

How many words per minute should my child read?

The full oral reading fluency table, by grade and time of year — and, more usefully, what the numbers do and do not tell you.

Reference · Hasbrouck & Tindal (2017) oral reading fluency norms

Reading speed is measured in **words correct per minute**, or WCPM. A child reads a passage out loud for a minute; you count the words they read, subtract the ones they got wrong, and that is the score.

The table below is the standard American reference for what is typical. It comes from Jan Hasbrouck and Gerald Tindal, who compiled it from assessments of hundreds of thousands of children, and it is what most US schools use.

The table

Read it like this: find your child's grade, then the time of year, then compare their WCPM to the columns. The **50th percentile** is the middle — half of children score above it, half below.

Grade	When	90th	75th	50th	25th	10th
1	Fall	<i>not normed — most children are not yet reading connected text</i>				
1	Winter	97	59	29	16	9
1	Spring	116	91	60	34	18
2	Fall	111	84	50	36	23
2	Winter	131	109	84	59	35
2	Spring	148	124	100	72	43
3	Fall	134	104	83	59	40
3	Winter	161	137	97	79	62
3	Spring	166	139	112	91	63
4	Fall	153	125	94	75	60
4	Winter	168	143	120	95	71
4	Spring	184	160	133	105	83
5	Fall	179	153	121	87	64
5	Winter	183	160	133	109	84
5	Spring	195	169	146	119	102
6	Fall	185	159	132	112	89
6	Winter	195	166	145	116	91
6	Spring	204	173	146	122	91

Autumn, winter, spring matter more than they look. Judging a Grade 3 child in September against the end-of-year figure (112) instead of the autumn one (83) makes a reader who is exactly where they should be look like they are failing. Always compare against the right season.

What the percentiles actually mean

- **At or above the 50th** — reading at a typical pace for their grade and the time of year.
- **Between the 25th and 50th** — within normal range. Plenty of children sit here and read perfectly well. Worth watching, not worth worrying about.
- **Below the 25th** — the point at which most schools would look more closely. It does not diagnose anything; it says something is worth understanding.
- **Below the 10th** — worth raising with their teacher, who can look at whether the issue is decoding, vocabulary, confidence, vision, or something else entirely.

Three things this table will not tell you

Speed is not reading. A child who reads 90 words a minute and understands none of them is not a better reader than one who reads 60 and follows the story. Rate is the easiest of the three parts of fluency to measure and the easiest to over-value.

One score is not a trend. A tired child, an unfamiliar passage or a noisy room moves a WCPM score by a surprising amount. What matters is the direction over weeks.

The text has to be right. These norms assume grade-level text. A child reading something far too hard will look much slower than they are, and a child reading something far too easy will look faster.

The other two parts of fluency

Fluency is three things, and schools score all three:

1. **Accuracy** — the share of attempted words read correctly. Below about 90%, the text is too hard to practise on, whatever the speed.
2. **Rate** — WCPM, the table above.
3. **Prosody** — phrasing and expression: reading in meaningful chunks, pausing at punctuation, making dialogue sound like speech. The US National Assessment of Educational Progress scores this 1 to 4, where a 1 reads word-by-word and a 4 reads in larger phrases with real interpretation.

A child who is fast but flat and a child who is accurate but word-by-word both need help — different help.

How to take the measurement yourself

1. Pick a passage at their grade level that they have **not** read before, around 200 words.
2. Have them read out loud for exactly one minute. Do not correct them while the clock runs.
3. Count the total words they got through.
4. Subtract any word they got wrong, skipped, or that you had to supply after about three seconds. Self-corrections do not count as errors.
5. The result is their WCPM. Compare it to the row for their grade and season above.

Our words per minute calculator will do the arithmetic and the percentile for you.

Where these numbers come from

Hasbrouck, J. & Tindal, G. (2017). *An update to compiled ORF norms* (Technical Report No. 1702). Behavioral Research and Teaching, University of Oregon. The figures above are the published percentile scores from that compilation, for grades 1 through 6.

Grade 1 has no autumn figure because most children that age are not yet reading connected text, and a number there would do more harm than good.

Free chart from myfluentreader.com — reading fluency benchmarks, a words-per-minute calculator and the full sight-word lists, free and without signing up.