

See also

CORE Reading Research Anthology
for background information

Better Readers Read More

Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found a significant, positive relation between the measures of amount of reading, particularly the amount of book reading, and the measures of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and reading speed. The table on the facing page provides a dramatic representation of the amount of reading done independently out of school by 155 fifth-grade students. Notice that the fifth-grade students who read the most, those in the 98 percentile rank, read books as much as 65 minutes per day, while the fifth-grade students who read the least, those in the 10 percentile rank, read books as little as .1 minute per day.

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Better readers get to read a lot more words. They read more on their own and continually build their vocabularies. Consequently, good readers keep getting better at reading and can read increasingly complex materials. They are exposed more often to new vocabulary, literature, concepts, and information. Weak readers read little, do not increase their vocabularies, and consequently struggle as texts get more complex. The table on the facing page shows the variation in the number of words read by the most skilled and the least proficient readers. Notice that the best fifth-grade readers, those in the 98 percentile rank, read about 4,358,000 words per year, while the poorest readers, such as the ones in the 10 percentile rank, read only about 8,000 words per year. The proficient reader reads approximately 544 times as many words as the less-skilled reader.

This lack of exposure to text and the resulting lack of productive practice on the part of less-skilled readers contributes to the gap between good and poor readers that tends to increase as these students progress through the grades. This phenomenon—in which students who learn to read early continue to improve in reading, or get “richer,” and students who do not learn to read early get “poorer,” or become increasingly distanced from the “rich” in reading ability—Stanovich calls the “Matthew effect.”

VARIATION IN AMOUNT OF INDEPENDENT READING

Percentile Rank ^a	Minutes of Reading per Day		Words Read per Year	
	BOOKS	TEXT ^b	BOOKS	TEXT ^b
98	65.0	67.3	4,358,000	4,733,000
90	21.2	33.4	1,823,000	2,357,000
80	14.2	24.6	1,146,000	1,697,000
70	9.6	16.9	622,000	1,168,000
60	6.5	13.1	432,000	722,000
50	4.6	9.2	282,000	601,000
40	3.2	6.2	200,000	421,000
30	1.8	4.3	106,000	251,000
20	.7	2.4	21,000	134,000
10	.1	1.0	8,000	51,000
2	0	0	0	8,000

^a Percentile rank on each measure separately. ^b Books, magazines, and newspapers.

Adapted from “Growth in Reading and How Children Spend Their Time Outside of School” (1988) by R. C. Anderson, P. T. Wilson, and L. G. Fielding. *Reading Research Quarterly* 23 (3), p. 292.