Title: Beyond Decoding: Motivating Adolescent Readers with Dyslexia
For: *Literacy Voices, Montana State Literacy Association*

Abstract
Adolescents with dyslexia often face challenges that extend beyond difficulties with decoding and fluency. Years of reading struggles can diminish motivation, undermine self-confidence, and contribute to disengagement from literacy experiences. While explicit, systematic reading instruction remains essential, educators must also address the motivational barriers that prevent students from engaging meaningfully with text. Drawing on research in reading motivation, self-efficacy, and self-determination theory, this article explores how educators can support adolescents with dyslexia by creating opportunities for successful and meaningful reading experiences. Particular attention is given to alternative texts, and other multimodal formats, as tools for increasing access to age-appropriate content and fostering reading engagement. Practical classroom strategies emphasize student choice, personal interests, opportunities for success, and supportive learning environments that build confidence and encourage persistence. By recognizing motivation as an essential component of literacy development, educators can help adolescents with dyslexia reconnect with reading while continuing to develop the foundational skills necessary for long-term reading success.
Keywords: dyslexia, adolescent literacy, reading motivation, alternative texts, student engagement

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Beyond Decoding: Motivating Adolescent Readers with Dyslexia

By the time students with dyslexia reach adolescence, most have spent their school years working harder at reading than almost anyone around them realizes. They have sounded out the same words a hundred times, lost their place in shared texts, and watched classmates finish chapters in the time it takes them to finish a page. What often goes unnoticed is that this sustained effort produces a second challenge: a steady loss of motivation. Years of effortful reading leave a deeper mark than slow decoding alone. Students are often left with a gradual erosion of the desire to read at all. The eager young child who once asked to be read to may now slump at the back of the room, avoid reading aloud at all costs, and insist that reading simply is not for them.

Motivation is not a peripheral concern to be addressed once the "real" work of remediation is finished. For adolescent readers with dyslexia, it may be the difference between a student who keeps trying and one who disengages entirely. What follows examines why reading motivation erodes for these students and what the research says about rebuilding it, makes the case for alternative texts as a bridge that restores access to grade-level ideas while decoding skills are still developing, and offers concrete strategies we can put to use immediately. Of course, none of these supports is a substitute for explicit, systematic literacy instruction and intervention. The ultimate goal is to keep students engaged with reading long enough, and with enough self-belief intact, for that instruction to do its work.

How Reading Motivation Erodes in Dyslexia

The motivational difficulties that accompany dyslexia are not a sign of laziness or indifference. They are a predictable consequence of how repeated struggle interacts with a developing sense of self. Stanovich (1986) famously described the "Matthew effect" in reading:

strong readers read more, grow more skilled, and accumulate vocabulary and knowledge, while struggling readers read less, fall further behind, and miss out on the very practice that would help them improve. Ferrer et al. (2005) showed that the achievement gap between typical readers and dyslexic readers is apparent as early as first grade and persists into adolescence. For students with dyslexia, this widening gap is not only cognitive. Each cycle of effort and frustration over years carries an emotional charge, and over time the accumulated weight of that struggle reshapes how a student approaches reading.

Studies of reading motivation have documented that children with dyslexia report lower levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to read than their typically reading peers, and these differences are often present early and tend to deepen across the school years (Donolato et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2008). Morgan et al. (2008) found evidence that early reading failure can decrease motivation, rather than the reverse. This suggests that struggle with the act of reading erodes the will to engage with text. By adolescence, when reading demands intensify across every subject, the gap in motivation can be especially pronounced.

Beneath motivation lies a student's belief about whether effort will pay off. Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as a person's belief in their capacity to carry out the actions required to reach a goal, and decades of research have shown it to be one of the strongest predictors of persistence (Toste et al., 2020). Reading is precisely the domain in which students with dyslexia have the most evidence, accumulated over years, that their effort does not reliably produce success. Even capable, high-achieving students carry this history with them. Stagg et al. (2018) found that undergraduates with dyslexia, students who had succeeded well enough to attend college, still scored lower than their peers on most measures of academic self-efficacy. If self-

doubt persists into higher education, we could expect it to be acute in middle and high school classrooms, where the experience of difficulty is more immediate.

