



THE KNOWLEDGE LIST

Understanding and Supporting Older Readers

Imagine yourself as a student in middle or high school. “I’m not a good reader,” you tell yourself every day you’re asked to read a novel, a scientific passage, a first hand historical account. You can sound out some of the words, but you know you’re slower than your friends. You often feel frustrated because you want to keep up in class and you have lots of ideas and questions to share during group discussions. But, with each increasingly difficult text, it gets harder to follow along, harder to contribute in class, and easier to give up.

For many students, this struggle didn’t begin in adolescence. Research shows that reading ability in first grade is a strong predictor of reading outcomes in high school. When students don’t get the support they need early on, difficulties with decoding, language, and comprehension can build year after year. By the time students reach later grades and texts turn even more complex, students may want to avoid reading.

According to the latest National Assessment of Academic Progress, just 30% of 8th graders scored at or above proficient on the reading comprehension assessment nationally (2024 Reading Test). The results are even more bleak for Black students (16%) and Hispanic students (19%) (2024 Reading Test).

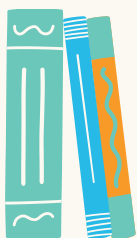
So, what do leaders need to know to support older students to not only build the skills they need to be successful, but also believe that they can?

This Knowledge List

Inside this Knowledge List, we’ve rounded up the resources that we use every day with leaders to help them understand the research about supporting older students who are not yet proficient readers. These same readings guide how we coach leaders to diagnose the unique needs of adolescent readers and respond with approaches that support, honor, and engage them.

You’ll find peer-reviewed research, articles by experts, and insights from educators. While not every article is peer-reviewed, each piece is grounded in the evidence base demonstrating how children become skilled readers. The authors—many of whom are researchers themselves—cite studies that have contributed to the large body of evidence commonly referred to as “the science of reading.”

This list can be a starting point for self-study or a place to curate readings for professional learning and coaching. Every Knowledge List includes:



- [The Essentials](#): Start here to get the basics and build your foundational knowledge.
- [Next Steps](#): Take it a step further with peer-reviewed research and examples of how other schools have translated the research into practice.
- [Deep Cuts](#): Deepen your own background knowledge and build domain-specific vocabulary with longer reads and deeper dives into the underlying research.



THE GIST

Too often, older students who struggle with reading are left behind by their elementary school systems. By the time students reach upper elementary, middle, or high school, their reading challenges are frequently mislabeled as motivation challenges, lack of effort, or knowledge gaps—when in fact, they often stem from unfinished skill development.

In searching for solutions, some educators turn to band-aid tactics that don't address the root cause of students' reading struggles. Increasing test prep time, simplifying texts, or reducing time spent reading in class may seem like logical responses, but research shows they don't lead to long-term gains (Freitag, 2023; ACT, 2006). In fact, these strategies often remove opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with complex, grade-level content. Similarly, providing an extra daily period in the school schedule for reading or assigning reading on technology programs has limited impact on improving reading (Baye et al., 2018).

Why do these strategies often falter? Because the key to supporting older students with reading starts with accurately diagnosing their needs and following up with targeted evidence-based instruction delivered in affirming, age-appropriate ways.

Consider two students who each earn a 40% on a reading assessment. Student A struggles to decode multisyllabic words but answers questions accurately when the text is read aloud. Student B reads aloud fluently but can't recall or explain what they read. Same score, different strengths, different instructional needs.

It can be helpful to reground in Hollis Scarborough's Reading Rope to better understand the challenge. The Reading Rope illustrates the interconnected processes that come together to support reading. At its core, it makes clear that reading comprehension—the ability to make meaning from the words on a page—depends on both word recognition and language comprehension.

Many older readers have not yet crossed the “decoding threshold” or the point where decoding becomes so accurate and automatic that it frees up cognitive resources for comprehension (Wang et al., 2024). If students haven't reached this threshold, they'll struggle with meaning no matter how much time is spent on strategy instruction or test practice. At the same time, other students may decode fluently but lack background knowledge or vocabulary needed for comprehension. Without diagnostic assessments, these very different readers can end up with the same “not yet proficient” label and receive the same support, despite having entirely different needs.

As you read, ask:

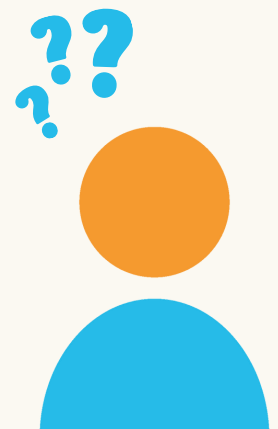
What do we know about the science of reading and older students?

What are some of the differences between older and younger students learning to read?

