

Reading Volume and Practice: What the Research Really Says

Research Summary

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Why Reading Matters	4
What Works, for Whom, and When: Taking a Look at Specific Populations	8
How Much Should Children Be Reading Each Day?	10
Conclusion.....	11
What Is Reading Volume, and How Is It Measured?	12
References.....	13

Executive Summary

Reading achievement shapes not just academic outcomes but earning potential, health, empathy, and mental well-being, yet U.S. children are not reading enough, and schools are not providing sufficient practice time. Perhaps much of the blame traces to a misreading of the National Reading Panel (NRP) report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), which found insufficient evidence that encouraging more reading improved achievement, a conclusion widely interpreted as license to limit reading practice.

This paper argues that interpretation is wrong, and reviews the correlational and experimental research the NRP missed or that has emerged in the 25 years since. It then offers practical, evidence-based recommendations, discussing three populations who need special consideration: beginning readers, striving readers, and multilingual learners. **The take-home message: reading volume matters, but so does the quality and structure of that time.**

Why Reading Matters

Learning to read is the first, and arguably, the most important skill a child learns upon entering elementary school. Being a skilled reader is fundamental to participate in society, and skilled readers are more likely to stay in school, graduate, and go on to participate in higher education. Skilled readers are also more likely to have higher life satisfaction scores, earning potential, and better health outcomes compared to less skilled readers (e.g., Kern & Friedman, 2009; McLaughlin, Speirs, & Shenassa, 2012).

Reading also shapes children's stress levels, behaviors, and empathy (e.g., Brancatisano et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2025). Reading fiction strengthens theory of mind (Kidd & Castano, 2013), builds real-world empathy (Santi et al., 2025; Van Der Kleij et al., 2022), and reduces behavioral problems like aggression and depression (Sun et al., 2024). Shared reading — a common activity during childhood — lowers the risk of social-emotional problems in children (Martin et al., 2022) and decreases parenting stress while increasing parental warmth (Canfield et al., 2020). The benefits of skilled reading are, in other words, far-reaching, which makes it all the more concerning that so many children never fully access them.

Recommendation

Read Aloud at Any Age

Reading aloud to children of all ages builds vocabulary, comprehension, and the emotional connection to books that motivates children to read independently. Shared reading also strengthens the parent-child bond, increases parental warmth and sensitivity, and reduces parenting stress.

A Troubling Gap in Practice

Given the immense academic, social, and mental health benefits of reading, it is worrisome that a large percentage of children in the United States are not proficient in reading, according to several decades of national test score results (e.g., National Center for Education Statistics, 2025). While experts argue whether the rate is improving or declining, and whether we should be alarmed, one thing is clear: many students will not go on to harness the widespread, multifaceted benefits of reading because they lack proficiency.

The path to proficiency in any skill, reading included, requires one thing: practice. The idea that “practice makes perfect” is not new or novel, and yet schools allot an alarmingly small amount of reading practice time. Indeed, recent reports show that some classes only provide a few minutes each day to practice reading connected text (e.g., Capin et al., 2025). So, what’s the disconnect? Part of the answer traces back to a landmark report that has shaped reading instruction for more than two decades.

That landmark report by the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) was a sweeping review of reading research that has guided policy and classroom practice ever since its publication. After the panel reviewed the research, they concluded that time spent reading has a positive effect on reading performance. Page 3-28 of the report states, “Despite widespread acceptance of the idea that schools can successfully encourage students to read more and that these increases in reading practice will be translated into better fluency and higher reading achievement, there is not adequate evidence to sustain this claim.”

The conclusions of the NRP report, however, warrant scrutiny. Did the panel really examine all the available research? And how did other reports come to different conclusions? Has there been any new research since the report was published more than 25 years ago? If so, what does this new research recommend about reading volume, reading practice, and time in text? I will answer all those questions and more, summarizing the research, providing recommendations for reading practice time, and discussing special considerations for specific subpopulations such as beginning readers, striving readers, and multilingual learners.

Beyond the NRP Report: Why "No Strong Evidence" Is Not the Same as "No Effect"

In 1997, Congress convened the NRP in order to synthesize the growing body of reading research and to make recommendations for practice. Their report came out in 2000 and contained a section on reading volume toward the end of chapter 3 titled "Fluency." The section begins by acknowledging the idea that "practice makes perfect" is pervasive: "The importance of reading as an avenue to improved reading has been stressed by theorists, researchers, and practitioners alike, no matter what their perspectives. There are few ideas more widely accepted than that reading is learned through reading."