There is also the matter of how students explain their struggles to themselves. A reader who concludes “I’m just not smart” has made this conclusion based upon continued struggle and perceived failure. The cause of repeated failure lies inside them, will not change, and colors everything. This explanation fuels what psychologists call learned helplessness, the sense that outcomes are beyond one’s control, so why try at all (Abramson et al., 1978). The avoidance we frequently observe in students with dyslexia is a rational response to this belief. If reading reliably produces public failure and shame, then refusing to read or cooperate in learning activities is a protective mechanism. Understanding avoidance as self-protection, rather than defiance, changes how we respond to it.

The encouraging news is that none of these factors are fixed. Motivation, self-efficacy, and attribution are all responsive to the conditions we create. The same student who has learned to expect failure can, under the right conditions, begin to expect success. A meta-analysis of school-based motivational reading interventions confirmed that programs designed to build reading motivation produced gains in both motivation and reading achievement (McBreen & Savage, 2021).

What Motivation Research Tells Us

Several complementary theories of motivation, developed largely outside the field of reading disability, offer a practical map for re-engaging adolescent readers with dyslexia. Taken together, they suggest that motivation is less a trait a student does or does not possess than a state that particular environments either nourish or starve.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory holds that human motivation flourishes when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, the sense of acting from one's own volition rather than under control; competence, the sense of being effective and capable; and relatedness, the sense of being connected to and valued by others (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are supported, people move toward more autonomous, self-sustaining forms of motivation. When they are thwarted, motivation becomes fragile and dependent on external pressure, or collapses altogether.

Viewed through this lens, the typical reading experience of a student with dyslexia is a near-perfect recipe for need-thwarting. Autonomy is low because struggling readers are rarely given a choice about what or how they read. Competence is low because the activity is defined by visible difficulty. Relatedness is at risk because reading aloud can expose a student's struggles to the whole class. Therefore, interventions that restore choice, engineer genuine success, and protect students from public exposure can affect motivation.

Self-Efficacy and Expectancy–Value

Bandura's (1977) work on self-efficacy explained that students will attempt, and persist at, tasks they believe they can accomplish. Self-efficacy is built primarily through mastery experiences, actual successes, supplemented by watching relatable models succeed, receiving credible encouragement, and learning to interpret one's own anxiety as normal rather than disqualifying. Expectancy–value theory adds a second dimension. Students invest effort when they both expect to succeed and value the task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Value can take several forms (interest, perceived usefulness, or importance to one's identity) and a deficit in either expectancy or value negatively affects engagement. For adolescents with dyslexia, both are

frequently low. They expect to fail, and years of disconnection from meaningful texts and learning tasks have drained reading of its perceived value. Effective practice raises both at once.

Reading Engagement and the Power of Interest

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) framed reading engagement as the combination of motivation and cognitive strategy. Engaged readers are motivated, strategic, knowledge-driven, and socially interactive, and intrinsic motivation predicts how much students choose to read. Guthrie and Davis (2003) extended this idea into a concrete engagement model for motivating struggling readers, emphasizing real-world relevance, meaningful choice, interesting texts, and collaboration as classroom supports for engagement. The role of interest is hard to overstate. In a study of adults with dyslexia who had become proficient readers, Fink (1996) found that many had learned to read not through generic remediation but by pursuing a passionate, personal interest. They found a topic so compelling that it gave them a reason to wrestle with difficult text and the persistence to do so. Interest, in other words, can supply the motivational fuel that instruction alone cannot. A recent meta-analysis of students through 12th grade showed reading motivation and reading achievement were significantly related (Toste et al., 2020).

