



EVERY CHILD A READER

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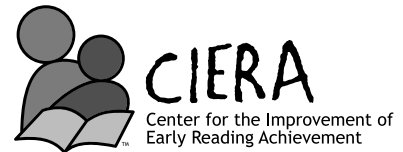


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EVERY CHILD A READER

TOPIC 3

Phonics and Word Recognition Accuracy

To recognize unfamiliar words when reading, successful beginning readers use **phonics** (letter-sound associations). Phonics knowledge must be applied to unfamiliar words in reading text and requires monitoring for meaning. To prepare for middle-grade reading, children must augment phonics skills with knowledge of English morphology—meaning units such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

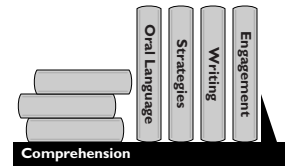
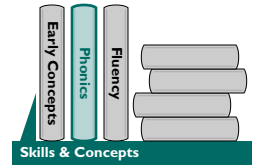
Phonic analysis involves applying letter-sound associations to unknown words in text.

During first grade, children go through stages in using letter-sound knowledge to recognize unfamiliar words.

Phonics helps young readers develop approximate pronunciations of unknown words. Simply using sounds to come up with the pronunciation of a word is not enough; they must check their pronunciation against the text and their own experience to see whether it makes sense. Good reading, even at the beginning levels, means attending to whether that particular word makes sense in the sentence or phrase.¹

As children move through the primary grades, they need to become swift and accurate at associating letters with sounds. They also need to focus increasingly on larger units, moving from individual letter-sound associations to groups of letters that share a consistent form and pronunciation. These units, variously labeled phonograms, word families, or rimes, are exemplified by the “ed” in *bed*, *red*, *Ted*, and *sled* (but not *bread*) or the “oat” in *coat*, *boat*, and *gloat*. There are also meaning units that change the meaning of words (consisting of prefixes such as *pre-*, *un-*, and *dis-* and suffixes such as *-ful* and *-able*) which children need to recognize by the end of the primary grades.

For most children, much of the growth in phonics knowledge and application occurs during first grade. Beginning first graders’ use of phonics is often limited to the first letters of words. For example, a child may substitute a word that begins with the same letter as the target word, such as *bug* for *bee*. Next, children move to the sequential decoding stage² where they produce sounds for the letters in a word in order as in /s/, /e/, /t/ for *set*. With practice, children’s attention moves to phonograms.³ Using phonograms to decode words would be evident in children’s production of *sack* as /s/, /ack/, rather than /s/, /a/, /k/. By the end of second grade, many of the words in grade-appropriate texts are multisyllabic, requiring that children recognize chunks of words that share meanings—prefixes (*anti-*), suffixes (*-ment*), and roots (*-spect-*). The ultimate goal is for children to be reading the majority of words automatically as sight words by third grade.



Accomplishments for Phonics and Word Recognition Accuracy⁴

KINDERGARTEN	FIRST GRADE	SECOND GRADE	THIRD GRADE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows many letter-sound correspondences • Begins to understand that the sequence of letters in a written word represents the sequence of sounds (phonemes) in a spoken word (alphabetic principle) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decodes phonetically regular, one-syllable words in texts • Monitors own reading and self-corrects when an incorrectly identified word does not fit with cues provided by the letters in the word or the context surrounding the word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decodes one-syllable words not yet known automatically through use of letter-sound correspondence knowledge and by recognition of phonograms or analogy to rhyming words • Decodes unknown multisyllabic words through phonic and structural analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decodes most multisyllabic words not yet known as sight words • Recognizes most words automatically

Word recognition begins in kindergarten but continues for several years. Children learn to use initial letters, then letter sequences, and later phonograms, suffixes, and prefixes as meaningful cues to words.

Instruction in Phonics and Word Recognition Accuracy

Associating letters and sounds

In kindergarten and early in first grade, classrooms abound with talk and activities that support children in associating letters and sounds.

Picture sorts allow children to use their knowledge of familiar concepts to attend to sounds in words.⁵ This activity begins with attention to initial consonants and extends to word endings and vowels within words. To make the sound associations with the letters *m* and *d*, for example, a sorting activity might use pictures of a dog and a monkey as reference cards. Individually or in pairs, children take a set of pictures of objects that begin with *m* and *d* and sort them, saying, “Does d-d-dinosaur start like m-m-monkey or d-d-dog?”

In **guided writing**, the teacher models and coaches as the class writes a sentence together about an event the class has shared. In the spring of kindergarten, a class might write, “The hen ate the bread,” after hearing *The Little Red Hen*, with children taking turns writing the various words in the sentence. The teacher might need to coach by asking, “What do you hear first in ‘hen’ and what letter is this? What do you hear next in ‘hen’ and what letter is this in the middle? What do you hear at the end of ‘hen’ and what letter is this?”

