Foundations First: How the 5 Pillars of Reading Empower Secondary English Language Arts (ELA) Instruction

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Abstract: Despite rising high school graduation rates, national literacy performance has stagnated, leaving many adolescents unprepared for the reading demands of secondary English Language Arts (ELA). National data show that only about one-third of U.S. students read proficiently by the end of eighth grade (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2025). As a result, secondary teachers are increasingly tasked with teaching complex literary and informational analysis to students who have not yet mastered foundational reading skills. This practice brief reframes the five pillars of reading—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—through a secondary lens, demonstrating how gaps in these components undermine access to grade-level learning and later adult outcomes. Drawing on current literacy research, the brief argues that foundational literacy awareness enables ELA teachers to identify the root causes of comprehension difficulties, collaborate with reading specialists, and adjust instruction to maintain rigor while supporting access. Rather than prescribing interventions, it emphasizes professional awareness, advocacy, and cross-disciplinary coordination to ensure that all students can participate fully in secondary literacy experiences.

Keywords: adolescent literacy, secondary literacy, secondary reading instruction, foundational reading skills, ELA teacher preparation

Introduction and Background

Adolescent Literacy as a Public and Economic Imperative

The terms *reading* and *literacy* are often used interchangeably, but they represent related—yet distinct—constructs. *Reading* refers to the set of cognitive and linguistic processes involved in recognizing words, constructing meaning from text, and integrating that meaning with background knowledge (Lupo et al., 2024). In contrast, *literacy* encompasses the broader ability to use those reading

and writing skills to communicate, learn, and participate effectively in society (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). Put simply, reading is a component skill, while literacy is the application of that skill in real contexts. For secondary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, this distinction matters: students cannot demonstrate literacy—analyzing literature, evaluating arguments, or composing essays—without first mastering the reading processes that allow them to access and interpret text (Scarborough, 2001; Willingham, 2017). Understanding how reading undergirds literacy helps teachers identify when academic difficulties stem not from lack of engagement or reasoning, but from incomplete development of the underlying reading system.

Literacy is not only a school outcome; it is a life outcome. Across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including the United States, adults with higher literacy proficiency are more likely to maintain stable employment and earn higher wages (Lane & Conlon, 2016). These advantages persist even when educational attainment is held constant, demonstrating that literacy functions as a distinct human-capital skill rather than a simple reflection of years spent in school. In economic terms, the implications are significant. A Gallup analysis conducted for the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy estimated that if all U.S. adults reached Level 3 on the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)—a level indicating the ability to interpret, evaluate, and use information from a variety of written materials—the national economy could gain approximately $2.2 trillion annually through increased productivity and earnings (Rothwell et al., 2020).

The reach of literacy extends into health and well-being. Research consistently shows that adults with limited literacy skills experience poorer health outcomes and are more likely to rely on emergency or high-cost medical services than those with stronger literacy skills (DeWalt et al., 2004). In plain terms, difficulty understanding medical instructions, consent forms, or health information can make it harder to prevent illness or manage chronic conditions. Quantitative studies indicate that adults with low literacy face between one-and-a-half to three times greater risk for adverse health outcomes compared to their higher-literacy peers (DeWalt et al., 2004). Reflecting this evidence, U.S. public health policy now identifies language and literacy as key social determinants of health—factors that influence health outcomes alongside income, education, and environment (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2024).

Perhaps most disturbingly, literacy is deeply connected to incarceration in the United States. National data show that incarcerated adults, on average, demonstrate significantly lower literacy and numeracy skills than adults in the

general U.S. population (NCES, 2016). This relationship begins long before incarceration. Scholars and policymakers have described a "school-to-prison pipeline," a pattern in which students who struggle academically—particularly those who cannot read proficiently—face higher rates of school disengagement, exclusionary discipline, and eventual justice system contact (Wald & Losen, 2003). In this context, literacy development becomes both an educational and social justice imperative. It is also important to note that participation in prison-based basic education programs for individuals who are incarcerated is associated with improved post-release employment rates and higher earnings (Cho & Tyler, 2013). Although the pathways to incarceration are complex, evidence consistently indicates that strong foundational literacy skills reduce both the risk of initial justice involvement and the likelihood of reoffending after release (NCES, 2016).

