

# The Decoding Threshold: A Critical Milestone in Every Reader's Journey

A Guide for Teachers, Specialists, and Education Leaders

## Decoding Threshold: What it is and Why it Matters

The decoding threshold—the point at which word reading becomes accurate and automatic—is a pivotal, research-based milestone in a student's reading journey. Until students cross this threshold, their cognitive energy is consumed by figuring out individual words, leaving little capacity for understanding what they read. Research shows that striving readers who have not reached the decoding threshold gain little benefit from comprehension-focused interventions (Wang et al., 2019).

## The Two Phases of Reading: Learning to Read and Reading to Learn

Reading development unfolds in two broad phases:

### DECODING THRESHOLD

#### 1 Learning to Read "Wiring the Brain" for Reading

##### BELOW THE THRESHOLD

Structured Literacy; Robust Decoding Support

In this foundational phase, students are still "wiring the brain" for reading. They need explicit, systematic Structured Literacy instruction across the five key pillars of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. During this phase, instruction emphasizes decoding skills while building vocabulary and comprehension primarily through oral language activities.

#### 2 Reading to Learn

##### BEYOND THE THRESHOLD

Focus on Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension

Once students can decode most words accurately and automatically, they enter the second phase. Now, reading becomes a tool for thinking, learning, and enjoyment, and the emphasis shifts to vocabulary and comprehension through engagement with text.

**The decoding threshold marks the transition between these phases.** It is the measurable, research-based point when foundational decoding skills are mastered and automatic, freeing up mental energy for comprehension, vocabulary growth, and knowledge-building.

# The Decoding Threshold is Significant

## Students BELOW the threshold:

- ✗ Read slowly and with effort
- ✗ May miss out on content and vocabulary growth through engagement with text
- ✗ Often get misidentified as having “comprehension problems” alone

## Students ABOVE the threshold:

- ✓ Read with accuracy and greater fluency
- ✓ Can focus on meaning rather than decoding
- ✓ Grow quickly in comprehension and vocabulary

## What This Means for Instruction

Knowing whether a student is below or above the decoding threshold helps pinpoint what kind of instruction or intervention is needed.

If a student is BELOW the decoding threshold	If a student is ABOVE the decoding threshold
Structured Literacy with explicit, systematic phonics and decoding instruction	Strategic support in fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension
Decodable and controlled texts for reinforcing practice	Rich, complex texts for knowledge-building and enjoyment
Decodable and controlled texts for reinforcing practice	Close reading, writing, and text-based discussion

**Remember:** Students at any grade—even middle or high school—may still be below the decoding threshold and need support with foundational skills.

# Determining Whether a Student is Below or Above the Decoding Threshold

## Educators can look for these indicators that a student may still be BELOW the decoding threshold:

- Labored, inaccurate word reading; slow reading rate
- Avoidance of independent reading
- Stronger comprehension when listening than when reading

## Assessment data can confirm:

- Oral reading fluency scores
- Decoding subtests (e.g., nonsense word reading)
- Spelling inventories

For screening, educators may choose to administer the Decoding Threshold Quick Check from EPS Learning.

## Moving Forward

Crossing the decoding threshold is more than a developmental milestone—it is a gateway to reading success. When educators identify where students are on their reading journey, they can provide the right instruction at the right time, ensuring every learner becomes a confident, independent reader.

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