

# Reading—Basic Skills: Helping Handout for School

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## INTRODUCTION

Basic reading skills are essential to children's successful long-term literacy. These skills build word recognition, which is required for reading fluency and for reading comprehension (see handouts on reading fluency skills and reading comprehension). For the purposes of this handout, basic reading skills include phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and decoding. In new standards documents, these basic skills are typically called foundational skills. That is, in addition to oral language, they are the foundation on which strong literacy is built. When a student has a difficult time developing basic reading skills in the first years of schooling, the long-term effects on school performance influence learning in all content areas. The good news is that these skills are sensitive to instruction (Ball & Blachman, 1991).

Foundational skills comprise a set of individual proficiencies that readers eventually coordinate. As a student acquires initial literacy, each component may require intervention. The developers of the Common Core State Standards highlighted the importance of phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and decoding by placing them explicitly in the standards for Reading: Foundational Skills strands. These particular skills are typically addressed in Grades K–2, but teachers may find a student struggling with them in later grades.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING SUPPORTS AND INTERVENTIONS

As is true with all areas of skill attainment, if a student is experiencing difficulty in learning basic reading skills, contributing factors should be considered and targeted for intervention where feasible.

## Individual Student Characteristics

Individual student characteristics that are often associated with poor basic reading skills vary depending on the student's age at the time the reading deficit is discovered. For example, it is normal for a student to develop full phonological awareness (commonly called phonemic awareness) and strong alphabetic knowledge during the kindergarten year. That student can take an orally presented word (e.g., cat) and pronounce its three phonemes separately as /c/ /a/ /t/. That student can also name letters and their associated sounds easily. However, a kindergarten student might develop those skills more slowly or may have had inadequate opportunity to learn. First graders typically acquire a wide range of decoding skills. They can easily decode most regularly spelled single-syllable words. It is important to know that a student whose decoding growth is atypical can still attain decoding proficiency with a combination of targeted instruction and interventions (Vellutino, Scanlon, & Small, 2006).

In addition to age, home language experience is an important consideration. Although a student learning English might develop basic reading skills slowly, the student can still attain these skills while acquiring spoken English. In addition, these skills transfer from one language to another; a student with strong phonemic awareness in English will also demonstrate that same strength in another language. Teachers may expect a slower rate of progress in the development of basic reading skills for a student learning English, but the student should have ample opportunities to learn (August, McCardle, & Shanahan, 2014).

Additional factors that should be considered are student motivation, interfering emotions, processing deficits, and practice and support at home. Assessment in those areas, either informal or formal, should help guide interventions.

## Influence of Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum and instruction affect the acquisition of foundational skills. Because these skills are sensitive to instruction, problems with them can often be explained by a lack of instruction. The following are some common curriculum and instruction factors that could easily be addressed:

- Lack of opportunity for language play with rhyming texts and rhyming words
- Lack of direct phonics instruction in favor of complete reliance on holistic reading and writing opportunities
- Lack of access to direct instruction in phonics, from a systematic scope and sequence, in favor of embedded instruction
- Insufficient instruction and practice opportunities for students in kindergarten and first grade
- Lack of access to text that provides decoding opportunities in context
- Lack of access to adult models for clear articulation of phonemes or letter sounds in isolation
- Inadequate assessment systems to monitor basic skills development

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to overarching classroom practices that build foundational skills, teachers should target phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and decoding for all students.

### Overarching Classroom Practices

The first set of recommendations supports classroom practices for developing foundational skills.

1. **Provide opportunities for language play.** Students in kindergarten and first grade develop phonological awareness from gamelike opportunities to compare and contrast sounds of words that rhyme and to sort pictures that represent words with the same initial sound.
2. **Provide repetitive access to clearly articulated letter sounds.** Clear adult pronunciation of words and sounds in isolation is essential for developing representations in memory. Some sounds (e.g., /s/, /m/, and vowels) are easy to pronounce in isolation. Others (e.g., /b/, /d/) are more difficult to pronounce crisply in isolation.
3. **Provide extensive practice with letter names and sounds.** Students typically learn letter names first, then letter sounds, and finally letter formation.