Poverty is perhaps the most pervasive contextual factor shaping literacy outcomes — and it does not operate in isolation. The disparities in healthcare access, incarceration rates, and educational trajectory described above are deeply intertwined with economic disadvantage. Unpacking these intersections is beyond the scope of this brief, but their presence is important to name. Early research by Hart & Risley (1995) suggested that children from low-income households entered school having heard millions fewer words than their more affluent peers — a claim that, while influential, has since been critiqued for its methodological limitations and its tendency to locate the problem within families rather than within systems (Golinkoff et al., 2019). What the broader body of research does consistently show is that economic disadvantage is associated with reduced access to print-rich environments, less exposure to varied oral language, and — critically — less access to the high-quality, systematic literacy instruction that could address foundational skill gaps early (Neuman & Celano, 2006; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). These disadvantages compound across the school years and are disproportionately concentrated among communities of color, reflecting the deep intersection of race, poverty, and structural inequity in American schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The relationship is bidirectional: limited literacy perpetuates economic disadvantage across generations, while economic disadvantage limits the conditions under which literacy can flourish. For secondary ELA teachers, this means that students arriving with below-grade reading skills are frequently also navigating material instability, under-resourced schools, and interrupted schooling histories — and that addressing literacy in adolescence requires both instructional precision and systemic awareness (Lupo et al., 2024).

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Beyond health and civic life, literacy is a decisive factor in postsecondary readiness and success. National assessments reveal that only about one-third of U.S. high school seniors demonstrate the level of reading proficiency associated with college readiness, and the majority graduate without the comprehension and analytical skills expected in first-year college courses (ACT, 2023; NCES, 2025). Similarly, the ACT (2023) reported that just 21% of test-takers met the College Readiness Benchmark in all four benchmarks of college readiness. These data mean that the majority of students graduate high school without the comprehension and analytical skills expected in first-year college courses. The consequences are significant: roughly two-thirds of community college entrants and one-third of four-year college entrants must take remedial English or reading courses (Chen, 2016). These findings underscore that when foundational literacy instruction falters in childhood, the effects extend into adolescence and adulthood.

The ability to read proficiently shapes a person's educational trajectory, earning potential, health decisions, and likelihood of civic participation. It also influences whether young people remain engaged in school or drift toward systems of exclusion and incarceration. Yet despite its far-reaching impact, literacy remains unevenly developed across the United States. Many children, adolescents, and adults continue to struggle with the very skills that underpin lifelong learning. The following section reviews current national data to illustrate where literacy progress has stalled, highlighting the urgent need to address foundational skill gaps before students reach secondary school.

The Current State of Literacy: Adults and School-Age Learners

Despite decades of policy attention, literacy performance in the United States has declined across both youth and adult populations. The most recent data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) show that the percentage of U.S. adults performing at the lowest literacy levels has grown—from 19% in 2017 to 28% in 2023 (NCES, 2023). Adults at these levels can often manage basic, familiar reading tasks—such as identifying a date on a bill—but struggle when information is presented in dense, unfamiliar, or digital formats. In practical terms, this means nearly one in three American adults may find it difficult to fill out a job application, interpret prescription instructions, or understand financial documents. These deficits ripple across generations, influencing the literacy environment in homes and communities and limiting children's early exposure to language and print.

A similar pattern appears among school-age learners. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only about one-third of U.S. fourth- and eighth-grade students read at or above the *Proficient* level, meaning they can

demonstrate solid comprehension of grade-level texts. Another third of eighth graders, and forty percent of fourth graders, are performing below the *Basic* level (NCES, 2024). Scores declined notably between 2019 and 2024, with the largest losses among students already performing below grade level. Educators have long known that early reading difficulties, when left unaddressed, tend to persist—and these national patterns confirm that the gap widens rather than closes over time. For secondary ELA teachers, this translates into classrooms where many students can decode text but lack fluency, vocabulary depth, or comprehension strategies necessary for higher-level analysis.

At the same time, high school graduation rates have reached record highs, with 87% of students graduating on time in 2022 (NCES, 2024). On the surface, this is an encouraging statistic. However, when juxtaposed with stagnant or declining literacy performance, it raises a pressing question: Are diplomas signaling skill attainment, or merely chronological completion? This mismatch highlights the limitations of equating graduation with academic mastery. For teachers, it also underscores the importance of instructional vigilance—recognizing that a student's apparent success in coursework may mask underlying reading weaknesses that limit future learning and employment opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these disparities. Prolonged school closures, uneven access to digital learning, and reduced instructional time disproportionately affected students who were already struggling. NAEP trend analyses and state-level data indicate that literacy losses were steepest in low-income communities and among students with disabilities or multilingual learners—groups who historically have had less access to early, explicit reading instruction (NCES, 2025). The aftereffects are still visible in secondary classrooms, where teachers increasingly encounter students reading two or more grade levels below expectation (Lupo et al., 2024).

Together, these indicators depict a troubling landscape: adult literacy declining, adolescent proficiency stagnating, and early intervention systems failing to reach every child in time. For secondary educators, the implication is clear—many of the students who arrive in middle and high school English classes are still developing the foundational skills that make complex reading and writing possible. Understanding this reality reframes comprehension struggles not as motivation problems, but as developmental skill gaps that can—and must—be addressed through informed collaboration and instruction.

