

School Reading Software



In September, *eSchool News* held its first-ever Reader's Choice Awards program devoted to school reading software. Believed to be one of the only programs of its kind, the poll asked you—the reader—to pick the best software products for improving students' reading instruction in five critical areas: phonics and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension, fluency, and

English as a Second Language (ESL).

More than 500 readers responded to the poll, which closed Oct. 1. Here, you'll see a list of the top performers in each category, along with our analysis of the results and some thoughts from your peers. Though Academy of Reading from Autoskill International Inc. was the clear overall winner across each category, a number of other products performed well in some areas but not as strongly in others, suggesting that different solutions might have their own unique strengths and advantages.

Best Software for Teaching Phonics and Phonemic Awareness

Phonics instruction teaches students to understand the relationship between phonemes, or the sounds inherent in spoken language, and the letters and spellings that represent those sounds. Phonics provides the basis for how students learn to read and write. **Phonemic awareness** refers to the learners' ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds, or phonemes, into spoken words.

YOUNGER READERS (grades preK-3)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	17.3%
Focus Reading and Language Program (PLATO Learning Inc.)	7.4%
Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	6.6%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	5.9%
Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	5.5%

OLDER READERS (grades 4-adult)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	23.1%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	10.7%
Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	8.7%
Fast ForWord (Scientific Learning Corp.)	6.1%
Reading Horizons (HEC Software Inc.)	5.8%

Leading the way in Phonics and Phonemic Awareness, as it did in every other category of our survey, was Autoskill's Academy of Reading. So what put Academy of Reading over the top? Many respondents cited ease of use, as well as the product's ability to deliver effective content for students of all ages.

"I have tried several of the other products, and none compare to the Academy of Reading's Phonemic Awareness component," wrote one satisfied educator. Another reported that students who used the program demonstrated "multi-level" gains in a "short expanse of time," adding, "I wouldn't teach reading without it."

For younger students, PLATO's Focus Reading and Language Program also received rave reviews. "The oral practice of sounds, words, and sentences helps to develop phonemic awareness, which enables the student to hear and identify sounds to become a good reader and writer," wrote one educator. "It is a complete reading and language program that meets the needs of students at all levels."

The top five products in each age group are equipped with an assessment component to gauge students' progress, or—as one educator put it—to "ensure that no child is left behind." Other products receiving votes included The Imagination Station, an online product from Istation.com, and WYNN, a literacy software tool that reads text aloud for students who have difficulty learning to read and write in traditional forums.



Best Software for Building Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the words we use to communicate. To become effective communicators, students must learn to recognize both spoken and written words. Vocabulary is essential to good comprehension, because students cannot understand what they are reading unless they know what different words mean.

YOUNGER READERS (grades preK-3)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	14.6%
Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	9.4%
Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	9.1%
Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	7.2%
Focus Reading and Language Program (PLATO Learning Inc.)	6.9%

OLDER READERS (grades 4-adult)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	20.6%
Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	13.3%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	8.6 %
Thinking Reader (Tom Snyder Productions)	4.4%
Leaptrack Assessment and Instruction (LeapFrog SchoolHouse Inc.)	4.2%
Successmaker Enterprise (Pearson Digital Learning)	4.2%

The competition for best vocabulary-building software was stiff, especially in the younger grades. Though Academy of Reading came away as the clear winner with 14.6 percent of the vote, Accelerated Reader from Renaissance Learning (9.4 percent) and Riverdeep's popular Reader Rabbit Series (9.1 percent) finished a strong second and third, respectively.

Voters gave several reasons for the products they chose. For younger readers, respondents sided with solutions that match words visually with definitions to promote stronger word recognition. They also praised the top products for promoting self-paced learning and adjusting to different skill levels. For older readers, motivation is key to establishing a good vocabulary, respondents indicated. "I have seen success in using this program with reluctant readers and with students who lack reading support and motivation from home," said one educator about Accelerated Reader.

The strongest programs reportedly help students recognize letter patterns while empowering them to sound out unfamiliar words. In the case of Autoskill's Academy of Reading, the software allows "students to practice until they have achieved mastery," one educator said.

Also receiving votes in this category were WYNN, The Imagination Station, and Reading Horizons.

Best Software for Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL)

English as a Second Language refers to those reading software products that are used to teach English literacy to students whose first language is not English.

YOUNGER READERS (grades preK-3)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	18.7%
Odyssey ELL: English-Language Learners (CompassLearning Inc.)	11.3%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	7.3%
Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	7%
LeapTrack Assessment and Instruction (LeapFrog SchoolHouse Inc.)	6%

OLDER READERS (grades 4-adult)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	21.7%
Odyssey ELL: English-Language Learners (CompassLearning Inc.)	11.8%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	7.9%
English in a Flash (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	5.9%
Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	5.3%

Teaching ESL students how to read presents a special set of circumstances for educators. Not only must they teach the skills that will enable students to read and write, but they first have to overcome the language barrier.

