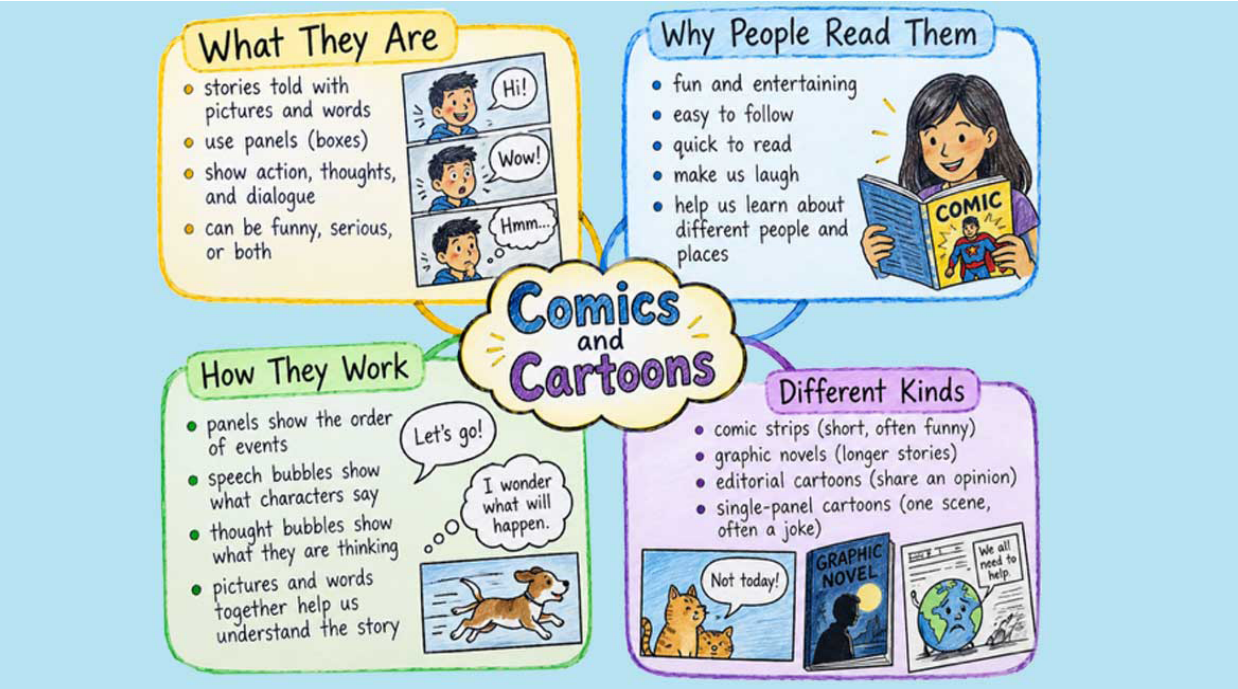
Reading More, Learning More

# Building Automaticity Without Putting Meaning on Hold

*Why texts for foundational skills can also build knowledge.*

by Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert




What comes to mind when we think about texts designed to develop automaticity in reading? Often, we think of short passages with carefully selected words, familiar spelling patterns, and repeated opportunities to practice decoding. These features matter. But there's another question worth asking: What do children learn about the world as they read these texts?

The answer: A lot! At TextProject, we've developed collections of free texts intended to increase students' opportunities to read accurately, efficiently, and with understanding. The collections range from texts for children taking their first steps in reading to texts for adolescents who are still developing automaticity

Consider a collection of texts about bats. These texts are accessible to developing readers, but they also offer information that children can organize and remember. After reading, students might create a semantic map connecting ideas from the texts.

This possibility extends to older students. A collection about comics and cartoons introduces different forms of visual communication. A text set about *A Long Walk to Water* introduces

adolescent readers to issues of survival, displacement, perseverance, and access to clean water.

These are different texts for different readers, but they share an important characteristic: Reading practice is also an opportunity to learn something.

## Automaticity and meaning are partners

The Simple View of Reading reminds us that reading comprehension depends on decoding and language comprehension. Instruction must attend to both, but that doesn't mean they must always be addressed through entirely separate materials.

Students need repeated opportunities to apply their knowledge of the alphabetic system. They also need encounters with meaningful vocabulary, ideas, and information. Well-designed accessible texts can contribute to both purposes.

Certainly, not every text can accomplish every instructional goal equally well. A beginning reader practicing short vowels will encounter different vocabulary and ideas than a fifth grader reading about engineering. Nor should we expect a brief phonics reader to provide the depth of a substantial informational book. The point is not that all texts do the same job. Developing automaticity does not require abandoning meaningful content.

## Making knowledge visible

A simple classroom routine can help children recognize what they've learned. After reading several related texts, ask students what they now know about the topic. Record their ideas in a semantic map using words, phrases, and illustrations.

These maps will look different across grades. Young children might draw and label features of an animal. Middle school students might organize information into categories and show relationships. Older students might connect events, causes, consequences, and themes.

In each case, the map helps organize knowledge while giving teachers a window into students' understanding.

## The instructional opportunity

As teachers select texts for reading practice, two questions deserve attention: Will this text strengthen students' word recognition? And what might students learn from reading it?