Yet, after their literature search, quality assessment of studies, and analysis of results, the panel stated it is "... unreasonable to conclude that research shows that encouraging reading has a beneficial effect on reading achievement (pg. 3-27)." Importantly, they do not state that encouraging kids to read is not helpful, just that there was not enough evidence at the time to support that it does: "It is impossible to sustain a negative conclusion with research. That is, the NRP cannot ultimately prove that a procedure or approach does not work under any conditions. No matter how many studies show a lack of effect due to an instructional routine, it is always possible that under some yet-unstudied condition the procedure could be made to work (pg. 3-27)."

In other words, the absence of strong evidence for a benefit is not the same as evidence of no benefit. The NRP's conclusion reflects the limitations of the research available at the time, not a definitive ruling that reading volume does not matter. How should practitioners interpret this result? Should we not provide in-class time for students to read independently? Should we not encourage reading practice time at home? The answer, grounded in a broader look at the evidence, is a resounding "no," and the next few sections talk about why.

Correlational Research Makes a Strong Case the NRP Report Overlooked

An important caveat to keep in mind regarding the NRP report is that their analysis focused on experimental studies, not correlational studies. Other subsequent reports by experts came to different conclusions than the NRP when they looked at the large body of correlational research. For example, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007) found that the "... frequency of reading for pleasure correlates strongly with better test scores in reading and writing. Frequent readers are thus more likely than infrequent or non-readers to demonstrate academic achievement in those subjects (pg. 21)."

But should we trust correlational studies to guide practice? Aren't correlational studies unscientific? Shouldn't we only focus on experimental studies, or even better: only randomized control experimental studies? I would argue not. In fact, I believe that ignoring the wide body of correlational research on reading volume and reading achievement would be unscientific and potentially harmful to students. The field of science and medicine has grown tremendously and saved many lives through correlational research alone. The correlational research on reading volume and reading achievement is too numerous and consistent to dismiss, and doing so would be inconsistent with how science and medicine more broadly evaluate evidence. Some of the most consequential public health advances in history have been built on correlational findings, and the field of reading research is no exception. There has not been a single randomized control study on effects of smoking on lung cancer, and yet we know smoking is bad for your health. These recommendations are based on correlational research. Sometimes it is unethical to perform experimental research on certain populations, like pregnant women. Yet, doctors make recommendations all the time for pregnant women based on correlational research (e.g., avoid excessive alcohol, avoid smoking cigarettes, etc.). Rather than universally dismissing correlational research, it might be more helpful to look at conditions when correlational research can be useful.

When Correlation Can Be Causation

The distinction between correlation and causation is more nuanced than it is often portrayed, and dismissing correlational evidence outright can lead researchers and practitioners to overlook findings that are both scientifically valid and practically important. Leading researchers and philosophers of science have compellingly made this case. One of the best books I've read on this topic is *Why Trust Science?* By Dr. Naomi Oreskes. It states, "The classic argument that correlation is not causation is misleading. What we should say is that correlation is not *necessarily* causation. Many things are correlated that are not causally related. But if we have an observed correlation between two phenomena, and we are aware of a mechanism that explains how one of them can be caused by the other, and if that mechanism is known to be present, then the logical conclusion is the observed correlation *is* caused by the known mechanism. Under these conditions, correlation is causation. Or at least, it is likely to be (page 116)."

This quote by Dr. Oreskes highlights the conditions when we should pay attention to correlational research: 1) when a correlation is observed, 2) when there is a known mechanism that explains how one variable can influence another, and 3) when the mechanism is known to be present. One can argue that all of these conditions are met when talking about reading volume and reading achievement. First, there is an "observed correlation" between two variables: several studies document a correlation between reading volume or reading practice and reading achievement. Second, as researchers, we are aware of a "mechanism that explains how one of them can be caused by the other." This mechanism is known as the practice effect, and there is a wide body of rigorous scientific research that shows practice leads to proficiency across a number of unrelated disciplines (e.g., Macnamara, B. N., Hambrick, D. Z., & Oswald, F. L., 2014; Share, 1999). Finally, the mechanism — in this case, the practice effect — is known to be present.

