

Reading Aloud

After reading this article, you should be able to understand the benefits of hearing your writing aloud; this includes reading your draft yourself, asking a friend to read it to you, or having your computer read it.

Why Read Aloud?

If you come to the Writing Center for a tutoring session, your tutor will likely ask if you would you like to read your paper aloud, or if you would like to hear your tutor read it. 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. You may notice things that you didn't see before, because:

- **Listeners need the ideas in a paper to make sense.** We can't flip back and forth through the pages to try to figure out what is going on. 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 need transitions to go from one main idea to the next.** When you hear your paper, you may recognize places where you have moved topics too abruptly.
- **We all make errors in our sentences.** Sometimes we leave out a word, create a typo as we copy and paste text, or make a grammatical mistake. These kinds of errors can be hard to see on the page, yet they are easy to catch if you listen to them aloud. Reading out loud is one of the most powerful proofreading techniques around.

- **Grammatically correct sentences can still be awkward.** They can be too long, convoluted, or repetitive. Problems like these are easily heard.
- **Hearing your paper can also give you a sense of the tone.** Does it sound too formal? Too casual? What kind of impression will this paper make on a reader? Hearing your words helps you get a more objective sense of the impression you are creating. Through listening, you can understand your reader's experience as s/he moves through your text.

What Are Some Strategies for Reading Aloud?

Reading your paper out loud has a lot of benefits, but also it presents some challenges. For example, a lot depends on *how* you read. It's easy to read too quickly or to let your brain automatically "smooth over" mistakes, subconsciously filling in missing words and making little corrections. If you don't read exactly what is on the page, you won't get an accurate sense of what's in your paper. Try these effective strategies:

- **Use a printed copy.** This will allow you to write on or highlight places where something sounds strange to you.
- **As you read, point at each word.** This can help you stay focused and not skip anything.
- **Read at a moderate pace.**
- **Read 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.
- **Cover up everything but the section/sentence you are working on** at the moment. This will help you to concentrate and not get lost.

Another strategy is to **ask a friend to read your paper out loud while you listen**. Make sure that your friend reads exactly what's on the page. Pay close attention to the 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, jot notes on a printed copy. You don't have to be in the same room to do this; you could email your paper to your friend and ask him/her to read it to you over the phone.

How Can Your Computer Help?

There are a number of text to speech software applications and web-based services, so your computer can read your paper out loud to you. This can be helpful because these programs will likely find things you might miss. You can control where the program starts and stops, speed it up or slow it down, and have it re-read the same paragraph as many times as you want.

There are many text-to-speech programs and services you can try (far more than we can review here). Some are free; others may have a free trial version but cost between \$10 and \$80 for long-term use, or for versions with more features. Here are a few free ones that are easily available, user friendly, and potentially effective (to explore other programs, do a Google search for "text to speech," "TTS," or "text reader").

Here are some questions to keep in mind:

- **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?

- **Can you convert your text file into an mp3 or wav file, download it, and listen to it on your music player?**
- **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)?
- **How many pages of text or words can be converted to voice at once?**
- **How quickly does the conversion happen?**
- **Do you need to copy text and paste it into a new window, or can the program work directly within an application** (like Microsoft Word or PowerPoint) and read the text on your screen?
- **Do you have to install any files on your computer to use the system?** If so, how big are the files?
- **Do you need an active internet connection to use the program, or can you run it without internet access once it has been installed?**
- **Does it work with your operating system** (e.g., Mac, or Windows Vista)?

Software

Many free software applications use electronic voices created by Microsoft, nicknamed “Sam,” “Mike,” and “Mary.” These voices are acceptable to most readers but are not very natural-sounding. If you decide you would like better voices, you may need to purchase an enhanced version of the software or AT&T’s Natural Voices, which sound better. The applications we’ll list here are fairly easy to download (from the web address provided with each one), install, and run. If you try one and later decide that you want to uninstall it from your Windows computer, go to the Control Panel and choose “Add or Remove Programs.”

