

## Volume, Stamina, and Avid, Independent Reading

“The amount and frequency with which one reads, or one’s reading volume, has profound implications for the development of a wide variety of cognitive capabilities, including verbal ability and general knowledge.”

– Dr. Anne Cunningham & Dr. Jamie Zibulsky,  
*Book Smart: How to Develop and Support Successful, Motivated Readers*

### Key Findings

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- » *Volume of reading* is critical in the development of reading proficiency (Johnston, 2011); volume is defined as a combination of the time students spend reading plus the numbers of words they actually consume as they read (Allington, 2012; Guthrie, 2004).
- » The U.S. Dept. of Education (2005) maintains that avid, independent reading is a widely recognized precursor to:
  - » Better skills acquisition
  - » Superior grades
  - » Desirable life related to income, profession, employment, and other attributes
- » It is during independent reading practice that students consolidate their reading skills and strategies and come to own them. Without extensive reading practice, reading proficiency lags (Allington, 2012; Hiebert, 2014).
- » Students who read widely and frequently are higher achievers than students who read rarely and narrowly regardless of their family income; so students from lower income families who read a lot score higher on reading achievement tests than do their more privileged peers who don’t read (Guthrie 2012; Brozo, et al., 2008).
- » “Independent reading is an essential practice, one that develops background knowledge, improves fluency and comprehension, heightens motivation, increases reading achievement, and helps students broaden their vocabulary” (Miller & Moss, 2013).
- » The volume of independent, silent reading that students do in school is significantly related to gains in reading achievement. (Swan, Coddington, Guthrie, 2010; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003).
- » “Students who read a lot score better on every imaginable test—the NAEP, the SAT, and the ACT. One of the best ways of doing this is to allow students to read habitually, and in ways that literate people the world over read. . . . Watch your strong readers. What

is one factor they all have in common? They read a lot” (Calkins, et al., 2012).

- » Reading volume ... significantly affects ... general knowledge of the world, overall verbal ability and academic achievement (Shefelbine, 2001).
- » “Most American students do not read a great deal. In the typical classroom, students spend less than 20% of the reading/language arts block reading (Brenner & Hiebert, 2010). Even a little more reading time can go a long way. In fact, as little as an additional seven minutes of reading per day has been shown to differentiate classrooms in which students read well from those in which students read less well” (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2009; cited in Hiebert, 2014).
- » Frequent readers are defined as children who read for fun five to seven days a week. Frequent readers ages 12-17 read an average of 39.6 books a year, while infrequent readers in this age group read an average of only 4.7 books a year” ([Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report™: Fifth Edition](#)).
- » Frequent readers have, on average, 205 books in the home and infrequent readers (a child who reads for fun less than once a week) have 129 books in the home.
- » There are three powerful factors that can predict whether a child (across ALL ages 6-17) will be a frequent reader including:
  - children's level of reading enjoyment
  - parents who are frequent readers
  - a child's belief that reading for fun is important
- » Additional factors predict reading frequency at different ages; predictors for students (ages 6-11) include:
  - being read aloud to 5-7 days a week before Kindergarten
  - being read aloud to currently
  - spending less online computer time.

Predictors for kids (ages 12-17) include:

  - having time for independent reading during the school day
  - reading more since starting to read ebooks
  - having 150 or more print books in the home.
- » Reading stamina refers to students’ ability to focus, engage with text, and read independently for periods of time without being distracted. “For students whose reading experiences occur primarily in school settings, a strong silent reading habit (of which stamina is a part) depends on the experiences that their teachers provide them. A habit such as silent reading does not occur in a single grade ...If students haven’t had the kind of support that develops solid silent reading habits by the time that they are in third grade, changing direction and developing appropriate habits may require instructional programs that are particularly well designed . . .” (Hiebert, 2014).

## More to Know: Proficient Readers Read A Lot

When it comes to the role of books and reading in increasing reading achievement, the facts are indisputable. Extensive and intensive reading—also known as avid, high-volume reading—supports not only high scores on reading achievement tests, but also a fulfilling and productive life. “For the majority of young people, enthusiastic and habitual reading is the single most predictive personal habit for the ability to achieve desirable life outcomes” (Bayless, 2010). Effective and enthusiastic reading does, as Dick Robinson maintains, “create a better life.”

