

Teaching Reading

Why Isn't It Working?

Our focus in this chapter is to understand current reading practices and to see why they cause as many problems as they do. Before starting out, it's worthwhile to define some key terms.

Setting Out the Terms

We'll begin with three key terms: *reading*, *writing*, and *literacy*. The first two are near-inseparable partners. Technically, the most accurate term to use to describe reading and writing ability is *literacy*, because it encompasses both processes. However, in everyday parlance, you'll usually find the single term *reading* used as a substitute for *literacy*.

Four processes are seen as central to attaining literacy: two (*decoding* and *comprehension*) are associated with reading, and two (*spelling* and *composing*) with writing. Don't be put off if these terms are unfamiliar. As you will see, their meaning is straightforward.

In order to read, you must be able to take the letters on a page (for example, *c-a-t*) and convert them into words (*cat*). The term for that process is *decoding*. Having decoded the words, you then have to figure out the message they are conveying. The term for that is *comprehension*. The two processes are independent of one another. For example, you can easily decode, or read, this string of words: *house if sleep between go red not lost*, but you cannot comprehend these words because they do not make sense within this string.

Writing offers a comparable set of terms. In order to write you must be able to take the sounds of words you speak and convert them into letters. The term for

The Key Terms of Literacy

Reading	<i>Decoding</i> —converting letters into words <i>Comprehending</i> —understanding what you have decoded
Writing	<i>Spelling</i> —producing the letters to represent words <i>Writing (composing)</i> —creating meaningful messages

that is *spelling*. You also have to be able to take the words you spell and combine them into meaningful messages that others can read. The term for that is *composing*, or *writing*.

In general, reading receives more time and effort in school instruction than does writing. However, poor achievement permeates both—with writing generally showing even more serious deficiencies than reading.

To let you see the problems for yourself, we will go through a brief tour of reading instruction and see what children must deal with on a regular basis.

Looking Back Before Looking Ahead


Despite all the recent attention it has been getting, the issue of reading failure is far from new. Half a century ago an “aroused parent,” Rudolph Flesch (1955), wrote a book that took the country by storm, *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do About It*. In it, Flesch railed against the teaching establishment. He made the astounding claim that there were “no remedial reading cases” in most European countries and that there “never was a problem anywhere in the world until the United States,” around 1925, switched its method of teaching from the phonics instruction to the whole word method. In the *whole word* approach, children were taught through *look and say* techniques to recognize, or decode, whole words. Flesch likened this approach to reading “English as if it were Chinese,” as if each word were represented by a different symbol.

Though attention getting, Flesch’s claims about the previous absence of failure were unfounded. The widespread testing needed to substantiate them simply did not exist generations back and would likely have contradicted his claim if they had. Still, the book struck a chord in the many parents who then, as now, were grappling with the ordeal of children struggling with reading. More to the point, Flesch offered a clear, simple answer: go back to basics, and teach children to decode with a solid phonics approach.


Phonics is now the central method of reading education used in our nation. Its hold is so pervasive that the term is almost synonymous with the teaching of reading. Although many variants exist, at their core is the idea that reading is based on sounding out the letters in words. Flesch himself set out a three-part program that starts by teaching children that “single letters . . . stand for single sounds,” for example, *t = tuh*, *b = buh*, and so forth. His program then moves on to more complicated issues, such as the sounds that are “spelled by two-letter or three-letter combinations” (such as *ow* as in *cow*, *ay* as in *say*, *chr* as in *Christmas*), and finally to the idea that “some of the letters do not spell one sound but two.” For example, the *a* in a word like *cat* is pronounced very differently from the *a* in a word like *watch*. If you’ve seen your child, or some other child, at the start of reading instruction, you’ll find these ideas familiar because they are largely the ones used in classrooms around the nation.

Flesch’s views were strengthened and given academic respectability with the publication in 1967 of Jean Chall’s *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. In this book, Chall, a professor at Harvard, evaluated the phonics and whole word positions and, in the end, came down firmly on the side of phonics as a more effective way of teaching reading. Under these pressures, phonics instruction reassumed its long-standing role at center stage. The only problem was that the failure did not stop.

No one should have expected that it would. Despite Flesch’s claims, whole word teaching had not appeared out of the blue. It had emerged as an effort to stem the failures generated by phonics. Unfortunately, the solution had not worked. Whole word teaching proved to be even more ineffective than phonics. That did not mean that phonics teaching was effective. It was just better than the only available alternative.



The better results obtained with phonics compared to whole word teaching did not mean that traditional phonics instruction was effective. It was just better than the limited alternative that had been offered.



