency support, children also read to therapy dogs every week to practice reading fluently in a relaxed, comfortable environment. Think of it as relaxed repeated readings with

Rover. The dogs (and their owners) were provided by the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (READ) organization. The children chose an independent-level book or poem to read to the dogs each time.

During the last week of clinic, the children selected their favorite independent-level text. Most chose poems or fiction. The children practiced reading their text in their pull-out sessions, where they focused on

prosody and expression, phrasing, and polishing their performance. The children also took the text home for a week to practice daily with their families. To make it feel more like American Idol, toy microphones were available if children wanted to practice with them. On the last day of clinic, we hosted the big event—Fluency Idol!

### ***The Big Day Arrives—Fluency Idol’s in the House!***

The “stage” was adorned with a Fluency Idol banner and balloons. The children eagerly awaited the big event as the emcee got the audience—peers and adults—warmed

up and ready to listen. Each performer entered the classroom through a streamer-covered doorway. The children all gave (and received!) booming rounds of applause—before and after each performance. All performers earned Rock Star bookmarks and a balloon. Did we find the newest Fluency Idols? Yes, we did. We found 23 of them!

### ***Postintervention Data***

After the event, we asked the children to share their thoughts about why fluency matters. We also asked them to write what they thought about participating in Fluency Idol. And we administered the revised Elementary

Reading Attitude Survey to children while parents completed a survey. The goal was to determine whether there was any change in the children’s perceptions of

themselves as readers or any changes in parents’ perceptions.

### ***What We Found—In Their Words***

All of the children, except one, were very positive and enthusiastic about performing in front of their peers. The children wrote that Fluency Idol was “a success” and various forms of “awesome.” Other comments included, “Today was vary fun” and even “fantastik” and “cool.” One of our favorite



quotes came from a very quiet first-grade boy who noted that Fluency Idol made him “Hape.”

The responses about why fluency is important were encouraging across all ages. The children in grades 4–5 shared insights about pacing, expression, attending to punctuation, the importance of practice, speed, and monitoring “how you’re reading to know when to go back and fix it.” The K–3 children shared that fluency means to “read smoothly,” “read with expression,” “to not read like a robot,” and to “read not too fast, but not too slow.”

Over the six weeks, there was an increase in MDFS scores from an average of 8.0 to 10.5, with the greatest increase found in expression and volume. Repeated readings seemed to be particularly helpful. Children had multiple opportunities to read both with and without feedback. When reading with the interns and clinicians, the children were given direct guidance. When reading with peers or to therapy dogs, the focus was on practice and enjoyment.

When reading with therapy dogs, every child appeared comfortable and seemed to enjoy the experience. Several children showed the dogs the pictures, talked directly to the dogs, or petted the dogs as they read. One child summed up the value of reading to the dogs to develop confidence when she wrote, “They never correct you, they just listen.” When asked what they thought about reading to the dogs, several children wrote that it was “fun” or “cool.” One child noted it was “Good because we got to pet the dog!” whereas another said it was “Funny because I got to read to difid [sic] dogs.” Another said that he would “rather read to kids”—a negative we were happy to hear!

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The parent post-intervention data were interesting. The biggest growth areas that parents noticed in their children were (a) their child liking to read aloud and (b) their child’s decoding skills. The perception of the parents that their children like to read aloud was particularly positive. The area that decreased was their child reading quickly. We believe that as the children learned about the importance of pacing, they became increasingly more adept at knowing how to control their speed.

### **Final Thoughts**

From our experiences in a college reading clinic for K–5 students and in a second-grade classroom, we strongly encourage teachers to try various forms of performance reading. Along with popular choices like Readers Theatre and student-led read-alouds (Rasinski, 2003), adding new forms of performance reading such as Fluency Idol can be very engaging for children *and* their teachers!

Not only does Fluency Idol get children working hard on their oral reading and encouraging one another’s performances, but it also builds in opportunities for repeated practice as well as supportive feedback from peers, teachers, and family members. Incorporating poems and texts chosen by students for their Fluency Idol performances gives children a purpose for practicing and encourages them to “practice a text to recreate the voice of the author so that an audience listening

to the performance of the text read aloud will fully appreciate the meaning that is embedded in the voice of the reader” (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2009, p. 19).

We also encourage teachers to find local organizations like READ, Paws for People, or Therapy Dogs International to locate therapy dogs and their owners who will volunteer to come to schools for informal fluency reading practice. Local libraries are great resources for finding these organizations. The calming effect that the therapy dogs have on the classroom environment and watching even the most reluctant readers reading aloud is well worth the time and energy it takes to find these volunteers.

We encourage you to provide your students with multiple ways to practice their fluent reading through Fluency Idol performances, repeated readings with and without feedback, and reading to therapy dogs. Not only will your students develop important fluency skills, but these activities will also help to foster a genuine love of reading.

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