Why Foundations Still Matter in Secondary ELA

By the time students enter middle and high school, most teachers assume that the shift from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* has already occurred. Yet national data suggest that for a large proportion of adolescents, this transition never fully takes place. Many students arrive in secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms without the fluent decoding, automatic word recognition, or vocabulary knowledge needed to comprehend grade-level texts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Lupo et al., 2024)). They may struggle with understanding and producing sentence-level thoughts, and therefore be lost in the context of lengthier texts requiring inference or critical analysis (Scarborough, 2001). The result is a quiet but pervasive mismatch between instructional expectations and student readiness: teachers design lessons for readers comfortable with accessing a variety of lengthy texts, while many students are still grappling with the mechanics of "cracking the code" of reading itself.

This disconnect can understandably produce frustration on both sides. Students, sensing that they are being asked to do the impossible, disengage or mask their struggles in patterns that often go unrecognized by adults who are themselves underprepared to identify the underlying skill needs (Smith, 1995). Teachers, unaware of these underlying skill deficits, interpret the behavior as apathy or low stamina (Moats, 2014; Smith, 1995)—a misreading that is itself a manifestation of what Broderick and Lalvani (2017) describe as dysconscious ableism in education. In reality, the problem is structural. Adolescents who have not mastered foundational reading skills are often placed in courses centered on complex literary analysis, research writing, and rhetorical critique—tasks that presuppose fluent access to print. Our contention is that asking such students to write an essay on War and Peace before they can decode war or peace accurately does not build sophistication; it builds shame.

Foundational reading skills remain essential long after early elementary grades because they enable the cognitive efficiency required for comprehension and critical thinking (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014; Willingham, 2017). Weak phonological awareness and limited phonics knowledge manifest as slow, error-prone word recognition, which monopolizes working memory and leaves too little capacity for meaning making (Ehri, 2014; Perfetti & Stafura, 2014; Willingham, 2017)). Deficits in fluency further interrupt syntactic processing, while limited vocabulary constrains understanding of both informational and literary texts (Spencer et al., 2017; Willingham, 2006). Without these underlying capacities, students cannot engage in the interpretive and analytic tasks that define secondary ELA (Lupo et al., 2024; Moats, 2020.

One factor contributing to this widespread gap is the persistence of balanced literacy approaches in early instruction. Balanced literacy approaches rely on

independent and partner reading with "word work" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017), where "phonemic awareness and phonics are rarely taught in highly explicit, systematic ways with attention to important prerequisite skills," (Spear-Swerling, 2019, p. 3) and an overreliance on predictable texts that hinder decoding development (Spear-Swerling, 2019). As Spear-Swerling (2019) explains, "the emphasis is frequently on using meaning in conjunction with print cues and having students 'problem-solve' with teacher guidance (e.g., Burkins & Croft, 2010). By contrast, the Science of Reading framework—an evidence base drawn from decades of cognitive, linguistic, and neurological research (Dubinsky et al., 2022; Snowling et al., 2022) —emphasizes structured, sequential instruction across the five core components (or "pillars") of reading (Ehri, 2020; Moats, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017). When balanced literacy practices dominate early education, students often develop compensatory strategies such as guessing words from pictures, shape, or context rather than establishing stable sound-symbol correspondences and orthographic mapping (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri, 2014). These partial strategies typically collapse under the demands of secondary reading and adult literacy, where texts are abstract, vocabulary-dense, and syntactically complex (Castles et al., 2018; Moats, 2020a, 2020b; Seidenberg, 2017).

For secondary ELA teachers, this reality requires neither guilt nor panic, but awareness. Understanding how foundational skills function empowers teachers to recognize when comprehension difficulties reflect missing subskills rather than lack of effort (Moats, 1999, 2014, 2020b; Willingham, 2017). Such awareness allows for more precise instructional design—selecting texts with accessible syntax, modeling fluent reading aloud, or embedding morphology instruction to unpack complex vocabulary (Moats, 2020; Lupo et al., 2024). Decades of research document that teachers entering the field rarely receive sufficient preparation in the linguistic and cognitive foundations of reading (McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Moats, 2014; Oliveira et al., 2019), making in-service awareness-building all the more critical at the secondary level. Such awareness allows for more precise instructional design—selecting texts with accessible syntax, modeling fluent reading aloud, or embedding morphology instruction to unpack complex vocabulary (Lupo et al., 2021, 2024). It also strengthens interdisciplinary collaboration and aids in meaningful problem solving. When ELA teachers can articulate concerns using shared, actionable conceptualizations (e.g., “His reading patterns are showing us that he needs solid *decoding* in order to comprehend better”), conversations about learner needs become less personal, and more productive.

