



A FRESH LOOK AT PHONICS

**Make instruction active and
engaging to turn students
into skilled readers**

BY WILEY BLEVINS

For decades, phonics instruction has been the topic of conversation and debate. It is often treated like a long-lost relative showing up for Thanksgiving dinner—sometimes welcomed, sometimes relegated to the kiddie table, and often misunderstood. But the research is clear: Phonics instruction matters, and it is essential for students to understand the alphabetic principle to learn to read.

English is an alphabetic language with 26 letters. Alone and in combination, they stand for 44 sounds. Phonics instruction is the teaching of these spelling-sound correspondences. Learning the basic phonics skills we typically teach in kindergarten and in first and second grades gives students a way to sound out approximately 84 percent of the words in English-language text. That's a powerful tool!

But reading is more than sounding out words. Once we sound out a word, we have to attach meaning to it. We string together the meanings of the words in a sentence and relate it to what we know already to understand the message. From a simple handwritten sentence such as "This Sunday, we are going to Grandma's" to a tale about three little pigs to an informational book about sharks, children are eager to crack the code of our written language to enjoy stories and build knowledge. Phonics instruction sets all of this in motion.

The Science of Reading

Phonics has been central to the national conversation surrounding the "science of reading," but it is not alone. Old models of reading, such as the "simple view of reading" (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) and "reading rope" (Scarborough, 2001) have reemerged to clarify the role of phonics in reading instruction.

The simple view of reading says that reading comprehension is a product of decoding (achieved through phonics instruction) and language comprehension (achieved by building vocabulary and content knowledge). One without the other does not result in comprehension, and both need an instructional emphasis in an early reading curriculum.

The reading rope extends this understanding by showing how, as word recognition skills improve (through phonics and decoding instruction) and readers become more strategic in using their language comprehension skills (e.g.,

vocabulary and background knowledge), they begin to intertwine like a rope, creating skilled readers.

The discussion has widened our view on the research around early reading instruction by looking at the evidence provided by scientists in medicine, psychology, and education. For example, researchers have taken pictures of the brain as readers read. These functional MRIs show how the parts of the brain work together to help us read. What's undeniable is that the mental pathways used by skilled readers are different from those used by unskilled readers.

One important brain research study out of Stanford University taught the participants one of two ways to read a new alphabetic text: sounding out the words using phonics or learning words by sight as whole units. What did they find? That participants who read by sounding-out words activated the parts of the brain that skilled readers use to access text. Readers who learned to read by sight-memorizing whole words behaved in ways that mirrored the brains of unskilled readers.

The participants who learned by sighting whole words got off to a fast start, but their learning was not transferable to new, unknown words; they hit a wall. Study participants who learned to sound out words got off to a slower start; it was work, and sometimes, it was hard work. But that learning transferred to new, unknown words, and the sounding out readers were able to surpass the sight-readers.

Unfortunately, too many of our nation's students spend the first year or two in school focusing primarily on reading texts by sight-memorizing words and story patterns through leveled texts, with few or no words that can be sounded out based on phonics skills. Is this the case with your students? Phonics instruction with follow-up reading in decodable, phonics-based texts is a strategy that works best.

Picking a Curriculum

School and district administrators have a responsibility to ensure that the hallmarks of good phonics instruction are firmly in place in the curriculum they choose.

Strong phonics instruction requires a skilled, informed teacher and seven key characteristics:

- 1. Readiness skills.** Phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition are the two best predictors of early reading success, and they play a critical role in beginning phonics instruction.
- 2. Scope and sequence.** A curriculum should feature a well-defined scope and sequence that build from simple to complex with built-in review and repetition.
- 3. Blending.** Teaching students how to sound out words being read must be modeled and applied frequently.
- 4. Dictation.** Guided spelling helps students transfer their growing reading skills to writing.
- 5. Word awareness.** Activities such as word sorts and word building engage students in conversations about words, solidifying their understanding of how words work.
- 6. High-frequency words.** Students need to master the most commonly used words in English. Some are irregular, and others must be taught before students have the phonics skills needed to sound them out.
- 7. Reading connected text.** Decodable texts—those with a high percentage of words that can be sounded out—have the biggest impact on accelerating mastery of phonics skills; writing about these texts further extends their instructional impact.

These resources should also be evaluated to avoid the common barriers that limit student success (see “The 10 Common Breakdowns in Phonics Instruction”). Principals play a significant role in evaluating teachers’ effectiveness in implementing these resources.

The two words most closely associated with strong phonics instruction are “explicit” and “systematic.” “Explicit” means that sound-spelling correspondences are initially taught directly to students, rather than using a discovery (implicit) method. The teaching is intentional. Students are taught, for example, that the /s/ sound can be spelled with the letter s.

Systematic means that the instruction builds from simple to more complex skills with built-in review and

THE 10 COMMON BREAKDOWNS IN PHONICS INSTRUCTION

Many phonics and reading curricula have flaws that stand in the way of maximizing student learning. Since we have only a few years to get students to master basic phonics skills, we need instruction that’s efficient, effective, and impactful. That requires us to take a critical look at curricular materials and remove any barriers standing in the way of rapid student growth.

