



A Road Map for Remediation

Part 3 Informal Assessment of Reading Deficits

In my [last blog](#), I wrote about how to gather information on a child struggling with reading, writing, and spelling deficits. That process is extremely helpful in building a “big picture” view of a child’s strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, and character. In addition it can also better inform a teacher, tutor, or parent about the most appropriate informal assessments to ascertain a particular child’s reading deficits. Today, I will briefly define the components of reading that need to be assessed, and provide a link to a [handout](#) of Informal Reading Assessment Resources that I use for my own assessments. My next blog will deal with informal assessment of spelling deficits, then later in this series I will explain how all this information can be brought together as a report, providing a road map for remediation for a child.

My [first webinar](#) explained in depth the components of reading and how they can be informally assessed. The first four reading components (phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary) are also explained in a series of blogs I wrote for [The Orton-Gillingham Online Academy](#). These can be found [here](#) under *Remediation: The Big Five*. I do plan to conclude the The Big Five reading components series by writing about comprehension.

This [handout](#) of Informal Reading Assessment Resources contains a list of assessments I have used in our practice, with links to each one. Any of these assessments can be substituted for ones not listed here, however, it is important to consider whether the substitution is still effectively assessing the area being tested. My [first webinar](#) provided forms for recording these test results.

The informal reading assessments discussed in my first webinar cover the following areas:

- Phonological and Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Sight Word Recognition (words read instantly)
- Fluency and Working Memory
- Vocabulary and Comprehension

My [handout](#) of Informal Reading Assessment Resources provides you with suggested assessments for each of these areas and I will now define each of those briefly and discuss the importance of assessing them.

I spend the most time evaluating phonological and phonemic awareness because this is the core reading deficit for most students. Phonological awareness plays a central role in the development of word-level reading. It is the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound properties of spoken words, such as syllables, initial sounds, rhyming parts, and phonemes. I like to think of phonological awareness as an umbrella term, with phonemic awareness as one of the skills that comes in under that umbrella. Phonemic awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate individual phonemes in spoken words.

Letter sound knowledge and phonological blending are vital to the process of phonic decoding. Without these two skills in place, a student will find it incredibly difficult to decode unfamiliar words and be able to identify them. Assessing phonological blending and phonemic manipulation skills gives us clues about how proficient a student is at phonological blending. When coupled with a student's letter-sound knowledge, these clues allow us to further predict how

successful they might be when they come to decode words. However it isn't until we see a student decoding real and (especially) nonsense words that we can tell how proficient they are at decoding.

Assessment of a student's sight word recognition allows you to tell which words a student can recognize instantly. My definition of a sight word is simply a word that a student instantly recognizes. They don't need to decode it because they know it. David Kilpatrick, in his book [“Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties.”](#) describes sight words as, “any word that is immediately recognized *by sight*.” That is, any previously learned words that are part of a person's sight vocabulary, regardless of whether they are “regular” or “irregular.”

Fluency is, to quote David Kilpatrick, largely “a byproduct of having a large sight vocabulary of instantly accessible words.” He references a 2005 study of 1st to 3rd grade students, by Eldredge, which concluded that development of phonics skills came before the development of skilled word recognition, which in turn came before the development of reading fluency. It is important to remember that exposure to words, and being able to identify words, is not sufficient to build a sight word vocabulary. Students must also be good at orthographic mapping; the process used to store words permanently and to recognize them in future. This process, which is necessary for encoding or spelling words, will be covered in more depth in the next blog on informal assessment of writing and spelling deficits.

All the previous assessments that have been undertaken to this point (and listed in the [handout](#)) will provide clues about whether and why a student might struggle with reading fluency.

Other factors have also been shown to impact fluency: Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN), reading experience, and prosody, which is about voice intonation. I dealt with these in depth in my [first webinar](#) and suggested resources to help webinar participants assess not only a student's fluency, but also to help them calculate a student's accuracy rate. David Kilpatrick says that

RAN difficulties are more closely related to word-reading speed than word-reading accuracy, which is why I have included it under fluency. He also gives us a nice definition of RAN:

“Sometimes referred to as rapid naming, RAN (Rapid Automatized Naming) refers to the skill of quickly accessing presumably rote information (numbers, letters, colors, or objects.) Students slower than average with RAN typically struggle with word-level reading.”

Working Memory is the ability to hold and work with information while performing a task. For example, a child is using their working memory as they recall the steps of a recipe when making their favorite meal. Difficulties in Working Memory and/or RAN indicate that a student will very likely require far more support during the remediation process and that process will very likely take longer than it would for a student who doesn't have these kinds of difficulties.

There is no doubt that vocabulary impacts comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge is essential to understanding grade level text. We all possess two semantic lexicons. One contains words we use every day and is limited to a few thousand words, but there is also a semantic knowledge lexicon that extends much further and helps us cope with a wide range of subjects. Some students function well at the everyday level, but their limited semantic knowledge lexicon will likely be impacting their reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension requires a variety of skills beyond reading the words. Comprehension may break down when a student has difficulty with any of the following: word reading, vocabulary, syntax (the arrangement of words in a sentence), background knowledge, inferencing, attention, metacognition (thinking about thinking), and working memory. All of these allow us to make sense of a text.

I have also noticed that students who are poor comprehenders often have difficulties constructing what David Kilpatrick describes as a “situation model.”

He describes it like this in his book, “Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties,”

“There is both experiential/intuitive and experimental evidence that as we read or listen to something read to us, we create a situation model of what is occurring.”

This has been referred to in many programs as the ability to visualize. I have included a link to a visualization assessment by [Erica Warren](#) in the [handout](#). (Full Disclosure: I am part of Dr Warren’s affiliate program and you can access this assessment through my [website](#), just click the image headed “DYSLEXIA PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS.”)

Many of the assessments I have suggested in the [handout](#) are untimed, but you need to look for automatic answers from a student to be sure they are proficient in the area being tested. If a student has to pause to think about the question and eventually gives the correct answer, it is unlikely they are proficient and this should be noted. I also recommend recording the assessment, because much can be missed at the time and a recording allows you to check again on a student’s automaticity and fluency as they complete a task, and not just their ability to give you the correct response.

Although this process of informal assessment and report writing, which will be discussed in later blogs, cannot provide a formal diagnosis and can never replace the assessment conducted by a professional in this field, it can go a long way to understanding your child’s reading strengths and weaknesses. It can also enable you to create a remediation road map for your child, or a child you work with.

My webinars on informal assessment of reading, writing, and spelling deficits are available from the Orton Gillingham Online Academy at the links below. These were written for teachers, tutors, and parents who wish to explore informal assessment of these skills in depth.

- [Informal Assessment of Reading Deficits](#)

- [Informal Assessment of Writing and Spelling Deficits](#)

All previous blogs written in this series entitled a Road Map for Remediation can be found [here](#).

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