

YOUTH SUCCESS MOVEMENT · DIAGNOSTIC SUPPLEMENT

When the Words Work and Reading Still Does Not

Nine failure modes above the word level — and how to tell them apart

A supplement to the Reading Engine. September 2026 · Version 2.0

What changed in version 2.0

Six checks in version 1.0 told you to read a single observation as a finding. Those readings have been withdrawn. The observations remain — what they are taken to mean has changed, and each one is marked where it appears.

Two modes have been added. The engine gained two parts since version 1.0: handling a word that is not in the library, and working with the picture once it is built. Both are places reading fails and neither was in the seven.

And one exit has been added that is not a failure mode at all — the student whose engine works and who still does not pass.

Two populations, one label

A state reading test returns one verdict: not proficient. Underneath it are two entirely different children, and the response is currently identical for both.

Group	What is true	Where it breaks
Below basic	Did not pass the early screener either. The words are not coming off the page.	The pipeline — signal, recognition, or the word entry. About four in ten fourth graders nationally.
Basic, not proficient	Passed every early screener. Every indicator said this child was fine.	The model — the picture is never built, never held, never worked with, or never checked. This is the group nothing is looking for.

This document is about the second group. Early screening largely tests word recognition — whether the words come out right. A child can pass it with the word level working perfectly and still not read, because reading is not the words. It is what the words are for.

So the diagnostic question is not whether the engine runs. It is where above the word level it stops.

A note on the first group

If the word level is failing, fix that first and nothing here applies yet. A stage that never received input looks exactly like a broken stage — you cannot look at comprehension in a child for whom the words are not arriving.

Run the word-level checks, correct what you find, then come back.

The nine failure modes

Five sit in the pipeline, which runs on every sentence. Four sit in the model, which is held across the whole passage. Pipeline failures show up on a single sentence.

Model failures show up on a paragraph or a page — and that difference is the first thing to establish, because it can be seen without any instrument.

	Mode	Where	One-line signature
1	Too slow	Pipeline	Every word right, and each one costs something
2	An unknown word stops everything	Pipeline	Hits a word they do not know and the sentence ends there
3	A thin entry	Pipeline	Knows one meaning for a word that has two
4	The sentence never assembles	Pipeline	Words arrive fine, the sentence does not
5	The knowledge is not there	Pipeline	Every word understood, the world behind them missing
6	The picture does not hold	Model	Fine on four sentences, adrift on fifteen
7	The picture cannot be worked with	Model	Can tell you everything in it. Cannot compare two parts of it
8	Nothing is checking	Model	Reads on past something that cannot be true
9	The wrong task was learned	Model	Reads beautifully. Surprised to be asked what it meant

MODE 1 · PIPELINE

Too slow

What is happening Every word is correct, but each one costs something. By the time the sentence ends, the beginning is gone.

What it looks like Accurate and laborious. Tired after a page. Comprehension improves markedly when time pressure is removed.

What points here Timed reading is slow while accuracy is high. Listening comprehension is fine — the understanding works when the words arrive without cost.

Two children read the same page aloud with no errors. One finishes in ninety seconds and asks what happens next. The other takes four minutes and does not want to talk about it. Both were accurate. Only one had any capacity left over for meaning — and a single fluency score would have hidden the difference.

What it needs. Volume of easy reading, well below their level, with no timing and no pressure on speed. Not more phonics — the mechanism works and the word library is what is short.

MODE 2 · PIPELINE

An unknown word stops everything

New in version 2.0.

What is happening Every text contains words the reader has not stored. What matters is not whether they can work one out — it is whether they can keep going without it.

What it looks like Stops dead at an unfamiliar word. Or works at it so long that the sentence is gone by the time they get there. Reads far below what their word library would allow, because progress halts at every gap.

What points here Watch a page slightly above their level and note what happens at each unfamiliar word. Three things can happen and only one of them works: they

stop and stay stopped, they work at it and lose the sentence, or they take what the sentence gives and carry on.

A boy reading about the desert hits the word arid. He stops. He tries it three times. He goes back to the start of the sentence and tries again. By the time he gives up, the four minutes he had for that passage are gone — and he understood the twelve sentences before it perfectly well.

One thing worth noticing while you watch

If sounding it out produces a word the child clearly recognizes when spoken, the library is thinner than the vocabulary. That is a storage problem rather than a language one, and it points at mode 1 rather than mode 3.

What it needs. Tell them explicitly that carrying on is allowed. Most children have never been told they may pass a word they do not know, and many have been taught by correction that they may not. Then practice it out loud together — skip a hard word deliberately and say what you think it probably meant. On a timed test, recovering and moving on is the skill that decides whether they finish.

MODE 3 · PIPELINE

A thin entry

What is happening The word is recognized and the entry is retrieved — and the entry has one meaning in it where the sentence needs another. Or the meaning attached is faint rather than absent.

What it looks like Reads the word correctly and cannot say what it means. Or says what it means confidently and is wrong for this context. Oral vocabulary is weak on testing.

What points here Definition quality is thin — associations rather than categories. The vocabulary sub-score on the interim assessment is low relative to the composite.