What are the instructional considerations necessary when teaching older children to read?

How do emotions, identity, and past experiences with reading impact older students' engagement and growth?

What role does diagnostic data play in identifying and addressing unfinished learning for older readers?





THE GIST

This is the reality for many older struggling readers—and many leaders and teachers aren’t equipped with the tools to diagnose and respond effectively (Petricone-Turchetta, 2021; Roberts-Grmela, 2024). In a blog post, one of Lit’s partners, Christina Lippert, compares this to driving on a paved road with potholes. Every older reader has their own unique set of potholes—unfinished learning and missing skills. “We don’t need to repave the road,” she says, “we need to use data to pinpoint the potholes and fill them with targeted support” (Lippert, 2021).

There’s no one-size-fits-all solution. There are, however, a concrete set of recommendations you can follow (Petricone-Turchetta, 2021). Begin by providing professional learning for teachers and instructional leaders in understanding the rationale and evidence-base for teaching reading to older students. Support teachers in diagnosing where “the potholes” lie for each student by using a reading screener and diagnostic assessments. Ensure that multi-tiered systems of support are in place throughout your school or school system that support the population of students you serve. Support teachers and instructional leaders in using evidence-based reading instruction throughout all tiers of support that are responsive to students’ needs, not just in Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction. Monitor student progress regularly and adjust instruction as needed. While these recommendations are similar to those in the early intervention literature (Torgesen, 2004), there is one big difference that is often overlooked.

Older readers often carry the emotional weight of unfinished reading. They may have learned to hide their struggles. They may not see themselves as readers. And they may feel that reading instruction isn’t for them. As the Libens write in *Know Better, Do Better*, “Work with students who have unfinished business in reading is just as much about encouraging and cheerleading as it is about doing exactly the right things technically” (Liben & Liben, 2019).

The answer is not simple or easy. But, it is possible. It’s not too late to support older students. And, it’s not too late to support older students from culturally and linguistically diverse identities.

**“Work with students who have unfinished business in reading is just as much about encouraging and cheerleading as it is about doing exactly the right things technically.”
David & Meredith Liben .**

This Knowledge List is a place to start learning about the research base on supporting students that includes both the technical aspects of diagnosing and responding to specific skill gaps as well as how to design instruction that centers students’ strengths and gives them agency in their learning.





THE ESSENTIALS

The Essentials

Start here to get the basics and build your foundational knowledge.



[Redefining and Reimagining Foundational Skills: Centering Joyful, Culturally, and Linguistically Sustaining Instruction in Literacy Instruction for CLD Students](#)

Abigail Akosua Amoako Kayser, Katie Keown, Carey Swanson, Madeleine Mejia, Brian Kayser (2025)

This article opens with a powerful vignette illustrating what can happen when school systems fail to recognize and build on students' assets. It concludes with a reimagined version of the same scenario, offering specific and actionable steps educators can take to improve outcomes. The authors emphasize that, for older students, "agency and motivation are catalysts for foundational literacy skills development" (Kayser et al., 2025, p. 316). They provide concrete strategies and accompanying resources for teachers and school leaders, including how to interrogate biases and maintain an asset-based mindset.



[Primary Considerations for Adolescent Literacy](#)

The Reading League Compass (2024)

This website offers a comprehensive collection of resources for supporting adolescent students with literacy. The introduction includes a compelling call to action: "The school community, including interventionists, general educators, special educators, and administrators, must all be committed to closing the literacy gap. A culture that values reading proficiency as a fundamental skill is mandatory" (The Reading League Compass, 2024). Beyond developing skills in word study, fluency, vocabulary, knowledge building, syntactic awareness, and comprehension, the site emphasizes the critical importance of student engagement and motivation. It also includes guidance on designing MTSS systems for adolescents, aligning assessments with intervention strategies, and accessing materials organized by key components of effective literacy instruction.



[Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9](#)

Institute of Education Sciences (2022)

If you're looking for evidence-based practices reviewed by a panel of nationally recognized experts, start here. This What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) practice guide presents four recommendations grounded in rigorous research that teachers can use to support reading interventions for students in Grades 4–9. The recommendations include building decoding skills to tackle multisyllabic words, developing reading fluency, using a consistent set of comprehension-building practices, and helping students make sense of complex texts that convey challenging ideas. The guide outlines each instructional practice and summarizes the research base supporting the recommendations.



THE ESSENTIALS



[What Role, If Any, Should Phonics Play in a Middle School or High School? The Answer May Surprise You](#)

Timothy Shanahan (2025)

Shanahan offers a concise review of the limited research on phonics instruction for older students. Drawing on the most recent evidence, he concludes the article with four key recommendations: identify students who need decoding support; provide high-quality Tier 2 phonics instruction and clearly communicate its relevance to students; and ensure that all classrooms incorporate word-level work, including vocabulary, morphology, spelling, and occasional instruction on decoding multisyllabic words.



