

Four Literacy Myths of Older Learners

UNVEILING THE TRUTH ABOUT SUPPORTING
READING PROFICIENCY IN OLDER STUDENTS



Reading Horizons

Where reading momentum begins™

Traditionally, educators have associated foundational literacy instruction with young learners. Understandably so, as most of their training focuses on developing these critical skills in primary students. Consequently, many educators find themselves unprepared to teach older learners how to read effectively.

However, with only 37 percent of high school graduates reading proficiently¹, it's no surprise that foundational literacy for older learners is an emerging hot topic for school admins and educators alike.

Regardless of the reasons behind this alarming trend, we must equip educators with the necessary tools to help these older students achieve reading proficiency as quickly and efficiently as possible. Given that more than 85 percent of learning depends on proficient reading, the lack of effective intervention means students risk falling increasingly behind in other subjects every day.

To empower educators and boost their confidence in influencing the literacy journeys of older learners, we're dispelling four common myths about literacy for older students and sharing solutions to overcome these perceived hurdles.

¹ <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=12>

MYTH #1

Older learners have foundational reading skills. The problem is *comprehension*.

Truth: Dr. Anita Archer famously said, “There is no comprehension strategy powerful enough to compensate if a student cannot read the words.”

When educators assess students and benchmark tests reveal below-average reading proficiency, it’s easy to assume the problem is comprehension—not foundational skills. However, making that assumption is like telling someone to play a song on the guitar without knowing how to form the chords!

When reading comprehension is low in older learners, they often lack the foundational reading skills (e.g., phonics and decoding) to understand what they’re reading. Educators must focus on filling foundational gaps—fluency and automaticity—before students can think deeply about and comprehend the text.

At any age, when an individual’s reading comprehension is more impaired than his or her listening comprehension, inaccurate and slow word recognition is the most likely cause (Shankweiler et al., 1999).

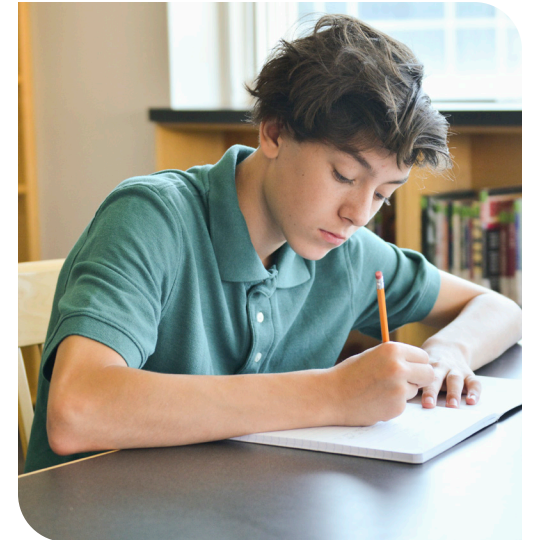
MYTH #2

Foundational literacy materials are too juvenile for older learners.

Truth: Whether it's Greek and Roman mythology or pop culture, studies show that including topics that interest learners can help them overcome academic difficulties.² This means that using materials designed for an older learner's age and interests is key to engaging them in the process. We need to honor their maturity level to keep their motivation high.

While it's true that many foundational literacy materials are geared toward younger students, educators and learners are in luck! Several companies offer age-appropriate student materials, including decodable passages, practice materials, reading libraries, and software made specifically for older learners.

² <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/32503/how-the-power-of-interest-drives-learning>



Scientists have shown that passionate interests can allow people to overcome academic difficulties or perceptual disabilities.

MYTH #3

Older learners aren't motivated to learn to read.

Truth: It's normal to avoid doing things we're not good at. By avoiding our shortcomings, our skill gaps only grow. While some older students may avoid reading if they lack confidence, this doesn't mean they're not motivated to learn.³

While age *can* play a role in motivation, the *instructional method* is the primary factor. The following components can significantly influence learner motivation, confidence, and engagement:

- Earning small victories
- Participating in educational games and activities
- Increasing self-efficacy and belief in themselves
- Lowering the perceived difficulty of learning to read

The most challenging aspect of teaching older students is that they cannot read, so they do not like to read; reading is labored and unsatisfying, so they have little reading experience; and, because they have not read much, they are not familiar with the vocabulary, sentence structure, text organization, and concepts of academic "book" language.

3 Ackerman & Dyckman, 1996; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997

When students begin to read fluently and gain confidence in their abilities, their enthusiasm and motivation become contagious.



As self-efficacy increases, perceived difficulty plummets for learners.

MYTH #4

Older learners will fall behind in *grade-level standards* if they focus on foundational reading skills.

Truth: Educators fear that if they spend time teaching foundational reading skills to older students, these students will subsequently fall behind in *grade-level standards* such as vocabulary and comprehension. Students can work on these skills concurrently, provided that the text is accessible to them (even if the text they are using to practice is below grade level).

For example, by the end of 7th grade, students are expected to be able to *determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text.*⁴ However, if a student cannot read the text, identifying central ideas becomes an impossible feat!

Instead, have the student read a passage independently—aligned with their Lexile level. With instruction, the student can analyze the passage using a graphic organizer. This approach allows us to teach the standard while the student practices foundational skills using a passage that is accessible to them.

4 Common Core State Standards: <https://www.thecorestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/7/>

All learners can gain reading skills

Reading presents opportunity. And for older learners, learning to read can be the difference between a life of meaning and fulfillment—and a life of missed opportunities. By acknowledging these literacy myths for older learners—and following our advice—educators will have an outsized impact on their students' current and future success.



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