Avid, voluminous reading (Atwell, 2007) is the most reliable path to the development of proficient readers; indeed, there’s no other way to become a proficient reader. No matter what we’re trying to get proficient at—ping pong, programming, or paddle boarding, we have to practice many, many hours. Malcolm Gladwell (2009) maintains that 10,000 hours is the magic number for optimal success. No surprise, then, that students who read voluntarily and extensively both at school and at home become proficient readers. Indeed, research demonstrates a strong correlation between high reading achievement and hours logged inside a book—or volume of reading. Effective reading programs include time for independent reading of a wide variety of reading materials, including abundant trade books across genres.

How important are time and engagement with books? The difference they make is nothing short of miraculous—engaged readers spend 500 percent more time reading than do their peers who aren’t yet hooked on books—and all those extra hours inside books they love gives them a leg up in everything that leads to a happy, productive life: deep conceptual understanding of a wide range of topics, expanded vocabulary, strategic reading ability, critical literacy skills, and engagement with the world that’s more likely to make them dynamic citizens drawn into full civic participation. As Mary Leonhart, author of *99 Ways to Get Kids to Love Reading* (1997), notes:

“The sophisticated skills demanded by high-level academic or professional work—the ability to understand multiple plots or complex issues, a sensitivity to tone, the expertise to know immediately what is crucial to a text and what can be skimmed—can be acquired only through years of avid reading (p. 11).”

Elfrieda Hiebert and D. Ray Reutzel (2010) note that Opportunity to Read (OTR) is associated with literacy performance:

“Foorman, et al. (2006) used hierarchical linear modeling to examine the relationship between various instructional practices and the impact on reading achievement for 1,285 first graders. Time allocated to reading was the only variable that significantly explained gains on any of the post-test measures, including word reading, decoding, and passage comprehension. Other time factors, such as time spent on word, alphabetic instruction, and phonemic awareness instruction, did not independently contribute to growth in reading achievement (p.198).”

While the best predictor of reading success is the actual time students spend inside books, reading achievement is also influenced by the frequency, amount, and diversity of reading. Avid readers are well acquainted with the joys of a good novel, but they also enjoy reading for a

variety of purposes — exploring informational text, absorbing information to perform a task, or sharing poetic text through a range of social media.

Sixth grade teacher Donalyn Miller requires her students to read 40 books a year. Many of them read more than the required 40, and her classroom, bursting at the seams with her wrap-around-the-classroom-and-out-the-door library (Donalyn stores her overflow books in a storage closet across the hall from her classroom), fosters both avid reading and outstanding test scores. In *The Book Whisperer* (2009), which chronicles her dedication to classroom libraries, student reading choice, and independent reading, Donalyn describes an instance during one of her speaking engagements when she was asked by a skeptical audience member how she can justify to her principal the hours of class time she dedicates to students' reading. Her answer was simple: she showed her students' outstanding test scores. But she also explains: "Pointing to my students' test scores garnered gasps from around the room, but focusing on test scores or the numbers of books my students read does not tell the whole story ...You see, my students are not just strong, capable readers; they love books and reading" (p. 4).

In a classic 1988 study, *Time Spent Reading and Reading Growth*, Taylor, Frye and Maruyama found the amount of time children spend reading is significantly related to their gains in reading achievement. They asked 195 fifth- and sixth-grade children to keep daily logs of their reading at home and at school over a four-month period. They found that the amount of time spent reading during reading period in school contributed significantly to gains in students' reading achievement as measured by reading comprehension scores on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test ( $p < .039$ ), while time spent reading at home approached significance ( $p < .068$ ).

In "one of the most extensive studies of independent reading yet conducted," Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) traced reading growth to an array of activities related to independent reading: "They found that the amount of time students spent in independent reading was the best predictor of reading achievement and also the best predictor of the amount of gain in reading achievement made by students between second and fifth grade."