Mindset and the Stories Students Tell Themselves

Finally, the way students understand ability matters. Dweck's (2006) research distinguishes a fixed mindset, in which ability is seen as static, from a growth mindset, in which ability is seen as developable through effort and strategy. A student with dyslexia and a fixed mindset reads every error as confirmation of permanent inadequacy. The same student, helped to adopt a growth orientation, including accurate information about what dyslexia is and is not, can reinterpret difficulty as a feature of how their brain processes print rather than a verdict on their intelligence. Reframing the narrative changes the attributions that drive persistence. Replications

of Dweck's original research indicate that growth mindset interventions reliably benefit lower-achieving students in particular, with effects strongest in classrooms that support the new belief (Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

Alternative Texts as a Motivational Bridge

If motivation depends on competence, autonomy, value, and a flexible self-story, then one of the most powerful moves we can make is to separate access to ideas from the decoding of traditional texts. Audiobooks, graphic novels, age-appropriate manga, digital texts, magazines, trading cards, technical manuals, and even some word heavy video games, are formats that let students engage with rich, high vocabulary content (see Table 1). In a classic analysis, comic books averaged 53.5 rare words per thousand, more than children's books and roughly three times typical adult conversation (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988). Alternative texts do not lower expectations.

Audiobooks and Text-to-Speech

Because dyslexia affects decoding rather than intelligence, students can often understand complex material by listening that they may not yet be able to access through print. Audiobooks and text-to-speech tools let them keep pace with grade-level content, participate in the same discussions as their peers, and experience books as a source of pleasure rather than punishment. In a study of adolescents with dyslexia, Milani et al. (2010) found that students who used audiobooks over several months showed gains in reading and reductions in emotional and behavioral difficulties, alongside greater engagement with reading. More recently, a meta-analysis of 22 studies found that text-to-speech and related read-aloud tools produced meaningful gains in reading comprehension for students with reading disabilities (Wood et al., 2018). Audio support is most powerful when it accompanies text. Pairing narration with the printed words on

screen or page lets students connect sound to symbol and can reinforce word recognition over time (Wood et al., 2018).

Graphic Novels and Multimodal Texts

By pairing words with images, graphic novels and other multimodal texts reduce the amount of decoding required while preserving, and often deepening, narrative complexity. The visual aspects scaffolds comprehension. For example, facial expressions, body language, and setting in the graphics carry meaning that a struggling reader might otherwise have to extract from text alone. The conversational, broken-up text in speech bubbles lends itself to repeated, low-pressure reading. Fenty and Brydon (2020) described how graphic novels can be used purposefully to engage students with learning disabilities during fluency instruction, turning a format students already enjoy into an instructional asset. Kennedy & Chinokul (2020) found graphic novels improved high school students' reading comprehension and reading motivation at a statistically significant level. When graphic novels are used purposefully with students with learning disabilities, engagement rises alongside fluency practice (Fenty & Brydon, 2020).

Table 2 provides examples for graphic novel, comic, and manga adaptations of often assigned classical and contemporary literature. Classical Comics titles are offered in three reading levels (Original, Plain, and Quick Text) which makes them useful for differentiating. For additional plays and classics, the Classical Comics, Campfire, and Self-Made Hero (Manga Shakespeare) series cover many more titles. This list includes widely taught secondary texts and is illustrative, not exhaustive.

Concrete Strategies and Tips for the Classroom

The principles above translate into practices that we can adopt with minimal specialized resources. The strategies below are organized around the three needs at the heart of self-

determination theory, competence, autonomy, and relatedness, because those needs offer a reliable checklist for diagnosing why a particular student has disengaged and what to adjust (see Table 3).

Build Competence Through Success

Because self-efficacy grows from genuine mastery, the single most important thing we can do is ensure that students with dyslexia experience real, visible success often. Choose texts at a level where the student can succeed with reasonable effort, then gradually increase challenge. Break reading tasks into small, manageable chunks and acknowledge each completion. Make progress concrete and personal: track words read, books finished, or fluency on a familiar passage over time, so the student measures growth against their own past self rather than against faster classmates. Praising process rather than fixed ability nudges students toward the growth mindset that sustains persistence (Yeager & Dweck, 2020).