Back to the Present

Fast forward now to the 1970s. Phonics once again holds sway, and to everyone’s dismay, the failure continues. Once again there is a call for reform. This time, rushing in to fill the gap is whole language—a new movement based on a seductive

argument. Abandon the tedium and dreariness of phonics. Instead, cater to children's imagination by providing complete, integrated, appealing books that represent "authentic" experiences and that make reading meaningful and rewarding.

The only problem is that like whole word teaching, whole language teaching causes reading scores to fall even further. So once again, decades later, history repeats itself as educational leaders push for a return to phonics as the remedy for the "new" reading crisis.

A key difference this time is that the great debate has morphed into the great accommodation. No longer are two techniques being pitted against one another for the purpose of declaring a winner and loser. Instead, in a spirit of reconciliation, the two methods—phonics and whole language—have been joined, on the grounds that each supplements the other. The end result is that many if not most children today, under the rubric of *a comprehensive approach* or *balanced teaching*, receive reading instruction that combines phonics and whole language.

Nevertheless, with its stronger techniques and longer history, phonics is almost always the dominant member of the partnership. It has been, and continues to be, the backbone of teaching kids their ABCs. In fact it is so widely taught that it has almost become a synonym for reading instruction. This is in part why the first thing parents typically do when trying to help their youngsters read a word is to say, "Well, let's sound it out. What sound does this letter make?" They do so because that is the way they were taught.

Why, then, are so many children still experiencing such difficulty in learning how to read? It certainly is not from a lack of attention. Seen as critical, reading dominates the school day for the first three to four years of a child's education. What is taught in this time, however, is plagued with problems. The remedies that have been tried over the years have been restricted to variants of methods that simply do not work for a large percentage of the children. No matter how they are repackaged, these techniques don't work. The current problems with reading education are not the fault of the children; they are due to the incomplete methods being used to teach them.

Seeing the World Through a Child's Eyes

A while back some distinguished researchers from Harvard University, in the course of studying children's thinking, realized how difficult it was for them to position themselves so they could understand just how children were viewing the world. In characterizing this gap between the children and themselves, the

researchers said, “It is curiously difficult to recapture preconceptual innocence . . . It is as if . . . mastery . . . were able to mask the . . . memory of things now distinguished” (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956, p. 50). This statement gives voice to a critical point: even though we were once without skills ourselves, once we have learned a skill, it is almost impossible for us to appreciate what it is like for someone who is just beginning.

This results in a serious paradox that besets all teaching, including the teaching of reading. The skill to be taught must be designed by individuals who already possess the skill. Otherwise, the content would be meaningless. But precisely because these persons *have* the skills, they cannot see what the novice really needs to get going.

Fortunately, there is a way out of this paradox. The knowledgeable person must somehow be placed in the position of the novice so that he or she can see the world through the eyes of the person who does not yet have the skills.

To that end much of what follows in this chapter is designed to place *you* in the position of a child who is starting on the path to reading. In other words, you are going to lose your advantages as an expert reader so that you can see the world through a child’s eyes.

Although it may seem impossible to lose your reading abilities that quickly, it’s not that difficult. All it takes is removing one language component you have long taken for granted. That component is the alphabet. Instead of the usual ABCs, you will be working with foreign symbols. In other words, the letters on a page will be as unfamiliar to you as our usual alphabet is to first-time readers.

In your newly created life as a child, you will go through a set of three exercises that emulate typical methods used in phonics and whole language teaching. The first involves a phonic lesson focused on decoding; the second, a whole language lesson focused on reading; and the third, a whole language lesson focused on writing. Each will enable you to see firsthand what it is about current reading instruction that leads to so much failure.

It’s likely that you will find yourself unwilling to complete the work. Many of the colleagues I enlisted in this endeavor got so frustrated that they refused to continue. It’s difficult to find yourself stripped of powers you long assumed were yours forever. If that is your experience, do not be upset. Just on its own, it will tell you a great deal about the experience children have in current reading education. So, on that cautionary note, try tackling a typical phonics lesson prepared for children in kindergarten or first grade.

Returning to Our Youth: A Phonics Lesson

This lesson, like much phonics instruction, is aimed at having you use the technique of *sounding out* to decode the words on the page. Sounding out new letters is difficult, and you would be overwhelmed if you had to deal with the entire alphabet. To ease your burden, you have to deal with a set of only nine letters.

