

HOW THEY READ

— By —

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Dr. George D. Strayer, professor emeritus of education at Columbia University, who has the reputation of knowing more about the nation's public school system than anyone else, asserts that children today read more and better than they ever did.

Although it would be pertinent to inquire what makes him think so, to debate this dictum is difficult, dull and useless. However, to discover how children really do read is easy, interesting to the point of shock, and it is an unbiased appraisal of present day methods of teaching reading.

To this end, the write has recorded errors made by students ranging from six to twenty-six. Some of these mistakes were made in the course of remedial reading lessons. Many others were made in connection with English, French, German, Latin, history, arithmetic, algebra, geometry – or in reading a newspaper, a magazine, a billboard, or a grocery list. These errors were recorded at the moment of making, exactly as they were made, together with the printed text from which they varied.

These misreadings, listed accurately and objectively, are clearly not unrelated accidents, meaningless, and significant of nothing more than carelessness or haste, or a lack of skill or intelligence. They are the logical consequence of a conception of reading established in the minds of these students with the first picture about which they were asked to tell a story, with the first word they were taught to recognize by its configuration, as one learns to distinguish giraffe from an elephant, or a circle from a triangle, with the first sentence they were permitted to paraphrase without effective correction, reading “We like it at school.” for “We have fun at school.”

From these errors a pattern emerges. It is a pattern with a mad consistency. When afraid is read frightened, and glisten is shire, that is consistency. When asleep is read as awake, attendance is absence, that is consistent, too. But when pig is lightening, mill bells, is noodles, keel is on your foot, and Massachusetts is Switzerland, that is madness. Students who read “the travelworn paper bag” as “twelve onions”, and “masses of reddish gold clouds” as “molasses and radishes”, will no almost certainly get odd and unfounded ideas about the function of the UN, the properties of heavy helium and the provisions of their insurance policies, will have difficulty with word problems all the way from the third grade through intermediate algebra.

To them reading is a matter of getting an idea from the text, but not the idea. It has become a process in which the reader projects his own experience, his own imagination, his own conjectures, his own preference, his own limitations, his own ignorance, using words which he chances to recognize – and those which he mistakes – as points of departure for his own improvisations and substitutions.

The attached pamphlet was evolved for use with my older reading students, from twelve to twenty, who are able from careful study of these typical errors to recognize not only the nature of their own mistakes, but the causes and handicapping consequences of so-called reading of this kind. It has been an amazingly successful approach. The insights and common sense of these has had as much to do with developing the methods I am using to correct such aberrations – and, when I catch them young enough to avoid them –, as has any skill and ingenuity of mine.

They are quick to recognize the monstrous fallacy of attempting to base the communication of mind to mind upon symbols inconsistent, inexact, and varying with the experience, mood, and the will of the reader. “If water can be pond, and five can be several,” one student observed

Two points must be made, which should be borne in mind in studying the material record in the following pages. The first is that the children who read like this, read everything like this – arithmetic problems, English, social studies. It is not difficult to see why success in more advanced mathematics, the sciences, and foreign languages is improbable when these children reach the secondary school level. At the higher levels, however, such failures are likely to be attributed to inferior native abilities, and the students to be told arbitrarily that they are not college material.

The second point can not be more than superficially dealt with here. It must, however, be mentioned. An accepted formula today is that emotional disturbances, particularly those expressing themselves in delinquency, are often caused by poor reading. There is far more evidence that in many cases the emotional instability is caused by the bewilderment, frustration, and constantly exhibited classroom inferiority of those children,, often of superior intelligence, who are poor readers. A startlingly high percentage of students with severe reading disabilities prove indisputably to be of above average mentality once their reading disability is corrected. The more original, imaginative, and responsive the student, the more fantastic and exuberant his surmises and improvisations.

When a disturbed parent ventures to express his dismay at the inability of his children to read, say in the fourth grade or perhaps in the last year in high school, an particularly when the parent is so intractable as to insist that his child cannot read despite readings tests which assert that he can, he will be told that we have more children reading better today than ever before, and that the modern method of teaching reading is successful because it is based on our modern knowledge of the psychology of how children learn. Very few parents are able to counter with any concrete, recorded evidence, or to be articulate about their ineradicable conviction that their own children are not learning to read, and, further, that what their children are taught to consider reading,, is not reading at all. If they are very stubborn indeed it is likely to be suggested to them that children who are worried or unhappy about things at home, who are jealous, or timid, or nervous, who are subjected to emotional tensions at home will find it impossible to learn to read. Sometimes the further suggestion is made that perhaps the parents must learn to accept the fact that their child is never going to be able to learn.