Support Autonomy Through Meaningful Choice

Autonomy is restored whenever students have real choice in their reading. Offer choice in what they read (topics, titles, genres), how they access it (print, audio, paired audio-and-text, graphic format), and how they demonstrate understanding (a discussion, a drawing, a recorded response, a project). Thankfully, choice doesn't have to be unlimited to be motivating. Even a curated menu of three appropriate options can go a long way towards restoring volition. A meta-analysis of 41 studies found that providing choices enhances intrinsic motivation, effort, and performance, and that a curated set of options motivates more effectively than an overwhelming array (Patall et al., 2008).

Protect and Build Relatedness

Relatedness is both a need and a risk for struggling readers, because so much reading happens in public. Never require a student with dyslexia to read aloud cold in front of peers. Round robin reading and its variants, such as popcorn reading, should not be used for whole group instruction. Despite their persistence in classrooms, researchers have found no evidence that turn-taking oral reading improves fluency or comprehension. Instead, it supplies students with disfluent models, fragments the text, and reduces the amount of actual reading each student does (Ash et al., 2009; Opitz & Rasinski, 2008). There is no research support for the claim that round robin reading helps students become better readers (Hilden & Jones, 2012). For students with dyslexia, the practice is not merely unhelpful but actively harmful. It converts reading into a public performance of their greatest difficulty, feeding anxiety and avoidance. Rehearsed reading, partner reading, readers' theater, and teacher modeling preserve the benefits of oral reading without the cost to students' confidence (Opitz & Rasinski, 2008).

Build a classroom culture in which difficulty is normalized and varied reading paths are simply how the room works, so that using audio or a graphic text never signals as a marker of deficiency. Where appropriate, help students learn accurate, affirming information about dyslexia and introduce them to capable people who share their profile. It is helpful to research and be aware of the popular misconceptions surrounding dyslexia, such as the persistent visual myth.

Connect Reading to Identity and Purpose

Expectancy–value theory reminds us that students invest in what they value (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Make the relevance of reading explicit and personal. Tie texts to students' goals, communities, and questions, and let them pursue topics they care about deeply, even if the texts are challenging (Fink, 1996). When interest is supported over time, it can develop into the kind

of individual interest that sustains effort through difficulty (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). The engagement model for struggling readers, including real-world relevance, meaningful choice, compelling texts, and collaboration, offers a practical template (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). A student researching a subject that genuinely matters to them will tolerate far more reading difficulty than the same student assigned a disconnected passage.

Conclusion

The reading difficulties of dyslexia are real and require explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills (Spear-Swerling, 2019). Alongside that instruction sits a second challenge we can address right now, with the resources already in our classrooms or readily available online, the slow erosion of motivation that years of struggle produce. Motivation is not a fixed trait that students with dyslexia happen to lack. It is a state that grows when their needs for competence, autonomy, relatedness, and meaning are met, and withers when they are not. Alternative texts and student choice are among the most powerful tools we have for meeting those needs, because they reconnect capable minds with successful interactions with interesting ideas. Alternative texts keep students reading, learning, and believing in themselves while explicit, systematic instruction does the slower work of building decoding skill. The student with dyslexia needs both, and motivation is what keeps them present for the harder half.

For the adolescent who has concluded that they are not a reader, perhaps the most powerful thing we can offer is genuine success through real choice and real texts worth finishing. Keeping students engaged and believing in themselves is not a distraction from the work of remediation. It is the condition that makes the rest of the work possible. We can teach adolescents with dyslexia to read more skillfully and successfully by first helping them want to read at all.

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Table 1. Alternative texts examples

