The scientific study of reading has taught us much about the beginnings of reading in childhood, with clear evidence that the gateway to reading opens when children are able to decode, or ‘sound out’ written words. Similarly, there is a large evidence base charting the cognitive processes that characterise skilled word recognition in adults. Less understood is how children develop word reading expertise. Once basic reading skills are in place, what factors are critical for children to move from novice to expert? This talk outlines the role of reading experience in this transition. Encountering individual words in text provides opportunities for children to refine their knowledge about how spelling represents spoken language. Alongside this however, reading experience provides much more than repeated exposure to individual words in isolation. According to the lexical legacy perspective, outlined in this talk, experiencing words in diverse and meaningful language environments is critical for the development of word reading skill. At its heart is the idea that reading provides exposure to words in many different contexts, episodes, and experiences which, over time, sum to a rich and nuanced database about their lexical history within an individual’s experience. These rich and diverse encounters bring about local variation at the word level: a lexical legacy that is measurable during word reading behaviour, even in skilled adults.