[Improving Reading for Older Students with David Liben](#)

Melissa and Lori Love Literacy Podcast (2022)

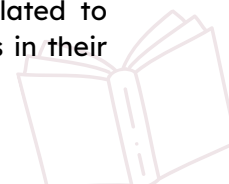
In this episode, David Liben poses the question, “We want kids to read engaging texts and Tier 1 texts as much as possible and get them into the habit of decoding first...so how do we do that?” (Melissa and Lori Love Literacy Podcast, 2022, 11:53). He explains that fluency instruction is essential, and that some students also require targeted word-level work. Simply giving older students decodable texts is not sufficient. Liben references Dr. Marilyn Jager Adams’s (1994) research, which finds that decodable texts are most effective in kindergarten and first grade, primarily to build the habit of sounding out unfamiliar words. While this habit remains important for older students, it represents just one part of the instructional puzzle. One solution Liben proposes is using short, dense paragraphs embedded with phonics patterns students need to practice. He also introduces another potential solution: the [Humanities Accelerator Course](#), developed in partnership with Student Achievement Partners.



[Effective Instruction For Adolescent Struggling Readers: A Practice Brief](#)

Center on Instruction (2008)

“Finding ways to motivate and engage students in reading is an essential feature of adolescent literacy instruction” (Center on Instruction, 2008, pp. 27–28). This practice brief devotes an entire section to increasing student motivation—an important yet often overlooked element of effective instruction. The section summarizes Guthrie and Humenick’s (2004) research identifying four key practices to boost motivation in literacy: (1) providing content goals for reading, (2) supporting student autonomy, (3) offering interesting texts, and (4) increasing social interactions related to reading. The brief also provides guidance on how educators can implement these strategies in their classrooms.





NEXT STEPS

Next Steps

Take it a step further with peer-reviewed research and examples of how other schools have translated the research into practice.



[Unpacking Automaticity: Scaffolded Texts and Comprehension](#)

Elfrieda H. Hiebert (2024)

Hiebert reviews the research on repeated oral reading and concludes that “repeated oral reading with adolescents has not resulted in a transfer to silent reading comprehension and to texts that are not part of the instruction” (Hiebert, 2024, p. 377). She argues that adolescent students need more opportunities to read silently and suggests that wide reading interventions offer a stronger approach. For students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, encountering words in multiple contexts supports vocabulary development. Hiebert recommends using text sets, such as [Topic Reads from TextProject](#), that gradually increase in complexity and provide repeated exposure to high-utility words (referred to as “critical word zones”), supporting both automaticity and comprehension.



[Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy](#)

Edited by Kathleen Hinchman & Heath K. Sheridan-Thomas (2022)

“Tap into students’ voices to become smarter about teaching them” (Tatum, 2022, p. 19). This quote appears in the opening chapter of this essential collection, which brings together research and effective pedagogical practices for adolescent literacy. The first section, *Valuing Adolescents*, explores motivation and the use of texts to build strong classroom communities that honor diverse student identities. The second and third sections—*Developing Literacy Strategies* and *Developing Disciplinary Literacies*—offer practical applications, case studies, and lesson planning ideas. The volume concludes with *Addressing Program and Policy Issues*, featuring chapters on assessment, differentiated instruction, and instructional coaching.



[Structured Literacy Interventions: Teaching Students with Reading Difficulties, Grades K-6](#)

Edited by Louise Spear-Swerling (2022)

Spear-Swerling opens the book with a clear, research-based definition of structured literacy: “Structured Literacy is an umbrella term for a range of interventions that share certain instructional features and content. These interventions can be highly effective for a variety of struggling readers, including those whose difficulties center on comprehension, as well as decoding. SL interventions include teaching not only foundational literacy skills...but also higher-level components of literacy, such as reading comprehension and written expression” (Spear-Swerling, 2022, p. 2). In Chapter 1, she also describes the three most common profiles of struggling readers and aligns each with targeted structured literacy interventions—establishing a strong foundation for the rest of the book’s chapters.



NEXT STEPS



[Best Practices to Change the Trajectory of Students Experiencing Reading Difficulties](#)

Victoria J. Risko & Doris Walker-Dalhouse (2023)

This chapter, part of the seventh edition of *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*, explores “evidence-based practices for K–12 instruction that are responsive to students’ assets, including their racial, cultural, and linguistic resources” (Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2023, p. 354). The authors describe research-based practices and provide concrete examples of how they can be implemented in classrooms. The chapter concludes with “Engagement Activities” designed to prompt reflection and action among teachers and school leaders in their local contexts.