The implications are systemic as well as instructional. As larger cohorts of adolescents present with below-basic reading proficiency, secondary schools must operate not on the assumption that all students are "reading to learn," but with the

recognition that many are still learning how reading works. Elevating foundational literacy knowledge across the secondary ELA teacher faculty fosters a shared professional language for identifying problems, referring students appropriately, and designing equitable pathways to access rigorous content (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Lupo et al., 2024). In this sense, the Science of Reading is not merely an early-elementary concern—it is the common key that unlocks better understanding for problem solving at every stage of learning (Moats, 2020b)

Implications for Educators: Not All Reading Struggles Are What They Seem

Secondary ELA teachers shoulder a particularly complex instructional load: they are expected to guide students through literary analysis, rhetorical reading and writing, and real-world literacy tasks such as résumés, cover letters, and workplace documents. Yet, when students disengage, fail to comprehend, or produce underdeveloped writing, educators often misattribute the cause to motivation or effort rather than underlying skill deficits (Willingham, 2017; Smith, 1995)—a pattern of misreading that perpetuates dysconscious ableism in classrooms even among well-intentioned teachers (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017). For many adolescents, comprehension difficulties reflect unaddressed gaps in foundational reading skills that trace back to early elementary instruction (Ehri, 2014; Moats, 2020b).

The purpose of this brief is to introduce the five core components of skilled reading—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—and to reframe them through the lens of secondary ELA. These key skillsets, or "pillars," were identified by the National Reading Panel (2000) and remain the most empirically supported components of proficient reading (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri, 2020). As Moats (2020) emphasizes, *"Most children must be taught to read through a structured, systematic approach grounded in decades of research from cognitive psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience."* While this explicit instruction typically begins in early elementary grades, many older students remain dependent readers due to missed opportunities or inconsistent support.

Secondary ELA teachers are uniquely positioned to observe these residual effects. They encounter the downstream manifestations of early literacy gaps every day—students who may be able to "read" many words aloud, but cannot decode unfamiliar words, interpret meaning, summarize arguments, or integrate information across sources (Lupo et al., 2024). Understanding the five pillars equips ELA teachers to identify when comprehension issues are symptoms of incomplete foundational development, enabling them to adjust instruction,

advocate for support, and collaborate more effectively with reading specialists and special educators (Fuchs & Stecker, 2010).

The Five Pillars of Reading: A Secondary Perspective

Each pillar contributes a distinct but interdependent function in the development of skilled reading (Ehri, 2014;; Scarborough, 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000). When the foundation is weak, the structure of literacy falters, regardless of the reader's age.

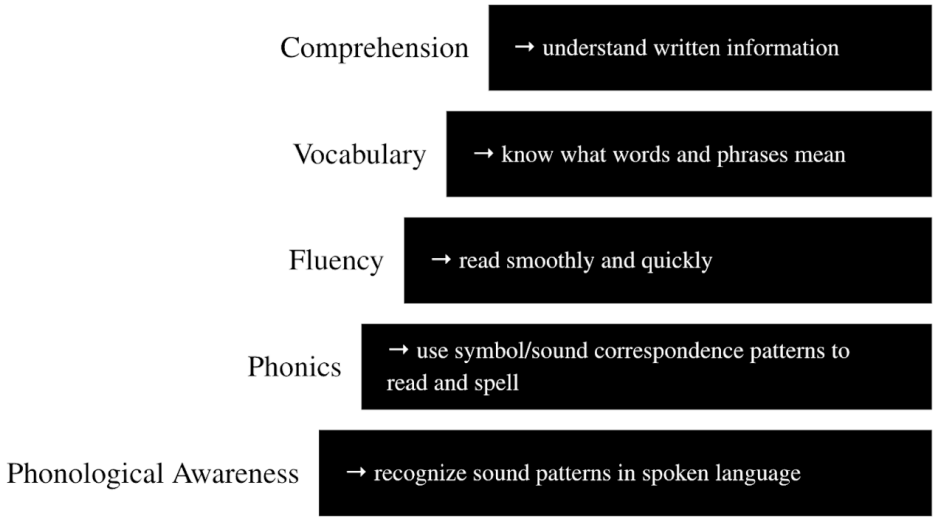


Figure 1. The five core subcomponents ("pillars") involved in skilled reading

Phonological Awareness

Definition. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to discern and manipulate the sounds in spoken language—such as rhyming, segmenting syllables, and isolating phonemes—without involving print (Ehri et al., 2001; Moats, 2020a)

Why It Matters. Phonological awareness is the earliest and strongest predictor of later reading success (National Reading Panel, 2000), and phonemic awareness specifically has the most direct causal relationship to decoding development (Ehri et al., 2001). Students who have not mastered these skills cannot accurately segment or blend sounds, which prevents the development of the orthographic mapping system that supports automatic word recognition (Ehri, 2014). Though commonly associated with early childhood, phonological deficits may persist into

adolescence for many struggling readers (Moats, 2020a). Such students may sometimes appear to read familiar words fluently, but rely on visual memory and context guessing rather than the automaticity made possible by a well-developed orthographic map (Castles et al., 2018; Ehri, 2014).