- **Adobe Reader:** <https://get.adobe.com/reader/>. Most students are familiar with this free program because it opens .PDF files, but it also has a “read out loud” feature. Simply click on the “view” tab, then scroll down and select “Read Out Loud.” This can read an entire document, a certain page, or it will read whatever text you click on. You can activate the software here. The Read Out Loud feature can be paused, stopped, and started. While the voices don’t sound particularly natural, it is still an excellent, cost-effective tool.
- **Read Please:** www.readplease.com. This application has been around for a while, so it may be a little outdated with your operating system (it’s for Windows only). There is a free version; the enhanced one costs \$49.95. Read Please allows you to copy text from a Word document, paste it into a window, and hear it read back to you—it highlights each word as it is read. You can change the speed of the voice that is reading. Read Please does not make mp3 or wav files. Use the Tools/Options menu to adjust settings, like whether it begins to read as soon as text is copied or waits for you to hit “play.” Most of the controls (play, pause, speed, voice selection, etc.) are visible in the Read Please window where you paste the text.
- **Natural Reader:** www.naturalreaders.com. There is a free version of Natural Reader, or you can purchase the enhanced “Personal” one. Natural Reader converts text from any program. One thing that makes Natural Reader stand out is that Mac versions of both the free and enhanced software are available. Natural Reader does allow you to create wav and mp3 files. It offers a “mini-bar” that looks like the controls on a tape recorder—this can hover over text (say, a Word document), allowing you to easily start, stop, and control the application.

Web-Based Applications.

Web-based text to speech applications allow you to hear your text read without having to install any software. All you need is an internet connection to translate your text into speech. You may then be able to download a wav or mp3 file so you can listen to your paper on your phone, mp3 player, or computer. Consider the following suggestions:

- **iSpeech:** www.ispeech.org. The iSpeech website offers a demonstration of its text to voice conversion; if you try it and like it, click “personal use” and create a free account. You can upload files or paste your text into a box on the iSpeech site. When your chosen text has been converted to speech, press “listen.” You can download the speech file or podcast it. The iSpeech voice is fairly natural; unfortunately, you cannot choose from a variety of voices, control the speed at which the voice reads while it is playing, or stop and start the voice. iSpeech may have trouble uploading open files, so be sure to close your file first if you want to upload everything. iSpeech does not highlight text as it reads. If you download the sound file, you can open it with a media player. iSpeech works for PDF, text, html, Excel, Word, rtf, and even PowerPoint files. Conversion is often fairly quick, and your uploads are archived with your account.
- **Yakitome:** www.yakitome.com. On this website, click on “Free Text to Speech” to create an account. Experiment with the different voices (the AT&T ones sound more natural than the Microsoft ones), choose your settings, and paste in your text. Your request will then be put in a work queue; it may take quite some time for it to be converted, so it’s best if you have something else to work on while you wait. Longer documents seem to linger at the bottom of the work queue. Once the conversion is done,

your text is stored on the site as an mp3 or wav file in the Yakitome Podcast Library and can be downloaded (you can listen to it on your computer, phone, or mp3 player). It is stored as private, unless you set it as public, so you'll need to sign into your account to access it. Yakitome's controls take a little getting used to, and its pronunciation is occasionally imperfect. Click "text" under view if you want to look at your text onscreen while listening. Hover your cursor over various controls to see how they work.

- **Vozme:** vozme.com. Vozme is a very straightforward site. Paste your text into a window; Vozme will create an mp3 and read it to you in a male or female voice that isn't supernatural but isn't awful, either. You can't control the speed at which the voice reads, and you can't pause, stop, or start. Vozme also reads in some foreign languages, including Spanish. You'll need to feed it relatively small chunks of text, perhaps a couple of paragraphs at a time. Vozme allows you to install a widget for Facebook or iGoogle so that you can access it easily.

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 helpful it is!

This information originally appeared in a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.