A child reads “The bank was steep and muddy” without a stumble, and pictures a building. She recognized the word and retrieved the only meaning she had stored for it. No hesitation, no error, no sign at all. She simply understood a different sentence than the one on the page.

What it needs. Meeting words many times, in different situations — the bank of a river and the bank on the corner in the same week. Read aloud above their level, where words arrive that never come up in conversation. Not flashcards, which produce exactly this: a thin entry with one meaning in it.

MODE 4 · PIPELINE

The sentence never assembles

What is happening The words arrive intact and the sentence does not come together — either because there is not room to hold it while it is being built, or because the grammar cannot be handled.

What it looks like Loses the end of long sentences. Retells in fragments. Manages one instruction but not three.

What points here Long sentences go worse than short ones, in reading and in listening alike. That listening result is what separates this from a reading problem.

“The girl that the boy pushed was crying.” Ask who was crying. A child who has lost the front of the sentence by the time they reach the end will say the boy. Every word was read correctly. What ran out was the room to hold the sentence together while it was being assembled.

Withdrawn from version 1.0 — reading the shape of the error

Version 1.0 said: if they truncate, reduce the load; if they simplify while keeping meaning, refer. It read the location of the error as the cause.

The grammatical half stands and it is worth watching for. If the meaning survives but the grammar is consistently flattened — the sentence coming back simpler than it went out, again and again, across a set of items — that is worth asking a speech-language pathologist about. Developmental language disorder is common and overwhelmingly undiagnosed, because these children speak fluently and nobody looks.

What comes off is the other half. Dropping the end of a sentence does not establish that memory ran out. Look for a pattern across a set of items, not a verdict from any one.

What it needs. Reduce the load either way — shorter segments, vocabulary pre-taught, rereading expected. This helps whatever the cause turns out to be and nothing is lost if you are wrong. If the grammar is consistently flattened while the meaning survives, ask for a speech-language evaluation alongside.

MODE 5 · PIPELINE

The knowledge is not there

What is happening Every word is understood on its own, and the passage assumes a world the child has never met. The text never says everything; the reader supplies the rest.

What it looks like Fine on everyday stories, adrift on anything explanatory or unfamiliar. Does not ask about what they have not met — reads past it.

What points here Take a familiar topic and an unfamiliar one at the same difficulty and notice whether the two go differently. A gap raises the question.

“She looked at the sky and reached for her umbrella.” Nothing in that sentence says it was raining. The reader supplies it, from knowing what clouds mean and what umbrellas are for. A child who has not met that connection reads the sentence perfectly and takes nothing from it.

Withdrawn from version 1.0 — “that contrast isolates it cleanly”

It does not isolate anything cleanly. Familiar and unfamiliar passages differ in more than knowledge — in vocabulary, in interest, and in how hard the child tries.

One comparison raises the question of whether knowledge is part of what is going on. It does not settle it, and it is not a result.

What it needs. Knowledge, deliberately and across subjects, over years. Trips, documentaries, conversation — and talking about it afterwards, which is the part that gets skipped. Read aloud well above their reading level. This is the slowest thing on this list and there is no shortcut.

MODE 6 · MODEL

The picture does not hold

What is happening The sentences assemble and the whole thing will not stay assembled. Building a representation and keeping it are different operations, and this is the second one failing.

What it looks like Answers everything about a short passage. On a long one, can only tell you what happened at the end.

What points here Short passage against long, same topic. Notice whether length changes anything. If it holds at four sentences and comes apart at fifteen, this is a place worth looking. If it comes apart either way, the question sits further back in the pipeline.

A child answers every question about a four-sentence passage. Given fifteen sentences on the same topic, she can only tell you the ending. The understanding works. What ran out was the room to hold it while more kept arriving — which is why she remembers the last part and nothing before it.

Withdrawn from version 1.0 — two things

“Fine on short and lost on long points here.” The group effect is real; the individual inference is not. It points you somewhere. It is not an answer.

“Do not train working memory for this — the size of the tank is not the problem, the packing is.” That instruction was never anyone’s position here and it is withdrawn. Working memory can be strengthened, and a child with more of it has an easier time of everything. Teaching packing is worth doing too. Both are worth doing; neither on its own is a guaranteed fix for this.

What it needs. Teach packing — pause, say what has happened so far, then continue. It takes no extra time, it helps whatever the cause is, and it is the part most families never think to do.

MODE 7 · MODEL

The picture cannot be worked with

New in version 2.0, and it is what most test questions actually require.

What is happening The picture is built and it is held — and holding it is not the same as using it. Comparing two things mentioned pages apart, putting events in order, or reaching a conclusion no sentence states are separate operations, and this is where they fail.

What it looks like Recall is good. Reasoning is not. Can tell you everything the passage said and cannot tell you which of two things was worse, or why something happened.

What points here Ask two kinds of question after they read. What happened is recall. Which of those two was worse, and why is working inside the picture. A child fine on the first and adrift on the second has built it and has never been asked to use it.

A girl reads a passage about two towns and can tell you everything in it. Which town is by the river. What each one makes. When each was founded. Then the question asks which town grew faster and why. She has every piece she needs and she cannot put them together, because nothing in the passage said it.

