

# You can always become a better reader, say researchers

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Our reading skills, and understanding of a text, depend on several factors.

"These include decoding texts, learning the letters of the alphabet, and knowing the different words and how they sound. However, vocabulary is also important," says Professor Hermundur Sigmundsson at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) Department of Psychology.

He is behind a special edition of *Frontiers in Psychology* together with Professors Heikki Lyytinen from the University of Jyväskylä and Elena L. Grigorenko from the University of Houston.

## **Most people can learn how to crack the reading code**

Of course, cracking the reading code, i.e., learning the letters of the alphabet and the different words, is one of the keys to understanding a text. Without this, you won't get far.

Fortunately, most people can read as long as they get the proper training.

"Approximately 2 to 4 percent of us have problems reading due to underlying biological factors. Everyone else should be able to learn to read without too many challenges," says Professor Sigmundsson.

Professor Heikki Lyytinen also believes that most people should be able to achieve good [reading skills](#) with the right reading training.

In an Icelandic study from the Westman Islands, 48 out of 48 Year 1 children managed to crack the reading code when they received the right kind of training. The following year, 47 of 48 managed to do it. Most people can crack the reading code if they are given the opportunity to use the right method, receive challenges that are proportionate to their skills, undertake a lot of focused practice, and get good follow-up. This is the good news.

However, being able to read a word isn't enough. You also need to know what the word means. This is a question of vocabulary, which demands even more of us.

## **Vocabulary is something you have to work on your whole life**

"We have to work on our vocabulary from birth, throughout our [school years](#), and really our whole lives," says Professor Sigmundsson.

This is where gender differences are found. It is a well-known fact that more [boys](#) struggle to read than girls. Vocabulary is probably a big part of the problem.

We challenge and expand our vocabulary in several ways, such as [creative writing](#) or giving a performance. But how boys and girls are raised, about biology and about habits also play a role.

Boys struggle with reading comprehension in all 67 countries where PISA tests are conducted. In the Nordic countries, boys struggle most in Iceland and Norway, where 34 percent and 26 percent of the boys, respectively, do not read well enough to understand a text they are presented with after completing 10 years of school.

"All in all, expanding their vocabulary is probably a bigger challenge for boys," says Professor Sigmundsson.

## **Boys tend to have a smaller vocabulary because they read less**

"Research shows that adults talk less with boys than they do with girls right from the moment they are born," says Sigmundsson.

This may be linked to the fact that baby girls often babble more and, therefore, get more responses.

We also read less to boys than to girls, and this is another important factor.

"To improve our reading comprehension, we need to read a lot, especially books. Boys face greater challenges here, too," says Professor Sigmundsson.

In a Norwegian survey a couple of years ago, twice as many boys as girls responded that they had not read a single book during the past year—17 percent compared with 9 percent. This leads to boys quickly falling behind. Perhaps they are diagnosed with dyslexia without it being certain that they actually have it. However, the [challenges](#) they face regarding reading and reading comprehension are often due to not practicing enough.

## **Read and write, and you will improve**

Professor Elena L. Grigorenko argues that the term dyslexia is often misused. She believes that we should concentrate on finding out exactly what the children are struggling with and initiate extra training that addresses the specific issue.

"Specific training enables us to build neural networks. Thus, targeted training combined with good follow-up is key to developing skills and knowledge that we can use to improve.

The challenge then lies in expanding [vocabulary](#) through creative writing, reading books, and learning to understand these books," says Professor Sigmundsson.

**More information:** Elena L. Grigorenko et al, Editorial to Research Topic published in Frontiers Letter-sound knowledge, Reading, Reading Comprehension and Full Literacy, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1292457](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1292457). [www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1292457/full](http://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1292457/full)

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