Signs of Challenge in Secondary ELA Classrooms.

- •Leaving out sounds within words, even when spelling phonetically (*bana* for *banana*)
- •Difficulty spelling phonetically regular words
- •Frequent confusion between visually similar words (e.g., *form* vs. *from*)
- •Limited ability to identify sound patterns, like identifying rhyming

Implications. Weak phonological awareness undermines both reading and writing fluency. If a student cannot consistently "chunk out" sounds within words that they hear, it will not be possible for them to consistently match letters/letter groups to specific sounds. This is a major barrier to further literacy development (Ehri, 2014; Moats, 2020a). Such students may engage in significant learned behavior related to compensating, such as guessing at words, making up a story, or avoidance through social connection or disruptive behaviors (Smith, 1995) . ELA teachers who observe red flags or patterns associated with low phonological awareness should consider referral for screening and intervention targeting sound-level awareness.

Practical classroom routines. In a secondary ELA classroom, phonological work belongs inside the literary and rhetorical analysis students are already doing—not in elementary-style drills that can feel infantilizing to adolescents. The following routines are designed for middle and high school classrooms and use texts already on the syllabus:

- **Sound devices as phonological work.** Analyzing alliteration, assonance, consonance, and slant rhyme in poetry, speeches, or rhetorical prose is, at its core, sustained work with the sound structure of spoken language. Have students locate and discuss sound devices in a current text (e.g., the consonance in Gerard Manley Hopkins, the assonance and cadence in King's "I Have a Dream," the internal rhyme in spoken word poetry), then experiment with substituting a vowel or consonant and analyzing how the meaning or tone shifts. This is sophisticated literary work that simultaneously strengthens the sound-level sensitivity many adolescents still need (Lupo et al., 2024; Moats, 2020a).

- **Stress patterns in multisyllabic academic vocabulary.** Multisyllabic academic words frequently shift stress with grammatical function (e.g., REcord/reCORD, CONtent/conTENT, OBject/obJECT, conDUCT/CONduct), and students must learn these patterns to read and use such words fluently. A brief routine of marking primary stress on the week's vocabulary words—and noting how stress signals part of speech—builds the suprasegmental phonological awareness that supports pronunciation, comprehension, and academic register (Moats, 2020a).
- **Schwa hunting in academic vocabulary.** The unstressed schwa /ə/ accounts for a substantial share of adolescent spelling errors (e.g., *definate* for definite, *seperate* for *separate*, *independance* for *independence*). Have students identify schwa-containing syllables in the current vocabulary list and connect the sound to the conventional spelling. This is a quick, age-appropriate phonological routine that pays direct dividends in writing accuracy (Moats, 2020a).

Phonics (Decoding and Encoding)

Definition. Phonics refers to the relationship between written letters (graphemes) and spoken sounds (phonemes), encompassing both decoding (reading words) and encoding (spelling them) (Ehri, 2020; Moats, 2020a).

Why It Matters. Phonics knowledge enables readers to independently decode unfamiliar words and encode accurate spellings (Ehri, 2020). Without systematic instruction, students often rely on memorization, which breaks down when texts contain multisyllabic or discipline-specific vocabulary (Castles et al., 2018). Reading and spelling are deeply interdependent, and deficits in one often mirror deficits in the other (Moats, 2020a). Indeed, misspelling patterns can provide an instructionally valuable window into a student's missing decoding skills (Moats, 2020a).

Signs of Challenge in Secondary ELA Classrooms.

- No strategy, or reliance on guessing, when encountering an unfamiliar word
- Substitutions of similar-looking words during oral reading (*invaded* for *invited*)
- Spelling errors that don't make sense at the sound level (*dunit* for *donut*)

Implications. It is important to point out that adolescents are not expected to exhibit perfect spelling. The concern centers around persistent patterns of

misspellings that (1) don't make sense phonetically, and (2) don't improve with spelling-pattern instruction. For example, an adolescent who writes *wil* for *will* is demonstrating an understanding of the sounds made by each of the letters, which is a good sign. However, if the student spelled *will* as *well* or *wul*, that signals a possible unmet skill need related to phonological awareness and/or phonics. ELA teachers are exceptionally positioned to recognize when decoding and encoding issues signal deeper skill gaps. Integrating morphology instruction—prefixes, roots, and suffixes—can help students decode complex words (e.g., *transportation*, *photosynthesis*) and builds transferable word-learning strategies. For example, a brief weekly routine of analyzing word parts — such as identifying that "transport" contains the Latin root "port" (to carry) — builds decoding and vocabulary simultaneously without requiring a separate curriculum. When consistent decoding errors persist, collaboration with a reading specialist or special educator is warranted to ensure students receive targeted intervention (Moats, 2020b; Fuchs & Stecker, 2010).

