



2006 Readers' Choice Awards: Best Reading Software

As schools strive to meet the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act, and the federal government's mandate that every student learn to read by the end of third grade, the stakes for teaching literacy in the nation's classrooms have never been higher. To help meet these standards, many schools are turning to technology and interactive software as a means of fulfilling the diverse needs of schoolchildren.

To help determine which software products are having the biggest impact in schools, *eSchool News* presents the results of our second Readers' Choice Awards for Best Reading Software. Conducted online in August, the informal survey asked readers to choose their favorite products in five areas of focus—phonics and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension, fluency, and English as a Second Language (ESL).

Nearly 900 readers responded to the poll, which closed Sept. 1. And one company—Autoskill International Inc.—finished at the top of every category. In making Autoskill's

Academy of Reading their clear solution of choice, readers cited its standards-based learning activities and targeted instruction as key attributes of value.

The software "not only tests the students but gives great tutorials to help students better understand the reading basics," wrote one educator. "It also helps teachers pick out the students that may need some one-on-one assistance." An elementary-school teacher had this to say about the product: "The ultimate reward is that the student raises his or her level of reading and becomes a more motivated and less reluctant reader." And a library media specialist who uses the software to meet the needs of older students said, "I like this product because the students look forward to the work—and they ask for it by name."

Two other products—Odyssey Reading from CompassLearning Inc. and The Imagination Station from iStation.com—also performed well across the board. Despite these clear favorites, however, a number of other products also received support from our readers. Here are the results from our survey.

Best Software for Teaching Phonics and Phonemic Awareness to...

A. Early Readers (pre-kindergarten through grade 3)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	20.4%
2. Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	10.8%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	10.4%
4. Earobics (Cognitive Concepts Inc.)	5.6%
5. STAR Early Literacy (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	4.8%
6. Lexia Early Reading (Lexia Learning Systems)	4.6%

Honorable Mentions: Riverdeep Interactive Learning's Reader Rabbit Series (4.3%), Pearson Digital Learning's Waterford Early Reading (3.9%), Riverdeep Interactive Learning's Edmark Reading Series (3.5%), LeapFrog SchoolHouse's LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System (3.2%)

B. Older Students (grades 4 and up)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	28.1%
2. Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	7.3%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	7.1%
4. Lexia Strategies for Older Students (Lexia Learning Systems)	6.5%
5. Destination Reading (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	4.9%
6. Reading Blaster (Knowledge Adventure)	4.7%

Honorable Mentions: Pearson Digital Learning's SuccessMaker Enterprise (4.5%), Kurzweil Educational Systems' Kurzweil 3000 (3.5%), Scientific Learning Corp.'s Fast ForWord (3.0%), LeapFrog SchoolHouse's LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System (2.8%), Renaissance Learning's Read Now (2.8%)

Most reading instructors agree that one of the first steps to teaching reading is students' ability to master phonics, or the sounds that make up letters and words, and phonemic awareness. While readers said they preferred Autoskill's Academy of Reading to other products in this category, several other solutions also received high praise. One language-arts teacher said she chose CompassLearning's web-based solution, Odyssey Reading, because it was "exciting, engaging, and enjoyable." Said one curriculum director of Lexia Early Reading: "This product provides students with a structured approach to the acquisition of phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency skills. Its student-friendly interface, enjoyable activities, and graphics that support—but don't clutter—the learning environment generate enthusiastic use. Its easy-to-use reporting system allows teachers to track students, targeting for supplemental instruction only those who are struggling with specific concepts." A third reader called The Imagination Station a "creative way to teach children to read" and said it "sets goals based on a child's progress, but also challenges children to improve."

Best Software for Building Vocabulary for...

A. Early Readers (pre-kindergarten through grade 3)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	19.7%
2. Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	12.6%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	11.6%
4. Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	7.9%
5. Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	6.0%
6. Lexia Early Reading (Lexia Learning Systems)	4.3%

Honorable Mentions: Riverdeep Interactive Learning's Destination Reading (4.1%), LeapFrog SchoolHouse's LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System (3.2%), Pearson Digital Learning's Waterford Early Reading (2.6%)

B. Older Students (grades 4 and up)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	24.2%
2. Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	12.0%
3. Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	11.8%
4. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	7.6%
5. Fast ForWord (Scientific Learning Corp.)	4.1%
6. Accelerated Vocabulary (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	3.7%

Honorable Mentions: Lexia Learning Systems' Lexia Strategies for Older Students (3.5%), Tom Snyder Productions' Thinking Reader (3.3%), Knowledge Adventure's Reading Blaster (3.0%), Pearson Digital Learning's SuccessMaker Enterprise (3.0%)

Another key stepping stone to teaching literacy is building vocabulary. In the early grades, the top three finishers remained the same—but educators also were fond of Renaissance Learning's Accelerated Reader, which finished second among solutions for older students and fourth in the younger grades. Commented one teacher, "It is a fantastic motivation product, as well as a useful tool to help assess reading comprehension. The entire school participates and loves it." Odyssey Reading, which one classroom teacher praised for its "great vocabulary lessons built in engaging ways" and "lessons that teach and enforce high-frequency words," again finished strong, placing second in the early grades and third for older students. For older learners, another Renaissance Learning product—Accelerated Vocabulary—placed sixth, while Scientific Learning Corp.'s Fast ForWord took fifth place. One reader gave Fast ForWord high marks for "self-pacing and student empowerment." Also finishing strong yet again was The Imagination Station, of which one respondent noted: "The graphics are cool enough that even older students can't help but like it."

