



# TEN STEPS TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION SCORES

by Dr. Joe Lockavitch, author of *Failure Free Reading*

## **Step 1: Understand that Reading is More than Recognizing Words**

Reading is gaining meaning from the printed page. Students who read for meaning also read with expression. They pause at commas, stop at periods and show emotion. More importantly, they comprehend what they have read as well as raise your test scores.

Let me tell you what reading isn't. Reading is not merely being able to recognize words. Reading is not merely sounding out words. Reading is not merely being able to apply a series of quasi-regular word attack rules.

Schools that spend too much on the use of "skills-based" reading interventions do quite poorly on state tests that measure comprehension. The reason is quite clear: despite what you might have heard, the National Reading Panel did not find research that supports the pronounced teaching of phonics in the classrooms.

Actually, the Panel found that there is little to no relationship between mastery of phonics and reading comprehension past the first grade. Phonics had an even worse impact for struggling readers and adolescents.

So you must ask this question, if my school is going to be judged on the results of standardized reading comprehension tests, why are we using reading interventions that focus on teaching skills?

## **Step 2: Remember Reading Research's One Universal Reading Fact**

Reading is the most researched topic in education. Thousands of studies and articles are done yearly. Here is reading's number one universal research fact: all programs work, but not for all students. There has never been a large-scale study proving one program to be one hundred percent effective for all students – never!

You must make sure that you have a variety of different interventions available in your building. Please do not fall into the trap of simply using interventions that are only variations upon the same theme. For example, students who don't do well in phonics-based instruction, don't need more intensive small group or individualized phonic interventions. Your alternative interventions have to be different!

## **Step 3: Recognize the Three Groups of Poor Readers in Your Building.**

There are three groups of students that fall under the low literacy umbrella in your school: poor, struggling and non-responders. Poor students test in the 49th -35th percentile on standardized tests of reading comprehension. Struggling readers fall into the 34th to 15th percentile. Non-responders test from the 14th to 0 percentile in reading comprehension. Too often, poor students will give you false hope that the school improvement plan in your building is on the right track. Why? Because poor readers are the easiest to impact – especially in grades one to three. Remember: poor readers were never that far behind and they don't need much intervention to score higher. Their growth should never be the primary measurement to determine that your school improvement plan is on track.

## Step 4: Make Sure to Measure Your Reading Intervention's ROI

Reading comprehension growth is your bottom line. Students testing in the bottom percentile will have significant impact on your school's improvement plan and overall reputation. For example, you will need 13 students testing in the 90th percentile to compensate for the impact that 6 students testing in the 15th percentile will have on your scores. These students, who are the hardest to teach, will need a variety of different non-conventional reading interventions.

Time is your enemy. Don't be fooled when you hear from your staff that these students are "making growth" in their specific interventions or that "all they need is a little more time". You need to impact fast and impact big.

Businesses talk about "ROI". This acronym stands for "return on investment". Ask yourself if your students' real growth reflects the tremendous amount of time, energy and financial resources you and your staff have already expended. Forget excuses. Either you are seeing significant impact quickly or you are not. Expand these interventions if the answer is the former. Trash the interventions if the answer is the latter because you are not getting an adequate return on your investment. Your reputation and perhaps your job is dependent on your ability to make hard decisions based on cold facts. Businessmen do this all the time.

## Step 5: Process Precedes Skills

It's hard to believe but many students in your building have never really read anything that even comes close to their grade level with fluency and expression. These students are "stuck at the skills" level, with the mistaken belief that skills must precede process, e.g. how can students ever read for meaning if they don't know their phonic skills?

Go into their class. Listen to what they are being taught and all you'll hear is "word attack on steroids". They are being tested, drilled and monitored exclusively on their ability to utilize a specific set of word attack skills under the mistaken belief that mastery of these skills must precede age-appropriate reading.

Sadly, these students soon get the wrong message about what reading actually is. They begin to think reading is simply "getting the words right" rather than gaining meaning from the printed page. Listen to them read. Their voices are monotone. They fail to pause at commas or stop at periods. Although they can say or sound out all the words correctly but when asked what they've read - after this slow, emotionless process - nine out of ten times, they will respond with "I don't know!"

This is wrong. Process must precede skills. Students must first experience the process of reading - reading fluently with expression and comprehension - before skills can really make sense. It has been my experience that once this occurs, many students actually start to automatically apply skills to the reading process. In short, the process - reading with expression - must precede sounding words out or memorizing sight words. Fortunately, this is not hard to accomplish.

## Step 6: Give Your Failing Students An Alternative to Skills

Failing students need interventions that provide a much needed "alternative to skills".

What's the alternative? Start by first teaching them to master "most common words". The English language is highly redundant. Out of the most commonly printed words, 2,000 account for 90% of all the words students see in grades one through nine. Every school improvement plan must begin with the assessment of their students' current mastery level of these 2,000 words. Don't assume these will be learned incidentally. They must be taught and it is your staff's responsibility to teach them in the most direct and meaningful context.

Fortunately, teaching these 2,000 words can be done relatively easily and quickly. Please notice that I did not say drilling in isolation using meaningless flashcards. Instruction must occur in a highly structured sequential format using multiple exposures within meaningful contexts. The four key words for success are: structure, exposure, meaningful and context. Teaching the recognition of words in isolation is useless. Everything must tie back to the overall reading process. Instruction must occur with a meaningful print context.