Again, Academy of Reading bested the competition in this final portion of our poll. A special feature called Spanish Tutor provides instructions to students in Spanish while relaying all of the lessons and exercises in English. "The program is very basic," wrote one reader, who said the program breaks words down into phonemes, "which helps students learn our language."

Odyssey ELL, which stands for English Language Learners, also performed well in both age groups. "Odyssey ELL offers students an effective tool for language acquisition," offered one respondent, who voted for the program because it is "research-based." For older learners, respondents said Odyssey ELL provided a "lot of real-world expectation," meaning its lessons deal with situations students are likely to encounter in their everyday lives—from asking for directions to introducing themselves to strangers or applying for jobs.

Kurzweil 3000, which finished a strong third in both age groups, also was the recipient of a few glowing testimonials. "This allows kids that have a difficult time with the English language to go at their own pace," wrote one classroom user. "[Kids] can continue to learn in a fashion we all work well with—hands on."

Best Software for Building Reading Comprehension Skills

Reading comprehension is often referred to as the purpose for reading. Using their acquired sense of comprehension, students apply the skills and strategies they've learned to understand, remember, and communicate with others about what they've read.

YOUNGER READERS (grades preK-3)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	15.6%
Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	12.4%
Focus Reading and Language Program (PLATO Learning Inc.)	8.4%
Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	7.7%
Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	5.8%

OLDER READERS (grades 4-adult)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	22.3%
Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	14.1%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	8.8%
Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	8%
Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	4.8%

Academy of Reading and Accelerated Reader scored another one-two punch in terms of reading comprehension, according to the survey. For younger students, one of the biggest selling points of good comprehension software isn't necessarily the technology itself. When it comes to comprehension, many respondents said there is little substitute for the value of teacher-student interaction in the learning process. One educator called Accelerated Reader "powerful for developing reading comprehension, because teachers are constantly intervening while monitoring each and every child daily."

Other solutions that performed well in the comprehension portion of the survey include Kurzweil 3000 and Odyssey Reading from CompassLearning. Odyssey was lauded for focusing on students' weaknesses in relation to critical state standards, while Kurzweil's product "can provide growing readers with visual and auditory support to increase comprehension, as well as dictionary access to build vocabulary," according to one voter.

Best Software for Building Reading Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read smoothly and accurately. Fluent readers recognize words automatically and group words quickly to help them gain meaning from what they read. Fluent readers read aloud naturally, as if speaking.

YOUNGER READERS (grades preK-3)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	19.5%
Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	7.8%
Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	7.8%
Focus Reading and Language Program (PLATO Learning Inc.)	6.1%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	6.1%
Achieve Now (PLATO Learning Inc.)	6.1%
LeapTrack Assessment and Instruction (LeapFrog SchoolHouse Inc.)	4.5%
Early Reading (Headsprout)	3.9%

OLDER READERS (grades 4-adult)

Product	Percentage
Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	24.4%
Kurzweil 3000 (Kurzweil Educational Systems Inc.)	9.6%
Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	8.4%
Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	4.9%
LeapTrack Assessment and Instruction (LeapFrog SchoolHouse Inc.)	4.7%

Not everyone who participated in the survey believes software can help teach students to read more smoothly. When asked what software they preferred, one educator declined to answer the question, responding simply, "I believe that fluency is learned best by teachers and peers interacting with students." But others said reading software programs can have a profound impact on teaching fluency.

The competition for most popular product was especially fierce within the younger age bracket. Though Academy of Reading again finished first with nearly 20 percent of the vote, two products—Odyssey Reading and Reader Rabbit—tied for second at 7.8 percent, while three products—Focus Reading and Language Program, Kurzweil 3000, and Achieve Now (also from PLATO) tied for third with 6.1 percent. LeapTrack Assessment and Instruction from LeapFrog SchoolHouse, the unconventional maker of learning devices for schoolchildren (4.5 percent), and Early Reading from Headsprout (3.9 percent) rounded out the top five among students in grades preK-3.

"Visual and auditory matching exercises promote fluency through the rhythmic pressing of the keys," said one educator who uses Academy of Reading. "Students develop skills at their level before moving on to more challenging words, letter combinations, and passages." For older students, Academy of Reading (24.4 percent), Kurzweil 3000 (9.6 percent), and Odyssey Reading (8.4 percent) were the top three choices. In all cases, respondents most liked those programs proven to build students' response time to questions. Also important, respondents said they preferred products equipped with reporting features to track students' overall progress toward prescribed benchmarks.

Lexia Early Reading, from Lexia Learning Systems Inc., also received several votes in the Early Readers category.