We start with the assumption that you have already learned the eight letters that follow, all of which are symbols for consonant sounds (shown in the second row):

Letter	Δδ	Ηη	Λλ	Μμ	Νν	Σσ	Ττ	Ξξ
Sound	<i>duh</i>	<i>huh</i>	<i>ell</i>	<i>mm</i>	<i>nn</i>	<i>ss</i>	<i>tuh</i>	<i>ecks</i>

In each pair, the letter on the left is uppercase, and the one on the right is lowercase. The letter on the extreme left, for example, is a capital *dee*, the one immediately to its right is a lowercase *dee*. They make the sound *duh* (just like the *d* of our alphabet). The next set of letters contains upper- and lowercase *ayches*, and they make the sound *huh* (just like the *h* of our alphabet). And so on.

Now, in this lesson you are going to learn a new, ninth letter. It is the α and it has the sound *aah*. It also happens to be the first vowel you are going to be using. Because all words must have a vowel and α will be our only vowel in this lesson, keep in mind that this letter will appear in every word.

Now, to our lesson. As in any good phonics lesson, you “simply” have to sound out each letter and then combine it with the sounds of the other letters until you come out with the complete word. Remember, if the sounds don’t end up sounding like a real word, try again. All the words are ones you know well. Go ahead and try your skill.

Δαν ηασ αν αξ.

Ηασ Δαν αν αξ?

Σαμ ηασ ηαμ.

Ηασ Σαμ ηαμ?

Δαν ηασ λανδ ανδ σανδ.

Ηασ Δαν σανδ?

Σαμ σατ.

Δαν σατ.

How did you do? How long did it take, and what was it like to sound out twenty-six ultra-short words limited to nine letters of the alphabet? For most people the experience is tedious, error laden, and difficult. Even the simplest real language has too much variation to allow traditional sounding out of letters to yield clear, user-friendly material for the beginning reader. Keep in mind that the task is not impossible. If you have tenacity, you can do it. It is just unpleasant, unrewarding, and demanding. Just as you can plow through the words if you have sufficient determination, your child can as well.

By the way, did you ever finish reading those twenty-six words? If not, here they are for you translated into a more recognizable format:

Δαν ηασ αν αξ.	Dan has an ax
Ηασ Δαν αν αξ?	Has Dan an ax?
Σαμ ηασ ηαμ.	Sam has ham.
Ηασ Σαμ ηαμ?	Has Sam ham?
Δαν ηασ λανδ ανδ σανδ.	Dan has land and sand.
Ηασ Δαν σανδ?	Has Dan sand?
Σαμ σατ.	Sam sat.
Δαν σατ.	Dan sat.

If translating those symbols was hard for you, imagine how it is for a child with no experience of reading. Some kids do learn this way. Some even learn without any instruction at all. You might be one of them. You would find that out in about three to four months. That seems to be the length of time successful children need to sort things out. For this group, after working diligently with material of the sort you just encountered, within a few months the jumble of letters begins to dissolve and to be replaced by real words. That is why many first-grade teachers are heard to remark, “By Christmas, the kids just get it. They start to read, and they zoom ahead.”

For many children, though, that is not what happens. The clouds don’t disperse. Things only darken further, as failure and despondency take over. Who in their right mind could possibly recommend unpleasant, unrewarding, and demanding tasks as the way to teach five- and six-year-old children? Yet this is what youngsters across the nation are asked to do every day. This fact alone can help you understand the astounding failure rate that marks the reading scene.

In addition, keep in mind that we've restricted ourselves to a range of extremely simple, mostly three-letter words where each letter can be sounded out. For example, with a word like *sat*, you can come up with a sound for each letter: *ss*, *ah*, *tuh*. These sorts of words are not at all representative of the words children actually see when they look at real books—even those designed for kindergartners and first graders.

The addition of even a single letter generally makes straightforward sounding out impossible. See, for example, what happens when you sound out each letter in four-letter words like *make*, *baby*, *seat*, *coin*, *loud*, and *bush*. The problem is perhaps best explained by pointing out that if phonics worked the way it is supposed to, the word *phonics* itself would be spelled *foniks*.

To overcome this problem, traditional phonics rapidly goes beyond sounding out and requires children to memorize hosts of complicated rules. Studies have shown that almost 600 rules are required if you are going to use explicit rules to decode basic English. And even with that astounding number, you will not be able to figure out how to pronounce “many of the most common words in English, like *one* and *have* and *of*” (Gough & Hillinger, 1980, p. 185).

You may have heard of some of the rules that children confront. Two of the most common are the silent *e* rule (where the *e* at the end of a word like *make* is silent) and the double vowel rule (where the double vowel *ea* in a word like *meat* gets a single sound). Not only are these rules tedious to learn, but they turn reading into a laborious process where each word has to be studiously analyzed before it can be deciphered.