Alternative Text	Why It Works for Readers
SEQUENTIAL & VISUAL STORYTELLING	
Graphic novels	Image and text work together; inference-rich and inviting for both reluctant and advanced readers.
Comic books	Serialized stories that teach dialogue, pacing, and sequencing of events.
Manga	Read right-to-left. New directionality provides interest plus a window into another culture.
Photo essays	Images plus captions that build and support a visual argument.
FUNCTIONAL & INFORMATIONAL TEXTS	
Recipes & cookbooks	Precise, sequenced procedural reading with real measurement and vocabulary.
Field & nature guides	Identification keys and descriptions that reward close observation and text-feature use.
Travel guidebooks	Maps, listings, and practical detail; navigating dense, layered text features.
How-to & assembly manuals (LEGO, IKEA)	Following multi-step written and visual directions toward a concrete result.
Infographics	Data paired with visuals; practice interpreting and synthesizing information.
Almanacs & catalogs	Skimming and scanning to locate a specific information.
GAME-BASED TEXTS	
Trading card games (Pokémon, Magic, etc.)	Dense rules and specialized vocabulary read closely for strategy.
Board game rulebooks	Complex procedural text read for an immediate, real purpose.
Tabletop role-playing manuals (Dungeons & Dragons)	World-building, collaborative storytelling, and large working vocabulary.
Strategy & walkthrough guides	Goal-directed, sequential problem-solving.
DIGITAL & MULTIMODAL TEXTS	
Blogs	Authentic voice and audience on current, relevant topics.
Websites	Nonlinear navigation and judging the credibility of sources.
Narrative video games	Interactive story, dialogue, and choices that carry consequences.

Alternative Text	Why It Works for Readers
Interactive / branching fiction	Reader agency and cause-and-effect across different paths.
Podcast transcripts	Pairing listening with reading to support fluency.
Captions & subtitles	Fluency practice in a natural dual-mode format.
EVERYDAY & ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT	
Menus	Functional reading with categories and rich descriptive language.
Advertisements, posters & signs	Persuasion and media literacy in the texts students see daily.
Labels & packaging (incl. nutrition labels)	Functional and critical reading of everyday print.
Schedules & timetables	Locating exact information for a purpose.
Greeting cards	Voice, sentiment, and wordplay in a short form.
PERFORMANCE & ORAL TRADITIONS	
Scripts, plays & screenplays	Dialogue, stage directions, and expressive, fluent reading.
Readers' theater	Repeated reading that builds fluency and expression.
Song lyrics	Rhythm, rhyme, and figurative language students already know by heart.
Poetry & spoken word	Imagery, sound, and theme in a compact space.
Speeches	Rhetoric, structure, and the craft of persuasion.
PERSONAL & PRIMARY SOURCES	
Diaries & journals	Perspective and authentic, personal voice.
Letters & correspondence	Audience awareness and epistolary structure.
Memoirs	Narrative nonfiction and reflection on real experience.
Oral histories & interviews	Primary-source listening and analysis.
Historical documents	Source analysis and historical literacy.

\Table 2. Examples of common texts with graphic adaptations

Commonly studied text	Graphic novel adaptation	Publisher (year)
EPICS & ANCIENT CLASSICS		
The Odyssey *Homer*	Adapted & illustrated by Gareth Hinds	Candlewick Press (2010)
The Iliad *Homer*	Adapted & illustrated by Gareth Hinds	Candlewick Press (2019)
Beowulf *Anonymous (Old English epic)*	Adapted & illustrated by Gareth Hinds	Candlewick Press (2007)
SHAKESPEARE		
Romeo and Juliet *William Shakespeare*	Adapted & illustrated by Gareth Hinds	Candlewick Press (2013)
Macbeth *William Shakespeare*	Adapted by Robert Deas; illustrated by Richard Appignanesi	Self-Made Hero (2008)
King Lear *William Shakespeare*	Adapted & illustrated by Gareth Hinds	Candlewick Press (2009)
The Merchant of Venice *William Shakespeare*	Adapted by Richard Appignanesi; illustrated by Faye Yong	Self-Made Hero (2009)
19TH-CENTURY CLASSICS		
Pride and Prejudice *Jane Austen*	Adapted by Nancy Butler; illustrated by Hugo Petrus	Marvel (2010)
Frankenstein *Mary Shelley*	Adapted & illustrated by Gris Grimly	HarperCollins (2013)
A Christmas Carol *Charles Dickens*	Adapted by Sean Michael Wilson; illustrated by Mike Collins	Classical Comics (2008)
Jane Eyre *Charlotte Brontë*	Adapted by Amy Corzine; illustrated by John M. Burns	Classical Comics (2008)
Moby-Dick *Herman Melville*	Adapted & illustrated by Christophe Chabouté	Dark Horse (2017)
Great Expectations *Charles Dickens*	Adapted by Jen Green; illustrated by John Stokes	Classical Comics (2009)
Dracula *Bram Stoker*	Adapted by Jason Cobley; illustrated by Staz Johnson	Classical Comics (2009)
20TH CENTURY CLASSICS		
The Great Gatsby *F. Scott Fitzgerald*	Adapted & illustrated by K. Woodman-Maynard	Candlewick Press (2021)
All Quiet on the Western Front	Adapted & illustrated by Wayne Vansant	Dead Reckoning / Naval Institute Press (2019)

