

French Immersion / Français langue - Reading advice

A lot of students in French Immersion struggle with reading. The goal of this page is to give you different strategies for different types of reading struggles you may be having.

Decoding the words - You often guess what a word is, misread it, or skip it

- Long words can be slow and frustrating to figure out
- You may struggle with distinguishing letters
- If you aren't reading the words correctly, understanding the text is very very hard

Strategies

- Study basic (high-frequency) words until you can read them instantly
 - In French, this would include words like: autant, tôt, selon, journée...
- Do not let yourself skip a word when reading (try to sound it out)
- Break words into syllables
- Study common prefixes and suffixes (e.g. pré-, -isme, -gion, -ment...)
- Study common letter groups and rhymes
 - eil (sommeil, soleil)
 - euil (seuil, feuille)
 - ll (travailler, réveiller)
- Read out loud with someone who can help you spot errors.

Speed - You find that you read too slowly

- It is normal to read more slowly in a second language
- Everyone naturally has a different speed of reading they prefer - being fast isn't always better
- It is normal (and a good strategy) to vary your speed depending on what you're reading: e.g. a novel is faster than a textbook
- Reading too slowly is associated with more difficulties understanding a text and remembering what you've read
- A minimum reading speed goal is around 150 words / minute (an enjoyable speed for reading a novel is often around 250-300 words / minute).
 - A goal for reading speed (out loud) for a Grade 8 students is between 150-180 words / minute. Silent reading goals may range from 200 words / minute in Grade 8 to 260+ in Grade 12. These goal speeds are suggested by researchers studying students working in their 1st language (Grabe, *Reading in a 2nd language*).

Strategies

- The more you read the faster you will get
- Practice using texts you find easy (e.g. no hard vocab, easy to follow etc.)
- Time yourself so you know your speed
- Push yourself to read a bit faster (but never so fast you stop understanding)
- Increase your vocabulary - reading is often slower in a second language because your brain is spending extra time processing words you don't know well

Vocabulary - You find you don't understand because there are words you don't know

- Reading a novel easily requires knowledge of 4000 - 9000 word families
- If you aren't doing extra vocab work (like notes or flashcards), you want to read something where you understand about 98% of the vocab already (about 1 new word per 50 words). In a standard novel, this would mean 3-8 words on each page.
- Unknown words, particularly longer ones, also slow down reading speed. Knowing more vocabulary means the flow of your reading will improve.

Strategies

- Keep a notebook of words you don't know that you come across when reading
- Make flashcards (e.g. with Quizlet) to practice these words
- Expose yourself to as much written French as possible (by reading, putting on French subtitles when you're watching tv etc.)
- You can't learn words from context unless you know 98% of the words you're reading already
- The first step of learning a new word is realizing that the word exists - stay alert when you see new words, repeat them to yourself...

Focus - You find it difficult to stay focused on the text

- Reading comprehension is easiest when your attention remains focused on the text for at least several minutes at a time.
- The longer the reading session is, the more beneficial it is to comprehension and enjoyment.
- It's easier to read material you're interested in, but everyone needs strategies to stay focused on texts they find boring as well.

Strategies

- Find a quiet place to read that has no distractions
- Don't listen to music
- Don't have your phone near you
- Consider if you are also losing focus because the text is too difficult
 - If this is the case, you may need to work on vocabulary
- Summarize on paper, on a post-it, or mentally what happened every page
- For an article or textbook - highlight key words or take notes
 - Do not highlight or write down everything!
- Follow down the margin with your finger
 - It is best not to follow the line with your finger word by word since your brain needs to see the text surrounding the individual word for meaning clues
- Use something to block off the other parts of the text so you just see the paragraph/area you're reading. (Blocking off everything but one line can decrease comprehension).
- If you are reading on a device, try making the font bigger

- Reread sections when you're unclear on meaning
- Try to create images of what's happening in the text in your head
- Read out loud / mouth the words

Phrasing - You understand individual words but not general meaning

- If you read out loud, you may find that it doesn't sound natural, you hesitate a lot, you don't separate sentences or dialogue well, or you can't anticipate what's coming next in the sentence.
- Difficulty increases sharply once the text has long/complex sentences.
- Strong readers don't read letter by letter (or even word by word). They anticipate what they will read through practice (knowing what sort of sentence or vocab is likely to appear). Their eyes also scan a small area around what they're reading so they can see how sentences will unfold. Don't try to do this consciously - you will feel crazy. Watch the eyes of someone reading and notice how they don't move smoothly!
- Good vocabulary and understanding of context helps strong readers guess what's next. This is part of the reason they can read faster.

Strategies

- Read along with an audiobook
- Pay attention to punctuation, capital letters and paragraph breaks so you pause naturally with the text.
- Read out loud or mouth the words. If you stumble over reading longer words or more difficult words, break them into syllables and notice prefixes/suffixes.
- Try translating the text into your first language. If you are unable to, identify if it is because of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, or how the words fit together. For French, noticing verb endings, COD/COI pronouns and prepositions is particularly useful.
- You might need more practice with grammar for complex sentences like:
 - Conditionnel passé: je n'aurais pas dû le faire (I shouldn't've done it)
 - Subjonctif: Il faut que tu y ailles (You have to go there)
 - Negatives: Tu ne l'entendras jamais plus (You'll never hear it again)

Reading difficulties not restricted to French

- If you find you have difficulty reading in English as well (e.g. due to dyslexia), some strategies to use may include:
 - Building your vocabulary
 - Finding audio versions of texts
 - Strategies to break down words into parts like prefixes and suffixes
 - Extra practice with spelling rules and common letter groupings
 - Read a version that has larger print, shorter lines (i.e. more space in the margins), and letters that aren't squished together.
 - Choose a sans serif font like Verdana or Comic Sans, and don't use italics.
 - Some people report that a "dyslexia-friendly" font is helpful (e.g. dyslexie, OpenDyslexic). Although studies have not found these fonts have a big effect for everyone, try it out for yourself!

Quizzes - You feel you understand the text but do poorly on reading comprehension quizzes

Possible reasons:

- Your answers are unclear
 - Possible solutions:
 - Make the subject of the sentence clear - Who are you talking about?
 - Focus on improving your written French (especially pronouns/homophones)
- Your answer doesn't respond to the question
 - Possible solutions:
 - Reread the question and your answer: does it make sense? Are you actually answering what is asked?
 - Circle the question word/keywords: Who? How? When? Etc.
 - Check if the question had 2 parts
- You didn't show an understanding of the text's language
 - Possible solutions:
 - You just quoted the text instead of explaining in your own words
 - Don't repeat big chunks of the text word for word (unless asked to)
- You didn't answer with an appropriate amount of detail
 - Possible solutions:
 - Look at how much space the teacher gives you to answer
 - Look at how many points the question is worth
 - Ask the teacher if your answer is detailed enough or too detailed
 - Explain if the question says "explain"
- You don't understand the text as well as you think
 - Possible solutions:
 - Reread the text
 - Work on vocabulary in general