Disregarding, for the moment, the standardized sweeping assertion that children today read more and better than their parents did, let us instead give our attention to finding out how they really do read. This is something which can be observed, recorded and studied, and if you will turn this page you will find listed, word-in-text followed by the word-as-read., exactly how a great many children actually did read, to me. (I should be explained that the error which numerically exceeds them all – the indiscriminate addition or omission of the final “s”, breaking down all distinctions between singular and plural forms and meaning – has not been included at all in this pamphlet, since it occurred with such frequency that it can be stated categorically that in general no consistent distinction is made in reading between the singular and plural forms of nouns.)

It does not seem to the writer that the children in our schools will profit by an academic and acrimonious attempt to establish the relative reading skills of children today and yesterday. What is vitally important is to scrutinize with open minds the theories and purposes underlying the teaching methods in use during the last two decades, to observe the results of this teaching without resistance, to interpret them without complacency or derision, and to redirect them without hesitation, if this is to be desirable.

The purpose of this study is to offer direct, objective evidence as to how children read. This is how they read. This is not good enough.

– How They Read –

Errors, selected as typical from approximately 10,000 actual mistakes, recorded, analyzed and classified for reference.

Significant Errors

1. Reading from configuration

squirrel – special
canary – crayon
valve – value
mystery – majesty
national – natural
forty – fifth
February – Friday
Field Day – Friday
bouquet – banquet
penguin – pigeon
trumpet – triumphant

airmail – animal
marriage – meringue
twelve years – twenty-five yards
miracle – marcel
uncle – under
Number 2 – November 2
sport shirt – short shirt
cottage – college
luggage – language
Pleiades – Pyramids
turnip – trumpet

2. Reading from association of ideas

snow – cold
milk – bottles
fire – stove
Thanksgiving – turkey
temperature – thermometer
regimen – army
pilot – helicopter
rolling – round
border – boundary
Father Christmas – Father Santa Claus

3. Reading from contextual clues

bursting with questions – bursting with excitement
clutching their sides – clutching their sandwiches
clowns playing drums – clowns playing tricks
where our machines were being warmed up – where our lunches being warmed up
put up her umbrella – put up her rainhood
practice sessions – practice shots
You do need a revolver – We do need a rifle
so much like a man – so real
in its proper place – in his pocket

4. Reading from pictures

circus elephant – gray squirrel
sewing basket – spinning wheel
parachute – airplane
dinner table – dining room
apron – broom
woods – squirrel

5. Reading from memory, without reference to printed word

Bobby – Jack
hypotenuse – hymastodon
turnips – stew
Valentine's Day – Thanksgiving
Sunday dinner – supper
Phil replied – Paul remarked
Mother Mouse – Mrs. Squirrel
Prose and Poetry – Frozen Poetry

6. Tenses changes

must tell – must have told
think – thought
was going – had gone
do – did
don't – didn't
can – could
was running – had run
will go – went
break of day -- broke of day
bus driver – bus drover

7. Positive and negative interchange

can – can't (Can you prove that/ -- You can't prove that.)
could – could not (It could be better.—It couldn't be better)
did – didn't, don't
have – have never
something – nothing
won't – would (that won't help – that would help)

8. Pronouns misread

we'll – I'll
they'll – he'll
him – her
his – her
them – him
him – me
they – we
he – she
you'll – we'll

9. Interpolation – embroidering

rabbit – little bunny rabbit
pole – telephone pole
light – red light
my own feet – my own two feet
tin box – tiny brown box
we will have dinner – we will have a fine dinner
called – always called
a news stand – a few news stands
had nothing – had nothing to eat
mosquitoes – mosquito bites
si – kind sir

10. Reading by synonym

afraid – frightened
puppy – little dog
astonishment – amazement
door closed – door shut
house – home
stairs – steps
immediately – instantly
fiddle – violin
grandma – woman
accurate – correct
glisten – shine
lazybones -- sleepyhead
magic – trick
wireless – radio

11. Reading Opposites

asleep - awake
wise – silly
queen – king
attendance – absence
silence – sound
everything – nothing
started – stopped
after – before
goes – come
mongrel – pedigree
upstairs – downstairs
winter – summer
easy – hard
door shut quietly – door slammed