Furthermore, the correlational studies are numerous and consistent in the positive association found between reading volume and positive, favorable performance outcomes. It would be unscientific to ignore these studies.

Newer Research Corroborates What Correlation Suggests

Since the NRP report was published more than 25 years ago, new studies have been conducted using techniques that better isolate the causal effect of reading practice, and collectively, they tell a more compelling story. In 2011, Mol and Bus reviewed 99 studies in a meta-analysis and found that the relationship between volume and achievement grew stronger over time and was reciprocal. Specifically, reading achievement was associated with reading volume in the primary grades, but the strongest correlation emerged between volume and reading achievement in older students.

A study by Torppa et al. (2020) examined the effect of reading for pleasure on reading skills and reading achievement from ages five through 14. While not an experimental study (they did not actively manipulate how many minutes children read for pleasure), the researchers were able to draw directional or causal inferences using a random intercept cross-lagged model. They found that in the primary grades, the direction went from reading fluency and reading comprehension skill to reading volume. This meant that the greater the students' skill, the more they read. Interestingly, the effect of reading volume on reading achievement started in third grade.

Results from another recent study (van Bergen, E., Vasalampi, K., & Torppa, M., 2020) corroborated the results found by Torppa et al. (2020) described above. They also found a reciprocal relationship throughout development, with reading achievement predicting reading volume in the early grades and volume predicting achievement starting around grade three. They state, "In both Torppa et al.'s study and the current study, most of the print exposure [reading volume] reading skills effects only appeared from grade 3 onward. This fits with grade 3 being a turning point in reading education, when the curriculum switches from learning to read to reading to learn. After having mastered the technique of reading, children can choose reading material according to their own interests. In other words, at that age, motivation (i.e., the choice to read) can bring about significant individual differences in the frequency and complexity of the reading experiences. (pg. 13-14)."

Erbeli and Rice (2022) recently revisited the question in a narrative synthesis review and quality evaluation, and their findings were more cautious than some of the studies described above. That said, it should be noted that they followed the same stringent criteria as the NRP panel, excluding much of the correlational research from their analysis. They found no meaningful beneficial effects of independent reading on reading outcomes; however, they were careful to note that this conclusion comes with significant caveats. Due to a lack of primary studies meeting the highest quality standards, they argued it is impossible to determine whether this result is universal or whether independent reading could be effective under the right conditions.

They concluded that "... even though the evidence is incomplete, silent independent reading might still have clear value for improving reading outcomes, as it could work under specific conditions." Importantly, they suggest that independent reading alone may not be sufficient, but that sustained silent reading paired with engagement, scaffolding, and social supports shows more promise. For students with reading disabilities specifically, they note that more intensive approaches, including direct and explicit instruction alongside engaged reading practices with effective feedback, may be necessary to produce meaningful gains.

These studies converge on a similar finding: reading volume is important for reading achievement, *but only after* initial reading proficiency has developed. This finding has important practical implications. First and foremost, it means we need to consider the stage of reading development before making recommendations about the independent reading volume. In educational research, we often talk about what works, for whom, and when, and these newer studies shed light on the strength of the link between reading volume and reading performance across development. In the next section, we will dive into specific populations and make research-based recommendations for beginning readers, striving readers, and readers who are multilingual language learners.

What Works, for Whom, and When: Taking a Look at Specific Populations

Beginning Readers

Time in text is critical for early elementary students who are beginning to decode words and working on becoming fluent readers. Beginning readers need ample time in text, but unlike fluent readers, this should not be independent time. Several research studies have documented the importance of *mediated* reading time, or time in which teachers guide and closely monitor student engagement in text (McIntyre, E., Rightmyer, E., Powell, R., Powers, S., & Petrosko, J., 2006).

Examples of mediated reading activities include repeated readings, paired reading, and assisted oral reading. A critical component of this mediated reading time is that the teacher provides feedback. Indeed, in a large review of research, Hattie (1992) stated, “The most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback (pg. 11).” It is important to note that quality of reading time is not just important for beginning readers; it is applicable to older students as well. In a study on more than 45,000 students in grades 1-12, researchers found that reading volume alone was not enough to produce high achievement gains. Rather, high quality reading time and high reading volume were necessary to produce high achievement gains.

Recommendation for Beginning Readers

Prioritize Mediated Reading Time

Independent silent reading is not the most effective use of instructional time for children who are still learning to decode. Beginning readers benefit most from mediated reading activities such as repeated readings, paired reading, and assisted oral reading, during which teachers can provide immediate corrective feedback.