Posters or illustrations of memorable characters with alliterative names such as “Silly Snake” or “Drowsy Dinosaur” are useful in kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. Routines of the sounds made by these characters can be engaging for young children. For example, “The silly snake goes /s/ /s/,” or “The drowsy dinosaur goes /d/ /d/.”

Sequential decoding

Children initially apply knowledge of phonics as they move sequentially through the letters of a word.

Teacher demonstrations of how to segment and blend sounds to decode unknown words are a primary source of information for beginning readers.⁶ In the fall of first grade, a teacher’s reading of *Cat on the Mat*^a might be followed by a demonstration of segmenting and blending the sounds in *cat*, *sat*, and *mat*. Segmenting and blending of sounds in words also occurs in classroom writing events such morning messages or guided writing.

Making words involves children in spelling words with the letter-sound patterns that are the focus of lessons.⁷ Sets of letters on small cardboard squares or magnetic letters can be useful. Once children have spelled and read the initial word, letters within the key word are substituted with other letters to form new words. The reading of *The Chick and the Duckling*^b might be followed by a request for children to pick these letters from their letter boxes: *c, d, g, k, l, n, i, u*. After spelling and reading *lid*, children change *lid* to *kid*, *kid* to *kick*, *kick* to *lick*, *lick* to *luck*, *luck* to *duck*, and *duck* to *duckling*.

Writing with phonetic spelling gives children many opportunities to practice decoding words sequentially. They often begin with the initial letter of a word they want to write and sometimes add letters derived from other prominent sounds, such as the last letter. For example, a child might write *crs* for *chairs*. A teacher can help the child segment and blend the sounds while also identifying the missing letters. Writing meaningful messages motivates children and allows teachers to assess their skill with sequential decoding.

Decoding by analogy

When children encounter new words, they can compare them to familiar words with similar letter combinations. Then they realize that “fill” must rhyme with “Bill” and that “sail”, “tail”, and “rail” all include the same letter-sound combinations.

Key phonograms and **key words** are parts of instructional programs in which children learn to decode unknown words by comparing them to either known phonograms (*vat* must rhyme with *at*) or known words (*vat* must be like *cat*). There are 353 different phonograms, each of which can be found in between 2 and 26 relatively common one-syllable words.⁸ The point of this activity is to develop children’s attention to consistent groups of letters, not to make them study all 353 phonograms. In most primary classrooms, too many phonograms are introduced and too few experiences are given in applying them to unknown words in reading and writing texts.

The following 38 phonograms appear in 600 words, with each phonogram occurring in between 14 and 26 words. A key word—usually the most common of the group (e.g. *bat* might serve for *at*)—might be chosen to represent each phonogram on a word wall or chart.

38 Phonograms in 600 Common Words⁸

	V-C/V-C-C	V-C-e/V-V-C	Diphthongs, r-controlled, others
a	at, am, ag, ack, ank, ap, an, ab	ay, ail, ain, ake	
e	ell, est, ed	eed	ew
i	ill, ip, ick, ing, in, ink, im	ine	ight
o	ot, op, ob, ock		out, ow, ore
u	unk, ug, uck, um		
y			y

If the phonics information taught in lessons does not connect to the words in the books that children read, it is unlikely that children will integrate the new information into their word recognition strategies.

Reading books with elements and words that have been taught in phonics lessons is important at every stage of learning to read. While connections between the content of lessons and the texts that children read make good sense, the question of what percentage of words should be represented by the target patterns is less certain. Recently, textbook publishers have chosen books for beginning reading programs because of their literary or predictable patterns rather than on a shared group of words.⁹ Few opportunities to apply the content of phonics lessons with the words in books are likely to serve as a roadblock in developing phonics strategies, especially among children who are most at-risk of failure in reading.¹⁰ At the same time, children enjoy texts that have engaging illustrations, patterns, and storylines. The best solution likely lies in inclusion of many different texts in beginning reading programs, including those that emphasize the phonics patterns and high-frequency words of instruction.

What there can be no doubt about is that children need to read many, many books to become good readers. One successful program reports that children who were initially struggling readers read as many as 600 books in independent and home reading programs during a single year.¹¹ These books were *in addition* to the texts of reading lessons.

Decoding multisyllabic words

By the second half of second grade, the focus of decoding instruction should be on multisyllabic words that children don't recognize instantly.

Key words can also be used effectively with multisyllabic words, since many of the common and consistent phonograms occur in multisyllabic words as well. Within the Benchmark program¹² (a research-based program for learning-disabled young readers), classrooms have a word wall with 120 key words, each representing a common phonogram. Children are taught to study chunks of multisyllabic words, looking for phonograms shared with the key words. When encountering the word *banter* for the first time, readers would use the key word *can* to figure out *ban* and *her* to figure out *-ter*.

Lessons also attend to recognition and meaning of common prefixes and suffixes. By removing recognizable prefixes, suffixes, and other endings (e.g., *est*,

er), children can look for familiar phonograms which they can pronounce. The most critical part of the strategy is for children to keep checking whether their conjectures for the unknown words make sense in the sentence or phrase.

