



National Center on
Improving Literacy

How to Use Explicit, Systematic Phonics Instruction in Your Classroom

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The research reported here is funded by awards to the National Center on Improving Literacy from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, in partnership with the Office of Special Education Programs (Award #: S283D160003). The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of OESE, OSEP, or the U.S. Department of Education.



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Office of Special Education Programs
U.S. Department of Education



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Boston University Wheelock College of Education
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National Center on Improving Literacy

NCIL Mission

To increase access to, and use of, evidence-based approaches to screen, identify, and teach students with literacy-related disabilities, including dyslexia

Identify or develop free or low-cost evidence-based assessment tools for identifying students at risk of not attaining full literacy skills due to a disability

Priority 1

Identify evidence-based literacy instruction, strategies, and accommodations, including assistive technology, designed to meet the specific needs of such students

Priority 2

Provide families of such students with information, and collaborate with parent training centers

Priority 3

Identify or develop evidence-based PD for teachers, paraprofessionals, principals, other school leaders, and specialized instructional support personnel

Priority 4

Disseminate the products of the comprehensive center to regionally diverse SEAs, LEAs, regional educational agencies, and schools

Priority 5



Big Ideas:

- More research-confident on what to teach, less research-confident on how to teach
- Not all words are created equal

The Educator's Science of Reading Toolbox

By the National Center on Improving Literacy in Partnership with The Reading League Journal

HOW TO USE SYSTEMATIC PHONICS INSTRUCTION IN YOUR CLASSROOM

The best approach to beginning reading instruction is one that incorporates explicit instruction in five areas: phonological awareness, systematic phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These are known as the "5 Big Ideas" in beginning reading. While the research is clear on what to teach, figuring out how to teach these pieces can be challenging. This Educator's Toolkit provides practical ways to incorporate instruction in one of the 5 Big Ideas, systematic phonics instruction, within your classroom. Phonics instruction teaches the idea that letters, and groups of letters, match individual sounds in printed words. The ability to apply these predictable relationships to familiar and unfamiliar words is crucial to reading success. Systematic phonics instruction begins with teaching letter-sound correspondence and progresses to regular and irregular word reading.

Tips for Teaching Letter-Sound Correspondence

Letter-sound correspondence, or the relationship of the letters in the alphabet to the sounds they represent, is a key component of learning to read. To teach letter sound correspondence:

- Work with a few sounds at a time by teaching each letter of the alphabet and its most common corresponding sound.
- For each letter-sound relationship, instruction should include naming the letter or letters that represent the sound.
- When introducing each letter-sound relationship in isolation (versus when reading connected text), associate a picture of an object with the target sound. Using picture cues helps students remember the relationship between the letter and the sound (for example, an image of a pig, the printed letter "p," and the teacher orally stating the sound for /p/).
- Incorporating a short story that features the sound and has a picture of an object with the target sound and letter helps students remember the picture and the sound when they encounter the letter in print. For example, if students are learning the letter and sound for "p" with an image of a pig as the picture cue, the accompanying story may be "Polly Pig likes to eat pizza and play with her pals."
- When teaching the relationship between each letter and its corresponding sound, introduce the letter in uppercase and lowercase.



- In what ways are teachers' current instruction reflective of the letter-sound correspondence and word reading practices suggested in the article?
- What challenges and opportunities exist for implementing these practices in your divisions?
- What resources and supports are needed to implement these practices in your divisions?

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Word Building Activities

Example 2.5. Advanced word-building

Provide students with letter tiles *f*, *a*, *t*, *c*, and *n*. Have them make the word *fat*, and then ask them to make other words by adding, moving, or replacing one letter tile at a time.

f a t c n

Teacher: Take the *f*, *a*, and *t* tiles and put them together so that the *f* is first, the *a* is in the middle, and the *t* is last. Does anyone know what the word is?

f a t

Student: *Fat*.

Teacher: Now, change a letter to make it say *fan*.

f a n ~~t~~

Teacher: Next, change a letter to make it say *can*.

c a n ~~f~~

Teacher: Now, make it say *cat*.

c a t ~~n~~

Teacher: Finally, make it say *fat* again.

f a t ~~c~~

Example 3.4. Building words with Elkonin sound boxes

Select a series of words that demonstrate a recently taught sound–spelling pattern. Provide students with a worksheet of sound boxes where each sound–spelling pattern has its own box. Silent *e*'s should be placed outside the series of boxes, as they do not contribute to a sound corresponding to their placement within the word. Either have students write the words in the boxes as you say them, or provide them with a collection of letter tiles that includes all the letters and spelling patterns needed to create the words. Say the words one at a time, and have students create the words by writing letters or moving letter tiles into the appropriate boxes.

Students write in boxes

t r ee
c a k e
sh ou t

Students move letter tiles into boxes

m igh t y
kn ee
S a t ur d ay

Foorman, B., Beyler, N., Borradaile, K., Coyne, M., Denton, C. A., Dimino, J., Furgeson, J., Hayes, L., Henke, J., Justice, L., Keating, B., Lewis, W., Sattar, S., Streke, A., Wagner, R., & Wissel, S. (2016). Foundational skills to support reading for understanding in kindergarten through 3rd grade (NCEE 2016-4008). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from the NCEE website: <http://whatworks.ed.gov>



Free Resources

- [Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through Third Grade \(WWC\)](#)
- [Grade 1 ladders instructional routine \(NCII\)](#)
- [Daily Sample Lessons and Activities: Phonics, Word Study, and Word Recognition \(K–5\) \(MCPER\)](#)
- <https://www.readingrockets.org/teaching/reading-basics/phonics> (Reading Rockets)
- <https://improvingliteracy.org/brief/alphabetic-principle-phonological-awareness-reading-words> (NCIL)