What it needs. Change the questions rather than the reading. After anything they read or watch, ask one question that cannot be answered by pointing at a sentence — which one would you rather, what do you think happens next, why did she do that. It works on films and conversations as well as books, and it is the simplest thing on this list.

MODE 8 · MODEL

Nothing is checking

What is happening The child does not notice when it stopped making sense, so never goes back. Monitoring is not a stage in the chain — it is a check that should be running alongside, and it is absent.

What it looks like Reads on through a sentence that contradicts the last one without pausing. Never rereads voluntarily.

What points here Plant sentences in passages that cannot be true — several of them, across more than one sitting — and see whether anything ever stops them.

A story says the gate was shut and latched. Six sentences later it says the gate had been standing open all day. A child who is checking as she goes stops and frowns. A child who is not reads straight past it, because nothing in her is asking whether this still makes sense.

Withdrawn from version 1.0 — the single planted contradiction

“Plant one sentence that cannot be true. Reading straight past it is the finding.”

One item, one sitting, one inference.

Everybody reads past things. A child who misses one may simply have been elsewhere for a moment. What is worth noticing is a pattern — nothing ever stops them, in anything they read.

What it needs. Teach stop-and-check explicitly. Say out loud when you lose the thread yourself and go back — children rarely see an adult do this. And change what gets asked about afterwards: what happened, what surprised you, rather than whether it was correct.

MODE 9 · MODEL

The wrong task was learned

This is the one that is almost never named, and it is not a deficit. It is what was taught.

If a child spends years in instruction where success means saying the word correctly — where the praise, the correction and the score all attach to accurate pronunciation — then that is what they learn reading is. Meaning was never the target, so it was never built.

These children are not faking, and they are doing the task they were taught, correctly and often very well. Asked what the passage was about, they are not evading the question. The question feels like a different subject.

How to recognize it

- Reads aloud accurately, at reasonable speed, with reasonable expression
- Comprehension is poor and does not improve when the passage is read to them

- Working memory and vocabulary come back adequate
- Asked what they just read, they look puzzled rather than embarrassed
- Asked what reading is for, the answer is about correctness rather than about knowing something

The question that finds it

“When you read, what are you trying to do?”

An answer about getting the words right, not making mistakes, or finishing the page points here. An answer about finding out what happens, or what it says, does not.

Ask it more than once. It is one question on one day.

Why it matters for what you do next

None of the other eight responses will help on their own. More vocabulary does not address it. More phonics makes it worse, because it reinforces the very belief that caused it.

What helps is changing what the task is understood to be — reading for something, being asked what happened rather than whether it was correct, and being allowed to be wrong about the words while being right about the meaning.

Narrowing it down

Two contrasts do most of the work, and neither needs an instrument. Both point somewhere. Neither settles anything on its own.

First contrast · listening against reading

Read a passage aloud to them and ask three questions. Have them read a matched passage and ask three more.

What you see	Where to look
Understands what was read aloud, not what they read	The words are the problem. Modes 1, 2 or 3 — or the word level below this document entirely.
Struggles with both	Above the words. Modes 4, 5, 6 or 9.
Both fine, results still poor	Look at length, at unfamiliar topics, and at the questions they were asked. Modes 6, 7 or 8 — or the test itself.

Second contrast · length, and familiarity

What you see	Where to look
Fine on short, adrift on long	Mode 6 — the picture does not hold. Worth following up, not settled.
Fine on familiar, adrift on unfamiliar	Mode 5 — the knowledge is not there. Raises the question.
Recall fine, reasoning questions fail	Mode 7 — the picture cannot be worked with.
Struggles regardless of either	Mode 4 — the sentence never assembles. Check listening on long items.

Expect more than one

Most struggling readers show two or three of these. You are not looking for a single tidy answer — you are looking for the one furthest upstream, because clearing it may make some of the others disappear untreated.

And “could not be checked” is a real answer. Record it as that rather than as a verdict. A form that forces a conclusion will manufacture one.

The exit that is not a failure mode

A student can pass every check in this document and still not pass the test. That student has a working engine, and looking harder for a comprehension fault will find nothing, because there is nothing there to find.

Four things sit between reading well and scoring well, and they belong to the test rather than to reading:

- **Rate.** Reading well and slowly still fails a timed test. Ask whether they finished.
- **Stamina.** Holding attention for one passage is not the same as holding it for an hour. Fine at ten minutes and gone at forty is a different problem with a different cause.
- **The questions.** Question stems are text too, and often denser than the passage. A child can understand a passage and misread what they are being asked.
- **The day.** Anxiety, or having already concluded they will fail.

Find out which of the four before doing anything else. The responses have nothing in common — running out of time is a rate problem, fading is a stamina problem, misreading the question is a reading problem in a different place, and dread is not a reading problem at all.

A child who reads every word correctly and understands nothing has not failed at reading.

They have succeeded at something else, which nobody noticed they were being taught.

Nothing in this document is a diagnosis or a test. The modes direct attention; the professionals named in them make findings. Youth Success Movement · youthsuccessmovement.org