Strategic use of decoding

To ensure that children apply word recognition strategies in their independent reading, teachers should consistently use an “apply it now” strategy when children are confronted with unknown words.

Reference charts summarize primary decoding strategies for unknown words, and should be posted in the classroom. Such visuals reinforce teachers’ demonstrations of and conversations about strategies. A chart in one second-grade classroom listed these strategies: 1) Take off any endings to make the word shorter; 2) See if there is a phonogram you recognize and blend the beginning sound and the phonogram together; 3) If it’s still not a real word, sound the word letter by letter; and 4) Check your reading: Does the word make sense in the story?

Instruction for English Language Learners

English language learners should learn to read initially in their first language. If this is not possible, they should be involved in numerous read-alouds and read-alongs of books.

When children’s initial reading acquisition is in their first language, they use their knowledge about written systems in learning to read and write English. When initial reading instruction occurs in English, classrooms should involve English language learners in daily events with books. Figuring out the sound-letter associations of a new language is a challenging task. A conventional stance has been to involve English language learners with few books and require them to indicate some “mastery” of a book before moving to the next book. What these children actually need is to see and hear literally hundreds of books over a school year.¹³ Reading along with more proficient readers (teachers, visitors, older students), participating in read-alouds of big books, and listening repeatedly to books read aloud can provide English language learners with the fluency in English that they need to recognize words.

Instruction for Children Who Struggle With Phonics

Struggling readers benefit from high quality, small group interventions that incorporate multiple features of strong decoding instruction.

Teachers and researchers in the Benchmark program described earlier have recently expanded their “decoding by analogy” program to incorporate sequential decoding as a first step.¹⁴ In the earlier version, students were taught to use the key words for each phonogram as a way of approximating the pronunciation of syllables in long, multisyllabic words. In their recent work, they have dramatically improved the effectiveness of this approach by taking their students through an initial sequential decoding stage in which they learn how to segment and blend the sounds in easily decodable words. For the sequential decoding stage, a core group of phonetically regular, familiar words are the materials for comparing and contrasting critical features of similar words (*bob* and *rob* differ at the beginning but *sat* and *sad* differ at the end). Children are guided in analyzing the sounds they hear in these words and matching sounds with letters. The Benchmark staff have found that once their

students are able to fully analyze words in this way, they make rapid progress in the decoding by analogy approach to unlocking multisyllabic words. This is an example of a good program made even better by incorporating insights from recent research on the decoding process.

**EVERY CHILD A READER:
COMPANION READINGS**

Cunningham, P.M., & Cunningham, J.W. (1992). Making words: Enhancing the invented spelling-decoding connection. *The Reading Teacher*, 46, 106–115.

Gaskins, I.W., Ehri, L.C., Cress, C., O'Hara, C., & Donnelly, K. (1996). Procedures for word learning: Making discoveries about words. *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 312–327.

NOTES

- ¹ Adams, M. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- ² Ehri, L.C., & Robbins, C. (1992). Beginners need some decoding skill to read words by analogy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 27, 14–26.
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- ⁴ Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ⁵ Invernizzi, M., Rosemary, C., Juel, C., & Richard, H. (1997). At-risk readers and community volunteers: A three-year perspective. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 1, 277–300.
- ⁶ Taylor, B.M., Frye, B.J., Short, R., & Shearer, B.L. (1992). Classroom teachers prevent reading failure among low-achieving first grade students. *The Reading Teacher*, 45, 592–597.
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- ⁸ Fry, E. (1998). The most common phonograms. *The Reading Teacher*, 51, 620–622.
- ⁹ Hoffman, J.V., et al. (1994). So what's new in the new basals? A focus on first grade. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 26, 47–73.
- ¹⁰ Juel, C., & Roper/Schneider, D. (1985). The influence of basal readers on first grade reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 20, 134–152.
- ¹¹ Gaskins, I. (1998). There's more to teaching at-risk and delayed readers than good reading instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 51, 534–547.
- ¹² Gaskins, I.W., Downer, M.A., Anderson, R.C., Cunningham, P.M., Gaskins, R.W., Schommer, M., & the teachers of Benchmark School (1988). A metacognitive approach to phonics: Using what you know to decode what you don't know. *Remedial and Special Education*, 9, 36–41, 66.
- ¹³ Elley, E.B. (1991). Acquiring literacy in a second language: The effect of book-based programs. *Language Learning*, 41, 375–411.
- ¹⁴ Gaskins, I.W., Ehri, L.C., Cress, C., O'Hara, C., & Donnelly, K. (1996). Procedures for word learning: Making discoveries about words. *The Reading Teacher*, 50, 312–327.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

- ^a Wildsmith, B. (1982). *Cat on the mat*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ^b Suteyev, V. (1972). *Chick and the duckling*. Trans. M. Ginsburg. New York: Macmillan.

This topic is part of the series *Every Child a Reader* by E.H. Hiebert, P.D. Pearson, B.M. Taylor, V. Richardson, & S.G. Paris of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA).

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