[See figure Variation in Amount of Independent Reading]

Based on the work of Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding "Growth in Reading and How Children Spend Their Time Outside of School," 1988 *Reading Research Quarterly*, No.23, pp. 285-303.

## Variation in Amount of Independent Reading (Readers and Words per Year)

Percentile for amount of reading	Minutes of Reading per Day	Words read per year
98	67	4,733,000
90	33	2,357,000
80	25	1,697,000
70	17	1,168,000
60	13	722,000
50	9	601,000
40	6	421,000
30	4	251,000
20	2	134,000
10	1	51,000
2	0	8,000

### Understanding the Power of “Wide” Reading

Robert Marzano (2004) regards “wide reading,” related to voluminous reading, as a key strategy for building academic background knowledge—particularly important for students who may have had limited experience with the world beyond their own homes and neighborhoods. Wide, extensive reading across content areas offers opportunities to transcend the limitations of narrow experience, but it shouldn’t be left to chance. Marzano suggests that the most effective wide reading programs are carefully scaffolded, making optimum use of reading resources, time, and teacher monitoring. To this end, he recommends eight key elements that characterize successful programs: (p. 42)

- » **Access:** a wealth of reading materials is readily available to students, in classroom libraries, the library media center and other school sources. Successful programs connect materials to students rather than rely on students to locate them on their own time.
- » **Appeal:** Students are encouraged to read materials that are of high personal interest and are at an appropriate level of difficulty.
- » **Conducive Environment:** A positive and comfortable space free of noise and interruptions for students to become immersed in their reading.

- » **Encouragement:** Teachers converse with students about their reading while also demonstrating excitement for their own personal reading.
- » **Professional Development:** Teachers understand their essential role in fostering wide reading among their students—and are supported in their own continuous professional growth.
- » **Independent Pleasure Reading:** Students read to satisfy personal interests; not just to demonstrate proficiency or knowledge gained by their reading.
- » **Follow-up Activities:** Students may be asked to interact with the material they are reading (“What is one thing you read today that you found especially interesting?”) or interact with their peers about their reading. Follow-up activities are designed to deepen comprehension and spark conversation, rather than to hold students “accountable” for doing certain tasks.
- » **Distributed time to read:** Teachers understand this refers to the frequency with which “wide reading” time is allocated within a school week. Ideally, students will have time every day—both at school and at home—for wide, independent reading.

## Closing Thoughts

To grow as readers, students need to read a lot—both at school and at home (children spend the majority of their time outside of school—those hours should be filled with reading). For those who engage in voluminous reading, the benefits are immeasurable. Avid readers:

- » **Expand their vocabularies**—Learn thousands of new words incidentally through reading; students with robust vocabularies are successful readers and learners.
- » **Deepen and broaden their background knowledge and expand their capacity to comprehend**—Read more, learn more, know more—and thus, comprehend more with every book they read; voluminous reading puts children on an upward spiral for continuous growth.
- » **Become fluent readers**—Learn the music of language—phrasing, prosody, rhythm, and rate.
- » **Develop awareness of text structure and format**—Become familiar with different kinds of genre, both literary and informational, as well as the structure, format, and elements of text; learn that genre serves the purpose of the text.
- » **Master the foundational conventions of language**—Develop critical understandings about how written language is organized and assembled: letters,

sounds, and how they work together to create the sound system of written language.

- » **Absorb critical information about how to write**—Learn to write and control all the foundational skills such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation—every time students open the pages of a book they receive a lesson in how to structure a sentence, a paragraph, or a whole text; how to begin a piece and end it. It’s no surprise that our best writers are also our strongest readers.
- » **Know themselves as readers**—Build rich reading lives. Students who are readers can talk about their favorite authors, topics, themes, and genres. They understand the joy of reading, deeply and profoundly.
- » **Become confident readers with a growth mindset**—Develop a can-do spirit and growth mindset about their reading abilities. It’s easy to feel confident and believe in yourself as a capable learner when you’re supported by the wide-ranging knowledge that reading makes possible.
- » **Achieve the goals of rigorous ELA standards**—Meet the goals of rigorous English-Language Arts standards and beyond; avid readers do all that and more with every book they read.

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