These proficiencies require extensive practice with the entire alphabet and with small sets of letters.

4. **Provide direct instruction in phonics and decoding.** Students learn decoding skills more reliably with direct instruction, from a systematic scope and sequence, rather than with embedded instruction, with phonics taught as needed in the context of reading.
5. **Provide opportunities to apply phonics in reading and writing.** Students benefit from opportunities to apply phonics skills by decoding in context. Texts with a high proportion of decodable words allow this practice. Similarly, giving students practice writing words from sounds (rather than memory) allows them to consolidate their phonemic segmentation and their alphabetic knowledge.
6. **Assess foundational skills regularly.** Informal inventories of letter-name, letter-sound, and decoding skills can easily identify students who need additional instruction and practice.

### Phonological Awareness

For students who are struggling specifically with identifying and manipulating the sounds in spoken English, teachers can use individual interventions to accelerate students' development. The next set of recommendations provides techniques for teaching phonological awareness.

7. **Organize instruction in phonological awareness developmentally.** Students typically learn to count words in oral sentences, then to isolate syllables in words they hear, then to segment onsets (initial consonant sounds) from rimes (vowels and consonant sounds that follow), then to segment individual phonemes. Pronouncing the three syllables in elephant is easier than segmenting mice into /m/ /ice/. The most difficult task is isolating the three individual sounds in a three-phoneme word (e.g., gum: /g/ /u/ /m/).
8. **Target the two most important phonological skills in each session.** Teaching blending sounds aids decoding directly, while segmenting aids spelling. When teachers pronounce syllables (/el/ /e/ /phant/) or sounds (/p/ /l/ /ay/) and students pronounce those sounds as words, the students are blending. When teachers pronounce words and students produce sounds, the students are segmenting. By focusing on just these two proficiencies, the teacher can have a clear instructional target and use brief, repetitive routines.

9. **Provide repetitive, massed practice in phonological awareness.** The following is a useful technique for development of blending and segmenting. For each target (e.g., syllable, onset-rime, or phoneme), prepare 20 items per session. Pronounce each word on the list slowly for the student, using your fingers to identify the target elements (e.g., /sur/ /prise/, /m/ /an/, or /j/ /u/ /m/ /p/). Then have the student say the word fast. Then pronounce the words normally and have the student say the target elements slowly using your fingers to mark elements.
10. **Add manipulatives to make the phonological task concrete.** Using markers or motions during segmentation and blending tasks supports students as they build their blending and segmenting skills. Pronounce a word slowly using your fingers to count the target elements. Then pronounce each element while moving a chip into an Elkonin box to make the segmentation process concrete. Allow students to repeat the process with their own manipulatives. As the students learn letter sounds, add letter tiles to make this modeling even more concrete.

### Alphabetic Knowledge

For students who are struggling specifically with learning letter names and sounds, teachers can use individual interventions to develop alphabetic knowledge. The next set of recommendations provides choices for supporting individual students and groups who have difficulty acquiring alphabetic knowledge. These procedures can be practiced chorally, so teachers or intervention providers can work with small groups.

11. **Organize instruction in alphabetic knowledge developmentally.** Given instruction and practice, a student typically learns the letter names in his or her own name first, then the rest of the letter names, then letter sounds, and finally letter formation.
12. **Use a compare-and-contrast sequence when teaching alphabetic knowledge.** Students learn letters more easily when they can compare a set of letters (e.g., a group of four like Bb, Mm, Rr, Ss), rather than learn one letter in each session.
13. **Target two skills in each alphabetic knowledge session.** To make learning more effective, teachers should limit practice to only two skills in any one lesson. For example, the teacher can work either with names and sounds or with sounds and formation. Practice should consist of using a large number of rapid trials (e.g., 30) in an instructional session.
14. **Use repeated routines to teach alphabetic knowledge.** Having students repeat routines allows them to build proficiency incrementally. Using a set of four letter cards or magnetic letters, spend 2 minutes pointing to a letter and cuing the students to respond chorally with its name. Then spend 2 minutes pointing to those same letters and cuing the student to respond with its sound. When the students are proficient with sounds, include letter formation. Using a set of four letter cards, spend 2 minutes pointing to a letter and cuing the students to respond chorally with its sound. Then pronounce a letter sound and have the students write the letter that represents that sound.