Educators have over the years become increasingly aware of the many children who lack the skills to allow current phonics instruction to work. Instead of seeking a new approach that meets the needs of these children, they have tried to change the children to meet the needs of phonics. They have developed training in what is called *phonological awareness*, the skills deemed to be the precursors for phonics instruction. In this method children are taught various types of sound analysis. They are taught to rhyme (for example, “Say a word that rhymes with *man*.”), to dissect the sounds of words (for example, “What would *bend* sound like without the *b*?”), and to break words apart (for example, “Clap for how many syllables there are in the word *opening*.”).

But after the phonological awareness training has ended, the children are still left to confront what I just asked you to do. They must decode unfamiliar

symbols, carry out seemingly endless sound–symbol associations, pay attention to minute details, and blend the many different sounds they come up with in the right sequence (all of which is commonly known as *reading!*).

You already have these phonological awareness skills, but you may have noticed that they didn't help you read the passage in an unfamiliar alphabet. Similarly for many children, even when they have developed the phonological awareness skills, reading is still fraught with difficulty. Endless sounding out doesn't work for them.

Additionally, today's children, accustomed to high-impact TV and video games, are at an even greater risk of failure than their parents and grandparents. To put it bluntly, students of previous generations were used to being bored. Phonics was anything but exciting, but in that respect it did not differ from the many tedious tasks children were typically expected to carry out. For example, children routinely had to accomplish long memorization tasks. A homework assignment might have been to memorize Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and then recite it the next day before the entire class.

Such diligence-demanding skills are totally beyond the ken of many of today's kids. The occasional sounding out of words is manageable and helpful, but repeated sounding out is a difficult chore, and children often cannot stay the course. The result is kids who do not learn how to read successfully.

Returning to Our Youth: A Whole Language Reading Lesson

As I explained before, phonics is generally not the sum total of children's instruction today. They are also exposed to the techniques of whole language. Now I'm going to ask you to take a short whole language lesson, to see if that method works any better.

The whole language approach focuses on a different aspect of language. Instead of concentrating on the dissected *sounds* of words, it provides children with complete stories, or *texts*. You will hear whole language proponents maintaining that stories are more "natural," "authentic," and "motivating." If you provide children with such stories, the thinking goes, their reading will naturally blossom.

In an effort to keep the material as simple as possible, a common technique in whole language is to use *predictable reading* material, in which small sets of words and phrases are repeated, as in the following passage (Segment 1). This is a typical lesson for a beginning reader in kindergarten or first grade.

Segment 1

Black bear, black bear, what can you see?

I can see a green bird looking at me.

Green bird, green bird, what can you see?

I can see a gray duck looking at me.

This rhyming verse, consistent with the whole language philosophy, is certainly more entertaining than the “Dan’s ax” and “Sam’s ham” passage used for the phonics lesson. Nevertheless, it shares the phonics aim of smooth decoding, or using the right words for various groups of letters. However, rather than repeating a letter, like the *a* in the phonics lesson, this approach repeats words and themes (for example, “what can you see? I can see a . . . looking at me”).

To see how this works in practice, read Segment 1 until you have it memorized. Then move on and read Segment 2. It contains the same words—but in our foreign alphabet. Now you’ll see how easy it is to read predictable texts.

Just repeat the sentences you have memorized, making sure to match each spoken word to the appropriate written word (for example, say “black” while looking at βλαχκ, and “bear” while looking at βεαρ, and so forth).

Segment 2

Βλαχκ βεαρ, Βλαχκ βεαρ, ωηατ χαν ψου σεε?

Ι χαν σεε α γρεεν βιρδ λοοκινγ ατ με.

Γρεεν βιρδ, γρεεν βιρδ, ωηατ χαν ψου σεε?

Ι χαν σεε α γραψ δυχκ λοοκινγ ατ με.

See? You’re *reading*, just as lots of children do when they start memorizing stories that are read to them on a regular basis.

But what exactly have you learned? To find out, let’s use the identical fifteen words but put them in a different order. OK, give it a try. Try to read Segment 3.

Segment 3

Δυγκ! δυγκ! Χαν ψου σεε?

Με, με? Σεε ωηατ?

Χαν ψου σεε α γρεεν βιρδ?

Ι χαν σεε α βλαχκ βιρδ.

You may have found that the decoding of Segment 3 posed some difficulties. That is certainly the case for many children. The use of this predictable reading method often leads to a laborious, error-filled reading of the text. Further, in this situation you may not even have the advantage of sounding out because you may not have been taught the sounds of the individual letters. That is why whole language teaching on its own fares less well than phonics. Neither is ideal, but phonics provides more systematic tools for dealing with new material.