[Unfinished Learning and Older Students: A Story](#)

David Liben & Meredith Liben (2019)

Chapter 7 of Meredith and David Liben’s book, *Know Better, Do Better*, focuses on specific instructional strategies for supporting older students in reading. In addition to offering concrete guidance for teachers and leaders, the Libens highlight the critical role of student self-efficacy. Early in the chapter, they write, “You have to believe in your students’ abilities for them until they see progress for themselves. Work with students who have unfinished business in reading is just as much about encouraging and cheerleading as it is about doing exactly the right things technically” (Liben & Liben, 2019). The chapter also emphasizes the importance of honest communication with students and families, and the power of collaborative efforts to support student growth.



[Turning the Page to Secondary Literacy](#)

Genevieve Thomas | Marshall Street (2024)

In this collection of “research-to-impact practices” from Marshall Street, the authors review the research literature on reading intervention for students in grades 4–12 and identify four best practices that participating schools across the country used to support nonproficient secondary readers. The practices include guiding literacy interventions through tiered assessment, repeated reading, developing multisyllabic word reading, and strengthening timely interventions through goal setting and progress monitoring.





DEEP CUTS

Deep Cuts

Deepen your own background knowledge and build domain-specific vocabulary with longer reads and deeper dives into the underlying research.



[Supporting Foundational Skills for Adolescents With Agency](#)

Margaret Vaughn & Jessica Masterson (2024)

How can educators center student agency in foundational literacy instruction? The authors define agency as “a student’s ability to have ideas, intentions, and to exert influence and take actions to expand the learning context” (Vaughn, 2020, p. 115). They emphasize that supporting foundational skills should not be framed from a deficit perspective. Instead, they provide concrete examples of how teachers can design learning experiences that position students as “knowledgeable meaning-makers”—an approach that can lead to stronger outcomes for adolescent learners (Vaughn & Masterson, 2024, p. 364).



[Teaching Reading to English Learners Grades 6-12](#)

Margarita Espino Calderón & Shawn Slakk (2018)

Fact or misconception? “It takes five to seven years for older MLLs to become proficient in English.” According to the authors, this is a misconception. Calderón and Slakk explain the factors that have contributed to this widely held belief and offer concrete, evidence-based solutions drawn from implementation in states such as Virginia, Texas, North Carolina, Hawaii, and New York. Key strategies include teaching academic language and content-specific writing across all subject areas, as well as engaging both teachers and principals in sustained professional learning to better support multilingual learners.



[16 Minutes of “Eyes-on-Text” Can Make a Difference: Whole-Class Choral Reading as an Adolescent Fluency Strategy](#)

David D. Paige (2011)

This study finds that just sixteen additional minutes per week of whole-class choral reading using narrative texts can significantly support students’ phonological decoding and oral reading fluency. While the study does not report gains in reading comprehension—an acknowledged limitation—it highlights that this simple, easy-to-implement strategy can yield measurable improvements. For teachers and school leaders, it offers a promising, low-lift practice to enhance fluency instruction for adolescent readers.



DEEP CUTS



Response to Intervention With Secondary School Students With Reading Difficulties

Sharon Vaughn & Jack M. Fletcher (2012)

How can schools design effective tiers of support for middle and high school students with reading difficulties? In this research article, Vaughn and Fletcher emphasize the importance of a schoolwide approach that strengthens vocabulary and comprehension instruction across all content areas, combined with ongoing intervention for students reading below grade level. They also recommend that students with persistent and severe reading difficulties may benefit from daily, intensive small-group instruction tailored to their needs.



We're obsessed with reading and reading research at Lit. In this resource, you can read more about [the questions we ask when we evaluate research](#). Taryn Tong created this Knowledge list with support from Christina Lippert, Margo Lukens, Susan Barrett, Emily Nagel, Lacy Reed, Marissa Fraser, Nicole Warren, and Carie Page. If you have a resource to add or another inquiry, you can email us at: hello@wearelit.org.

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You can learn more about Lit's work and impact at: wearelit.org. We partner with system and school leaders to see, transform, and implement every aspect of their reading ecosystem, from the materials in teachers' hands to the ongoing data cycles that inform ongoing instruction.





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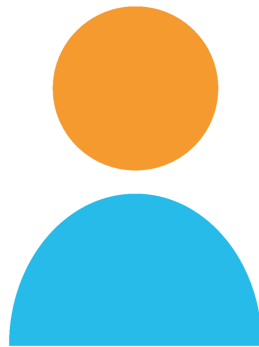


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