## Step 7: Ramp Up Your School's Reading Volume Rate

Reading volume – the amount of actual student reading time – directly impacts reading comprehension. Improve their reading volume and you will automatically improve their reading performance.

Researchers have found that students testing in the 90th percentile or higher on standardized reading comprehension scores spend at least one hour a day reading outside of school. This translates to an additional exposure to 2,500,000 words a year. This is 46 times more than students testing at the 10th percentile who are exposed to just 51,000 words outside of school.

Your goal is simple. Increase reading contact time. You need to ramp up the reading volume rate of your struggling and non-responders to warp speed. If they can't do it by themselves outside of school, you must do it for them inside school. Remember: non-responders usually spend less than 6 minutes a day actively engaged in reading independently. When we improve this to 30 minutes a day, you have increased their reading volume rate by five times - a five hundred percent increase in their exposure to the most common words. Increasing their actual reading volume to 30-50 minutes a day is easily accomplished when you control for the key instructional variables that promote this.

## Step 8: Help Expand Your Students' Vocabulary

The key for dramatic and long-term success in reading comprehension centers on vocabulary. Students can't read for meaning above their language level of comprehension. Improve vocabulary and you will improve the comprehension.

Struggling and non-responding readers have the weakest vocabulary. Your staff must agree to become language teachers first, reading teachers second and content-area teachers third. The research clearly supports this order.

Failing students are not getting direct, explicit vocabulary instruction in their classroom. Two separate research studies clearly document this sad fact.

In the first study, researchers found that only 19 minutes out of 4,469 minutes of reading instruction were devoted to vocabulary instruction. Can you believe it? Just 19 out of 4,469 minutes of reading instruction. The second study wasn't much better. Researchers found that teachers spent an average of 1.67 minutes on vocabulary instruction during each 60-minute reading lesson. Less than two minutes on average. Do you know your school's average?

## Step 9: Expand Background Knowledge by Broadening Student Experiences

Reading is relating. Many students can't relate because they lack the necessary experiences needed to relate. Many come from backgrounds foreign to our culture or from houses that lack the financial resources to provide the every day experiences found in middle and upper income homes.

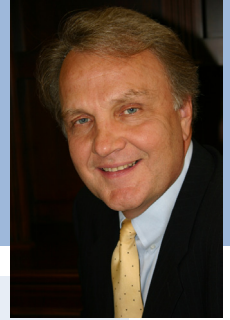
Students learn by doing: talking about something is good, seeing something is better, actually doing it is best. Whenever possible, expand your students' experiences. Background knowledge can be taught and expanded.

## Step 10: Forget the Past

Struggling students and chronic non-responders can learn to read fluently with expression from age appropriate material regardless of their prior reading ability. Forget their past. Forget where they have come from and start looking at where they are going. When schools set low expectations, schools achieve low results. Past performance then becomes simply an excuse for poor future performance.

All students – and I do mean all - can read faster, comprehend higher and complete more. Disregard the labels. Who cares if they are currently labeled as: at-risk, minority or limited English? Remember these letters: C-B-A, Conceive, Believe, Achieve! It's really up to you. If your staff thinks they can, and believes they can, then they will succeed. All they need to do is set the conditions within their classrooms that will allow them to demonstrate the innate strengths of their students.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Joe Lockavitch, a nationally recognized reading expert, is a former classroom teacher, school psychologist, university professor, special education director, applied researcher, and is the best selling author and developer of: *The Failure Free Reading Program*, *Don't Close the Book on Your Not-Yet Readers*, *Joseph's Readers Talking Software for Non Readers*, *Verbal Master-An Accelerated Vocabulary Program*, *The Test of Lateral Awareness and Directionality*, *Faster, Higher, More! 44 Ways to Improve the Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehension of Struggling Readers in the Classroom*, and *The Failure Free Reading Methodology: New Hope for Non-Readers*.

Dr. Joe has been involved in the research of over a dozen published professional articles that can be found in such distinguished publications as: the Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities, the Journal of Learning Disabilities, Special Services in the Schools, The Journal of At-Risk Issues, The Florida Reading Quarterly, Neuron and Neuropsychologica.

Among his most recent research projects was one involving the Florida State Legislature and their search for a viable non-phonetic reading intervention for their chronically failing students. Initial results showed that Failure Free Reading outperformed all other state-wide interventions by 32%.

Dr. Joe is also the host of The Reading Show with Dr. Joe - a live national call-in radio show heard weekly on: <http://toginet.com/shows/thereadingshow>

A noted speaker who is listed in Outstanding Teachers in Exceptional Education, Who's Who in American Education and Who's Who in the South and Southwest, Dr. Joe has spent the past thirty years training ten of thousands of teachers, parents and administrators across the nation on how to meet the unique needs of students with severe reading difficulties.

Featured on a segment of the PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer and frequently mentioned on national radio shows such as: Tom Joyner, Dr. Laura, Mike Gallagher and Michael Medvid, Dr. Joe holds a Doctorate of Education from Boston University and a Master of Science in Special Education from Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut.

He is currently the President of Failure Free Reading - an educational publishing and software development firm housed outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Failure Free Reading has been used by thousands of teachers to serve hundreds of thousand of students in schools across the nation. Failure Free Reading has clocked close to a million tutoring hours.



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