We don't need to choose between automaticity and knowledge. Thoughtfully selected texts can give students opportunities to develop both.

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# When Texts Build on One Another

*From isolated reading experiences to cumulative knowledge*

by Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert

Imagine a classroom in which students hear a wonderful story on Monday, an interesting informational text on Tuesday, and a poem on Wednesday. Each selection may be engaging and worthwhile. But what connects these experiences? What knowledge carries forward from one day to the next?

Now imagine a classroom where texts develop a small number of important ideas. Each introduces something new while extending what students have already encountered. Vocabulary reappears in different contexts. Discussions become more informed. Students make connections that no single text could support. The difference isn't necessarily the quality or types of individual texts. It's the relationships among them.

## From separate experiences to connected knowledge

Often, texts are organized around genres, skills, or calendar events. These are useful considerations, but they don't necessarily ensure that knowledge accumulates. A collection of stories about friendship, for example, may present appealing characters without helping students develop a substantial understanding of belonging, loneliness, inclusion, and community.

Consider what happens when students encounter Because of Winn-Dixie, The Invisible Boy, The Day You Begin, Watercress, and Southwest Sunrise. Each provides a different perspective on relationships, identity, and belonging. Students begin recognizing emotions and experiences that connect the characters. They encounter language associated with loneliness, unfamiliarity, acceptance, and personal history. Their understanding becomes richer as they consider similarities and differences across texts.

The goal isn't to make all the stories say the same thing. It's to help students use what they learn from one to understand another.

## Vocabulary grows through connections

Connected texts also provide opportunities for vocabulary learning.

Consider words associated with sadness and loneliness: lonely, sorrowful, friendless, and melancholy. These words are related but not interchangeable. Students can discuss differences in meaning, connect the words to characters' experiences, and decide which best describes a particular situation.

The same principle applies to informational texts. Reading several selections about an animal, ecosystem, or scientific process provides encounters with related concepts and terminology. Each text enlarges or refines what students know.

## Making connections visible

Semantic maps offer one way to organize accumulating knowledge. As students encounter additional texts, they add information, revise categories, and identify relationships.

Discussion and writing extend this work. Turn-and-talk questions can prompt students to connect experiences across stories. Short written responses can ask students to explain what they've learned from two texts rather than recall details from one.

These activities need not consume large portions of the day. What matters is the intellectual work: remembering, connecting, comparing, explaining, and extending.

## Connecting different kinds of texts

Literary and informational texts can complement one another. Stories illuminate human experiences; informational texts provide cultural, historical, and scientific knowledge that deepens understanding.

The challenge isn't simply assembling a text set. It's identifying what students should know more deeply after reading the set than they knew before. A strong reading experience doesn't end when the book closes. It becomes part of the knowledge students bring to the next text.

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# You Can't Become Automatic at Something You Rarely Do

*Why reading volume and word distribution matter*

by Elfrieda (Freddy) H. Hiebert

Consider three words from a third-grade DIBELS passage: invented, avoid, and reduced. These words aren't especially rare in English. Nor do they necessarily contain unfamiliar letter-sound relationships for students who have completed foundational skills instruction. Yet recognizing these words accurately and automatically requires more than knowing how to sound them out. Students need opportunities to encounter them in print. It's hard to become automatic at something you rarely do.

## How often do children encounter words?

English words are distributed unevenly across texts. A relatively small group of high-frequency words accounts for much of what students read. Words such as the, was, and about occur frequently. Other words appear much less frequently. They may be important for understanding a passage, but students have fewer opportunities to encounter them.

Analyses of school texts indicate that approximately 620 high-frequency word families account for a substantial proportion of running words. A larger group of medium-frequency families accounts for a smaller, but still critical, proportion. The consequence is important: Reading the same number of words doesn't provide equal practice with every word.

## What does this mean for automaticity?

Consider a word predicted to occur approximately 50 times per million running words. A third grader who reads 20,000 words over a month of school would encounter that word about once in typical texts. And encounters aren't scheduled. A word might appear twice in one week and then disappear for months.

A student may successfully decode invented in isolation. Recognizing it immediately in connected text is another accomplishment, one that depends partly on repeated encounters

## Volume matters—but so does text selection

The solution isn't simply assigning more reading, regardless of difficulty or content.

Students need texts they can read accurately enough to sustain attention and meaning. A consistent diet of texts with numerous unknown words can limit reading volume. Students also need engaging content that makes sustained reading worthwhile.

This is the rationale behind TextProject's Staircase of Automaticity: providing accessible, meaningful texts while gradually expanding the vocabulary and complexity students can manage. Informational readers, trade readers, and phonics readers all contribute to this goal. Connected sets of texts provide repeated encounters with words and concepts in meaningful contexts.

## An instructional priority

Explicit foundational skills instruction remains essential. Students must learn the patterns and structures that make unfamiliar words decodable. But decoding instruction is not the end of the process. Students need extensive opportunities to apply those skills in connected reading.

We should ask not only whether students have been taught a spelling pattern, but whether they've had enough opportunities to read words containing that pattern.

Automaticity develops through successful encounters with print. Our responsibility is to make those encounters plentiful, accessible, purposeful, and engaging

https://textproject.org/frankly-freddy/you-cant-become-automatic-at-something-you-rarely-do