

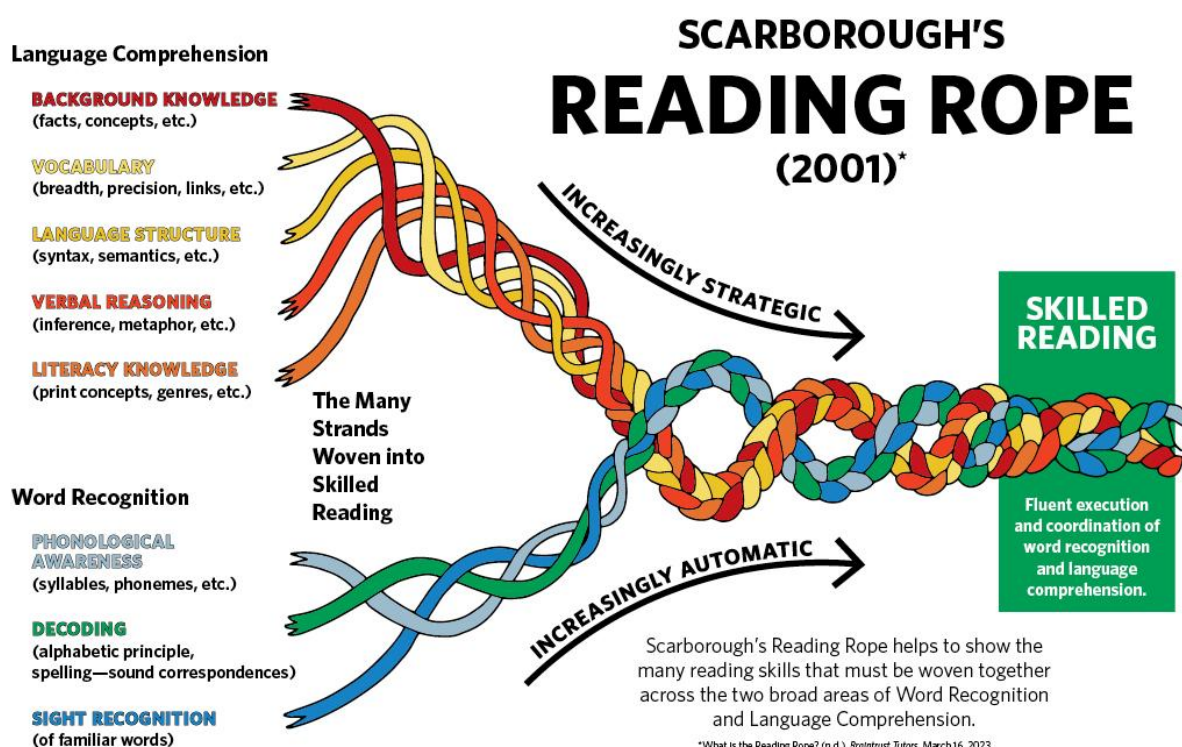


Scarborough's Reading Rope Explained

Learning to read well doesn't happen all at once. Children need to develop and connect eight different skills as they grow into confident, fluent readers. If a child is struggling with even one of these skills, it can make it harder for them to sound out words, build vocabulary, or fully understand what they are reading.

Teachers often use a model called **Scarborough's Reading Rope** to better understand where a child may be having difficulty and how best to support them. This model, created by reading researcher Dr. Hollis Scarborough, shows how different reading skills are woven together—much like strands in a rope—to create strong reading ability.

Dr. Scarborough used hands-on examples, such as pipe cleaners twisted together, to show how these skills must work together and depend on one another. Her research helps teachers understand the complexity of learning to read and guides the support they provide to children. Scarborough's Reading Rope is based on years of research and is strongly supported by what we know from the science of reading.



The strands of the Reading Rope are divided into two sections: Word Recognition (phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition of familiar words) and Language Comprehension (background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge). Together, these two sections produce a skilled reader. Each of these strands in each section is dependent upon one another.

In Scarborough's Reading Rope, Word Recognition is a combination of:

- Phonological awareness
- Decoding
- Sight recognition

Of these three, Scarborough proposed decoding is the element that ties everything together. A student's ability to decode words begins with their understanding of the language sound system. Then, it moves to their knowledge of the writing system through understanding phonology, orthography, and morphology.