Practical classroom routines. Integrating morphology instruction—prefixes, roots, and suffixes—can help students decode complex words (e.g., transportation, photosynthesis) and builds transferable word-learning strategies (Lupo et al., 2021, 2024; Spencer et al., 2017). The following routines work within a typical ELA period:

- **Weekly morphology mini-lesson.** A brief weekly routine of analyzing word parts—such as identifying that transport contains the Latin root port (to carry), then generating cognates (transportation, import, export, portable, portfolio)—builds decoding and vocabulary simultaneously without requiring a separate curriculum (Lupo et al., 2024).
- **Multisyllabic word attack routine.** Teach a four-step process students can apply independently when they hit an unfamiliar word in a text: (1) underline known prefixes and suffixes, (2) circle the root or base, (3) read each chunk, (4) blend and check whether the word makes sense in context (Moats, 2020a).
- **Spelling-as-diagnostic.** Treat student writing as a data source. When grading short responses, jot a tally of phonetically irregular misspellings. A pattern of vowel-team or schwa errors signals a different need than consonant-cluster errors, and that information should drive referrals or in-class scaffolds (Moats, 2020a).

Fluency

Definition. Fluency is the ability to read text with accuracy and rate sufficient for comprehension. It also encompasses expression when reading aloud (Rasinski, 2012). In instructional settings, the focus is often on reading quickly while maintaining a high rate of accuracy at the word level. It's important to know that fluency measures always include a timed component (explicitly, using a timer, or implicitly by determining whether the student read "fast enough" for the context and purpose of the activity).

Why It Matters. Fluent readers process words automatically, freeing cognitive resources for comprehension (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014; Rasinski, 2012). Conversely, readers who decode laboriously, or who rely on context to guess, often lose meaning across sentences (Willingham, 2017). Fluency difficulties can easily and understandably be mistaken for lack of focus or effort—despite signaling a very specific instructional need (Rasinski, 2012). Research shows that oral reading fluency remains a strong predictor of reading comprehension into high school (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2017). It is critical to recognize underlying needs, rather than pushing a struggling student to simply read faster. For someone who cannot effortlessly decode most words, reading faster simply means increasing the rate of guessing, which is essentially practicing reading mistakes at a higher pace—the opposite of what these students need (Torgesen & Hudson, 2006).

Signs of Challenge in Secondary ELA Classrooms.

- Slow, choppy oral reading
- Reliance on guessing or skipping for certain words
- High error rates, even if (*especially* if) smooth/confident
- Such focus on word-level reading that punctuation is ignored
- Omission or repetition of small function words

Implications. Reading faster is not the goal in and of itself; reading accurately and automatically is (Rasinski, 2012). Fluency development should always be paired with support in any underlying skill needs. ELA teachers can model fluent reading through think-alouds, use choral or partner reading, and provide repeated readings of short passages once accuracy is secure. Overemphasis on speed without decoding or comprehension risks reinforcing surface-level processing and high rates of error (Torgesen & Hudson, 2006).

Practical classroom routines. Secondary ELA teachers can build fluency without sacrificing literary content by selecting short, content-rich passages and applying the following routines:

- **Modeled fluent reading.** Begin a text with a teacher think-aloud read of the first one to two paragraphs, deliberately modeling phrasing, pacing, and prosody. This exposes students to what skilled reading sounds like and provides a target (Rasinski, 2012).
- **Repeated reading of high-leverage passages.** Select a short, dense passage from the current text (e.g., a Shakespearean soliloquy, an opening paragraph of a major essay, a poem) and have students read it three times across the week—first for accuracy, then for phrasing, then for expression. Pair with a brief comprehension or analytic question to keep meaning central (Rasinski, 2012).
- **Partner reading with feedback protocols.** Partner students for low-stakes paired reading using a structured protocol: Reader 1 reads aloud for two minutes; Reader 2 notes one place where phrasing changed meaning and one place where prosody enhanced it; then they switch. This builds fluency for the reader and metalinguistic awareness for the listener.
- **Performance-based fluency.** Reader's theater, choral reading of poetry, and rehearsed dramatic readings give students authentic reasons to practice fluency repeatedly without the stigma of "remedial" reading practice (Rasinski, 2012).

