



Reading is Everywhere, Not Just in ELA

RECOGNIZING READING CHALLENGES ACROSS SUBJECT AREAS AND DAILY LIFE

Reading shows up in every subject area and in life beyond school. This brief helps families recognize when reading challenges might be behind a struggle, and what to bring to the conversation with their child's school.

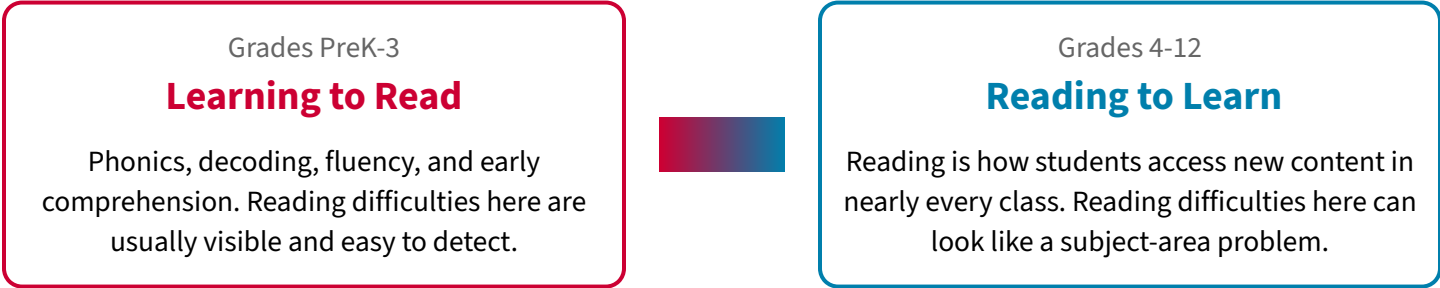
Your child's math grades dropped in middle school even though they can still work through problems correctly when you sit with them. Your middle schooler is one of the most talkative kids in history class but consistently struggles on tests and written assignments. Your teenager has been putting off a job application for weeks, and getting through the form has turned out to be a bigger obstacle than expected. These patterns are worth paying attention to, because reading demands are built into tasks across every subject and throughout daily life.

Students spend the first school years learning to read. In kindergarten through grade 3, they develop the ability to recognize words, connect letters to sounds, read with fluency, and understand what they read. Around grade 4, the expectation shifts. Students are now expected to read to learn. Reading becomes the primary tool for accessing new content in math, science, history, electives, and everyday routines.

Reading belongs to every class. Science has textbook pages, diagrams, data tables, and lab directions. History has maps, timelines, speeches, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Math has word problems and multi-step directions before any calculation begins. Even PE and have posted routines, equipment labels, and written instructions.

Early reading struggles are often easier to see. A child cannot sound out words, reads very slowly, or avoids books. Later reading struggles can be harder to recognize because they surface inside other subjects. A student who did well in the early grades can hit a wall around fourth or fifth grade, when assignments grow longer, vocabulary grows more specialized, and more learning happens through reading independently.

For students with disabilities, reading demands are present across the entire school day, not just during ELA. Understanding that pattern can help families have specific and productive conversations with their child's school.



How Reading Challenges Show Up Across Subjects

Reading difficulties do not look the same in every class. The following patterns can help families notice what they are seeing across subjects, assignments, and daily routines.

Math: Math has a lot of reading. Students read word problems, multi-step directions, and precise vocabulary: sum, product, ratio, factor, estimate, compare. Word problems require students to understand what is being asked before they can calculate anything. A student who handles the math itself just fine can still struggle when that math is wrapped in language they have to read and interpret on their own.

➤ *You might notice your child can work through problems when you talk through them together but has more difficulty working from the page independently. They may seem to understand the concept but have trouble figuring out what a word problem is actually asking. Multi-step directions can be hard to follow.*

Science: Science reading can be dense. Students encounter technical vocabulary, symbols, captions, diagrams, data tables, lab steps, and written explanations of cause and effect, often all on the same page. Making sense of a science passage involves connecting the words to the visuals and to what the student already knows, not simply reading each sentence in order.

➤ *You might notice your child can describe a concept or experiment in conversation but has more difficulty explaining what a textbook passage says about the same thing. They may skip diagrams, captions, or data tables, or read through a section without being able to state the main idea afterward.*

Social Studies: Social studies and history texts ask students to read about unfamiliar places, people, and events, often with limited background knowledge to draw on. Students work with maps, timelines, and original documents, including speeches and letters written in language that sounds formal or archaic. These texts also ask students to understand point of view, trace causes and effects, and draw conclusions from complex material.

➤ *You might notice your child can recall specific facts but has a harder time explaining why something happened or what it meant in a broader sense. Original documents or primary sources may be especially difficult to work through because the sentence structure and vocabulary feel unfamiliar.*

Electives: Even in classes that feel primarily hands-on, reading is present. Art classes have written project instructions. PE and health classes post routines and safety rules. Career and technical education courses use manuals, safety guidelines, and procedural directions. Music classes involve reading notation and instructions.