Readers Who Have Learning Disabilities or Those At-Risk

Time in text is important not just for beginning readers, but also readers (of all ages) who struggle with decoding and fluency. Research suggests that roughly 5-17% of students will experience significant difficulty learning to read, and for these students, the stakes of insufficient reading practice time are especially high (Wagner et al., 2020). In 2024, Dr. Heidi Anne Mesmer published a helpful review article for practitioners titled

“Time in Text: Differentiating Instruction for Intermediate Students Struggling with Word Recognition.” In it, she emphasizes that striving readers need ample time in text to practice recognizing words themselves. She gives several research-based tips for how teachers can help striving readers access grade-level text through scaffolding.

For example, research supports that students can engage with texts they initially read with as low as 80% word accuracy, provided an adult is nearby to supply unknown words and ample rereading opportunities are built in (O'Connor et al., 2010, as cited in Mesmer, 2024). Mesmer also describes the use of text sets, in which challenging grade-level texts are paired with more accessible texts on the same topic, allowing students to build the background knowledge and vocabulary needed to engage with more complex material. A third strategy involves repeated reading of the same text across a week, an approach that has been shown to produce meaningful gains in fluency, accuracy, and comprehension for struggling readers (Stahl & Heubach, 2005, as cited in Mesmer, 2024). Across all of these approaches, a consistent theme emerges: striving readers benefit most when a knowledgeable adult is present to introduce texts, support word recognition, and hold students accountable for sustained engagement with connected text.

Like the mediated reading activities mentioned above for emerging readers, striving readers also require additional support if sustained silent reading time is to be effective. One of the most well-known frameworks for structuring independent reading time is Scaffolded Silent Reading (ScSR; Reutzel et al., 2008; 2010). In ScSR, teachers arrange the classroom library so that students can select books suited to their reading levels, for example, using color codes, and explicitly teach book selection strategies such as the three or five-finger rule for gauging whether a text is too difficult. ScSR also encourages reading across a variety of genres and includes frequent brief student-teacher conferences during which teachers monitor comprehension, engage students in discussion, and provide feedback.

Recommendation for Striving Readers

Scaffold, Do Not Skip Reading Time

Striving readers need more time in text, not less, but that time must be carefully structured to be productive. Effective modifications include helping students select appropriate books that align with their interests, scaffolding word recognition when necessary, using text sets, repeated readings, and incorporating frequent feedback.

More recently, Merke, Ganushchak, and van Steensel (2024) put these kinds of structured additions to empirical testing in a meta-analysis of 51 studies. They found that simply allotting time for independent silent reading does not guarantee that students actually read, and that striving readers face particular barriers: they often lack the skills to select appropriate books, they have no built-in accountability, and they rarely have opportunities to discuss what they are reading. When structured supports were added to address these barriers, the effects were meaningful, particularly for students at risk of reading failure, who showed significant gains in reading proficiency, while stronger readers showed no such benefit. In summary, the broader research base supports helping striving readers select appropriately leveled books that align with their interests, building in accountability through reading conferences or reading logs, creating structured opportunities for book discussion, and mediating word recognition where necessary.

Multilingual Learners

Multilingual Learners (MLLs) currently make up a significant and growing share of U.S. public school students, with more than three-quarters of public schools now serving this population. The research base specifically on reading volume and MLLs is thin, but recent work by Goldenberg (2020) and Cheung & Slavin (2012) underscores that the same instructional approaches that benefit monolingual students also benefit MLLs, but that those approaches require meaningful adjustments to be effective.

For emerging or striving readers, unstructured independent silent reading is not the best use of limited instructional minutes. Research only points to several practices that can make independent reading practice time more effective for multilingual learners. Some modifications include: pre-teaching vocabulary before reading, embedding oral language opportunities and discussion into reading time, using home language as a bridge rather than a barrier, and frequent teacher check-ins. Taken together, the research suggests that reading volume matters for MLLs, but the quality and scaffolding surrounding that volume are what determine whether the time actually builds reading skill.

Recommendation for Multilingual Learners

Build Language Into Every Reading Session

Unstructured independent reading time is likely the least efficient use of limited instructional minutes for multilingual learners. Before and during reading, teachers should pre-teach key vocabulary, build in structured opportunities for oral language use, and check in frequently to monitor comprehension.