Language Comprehension is the other necessary component of reading comprehension. It makes up the top half of the Reading Rope. Language comprehension requires the combination of:

- Background knowledge
- Vocabulary
- Language structures
- Verbal reasoning
- Literacy knowledge

While the skill components in the [Reading Rope differ slightly from other science of reading](#) theories, such as the Five Pillars of Reading and the [Simple View of Reading](#), each strand illustrates a fundamental part of a Structured Literacy approach.

Upper Strands: Language Comprehension

The upper strands of the Reading Rope refer to the components of language comprehension that work in tandem with word recognition skills to develop skilled reading. These strands help readers understand the meaning of a text after they decode the words that comprise them. While the lower strands focus on the technical aspects of reading, the upper strands focus on deriving meaning from what is read through background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literary knowledge.

Background Knowledge

The more students know about a subject before they read about it, the easier it is for them to derive the meaning behind a text. Background knowledge, or what students already know about topics such as plants, the weather, or a historical figure, impacts their understanding of what they read. Students reading about Benjamin Franklin's discovery of electricity will get a lot more meaning out of the text if they understand the concept of electricity in general. By including reading materials in the context of the rest of their curricula, teachers can teach reading concurrently with science, social studies, or math topics. This helps students learn from content-rich texts and improve literacy skills simultaneously.

Vocabulary

Students can't understand what they are reading unless they know the meaning of the words in a text. In some cases, new readers skip words they don't know or attempt to read them without fully understanding them. By increasing their vocabulary knowledge, students can read and enjoy a wider variety of books. If they have to pause frequently to determine a word's meaning, they're more likely to lose interest in reading. Students develop their [vocabulary knowledge](#) both orally and by reading. Teachers can practice vocabulary with their students by making word learning a part of their everyday classwork.

Language Structures

According to the [Literacy Engagement Action Project at George Mason University](#), students must grasp several concepts to understand language structures. These include syntax (the order of words) and semantics (the meaning of the text). Syntax refers to the rules governing the arrangement of words in sentences to convey meaning, including grammar and sentence structure. Semantics refers to the meaning of words and sentences, including vocabulary and context. Readers continue to build skills in both areas as they encounter more challenging texts.

Verbal Reasoning

Scarborough's Reading Rope defines verbal reasoning as the understanding of the ways words can be used literally and figuratively. Students use verbal reasoning to decipher the meaning of metaphors, analogies, idioms, and other types of figurative language. For example, students must understand that the metaphor "my home is my castle" doesn't necessarily mean the protagonist in the story lives in a castle. Likewise, they must recognize the simile "sick as a dog" refers to someone feeling ill.

Literacy Knowledge

Literacy knowledge refers to understanding a book's parts, including how its Table of Contents relates to the book, the difference between fiction and nonfiction, and an

understanding of different genres—including poetry, fantasy, or biography. Teachers can build students' literacy knowledge by exposing them to diverse texts.

Lower Strands: Word Recognition

The Word Recognition, or lower strands of the Reading Rope, is foundational to reading fluency and requires students to process written words automatically and effortlessly. The three strands in Word Recognition include phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition.

Phonological Awareness

When students develop phonological awareness, they begin to understand spoken words are made up of sounds and blends of sounds in language. Children may not be aware of these sounds when they learn to speak, but to read, they must associate spoken sounds to letters, and, later, words on a page. When students develop phonological awareness, they can learn letter-sound correspondence and blend sounds together to form words.

Decoding

[Decoding](#) refers to the process of linking spoken sounds to printed words or letters on a page. Students can't decode words until they understand the English language sound system and alphabet through an understanding of phonology, orthography, and morphology. The ultimate goal of teaching students how to decode is to help make reading automatic. Decoding has gained more attention as the science of reading movement has illuminated the role of word recognition in early literacy acquisition.

Sight Recognition

Sight recognition improves reading fluency and efficiency, according to [The Digital Promise](#). When students can recognize irregularly spelled words that do not follow regular spelling conventions, they can better pronounce and understand the meaning of those words without struggling to decode them. Also known as orthographic mapping, sight recognition refers to a student's ability to recognize and permanently store words.

Students acquire orthography by learning frequently recurring patterns required to match sounds to letters or groups of letters. As they become more experienced readers, they learn syllable types, the major syllable division matters in English, and ultimately begin reading grade-appropriate texts aloud to build fluency skills.