



Achieve3000®

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Five Best Practices for  
Engaging Middle and  
High School Students in  
Foundational Literacy



## Introduction

A significant number of middle and high school students have fallen behind in reading fluency and comprehension. While learning loss due to COVID has compounded this problem, this is an issue secondary students and their teachers have struggled with for years.

“Even before the pandemic, this is an area that hasn’t been fully supported,” said Judith Gould, Regional Vice President, Implementation, McGraw Hill. “Students who reach secondary and have these gaps are vulnerable to academic failure and dropout.”

Alternatively, they may be pushed along and finish high school without the literacy skills they need to succeed in college and in their careers.

“I had friends who were illiterate,” said Dr. Doug Fisher, author and professor at San Diego State University, in an EdSurge article. “They just pretended they could read, and the teachers pretended, and they graduated.”

Often, these students’ foundational reading skills aren’t strong enough to successfully navigate the increased rigor of academic texts.

As more districts realize the urgency of this issue, many states have begun to add reading intervention standards for secondary students which cover phonemic awareness, word analysis, reading comprehension, and fluency. However, due to the lack of explicit instruction for students struggling with these skills, teachers are finding it difficult to include literacy across the curriculum to meet increased mandates for active reading in the classroom.

“Most teachers in secondary are subject matter experts and may not be familiar with or even want to teach foundational skills like phonics and word analysis strategies,” said Alyson Watts, Director, Achieve3000 Academic Design, McGraw Hill. “They also may not have a way to identify students who need help with these skills.”

**“Complex texts don’t give up their meaning easily. Students have to read and reread to figure out what the text is saying and what they think about that text.”**

**Dr. Doug Fisher**

With the appropriate tools and resources, teachers can overcome the challenges that come with teaching older students the basics. By providing focused, instructional support for key foundational literacy skills, secondary students can improve the critical skills necessary to achieve reading success in all content areas.

## Best Practices for Teaching Foundational Skills to Secondary Students

### 1. Rediscover the Science of Reading

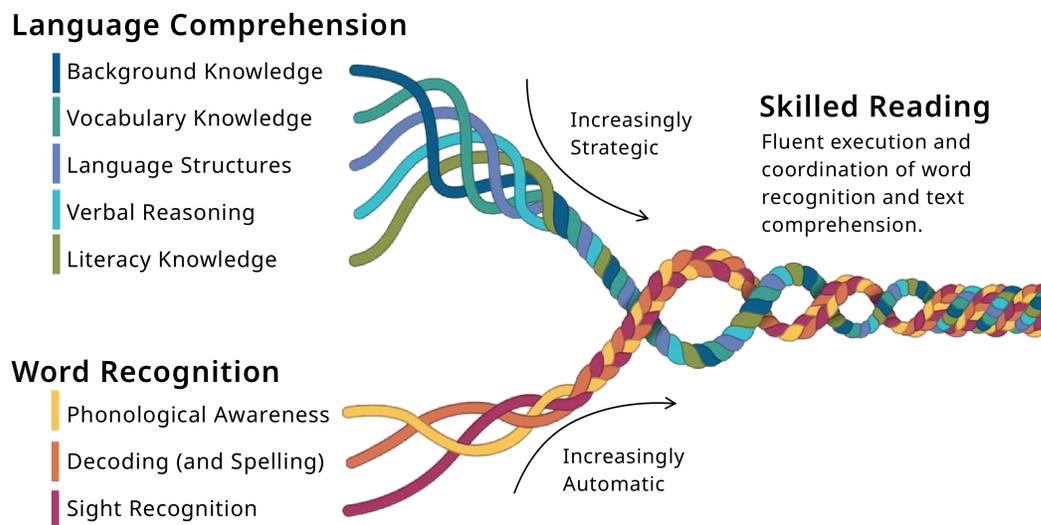
Most secondary teachers learned to teach foundational skills as part of their training, said Gould. However, since foundational literacy isn't a part of their daily teaching, it's important they get a refresher on the basics.

"Having a solid understanding of the science of reading is fundamental to adjusting and improving your pedagogical practice," notes Dr. Ana Gabriella Bell Jiménez in her guide to *The Science of Reading*.

The *Science of Reading* is a body of research covering "how we learn to read, what goes wrong when students don't learn, and what kind of instruction is most likely to work the best for the most students," according to Dr. Louisa Moats. In her guide, Jiménez discusses the Simple View of Reading framework (Gough and Tunmer, 1986), which states that students can't achieve reading comprehension unless they can decode and comprehend text.

She illustrates this framework further with the Reading Rope (Scarborough 2001), consisting of the two strands students need to master to become skilled readers:

- ✓ The language comprehension strand is comprised of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge.
- ✓ The word recognition strand consists of phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition.



"The Language Comprehension rope won't support strong readers if students are using all their thinking space to decode words," said Gould. "We need to help teachers recognize that both strands need to be equally supported if we want students to be confident readers."

Gould cites Edward B. Fry's research in noting that at least 65 percent of all text is made up of sight words. So, if students lack automaticity—the ability to decode words quickly and effortlessly—that can pose a significant barrier to reading fluency and comprehension.