There are 10 common barriers to phonics instruction:

1. An inadequate or nonexistent review and repetition cycle. Many curricular materials focus on exposure, rapidly moving from one phonics skill to the next. Most students need significantly more time in applying the skill after the initial introduction to achieve mastery—often at least four to six weeks.

2. Lack of application to real reading and writing experiences. Learning sticks when applied, and students need to apply their growing phonics skills to reading and writing daily in texts with ample decodable words.

3. Inappropriate reading materials to practice skills. Decodable texts are an essential part of each day’s phonics lessons. Leveled texts often don’t contain enough decodable words to bring all students to mastery.

4. Ineffective use of the gradual release model. Whoever does the thinking in a lesson does the learning, so teachers must not oversupport lessons; the teacher’s role is to model, provide ample practice opportunities, and offer corrective feedback.

5. Losing time in transitions. Phonics lessons often require a lot of resources, such as books and manipulatives. Too much time is lost distributing and collecting these materials; these moments need to be preplanned around review skills and treated as important instructional moments.

6. Limited teacher knowledge of research-based phonics routines and linguistics. Building teacher capacity around phonics and linguistics, including key instructional routines, has been proven to increase student learning.

repetition to ensure mastery. Systematic phonics instruction has a clearly defined scope and sequence rather than being random, and it builds from the known to the new in steps that make learning easier to grasp.

The best phonics instruction is also active, engaging, and thought-provoking. Students “play” with letters and sounds and discuss what they observe about how words work to deepen their understanding. Phonics instruction involves talk, observation, and application so that the skills can be transferred to all reading situations.

This can be challenging for administrators who haven’t taught the primary grades or don’t have backgrounds in early reading. Videotaping master teachers implementing phonics lessons and analyzing key aspects of those lessons can improve teacher feedback and aid student learning.

To assist in teacher observation and ensure your phonics program is paying off, check the administrator “look-fors” surrounding key aspects of phonics instruction (see “What to Look for in Phonics Instruction”).

Use these as a springboard for feedback to ensure that the phonics instruction your teachers deliver is effective, efficient, and impactful—instruction that accelerates student learning and prepares them to be skilled, lifelong readers. ●

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7 Inappropriate pacing. Lessons need to be fast-paced and engaging, focusing on the most high-impact activities (blending, dictation, word building, and reading and writing about decodable texts).

8 A lack of comprehensive or cumulative mastery assessment tools. A big issue with phonics instruction is when there isn’t enough review and repetition. Use comprehensive assessment tools to place students along a phonics continuum, and cumulative assessments to check mastery and/or decayed learning and make course corrections.

9 Transitioning to multisyllabic words too late. Students encounter a large number of multisyllabic words in grade 2 texts, yet phonics instruction at that level generally doesn’t address longer, more complex words early enough or with enough intensity.

10 Overdoing it (especially in isolated skills work). Equal attention must be paid to phonics and building vocabulary and content knowledge. Rich, interactive, daily read-alouds—especially around science and social studies concepts—are beneficial.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN PHONICS INSTRUCTION

1. Blending (Modeling how to sound out words)

- This is a fast-paced activity during which the teacher models one or two words, then has students do the rest the first time.
- Blending word sets are revisited quickly by calling on students, rows, etc. They are also revisited multiple times throughout the week.
- Copies of blending word sets can be used for independent and at-home work.

2. Dictation (Guided spelling)

- Dictation begins in kindergarten.
- The teacher extends sound box activity by having students replace counters with letters.
- The teacher analyzes student writing for evidence of the use of taught phonics skills.

3. Reading Connected (Decodable) Texts

- Decodable/accountable texts are a daily part of phonics lessons.
- The reading of these texts focuses on decoding strategies, checking comprehension, and building vocabulary.

4. High-Frequency Words

- Are teachers using a research-based routine to accelerate mastery?
- Are more challenging words (e.g., words that begin with th and wh) cycled throughout the year?

5. Word Awareness Activities (Word sorts, word building)

- Follow-up discussion about what students learned about how words work.
- Performed every week, and in small groups for students needing more support.

6. Readiness Skills (Phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition)

- Is there more focus on the “power skills” of oral blending and oral segmentation in K–1?
- Are students assessed for more complex phonemic awareness skills at the end of grade 1?
- Are instructional resources available for teachers in grades 2 and 3 to work on these skills?
- Are the skills taught in a progression or in multiple levels for a whole group?
- Are supports such as sound boxes and counters provided?
- Does the instructional language result in confusion (e.g., rhyme)?
- Does the alphabet sequence enable students to make words early on?

7. Professional Development

- Can you build capacity to bring teacher control to reading instruction so they can be more responsive to individual student needs?
- Is fidelity to flawed resources hurting student growth?
- Can you restructure professional development to differentiate individual teachers’ needs?