Commonly studied text	Graphic novel adaptation	Publisher (year)
Erich Maria Remarque		
The Hobbit *J. R. R. Tolkien*	Adapted by Chuck Dixon & Sean Deming; illustrated by David Wenzel	Del Rey (1990)
Anne Frank's Diary *Anne Frank*	Adapted by Ari Folman; illustrated by David Polonsky	Pantheon (2018)
Fahrenheit 451 *Ray Bradbury*	Adapted & illustrated by Tim Hamilton (authorized)	Hill and Wang (2009)
To Kill a Mockingbird *Harper Lee*	Adapted & illustrated by Fred Fordham	Harper / HarperCollins (2018)
A Wrinkle in Time *Madeleine L'Engle*	Adapted & illustrated by Hope Larson	Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2012)
1984 *George Orwell*	Illustrated by Fido Nesti	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2021)
Slaughterhouse-Five *Kurt Vonnegut*	Adapted by Ryan North; illustrated by Albert Monteys	Archaia / BOOM! Studios (2020)
Brave New World *Aldous Huxley*	Adapted & illustrated by Fred Fordham	Harper Perennial (2022)
The Giver *Lois Lowry*	Adapted & illustrated by P. Craig Russell	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2019)
Kindred *Octavia E. Butler*	Adapted by Damian Duffy; illustrated by John Jennings	Abrams ComicArts (2017)
The Handmaid's Tale *Margaret Atwood*	Illustrated by Renée Nault	Nan A. Talese / Doubleday (2019)
CONTEMPORARY		
Parable of the Sower *Octavia E. Butler*	Adapted by Damian Duffy; illustrated by John Jennings	Abrams ComicArts (2020)
Long Way Down *Jason Reynolds*	Illustrated by Danica Novgorodoff	Atheneum / Caitlyn Dlouhy Books (2020)
The Lightning Thief (Percy Jackson) *Rick Riordan*	Adapted by Robert Venditti; illustrated by Attila Futaki	Disney-Hyperion (2010)
Coraline *Neil Gaiman*	Adapted & illustrated by P. Craig Russell	HarperCollins (2008)
The Golden Compass (His Dark Materials) *Philip Pullman*	Adapted by Stéphane Melchior; illustrated by Clément Oubrerie	Knopf (2015)
City of Ember *Jeanne DuPrau*	Adapted by Dallas Middaugh; illustrated by Niklas Asker	Random House (2012)

Commonly studied text	Graphic novel adaptation	Publisher (year)
Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children *Ransom Riggs*	Adapted by Cassandra Jean	Yen Press (2013)

Table 3. Classroom strategies summary

Motivation principle	What the research suggests	Try this in class
Competence / self-efficacy	Persistence grows from genuine mastery experiences and process-focused feedback.	Use manageable chunks, personal progress tracking, and praise for strategy use.
Autonomy	Choice over what, how, and why, when possible, supports self-sustaining motivation.	Offer curated choice of titles, formats (print/audio/graphic), and ways to show understanding.
Relatedness	Belonging and protection from public failure builds trust and keeps students engaged.	Never require cold reading aloud or Round Robin Reading; normalize varied reading paths; share relatable role models.
Value / interest	Students invest effort in reading they find useful, important, or interesting.	Use interest inventories; connect texts to identity and goals; allow passionate-interest projects and alternative texts.
Access (alternative texts)	Decoupling ideas from decoding restores grade-level engagement and enjoyment.	Provide audiobooks/text-to-speech, paired audio-and-text, graphic novels, and adjustable formatting.