## 2. Identify Struggling Students

Effective phonics instruction can't begin until you understand what students already know about essential skill words and what they're ready to learn going forward. Since spelling and word reading tap into many of the same types of abilities (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics skills, and morphemic knowledge), analyzing spelling errors can reveal a lot about a student's reading skills.

Spelling inventories are lists of words that represent spelling features or phonetic patterns. These informal assessments can be useful in establishing a starting point with phonics instruction. For example, Achieve3000 Literacy's WordStudio is a collection of supplemental digital lessons designed to support secondary students who need to strengthen their foundational literacy skills.

After completing a spelling inventory, teachers can gain insight into which lessons students might need based on deficiencies, helping to fill in the cracks.

Using the LevelSet assessment in Achieve3000 Literacy can also help determine if a student needs to build the foundational literacy skills included in WordStudio. Students can then work independently or in small groups using WordStudio to practice those skills.

"The results of the LevelSet assessment allow teachers to identify students who may be striving readers. Those results, in combination with the error analysis in the Spelling Inventory, provide two sources of information needed to more accurately pinpoint the appropriate WordStudio lessons needed to close the foundational gaps that hinder comprehension," said Neff. "These tools allow teachers to assess, target instruction, and re-evaluate to determine what has been mastered."

**"We use an error analysis as a guide to examine each spelling error, evaluating only those errors that pertain to the specific phonetic rule. We also provide a class composite chart so teachers can identify students who need the most intervention, and in which specific area."**

**Deb Neff, Senior Director, Digital Content and Operations,  
McGraw Hill**

## 3. Give Every Student What They Need

Using the assessments described above, educators can determine which lessons will be most valuable for each student, allowing them to differentiate their instruction.

"Not everyone has to start at the beginning," said Gould. "Teachers should provide secondary students only with what they need to fill in the missing pieces."

This is why WordStudio lessons provide direct instruction in targeted, bite-sized chunks, to be delivered as needed, when needed. In addition, students can see that instruction directly applied in a piece of text.

### Here's how it works:

- ✓ Students begin by watching a video in which a teacher guides them through a lesson to prepare them for independent reading practice. The video can be used independently or in small-group instruction.
- ✓ Students complete activities like reading comprehension questions and technology-enhanced items on their own, receiving guided practice at their individual Lexile level.
- ✓ Teachers can then review student progress through analytics and reinforce skills when needed.

"Differentiation is a game-changer. It builds self-confidence and motivation," said Watts. "We write up to 12 different Lexile levels of each article so we can tailor the material to each student's specific reading level. We also focus on using vocabulary we know they'll understand but that will also challenge them, as well as including context clues to help them figure out the structure."



#### 4. Provide Relevant, Age-Appropriate Materials

Motivational interventions are important factors for struggling secondary students. Studies have suggested that student motivation, in part, comes from engagement. However, tools for learning foundational skills are typically targeted to elementary students, which tends to make them inappropriate and demoralizing for older students.

The differentiated passages in WordStudio are developed using themes, topics, and vocabulary appropriate for middle and high school students. Lessons also include subject-area vocabulary that students will encounter in math, social studies, and science classes.

“If students aren’t engaged, they won’t comprehend what they read, and they won’t be learning on the level they should be,” said Watts. “We want them to be able to have fun and relate, including being able to see themselves in the stories they read.”

One of the elements that’s lacking in foundational literacy instruction for secondary students is the idea that many students grow through being read aloud to. The use of video and audio can bring reading aloud to the secondary classroom in an age-appropriate way.

**“You don’t give coloring sheets to kids who drive to school. Teachers need to provide instruction for students that honors their age. We give teachers a place to start.”**

**Judith Gould, Regional Vice President of Implementation at Achieve3000**

#### 5. Support and Engage Teachers

Developing skilled readers means supporting not only students, but teachers as well. “When we were conceptualizing WordStudio, we realized we had to concentrate as much on the teacher as the students,” said Watts. “That’s why we take a holistic approach to engaging both.”

WordStudio includes teacher guides for different teaching strategies and recommends research-responsive instruction—moment-to-moment teaching decisions educators make as they observe and analyze student reading behaviors.

Responsive instruction is an important part of any differentiated reading program, because each student’s reading needs are different, particularly at the middle and secondary levels. The ability to make different decisions for individual students at different times is the key to effective and responsive literacy instruction.

## Conclusion

**“We want students to become inspired—not passive—consumers of text. We want them to think about text deeply and then take action with the information they gain from those texts.”**

**Dr. Doug Fisher**

### Paving the Way for Independent Thinkers

Mastery of foundational reading skills is the first step towards understanding complex ideas and subject-area vocabulary. By the time students reach grades 6–12, individual readers have mastered some foundational reading skills, but not others. Since teaching will change as students develop proficiency, it’s important to provide students with the skills and strategies they need to become independent thinkers as well as readers.



For more information about Achieve3000 Literacy, call 800-838-8771 or visit [achieve3000.com](https://www.achieve3000.com)