

# Reading milestones, preschool to Grade 3

What is typical at each age, how wide "typical" really is, and the handful of signs that are worth acting on rather than waiting out.

Reference · ages 4 to 9

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The single most useful thing to know about this list is how **wide** normal is. At nearly every age below, the children at the 25th percentile and the 75th are both fine. The milestones that matter are not about speed; they are about whether the underlying skill has appeared at all.

## Preschool (ages 3–4)

This is before reading. What is being built is the ear.

- Enjoys being read to, asks for the same book repeatedly
- Recognises their own name in print
- Hears and makes rhymes — "cat, hat, bat"
- Knows some letter names, often the ones in their name first
- Pretends to read a familiar book from memory and the pictures

**Worth acting on:** no interest in books at all, cannot hear rhyme by about four and a half, or speech that is noticeably hard for strangers to understand.

## Pre-K and Kindergarten (ages 4–6)

The year the alphabet becomes sounds rather than a song.

- Names most letters and gives most letter **sounds** — the sounds matter more than the names
- Blends sounds into a word: "s-u-n" becomes "sun"
- Breaks a word back into sounds
- Reads a handful of common words by sight: *the, and, is, to, a*
- Writes their name; spells by sound ("kat" for cat), which is a good sign, not a bad one

**Worth acting on:** cannot hear rhyme, cannot name many letters by mid-year, or cannot blend two sounds together by the spring. These are the strongest early predictors there are, and they are checkable in a few minutes.

Most children learn to read between **ages 5 and 7**. A child reading at four is early, not gifted; a child not reading at five is normal, not behind. What matters at this stage is the sound work underneath.

## First Grade (ages 6–7)

Decoding becomes reading. The spread between children is at its widest here, and most of it is normal.

- Sounds out unfamiliar words, sometimes slowly

- Reads simple sentences and short books
- Knows roughly 100 common words by sight
- Self-corrects when a sentence stops making sense — a very good sign
- Retells what happened in a story

**Typical fluency:** about **29 words correct per minute** by winter, **60** by spring. The middle, not the target.

**Worth acting on:** guessing from the first letter, accuracy under 90% on grade-level text, or real avoidance. See my first grader is struggling with reading.

## **Second Grade (ages 7–8)**

The year reading starts to sound like talking.

- Reads most grade-level text accurately
- Reads in phrases rather than word by word, with some expression
- Handles longer words by breaking them into chunks
- Reads silently and gets something out of it
- Answers questions about what they read, not just what happened

**Typical fluency:** about **50 WCPM** in autumn, **84** by winter, **100** by spring.

**Worth acting on:** still reading word by word with no phrasing by mid-year, or accurate reading with no comprehension — which is a different problem from slow reading and needs different help.

## **Third Grade (ages 8–9)**

The year the purpose changes: from learning to read, to reading to learn.

- Reads chapter books independently
- Reads with expression that reflects meaning, not just punctuation
- Works out unfamiliar words from context and word parts
- Summarises, predicts, and notices when something does not add up
- Reads non-fiction to find things out

**Typical fluency:** about **83 WCPM** in autumn, **97** by winter, **112** by spring.

**Worth acting on:** this is the year a quiet reading difficulty stops being quiet, because every other subject now depends on reading. A child still decoding effortfully in Grade 3 needs help that will not arrive by itself.

## **The full benchmark table**

The numbers above are the 50th percentile only. The **complete fluency norms table** gives every grade and percentile, autumn through spring, so you can see how wide the normal range actually is — and our **words per minute calculator** will place a reader on it in about a minute.

## The three parts of reading, at every age

Whatever the age, reading well is three things at once, and a child can be strong at one and weak at another:

1. **Accuracy** — getting the words right. Below about 90% on a text, nothing else on the page is working.
2. **Rate** — how quickly. The easiest to measure and the easiest to over-value.
3. **Prosody** — phrasing and expression. Reading in meaningful chunks, pausing at the full stops, making dialogue sound like speech. This is the one most often ignored, and it is the clearest signal that a child is understanding as they go.

A child who is fast and flat, and a child who is slow but expressive, are telling you two very different things.

### A note on comparing children

Reading age is not a race, and the research is clear that early readers do not stay ahead by default — most of the spread closes by about Grade 4 for children without an underlying difficulty.

What does not close by itself is a genuine decoding problem. That is why the "worth acting on" lines above are about **missing skills**, not about being slower than the child next door.

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Free chart from [myfluentreader.com](https://myfluentreader.com) — reading fluency benchmarks, a words-per-minute calculator and the full sight-word lists, free and without signing up.