12. Reading by paraphrase

I'll get you another ticket – I'll take you again
stirred in the salt – salted
she simply lay in a deep sleep—she slept
the ones in front – the first ones
what was the cost of the house? – what did he pay for it?
try to dam up the brook – try to make a dam
began once more – came once again
we didn't know you war as funny as that – we didn't know how funny you were
within hauling distance – anywhere

13. Complete improvisation

at the washstand – as she walked
the know came untied – he noticed
some day on the farm – soon Mr. Lee
every day – after dinner
toward evening – tomorrow
it will be dark – he will be back
put on their rain hats – they ran out
keel – on your foot
the call came late one afternoon – that smoke

14. Telescoping

heat haze forming – heat hazing

Miss Maria did not reply. She looked sharply – Miss Maria looked.

tsting the heat of the iron – testing the iron

gray smoke, and the fire just under way – gray smoke under the way

push back the heavy door on rollers – push back the rollers

15. Reading from experience

colored crayons –crayolas

cooking eggs in butter – in bacon fat

bleachers – benches (We don't call them bleaches in our school.)

howdy – how do you do it (howdy isn't polite)

patted Violet's dark head – picked violets

in the elephant house – in the house (Elephants don't have houses.)

Emil – Elmer (Can't I call him Elmer? I'm used to saying Elmer)

16. Habitual mispronunciations not recognized as inconsistent with spelling.

get – git

desks - desses

salt – sawt

lie – lay

escape – excape

vagabond – bagabond

bulletin board – billington board

absent – assent

typewriter – tapwriter

measles – measles

napkins – napkins

posts – posses

17. Subjective reading – actually seeing a word which is not in the book, to the point of spelling the nonexistent word when asked to spell the word presented to the eye.

French – F-r-a-n-c-e

ladle – l-a-n-d

told – s-p-o-i-l-e-d

thought – s-h-o-u-l-d

easy – f-a-s-t

another – o-u-t

Note: A curious, though only superficially related, variation of this is the careful spelling of an unfamiliar word, followed by a completely inconsistent pronunciation:

s-m-o-o-t-h – feet

18. Conjecture reading. This is an extraordinary phenomenon, where words are pronounced completely without regard for or reference to the printed page. When this occurs repeatedly and consistently, it is incontrovertible evidence of a basic misconception of reading.

The reader, confronted with an unrecognized word, looks away from the printed page, into the air or at the instructor, with an unmistakable introspective expression, and offers a rapid series of widely different conjectures. These are obviously not based upon any aspect of the printed word at all, and not especially upon the implications of context. They represent the reader's free-style, random casting about for something acceptable to the instructor at that point.

probably, certainly, sometimes, -----	for usually
sad, careful, angry -----	for sorry
very, green, head -----	for never
presents, puzzle, parents -----	or pages
slowly, carefully, straight -----	for gently
hurt, turned, try -----	for carry
umbrella, branch, pilot -----	for parachute
make, must, wait -----	for like
bones, brothers, bowl -----	or bottles
if, of, where, when -----	or with
seven, eight, several, thirty -----	or eleven
middle, slide -----	or each

19. Blocked reading. The inability to read a sentence at all, when all the words are familiar and quickly pronounced when presented separately, because the total meaning of the sentence is outside or contrary to experience.

20. Jumbled geography. The inability to pronounce place names, where context and configuration clues are usually useless or misleading.

Massachusetts – Switzerland
Atlantic – Africa
Denver – Delaware
Bulgaria – Belgium
Poland – Portugal
Memphis – Michigan
Lincoln – London
Europe – Seaporto
Pennsylvania – Binghamton
Africa – America
London – Lisbon
China – Corinth
Colorado – Corinoco
Yokohama – Yokoslavia

Note: Closely related to jumbled geography, of course, are errors in proper personal names.

Michael – David
Janet – Susan
Jacob – Joseph
Mary – Bert
Jane – Judy
Tom – Betty
Ted – Tom
Jesus -- James

These are, however, most often due to reading from memory.