Vocabulary

Definition. Vocabulary knowledge involves familiarity with words and their meanings in context. Vocabulary encompasses the words a student understands and uses, including words that are spoken and written, across academic and functional domains (Beck et al., 2013; Stahl, 2005).

Why It Matters. Vocabulary knowledge is a critical component of reading comprehension (Beck et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2017; Willingham, 2006). Limited vocabulary constrains access to both literary nuance and disciplinary concepts. Vocabulary knowledge is cumulative and begins in early childhood with exposure to oral language (Golinkoff et al., 2019); students with strong early word knowledge acquire new words faster, widening the "Matthew effect" in literacy development (Stanovich, 1986). Critically, vocabulary is not merely a list of definitions—it is the surface manifestation of a much larger underlying construct: background knowledge. Willingham (2006) argues persuasively that what teachers often diagnose as a "comprehension problem" is frequently a knowledge problem in disguise; readers cannot construct meaning from texts that reference concepts, events, or domains they have not previously encountered.

Signs of Challenge in Secondary ELA Classrooms.

•Superficial responses to open-ended questions

•Overreliance on generic language ("stuff," "things," "good")

•Difficulty paraphrasing or defining key terms

•Limited ability to discuss author's diction or tone

•Major drop in reading rate when vocabulary complexity increases

Implications. Vocabulary instruction should be intentional, explicit, and contextualized across reading and writing tasks (Beck et al., 2013; Stahl, 2005). Teaching words in context promotes comprehension and expressive language, including general academic vocabulary (analyze, compare) and subject-specific words (nucleus, Congressperson). Morphology—the study of word parts—plays an important role in vocabulary instruction; knowing roots, prefixes, and suffixes equips students to unlock unfamiliar words independently (Lupo et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2017). Visual support (graphic organizers), semantic mapping, and repeated exposure across modalities reinforce deep word learning.

- **Frontload disciplinary background knowledge.** Because vocabulary and background knowledge are inseparable (Willingham, 2006), spend 10–15 minutes before a complex text immersing students in the historical, scientific, or literary-critical context the text presupposes. For example, for a satirical novel, a brief on the political controversy the author was responding to. The goal is to build the schema that allows comprehension and analysis to proceed (Lupo et al., 2024).
- **Build a thematic vocabulary network across the unit.** For texts organized around a central concept (e.g., justice, power, identity, complicity, ambition), maintain a class-wide thematic vocabulary network that students contribute to as they read. Each entry pairs a word with the text passage where it appears, the function it serves in the author's argument or imagery, and the related words it activates within the unit. By the end of a unit, students have a working analytical vocabulary they can draw on for essay-writing, Socratic seminar, and revision—linking vocabulary directly to written argument rather than to isolated recall.

Demand productive use in academic writing and discourse. Require students to deploy target Tier 2 vocabulary in analytical writing, Socratic seminar, and structured debate—not merely to define it on a quiz. Precise, productive use in academic discourse is what moves a word from receptive to expressive vocabulary and from a definition to a tool of analysis (Beck et al., 2013).

Comprehension

Definition. Comprehension is the active process of constructing meaning from text. It requires integrating linguistic, cognitive, and background knowledge to achieve understanding (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Why It Matters. Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading and the foundation of learning across subjects (Willingham, 2017). As a practical matter, anyone who decodes accurately but cannot extract meaning remains functionally illiterate. We have known for more than a decade that comprehension failure has lifelong consequences. Hernandez (2011) reported that adolescents with below-basic reading proficiency are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Research also suggests that these individuals are also at higher risk for underemployment and justice involvement in adulthood (NCES, 2016). Crucially, comprehension is not a single skill but a product of multiple interacting capacities—decoding, fluency, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, and background knowledge—operating in coordination (Scarborough, 2001; Willingham, 2006, 2017).

Signs of Challenge in Secondary ELA Classrooms.

- Difficulty summarizing or discussing a text
- Struggles to identify main ideas, tone, or author's purpose
- Errors when asked to infer implications or next steps from text
- Inability to complete tasks requiring reading directions
- Difficulty navigating text containing multiple contradictory views or requiring analysis beyond direct application of directions

Implications. For secondary ELA teachers, the key insight is not that comprehension strategies are insufficient—most are already skilled at teaching prediction, questioning, and text analysis—but rather that these strategies have a ceiling effect when upstream skills like decoding, fluency, and vocabulary are underdeveloped (Willingham, 2017). Recognizing when a student's comprehension difficulties are skill-based rather than strategy-based is the critical first step toward effective support. Comprehension instruction must extend beyond "strategies" like predicting or questioning; while those scaffold engagement, true comprehension improvement depends on strengthening upstream pillars—phonics, fluency, and vocabulary—and on systematically building students' background knowledge (Willingham, 2006).

