

Reading Aloud

What this handout is about

This handout explains some of the benefits of hearing your writing read aloud. It offers tips on reading your draft yourself, asking a friend to read it to you, or having it read by a text-to-speech program or app.

Why read out loud?

Reading aloud has many benefits that we want to share with writers. Most people have far more experience listening to and speaking English than they do reading and editing it on the printed page. When you read your draft out loud or listen to someone else read it, your brain gets the information in a new way, and you may notice things that you didn't see before.

As listeners, we need the order of ideas in a paper to make sense. We can't flip back and forth from page to page to try to figure out what is going on or find information we need. When you hear your paper read out loud, you may recognize that you need to re-order the information in it or realize that there are gaps in your explanation. Listeners also need transitions to help us get from one main idea to the next. When you hear your paper, you may recognize places where you have moved from one topic to another too abruptly.

You may also hear errors in your sentences. Sometimes we leave out a word, mess things up as we copy and paste text, or make a grammatical mistake. These kinds of errors can be hard to see on the page, but sentences that contain them are very likely to sound wrong. For native speakers of English (and some non-native speakers, too), reading out loud is one of the most powerful proofreading techniques around.

Sometimes sentences aren't grammatically incorrect, but they are still awkward in some way—too long, too convoluted, too repetitive. Problems like these are often easily heard. Hearing your paper can also help you get a sense of whether the tone is right. Does it sound too formal? Too chatty or casual? What kind of impression will your voice in this paper make on a reader? Sometimes hearing your words helps you get a more objective sense of the impression you are creating—listening puts in you in something more like the position your reader will be in as he/she moves through your text.

What are some strategies for reading out loud?

Reading your paper out loud has a lot of benefits, but it presents a few challenges, too. One issue is that a lot depends on how you read. It is very easy to read too quickly or to let your brain automatically “smooth over” mistakes, fill in missing words, and make little corrections without you ever becoming consciously aware that it's happening. If you don't read exactly what is on the printed page, you won't get an accurate sense of what is in your paper.

Here are some strategies to help you read out loud effectively:

- Try working from a printed copy. This will allow you to make marks at places where something sounds wrong to you so you can return to them later.
- As you read, follow along with your finger, pointing at each word. This can help you stay focused and not skip anything.
- Try to read at a moderate pace.
- If you are proofreading, consider reading your paper out loud one sentence at a time, starting at the end and working back to the beginning. This will help you focus on the structure of each sentence, rather than on the overall flow of your argument.
- Try covering up everything but the section or sentence you are working on at the moment so you can concentrate on it and not get lost.

Another great strategy to try is to ask a friend to read your paper out loud while you listen. Make sure that your friend knows to read exactly what is on the printed page. Pay close attention to places where your friend seems to stumble or get lost—those may be places where you need to make things clearer for your readers. As your friend is speaking, you can jot notes on a printed copy of the paper. You don't have to be in the same room to do this—you could email a copy of your paper to your friend and ask him/her to call you and read to you over the phone.

How can technology help?

You don't necessarily need to recruit a friend to read to you. There are a number of text-to-speech software applications and web-based services that will help you get your computer, smartphone, tablet, or e-book reader to read your paper out loud to you. One advantage of this approach is that an automated reader will definitely not cover up any errors for you! You can also control where it starts and stops, speed it up or slow it down, and have it re-read the same paragraph as many times as you want.

If you decide to experiment with this approach, there are many free text readers available. MS Word has a text-to-speech feature built in. Recent Android and iOS phones also have text-to-speech capabilities, which you can find under accessibility settings. You may also find text-to-speech software among your Windows or Mac computer's accessibility features.

If you decide you want to acquire specialized software, "text to speech," "TTS," and "text reader" are search terms that can help you find what is available.

Here are some differences to keep in mind as you choose the best reader for you:

- **Voice quality and selection:** how many voices can you choose from, and how natural do they sound?
- **Controls:** can you determine the speed and pitch of the speaker, where the reading starts and stops, etc.? Is there a pause button?

- **Applicability:** can you convert your text file into an audio file, download it, and listen to it on your phone or music player?
- **Text handling:** does the software highlight each word as it is read (which may be especially helpful for non-native English speakers and students with reading/writing disabilities)? Do you need to copy text and paste it into a new window, or can the program work directly within an application (like Word or Powerpoint), or does it just read the text on your screen?
- **Speed:** how many pages of text or words can be converted to voice at once? How quickly does the conversion happen?
- **Type of program:** do you need an active internet connection to use the program, or can you run it without internet access once it has been installed?

While synthetic voices continue to improve, they will likely not sound completely natural to you. But you may find that if you choose a favorite voice, you can get used to its intonation and pacing over time.

I feel kind of silly doing this...

Reading aloud (or listening to your writing being read) takes some getting used to, but give it a try. You may be surprised at how much it can speed up your revision process!

Works Consulted:

“Tips & Tools.” Writing Center, writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/.