### Decoding

For students who are struggling with using letter sounds to decode words, teachers can use individual interventions to develop those specific skills. The next set of recommendations provides choices for supporting individual students or small groups of students who have difficulty becoming proficient at decoding.

15. **Organize instruction in decoding developmentally.** Students typically learn to decode consonant-vowel-consonant words with short vowels first (e.g., cat, mug, pin), then single-syllable words with short vowels and blends and digraphs (e.g., chat or spot), then single-syllable words with r-controlled vowels (e.g., /ar/, /or/, /er/), then vowel-consonant-e words (e.g., cake), and finally vowel teams and diphthongs (e.g., paint, bread, boil).
16. **Use a compare-and-contrast sequence.** Phonic features are better learned when students are able to compare a set of patterns (e.g., a group of three different blends), as opposed to focusing on one pattern each day or each week.
17. **Teach synthetic and then analytic decoding strategies.** Some words can be sounded out from left to right, sound by sound (e.g., pig, slip, past). Others can be sounded out if letter pairs are taught as single sounds (e.g., ship, park). Sound-by-sound decoding eventually helps students learn decoding by analogy (e.g., c-an, p-an, f-an). Other words initially require pattern-based analytic decoding (e.g., cake, bike). Explicit modeling of these

strategies, along with opportunities to practice with many items, builds proficiency.

18. **Include decoding instruction for irregular words.** A small set of function words—words that express grammatical relationships of words in a sentence, such as the, of, have, was—make up a large proportion of words in text. These words must be taught and then practiced in running text. Although these words may include irregular or low-frequency sound-spelling relationships, they still use letters to represent sounds. Directly explaining these relationships may speed students’ learning.
19. **Provide opportunities for students to practice decoding in context.** Texts that provide supportive context, commonly called decodable texts, allow students to practice the isolated skills they were first taught. Reading these texts repeatedly, with varying levels of teacher support, improves proficiency. Students can use whisper reading to apply skills, then move to choral reading to consolidate those skills.
20. **Use repeated routines when teaching decoding.** Specific, fast-paced routines can be combined into an intervention session. In a 15-minute lesson, using a set of three to four patterns with corresponding anchor words, spend 2 minutes reviewing the patterns and anchor words. Then spend 6 minutes cuing students to chorally decode words featuring the pattern. Teach and review high-frequency words for 3 minutes. Finally, in a 4-minute routine, first whisper-read a short decodable passage featuring the pattern (2 minutes) and then read chorally for (2 minutes).

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Websites

[www.fcrr.org/assessment/ET/index.html](http://www.fcrr.org/assessment/ET/index.html)

The Florida Center for Reading Research is a multidisciplinary research center at Florida State University. This website offers information on differentiated instruction, including suggestions for forming small groups for intervention.

[www.comprehensivereadingsolutions.com](http://www.comprehensivereadingsolutions.com)

This website provides educators and administrators with access to free professional development modules on basic reading skills, as well as videos of classroom teachers providing reading instruction in basic skills.

[https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc\\_foundationalreading\\_040717.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_040717.pdf)

The IES Practice Guide *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Foorman et al., 2016) is available in full online. It summarizes research and provides implications for practice.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVHqsnePfULo3KA8dspX6558xwZxVr2rB>

This website provides links to short YouTube videos of teachers providing instruction for each of the recommended skills discussed in the IES Practice Guide *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*.

### Books

Adams, M. J. (2006). *Phonemic awareness in young children: A classroom curriculum*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

This book contains easy-to-implement routines that can be used as interventions in one-on-one instruction.

Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2015). *Words their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

This book contains a comprehensive treatment of foundational skills development, a diagnostic spelling inventory, and resources to use in intervention.

O’Connor, R. E. (2014). *Teaching word recognition: Effective strategies for students with learning difficulties*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This book provides research and instructional routines that would support those providing interventions for students with disabilities in the area of foundational skills.

### Related Helping Handouts

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Reading Comprehension: Helping Handout for School

Reading Fluency Skills: Helping Handout for School

Reading Skills: Helping Handout for Home

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