Practical classroom routines. Lupo, Reynolds, and Hardigree (2024) describe a scaffolding approach for grades 6–12 that maintains rigor while supporting access. Their core principle—that scaffolding means temporarily altering the

supports around a text rather than replacing the text with an easier one—is foundational for the routines below:

- **Pair texts strategically.** Precede a challenging primary text with a more accessible secondary text on the same topic. The secondary text builds background knowledge and topic-specific vocabulary, raising students' capacity to comprehend the primary text without diluting it (Lupo et al., 2024).
- **Chunk and summarize.** Break a complex text into meaningful chunks (often 2–3 paragraphs), with students writing a brief summary or generating a question after each chunk. This makes comprehension monitoring visible and prevents students from "glazing over" long passages while their decoding system labors (Lupo et al., 2024).
- **Explicit knowledge-building.** Pre-reading work should include explicit instruction in the historical, scientific, cultural, or rhetorical context the text assumes. A 10-minute mini-lecture, a structured timeline, or a short documentary clip can dramatically improve comprehension of the text that follows (Willingham, 2006).
- **Writing-to-learn for synthesis.** Short, frequent writing tasks—one-paragraph syntheses, dialectical journals, structured comparison prompts—require students to integrate ideas across portions of a text, which is the cognitive work comprehension actually demands (Lupo et al., 2024).
- **Model expert reading aloud.** Conduct teacher think-alouds with complex passages, narrating where you notice ambiguity, where you generate an inference, where you re-read because something didn't make sense. This makes the invisible processes of skilled comprehension visible (Willingham, 2017).

Implications for Collaboration

Awareness of foundational literacy allows ELA teachers to shift from frustration to precision. When comprehension issues emerge, the guiding question becomes *"Which pillar might be weak?"* rather than *"Why won't this student try?"*

When ELA teachers can articulate foundational skill patterns, collaboration with interventionists becomes more effective (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Moats, 2020b). Shared terminology around phonological awareness, decoding, and fluency enables interdisciplinary problem-solving. For example, if a student's written work reveals consistent phonetic errors, the ELA teacher can recommend screening for phonics or orthographic deficits rather than general "reading

comprehension" testing (Moats, 2020). When a student comprehends discussion but cannot comprehend a written text on the same topic, the gap may sit not in interpretation but in decoding, fluency, or domain knowledge (Willingham, 2017)—a distinction that changes who is consulted and what support is provided.

Professional learning communities can also use the five-pillar framework to organize literacy discussions and identify cross-departmental supports. Sustained, content-focused professional development—rather than one-shot workshops—is what produces durable changes in teacher knowledge and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2009; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). Integrating reading science into secondary professional development ensures that foundational literacy is not viewed as an "elementary concern" but as the infrastructure of all academic learning (Bardach & Klassen, 2020; Moats, 2020b). Department-level routines—common vocabulary protocols across content areas, shared annotation conventions, coordinated text-pairing in interdisciplinary units—distribute responsibility for adolescent literacy across the school rather than concentrating it in remedial settings (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Lupo et al., 2021, 2024).

Final Thoughts: Awareness and Insight, Not Intervention

This practice brief does not call on all ELA teachers to become reading interventionists. Instead, it invites a shift in awareness—an understanding that literacy development does not end in third grade. Foundational skills continue to shape adolescents' access to curriculum, identity as learners, and future opportunities. When educators are equipped with knowledge about literacy development, they can develop insights into students' unmet learning needs at the critical time before entering adulthood—and, in doing so, begin to dismantle the dysconscious assumptions that too often frame struggling adolescent readers as unmotivated rather than underserved (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017).

By recognizing the signs of unfinished reading development, ELA teachers can:

- Adjust materials and scaffolds to improve accessibility without reducing rigor (Lupo et al., 2024);
- Integrate student-friendly reading routines—morphology mini-lessons, repeated reading of high-leverage passages, knowledge-building previews, and tiered vocabulary instruction—informed by foundational knowledge (Beck et al., 2013; Moats, 2020b; Rasinski, 2012); and
- Partner with reading specialists, interventionists, and/or special educators to ensure that students receive appropriate skill-based support to remediate deficits, not bypass teaching (Fuchs & Stecker, 2010; Moats, 2020b).

As Moats (2020b) reminds us, *"The ability to read and write is the foundation for success in school and in life. It is the gateway to knowledge."* Secondary ELA teachers are stewards of that gateway, and they may be the last option for students about to exit school as poor readers. Teacher awareness can bridge the gap between student struggles and specific undeveloped skills, ensuring that every student is afforded an opportunity to reach basic levels of literacy for success in postsecondary life.

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