➤ *You might notice your child does well when the teacher models every step but has more difficulty when working from written directions alone. Steps that are posted or written may need to be communicated in another format as well.*

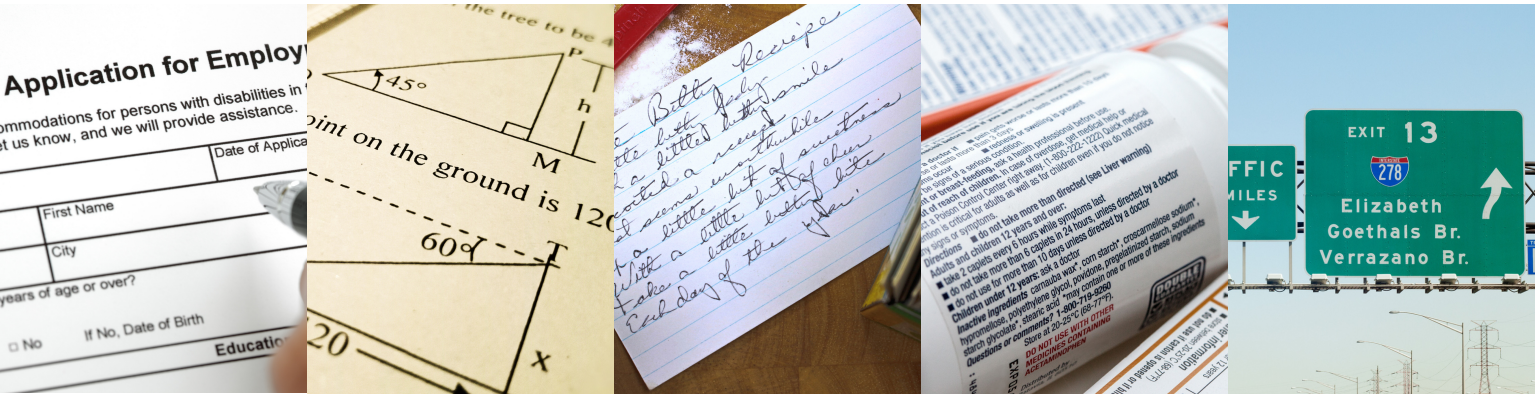
Reading shows up throughout daily life, too: signs, menus, labels, schedules, forms, text messages, emails, and warnings. These are not school tasks, but they draw on the same skills. A student who finds reading difficult does not stop encountering reading demands when the school day ends. You might notice your child needs support with written directions at home, has difficulty navigating everyday forms or schedules, or tends to avoid tasks that involve reading without quite saying why.

Reading Challenges and Students with Disabilities

Reading difficulties can stem from different sources and can look different depending on the student. Some students have trouble with decoding, meaning reading the words themselves accurately and fluently. Others decode adequately but have difficulty understanding what they read. Still others find that sustaining attention and keeping track of meaning across a longer text is the hardest part, particularly when reading demands pile up across a full school day. These are distinct challenges, and they sometimes appear together.

- A third grader with dyslexia participates enthusiastically in science experiments, asks good questions, and makes strong observations. When a written worksheet is introduced, the task of getting ideas onto paper becomes the obstacle rather than the science itself.
- A sixth grader with a language disorder is one of the more engaged students in class discussion. When asked to read a primary source independently in social studies, the sentence structure and unfamiliar vocabulary make the text genuinely hard to work through on her own.
- A ninth grader with ADHD reads slowly and loses focus mid-paragraph. Staying on task, holding meaning in mind across a longer passage, and moving between sections of a text all draw on planning and attention skills that are harder for him to sustain. When those demands accumulate across several classes in a day, homework takes considerably longer than anyone expects.

When a student appears to be struggling in a particular subject, it is worth asking whether the reading and language demands of that subject might be playing a role.



What Families Can Do

Families are not expected to diagnose a reading problem or deliver a reading program at home. The most useful role is to notice patterns, write them down, and share specific examples with school staff.

Notice and document what you see. Where does your child seem to hit a wall? Do they do better when someone reads the text aloud? Can they explain an answer verbally but struggle with written tasks? Do challenges seem to increase when there are directions, diagrams, forms, or longer passages? Specific observations are more useful in a school meeting than general impressions.

Asking Questions at School

Specific, concrete questions are enough to open a productive conversation with a teacher or during an IEP meeting.

- Could reading or language be part of what we are seeing, even if it does not look like a reading problem on the surface?
- How can we support reading needs in math, science, and social studies, not just ELA?
- Does my child have enough time to complete reading-based tasks, or is speed part of the challenge?
- Are there ways my child can show what they know without having to read or write, like talking through an answer?

Share specific observations. "He can work through the math when we sit together, but word problems on his own are really hard" gives a teacher or IEP team more to work with than "he is bad at math." "She always has something to say in discussion, but the textbook chapters don't seem to be getting through" points to something the team can examine more closely. Bringing concrete examples to the teacher, case manager, or an IEP meeting can lead to a more productive and detailed conversation.

Use simple supports at home. Read directions, problems, or short articles together, then let your child do the thinking and the talking. Break multi-step tasks into smaller pieces and use a checklist or visual schedule. Allow your child to respond by talking, drawing, or pointing rather than always requiring a written answer. Keeping reading practice short and predictable tends to work better than longer sessions. Ten to fifteen minutes at a time is a reasonable place to start.

Key Takeaways

- Reading is not only an ELA skill. It is how students access content across every subject and navigate tasks in daily life.
- Reading challenges can show up as difficulty with a particular subject, especially as students move into upper elementary school and beyond, when reading to learn becomes the primary expectation.
- Reading difficulties can stem from different sources, including trouble with decoding, language comprehension, or the attention and focus skills that help a reader hold onto meaning across a longer text. Recognizing the pattern is the first step toward getting the right support.
- Families' observations are specific and valuable. Sharing them with the school in concrete, descriptive language can help open more focused conversations about what support might look like.

The BRIDGE Initiative

The Building Resources for Inclusive Development and Growth in Education (BRIDGE) Initiative is a partnership between Rutgers University and the NJ Department of Education Office of Special Education. It promotes strong partnerships between families and schools to help students with disabilities make steady progress towards their learning goals. Learn more at go.rutgers.edu/bridge.