21. Reading from initial letter or letters

ORdinary – ORganize
ADVice – ADVenture
AWkward – AWare
ABSurd – ABSolute
UNtil – UNder
ROOms – ROOsters
CHerries – CHildren
GALLOws – GALLOping
DIFFiculty – DIFFerence
WEstern – WEdnesday
ENTire – ENTrance
IRRESponsible – IRRESistible
Lime Juice – Lemon Jello
DELicious – DELuxe
COMpanyu – COMPLAINED

Note: This of course is the principle of clue-from-context teaching, applied to the word instead of the sentence

22. Specific errors, occurring in a high percentage of all cases of reading difficulty, and with high frequency even where no reading problem is recognized.

said -----	for -----	and*
a -----	“-----	the*
when -----	“-----	then*
now -----	“-----	how*
quick -----	“-----	quiet*
this -----	“-----	that*
these -----	“-----	those*
home -----	“-----	house*
talk -----	“-----	tell*
horse -----	“-----	house*
soon -----	“-----	so
when -----	“-----	with
hand -----	“-----	head*
twelve -----	“-----	twenty*
dark -----	“-----	black*
started -----	“-----	stared*
sometimes -----	“-----	something*
minute -----	“-----	moment*
sure -----	“-----	sorry*
along -----	“-----	around*
I’ll -----	“-----	we’ll*
at least -----	“-----	at last*
began -----	“-----	begged
frightened -----	“-----	afraid
cried -----	“-----	called*
called -----	“-----	could*
explained -----	“-----	exclaimed*
different -----	“-----	difficult
messenger -----	“-----	passenger

Notre: Pairs marked with * are used interchangeably.

23. Indifference to distinctions. A number of errors, originally probably due to reading from configuration, will have taken on a slightly different character in several instances, possibly where they have long been accepted without correction. The reader seems to be completely unaware of any difference in meaning or use of certain pairs of words, and not only reads them interchangeably – curiously enough, most often incorrectly – but is manifestly bewildered by the correction.

Pairs of words where this has occurred are:

a, the
this, that
these, those
now, how
then, when
in, on
what, that
of, off

Note: Words listed as specific errors in the preceding category are read interchangeably, but the reader recognizes the difference when corrected.

24. Mispronunciations due to lack of phonics

Most of the errors listed in the preceding twenty-three categories.

25. Random reading. These otherwise unclassified errors, as they were observed and recorded, could not be reasonably assigned to any of the categories listed above. There is no obvious common denominator except the complete lack of connection between the word in the book and the word which was read.

lazy – snowing
mill bells – noodles
pitcher – dog
appliance – position
view – winter
justly – smooth
piston rod – signal
dish towel – sweater
nothing – dinner
meanwhile – merry
cracker – woodpecker

air – ground
way – name
feeling – joke
apples – scissors
remember – scissors
attractive – several
pig – lightning
lieutenant – lunatic
finger – lantern
rotor – pole
ready – crying

Contemporary Reflections on Lowe's article, "How They Read:

by Donald Potter, 10/4/03

My fourteen years experience as an elementary bilingual teacher, instructional resource teacher, private tutor, and dyslexia teacher convinces me that all of the problems identified by Helen Lowe in this seminal paper are still with us. In fact, it is the same look-and-say reading methods that instructed students to identify words by **configuration** and **context clues** that cause the same problems today. Today we call the method *whole language, balanced literacy, or guided reading*. Lowe used the information in this paper to expose faulty reading methods and to help students whose reading skills had been damaged by those methods. These are the same two reasons that I am making Lowe's 1951 paper available for a larger readership through the donpotter.net web site.

I highly recommend that every teacher read Chapter 2, "Readers Reading," in Diane McGuinness' *Why Our Children Can't Read and What We Can Do About It*. McGuinness, like Lowe, has recorded and classified thousands of children's misreadings. She sees four main faulty word identification strategies: letter-name-decoding, name-to-sound-translating, sight-word-reading, real-word guessing.

I recommend the following brilliant essays by Raymond Laurita which are available on my donpotter.net web site, by kind permission of Mr. Laurita. Ray explains how that teaching sight-words can lead to what he calls a *confused visual patterning response reflex*.

[1. A Critical Examination of the Psychology of the Whole Word Method](#)

[2. Basic Sight Vocabulary: A Help Or A Hindrance](#)

I would like to thank my friend Geraldine Rodgers for making Lowe's article, "How They Read," available to me for internet publication. Ms. Rodgers and I hope for a very wide readership for this invaluable article. Geraldine has made available to us the fruits of her years of intensive research into the history and psychology of reading in her books *The History of Beginning Reading*, and *The Hidden Story*, available from www.1stbooks.com/.