Best Software for Building Reading Comprehension Skills in...

A. Early Readers (pre-kindergarten through grade 3)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	19.4%
2. Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	12.7%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	11.6%
4. Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	9.6%
5. Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	4.9%
6. Lexia Early Reading (Lexia Learning Systems)	4.0%

Honorable Mentions: Pearson Digital Learning's Waterford Early Reading (3.8%), Tom Snyder Productions' Reading for Meaning (3.8%), Riverdeep Interactive Learning's Destination Reading (3.1%), LeapFrog SchoolHouse's LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System (2.9%), Scholastic Inc.'s Reading Counts (2.9%)

B. Older Students (grades 4 and up)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	22.1%
2. Accelerated Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	14.1%
3. Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	12.5%
4. Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	4.9%
5. Reading for Meaning (Tom Snyder Productions)	4.5%
6. Scholastic Reading Inventory (Scholastic Inc.)	4.2%

Honorable Mentions: Scholastic Inc.'s Reading Counts (4.0%), Lexia Learning Systems' Lexia Strategies for Older Students (3.5%), Pearson Digital Learning's SuccessMaker Enterprise (3.1%), American Education Corp.'s A+nywhere Learning System (2.6%)

For teaching reading comprehension skills to younger students, several of the same products again dominated this year's survey. One respondent called Odyssey Reading "very interactive and colorful" and said it "captivates the students' attention and keeps them involved with lessons." For older students, Accelerated Reader again finished second. While Odyssey Reading and Scholastic's Read 180 also placed well, two other Scholastic products—Tom Snyder's Reading for Meaning and Scholastic's Reading Inventory—made their first appearances in the survey results. And though it didn't make the top six, Pearson Digital Learning's SuccessMaker Enterprise "helps us identify students who need additional or intensive intervention, especially through reports that identify students' areas of difficulty," wrote one curriculum director.

Best Software for Building Reading Fluency among...

A. Early Readers (pre-kindergarten through grade 3)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	24.0%
2. Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	13.1%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	12.8%
4. Fluent Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	5.9%
5. Lexia Early Reading (Lexia Learning Systems)	5.2%
6. LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System (LeapFrog SchoolHouse)	4.0%

Honorable Mentions: Riverdeep Interactive Learning's Reader Rabbit Series (3.3%), Headsprout Inc.'s Headsprout Early Reading (2.8%), Riverdeep Interactive Learning's Destination Reading (2.8%), Scholastic Inc.'s Wiggle Works (2.8%), Pearson Digital Learning's SuccessMaker Enterprise (2.4%)

B. Older Students (grades 4 and up)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	26.4%
2. Odyssey Reading (CompassLearning Inc.)	12.4%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	9.0%
4. Fluent Reader (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	7.1%
5. Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	6.7%
6. Lexia Strategies for Older Students (Lexia Learning Systems)	4.3%

Honorable Mentions: Tom Snyder Productions' Thinking Reader (4.0%), Pearson Knowledge Technologies' Write to Learn (2.4%), Scientific Learning Corp.'s Fast ForWord (2.4%)

As students begin to master basic reading skills, educators also must help them learn to read with ease and fluency. In the early grades, two new solutions placed among the top six: Renaissance Learning's Fluent Reader and the LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System from interactive device-maker LeapFrog SchoolHouse. Fluent Reader, a product designed specifically for teaching reading fluency, also appeared among the choices for older students. Wrote one respondent of this specialized offering: "Students can feel they are reading privately." That's good news, said the educator, especially when teaching struggling learners or ESL students. And though the product does have some drawbacks—teachers say scoring assessments can sometimes be time-consuming—Fluent Reader is a "strong product for intervention" overall, this respondent said.

Best Software for Teaching English as a Second Language to...

A. Early Readers (pre-kindergarten through grade 3)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	21.3%
2. Odyssey ELL (CompassLearning Inc.)	15.0%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	13.1%
4. Reader Rabbit Series (Riverdeep Interactive Learning)	5.2%
5. Lexia Early Reading (Lexia Learning Systems)	4.5%
5. (tie) English in a Flash (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	4.5%

Honorable Mentions: LeapFrog SchoolHouse's LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System (3.1%), Pearson Digital Learning's Waterford Early Reading (2.9%), Riverdeep Interactive Learning's Destination Reading (2.4%)

B. Older Students (grades 4 and up)

1. Academy of Reading (Autoskill International Inc.)	22.3%
2. Odyssey ELL (CompassLearning Inc.)	16.9%
3. The Imagination Station (iStation.com)	9.8%
4. English in a Flash (Renaissance Learning Inc.)	6.8%
4. (tie) Read 180 (Scholastic Inc.)	6.8%
6. Lexia Strategies for Older Students (Lexia Learning Systems)	4.9%

Honorable Mentions: Kurzweil Educational Systems' Kurzweil 3000 (3.5%), LeapFrog SchoolHouse's LeapTrack Assessment & Instruction System (3.3%), Crick Software Inc.'s Clicker (2.4%)

While teaching reading is a challenge for any educator, it can be especially difficult for teachers whose students don't speak English as their native language. To help meet the needs of ESL learners, several software companies have developed special product lines designed to play to students' strengths while building on their inherent weaknesses. One such company is CompassLearning, which offers a variation on its popular Odyssey Reading product, called Odyssey ELL. One survey respondent said this specially designed product "supports the [ESL] student by providing an environment that allows the student to read, write, listen, and speak English." Another such product is English in a Flash from Renaissance Learning, which tied for fifth place in the early grades and fourth for older students.