Having established what effective reading practice looks like for beginning readers, struggling readers, and multilingual learners, a natural next question is: how much reading time should students be getting each day?

How Much Should Children Be Reading Each Day?

This is a tough question to answer, especially if you want to base it on research. As we saw above, the research base on whether children should even engage in independent reading time is mixed, and the subset of studies that examined independent reading time is sparse. That said, 20 minutes a day seems to be a number that is widely circulated. The commonly cited benchmark of 20 minutes of daily reading can be traced to Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988), who found that students reading approximately 20 minutes per day encountered substantially more words per year and scored considerably higher on standardized reading tests than peers who read far less. Although this finding became a standard touchstone in reading education, it is correlational in nature, meaning it is equally plausible that stronger readers simply choose to read more rather than that reading more causes stronger performance.

If 20 minutes is indeed a reasonable target, the troubling reality is that most schools are not coming close to providing it. Research suggests that the amount of actual reading time built into typical core reading programs falls well short of what students need. Allington (2014) observed that most core programs provide only around 15 minutes of genuine reading practice per day and argued this is inadequate for developing proficient readers. This estimate was corroborated by Brenner and Hiebert (2010), who found that third-grade core programs averaged a similar amount of daily reading time. Whatever the precise target, the evidence reviewed throughout this paper makes one thing clear: the amount of reading time students currently receive is insufficient, and increasing it should be a priority for schools and educators.

Recommendation

Aim for Approximately 20 Minutes of Reading Per Day

The research does not prescribe a single universal target for daily reading volume, but 20 minutes per day is a reasonable and commonly cited benchmark that is consistent with the broader evidence base on reading practice and achievement. What matters most is that the time is consistent, that it increases as students move through the grades, and that it is accompanied by the quality and structure described throughout this paper.

Conclusion

Skilled reading matters, and its benefits extend far beyond test scores, touching nearly every domain of a child's development, from academic achievement and vocabulary growth to empathy, mental health, and lifelong well-being. Skilled reading takes ample practice, but volume alone is not enough. The correlational research on reading volume and achievement is too numerous and consistent to dismiss, and when paired with a plausible mechanism (the practice effect), it meets the scientific standard for drawing meaningful, actionable conclusions. Research conducted since the NRP report has only strengthened that case. Yet the research is equally clear that reading volume without structure and support is unlikely to move the needle, particularly for students who need it most. For beginning readers, mediated practice with immediate feedback from a knowledgeable teacher is essential. For striving readers, that teacher presence becomes even more critical: scaffolding word recognition, guiding book selection, and holding students accountable for engagement. For multilingual learners, the teacher's role shifts to building the oral language and vocabulary foundation that makes reading practice productive in the first place. Across all three populations, the teacher is not incidental to reading practice. The teacher is what makes reading practice work.

The question is no longer whether reading volume matters. It is whether we will give children the time, the books, and the skilled, attentive adults they need to become the readers they are capable of becoming.

What Is Reading Volume, and How Is It Measured?

Reading volume refers to the amount of reading a student engages in. While there is no universal definition of reading volume, it is frequently measured, reported, and discussed as minutes per day (like my son's third-grade homework assignment to "read 20 minutes for homework each night"), but it can also be measured in other ways, such as number of books read per month or year, or even number of words read per week, month, or year.

Researchers have used different means of getting an accurate estimate of reading volume. A common and easy method is self-report, where a student reports the number of books they read or the time spent reading in a reading log. Young children might forget to log their minutes and have inaccurate estimates, so a parent or teacher is often enlisted to corroborate a student's self-report after the fact or even to observe the student reading in order to time the minutes read. Another, less stringent way of measuring reading volume is to ask the student or parent (or teacher) roughly how many minutes students read each week in a questionnaire-style survey. Different methods for assessing each have their own pros and cons. While easy to administer, self-report surveys are not as accurate or specific as detailed nightly reading logs, which, in turn, can be time-consuming and cumbersome to maintain.

These distinctions in how reading volume is measured become important when discussing the research base of reading practice on reading performance or reading achievement. If students find reading logs too difficult or annoying to maintain, then the measurement accuracy (and reliability) decreases, which can compromise the validity of a research study.

As a researcher, if you cannot be certain *what* exactly you are measuring and that you are measuring it accurately, the rigor of the study can be undermined, and recommendations for translating research into practice can become muddled.

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