



Reading Software: Finding the Right Program

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Reading software has transformed instruction for struggling learners and students with disabilities. Not only do these applications have the ability to read text aloud, they can do so while highlighting individual words or entire sentences. Some applications have features to help students organize their thoughts, while others offer activities that help students learn new concepts.

Students enjoy these devices because they enable them to work independently, yet receive just-in-time support when necessary. Teachers enjoy these devices because they provide targeted reading support that best meets the needs of students. Parents enjoy them because they offer ideal solutions to the learning difficulties faced by their children.

Since different reading software applications contain different features, it is important that students are matched with software that best meets their specific needs. LD Online has identified five web-based resources that contain detailed information on reading software programs and address specific needs of students with special needs in reading. The following overview provides a synopsis of each resource to help streamline the selection process.

The Tech Matrix

The **TechMatrix** serves as a database of both published research and commercial products, reviewed for universal design and accessibility features that benefit students with learning challenges. The TechMatrix is organized around seven learning supports for the use of technology in instruction, including:

- Access to electronic references and resources
- Access to multiple formats of text, notation, and symbols
- Alternate access to the computer and peripheral devices (input and output)
- Means to create and engage in multimedia products and projects
- Means to organize and plan
- Opportunities to learn concepts
- Practice and reinforcing activities

Products are reviewed for the presence of features such as text-to-speech capabilities, word prediction, embedded resources (ex. e-dictionary, e-thesaurus, highlighting) customizable views, and differentiation. The

matrix is updated regularly with new products, research reports, and additional features. In addition to reading, users can find reviewed products and research in writing, mathematics, and assistive technology access devices.

A simplified search process helps users easily create custom matrices of software products and research that meet individual needs. Parents, teachers, and administrators can find choices and reviews to inform their decision-making and improve student outcomes. Custom searches and product profile pages can be bookmarked or sent to colleagues and friends to share information.

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National Center for Accessible Media

The **National Center for Accessible Media** (NCAM) website focuses on the technological aspects of e-books and digital talking books (DTB) software and hardware. Digital books are computer files stored on CD, in a directory, or on a memory card. They can also be read on stand alone players or on computers. Digital books make print accessible to readers with learning difficulties or vision impairments. The NCAM reading matrix serves as a resource for identifying capabilities for tools, such as:

- Cost
- Operating system requirements
- Supported text formats
- Supported multimedia formats
- Additional features such as ability to link to external media devices

The matrix is regularly updated with information as new versions are released or updates add capabilities to existing products. Direct links are provided to product websites.

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Curriculum Software Search

The **Curriculum Software Search** is part of the Stages developmental framework which supports the language and learning of students with moderate to severe impairments. The database is organized around eight stages:

- Cause and effect
- Language readiness
- Emerging language
- Early concepts
- Advanced concepts
- Functional learning
- Talking word processors
- Writing tools, written expression, and syntax development

Users are able select a stage and search a list of software database choices. These choices include: access options (i.e., mouse, switch), graphics and content (child, teen/adult), platform (Mac, Windows, DOS), prompt options (auditory, visual, multisensory), activity type (press and hold or press and release), and feedback type (auditory, visual). The portal allows users to search for software that is compatible with the user's needs as indicated by the query fields.

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Texas Assistive Technology Network

The **Texas Assistive Technology Network** provides another variation in web-based reading resources as part of its training to educators in the state. The **reading module** includes presenter and participant training materials (as a downloadable PowerPoint presentation). Accompanying the training materials is *Technology for Struggling Students**, a PDF matrix of software products and strategies. The products and strategies are organized into six components that align with federal guidelines for research based reading instruction:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Word identification
- Vocabulary
- Fluency
- Comprehension

The product and strategy reviews also list product name, manufacturer, website, product description, and a no tech/low tech category.

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Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic (RFB&D)

The **Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic (RFB&D)** offers both resources for understanding content materials, as well as content materials to assist students with reading disabilities and difficulties. Sponsored by the (RFB&D), the **Learning Through Listening** website provides free lesson plans, activities, teaching strategies, and other resources to help K-12 educators teach critical listening skills and meet the needs of diverse learning. The site offers a link to the RFB&D's online ordering center which distributes desktop, portable and software playback equipment. It allows users to compare:

- Equipment features
- Costs
- Functionality on the site

RFB&D also offers **AudioAccessSM**, which enables students with learning and print disabilities to download audio textbooks and literature for school to a Windows[®] computer. The digital files can be synced to a compatible portable media player and students can take them wherever they go.

Although the resources identified in this Info Brief can help address an array of reading difficulties and disabilities, it is imperative for educators and parents to be pro-active in exploring all options for their struggling students. Guidance on doing so can be found in the LD OnLine Info Brief, **Be an Empowered Consumer: Let Your Voice Be Heard**.

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http://www.ldonline.org/article/Reading_Software%3A_Finding_the_Right_Program?theme=print

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