The problems of whole language are obvious even when a text is limited to just fifteen words. With the inevitable introduction of more material, the difficulties soar. You will hear whole language proponents maintaining that the inherent appeal of well-written stories will automatically lead children to master the reading process. As you have just seen for yourself, it doesn't work out that way.

The presentation of stories early in reading instruction means children can often prematurely face a much wider range of words than they can manage. So while traditional phonics offers children tedious rules that are difficult to apply, whole language leaves them stranded without the controls a learner needs to master a new terrain. The number of words in any meaningful text is simply too great for the majority of novice readers to handle effectively.

In case you are interested, here is the translation of Segment 3:

Segment 3 Translation

Duck! duck! Can you see?

Me, me? See what?

Can you see a green bird?

I can see a black bird.

Returning to Our Youth: A Whole Language Writing Lesson

Whole language instruction is not confined to reading. In contrast to phonics, this approach rightly places enormous value on writing. Writing is, if anything, more difficult to teach than reading, and parents and educators alike are concerned about the extent to which it has been neglected.

There are good reasons why phonics downplays writing in the early grades. Imagine a young child wanting to express a relatively simple idea such as, “My dog is sick.” Imagine further that the child is totally willing to abide by the phonics rules that have been taught. In this case the writing of this single idea could legitimately end up as, “Mie dawg iz sik,” or as “Mye daug iz sic,” or as any number of other variations. From a phonics point of view, it would be almost impossible to explain to the child why his or her writing is “wrong.”

Whole language gets phonics off this uncomfortable hook. It says that children should not be constrained to use what adults have determined is *correct* spelling. Instead, they should be allowed, indeed encouraged, to use *invented spelling*. As captured in the title of an influential book (Bissex, 1980) on this topic, *Gnys at Wrk* (meaning “genius at work”), in this technique children write words in whatever way they feel is appropriate.

Many, if not most, schools today use phonics as the basis for teaching reading, and whole language as the basis for teaching writing. So for the final exercise, I am going to ask you to try out some whole language writing techniques.

Here is a typical writing lesson from the early grades that once again employs the foreign alphabet we’ve been using in these exercises. The teacher starts by saying:

Let’s try some writing. I’d like you to use the words we’ve been reading like these—

βεαρ	βιρδ	γρεεν	δυχκ	σεε	γραψ
bear	bird	green	duck	see	gray

—to express your own ideas and experiences. To help you with other words, here is the whole alphabet:

α β χ δ ε φ γ η ι ϕ κ λ μ ν ο π θ ρ σ τ υ ω ξ ψ ζ

Remember, all your ideas are important. Feel free to say anything you'd like. Just make sure, in the space below, to write at least three sentences using the new words you've learned—along, of course, with other words you need to make meaningful sentences. For example, if you want to write the word *fly*, you can write φλψ. But don't feel constrained. You may also use the invented spelling technique of whole language, in which you can create your own spelling and write the words in whatever way seems comfortable. [In other words, you may do just what young children do when they write *puld* for *pulled*, *wantid* for *wanted*, and *grl* for *growl*.]

Τησ ισ μψ στορψ (**This is my story**)

It's tough going, isn't it? When you have to keep creating words that you don't know, the process is slow and grinding. Schools will proudly boast how they teach children to love writing. If you speak to the children, though, you will hear a far different message. For the novice, the goal is often to do anything to get by. Children cope by writing the shortest sentences they can think of, by reusing the same types of sentences, and by spelling words in a haphazard manner. Each session works to ingrain patterns of poor writing that can haunt students for the rest of their lives.

Sorting Out the Means and the Ends

The experiences in this chapter may have been uncomfortable, but I hope you got to complete one or two of the tasks. Only through firsthand experience can you begin to sense the problems of current methods of instruction and to see why they are the source of so much failure.

These problems in no way deny the value of the goals that phonics and whole language have set for themselves; these goals remain on target. If children are to master reading, they must learn how to decode words smoothly. That's what makes phonics central to any effective method of teaching. Things go awry when we imagine that current sounding out techniques are the way to go in reaching that goal.

Similarly, if children are to master reading, they must know how to read books knowledgeably and write texts effectively. That's what makes the focus on meaning in whole language so important. Once again, however, that goal should not be equated with having to accept the complex and insufficiently structured materials that have been used in that approach. The goals of phonics and whole language approaches are correct. Their methods are failing.

The question is, What are the alternatives? The next chapter provides an answer.



***The goals of phonics and
whole language are correct.***

***It is the methods that
are failing.***

