PHONICS

Sadlier School
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Phonics Instructional Guide:
Multisensory/Multimodal Instruction: The Latest Research

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INTRODUCTION

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, or implicit, method. That is, students are taught, for example, that the /s/ sound can be spelled with the letter ***s***. A discovery method is less effective for initial teaching because it relies on students having prerequisite skills, such as sophisticated phonemic awareness, that some do not have. As a result, the implicit method can leave some students behind—either not learning the new content or facing difficulties and confusion.

Systematic means that the instruction builds from easy to more complex skills with built-in review and repetition to ensure mastery. There are two critical aspects of systematic phonics. First, the instruction has a clearly defined scope and sequence, rather than being random. Second, it builds from the known to the new in easy steps that make the new learning more obvious and easier to grasp.

When it comes to teaching phonics to students with dyslexia or other more severe learning issues, a third word is routinely associated with strong phonics instruction: **multisensory**. But what is multisensory instruction and what does the current research say about it?

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MULTISENSORY INSTRUCTION

Multisensory instruction is teaching that engages all the senses. For example, students see a letter or word (visual/eyes/sight), hear the sound a letter represents (auditory/ears/hearing), say the sound for a letter or spelling (auditory/mouth/speaking), trace a letter newly learned (tactile/hands/touch), and write a letter or word (tactile/kinesthetic/hands/movement).

This type of instruction has been popularized by Orton-Gillingham approaches, which have proven successful for students with dyslexia. This instruction is explicit and systematic, uses research-based phonics instructional routines, and also contains multisensory activities such as tracing letters in sand and writing in the air. But are those multisensory activities the reason for student learning? What is their actual impact on student progress? For years, researchers didn't focus as much on these questions or attempt to tease out activities like tracing letters from the other instructional activities used in the phonics lessons. Now they are.

In 2017, Schlesinger and Gray looked at instruction for students with dyslexia to determine the impact of multisensory activities to figure out if this multisensory instruction was better than structured language instruction without these activities. They found that the multisensory intervention for struggling readers did not provide an advantage over the structured instruction (without these activities) for students with either typical reading development or with dyslexia.

In the 2019 edition of *Learning Disabilities: From Identification to Intervention*, Fletcher and his colleagues summarized research from the past two decades on these instructional approaches. Here is what they revealed:

- The 2000 Report of the National Reading Panel examined four critical studies on the Orton-Gillingham approach. Two of the studies showed positive effects and two did not.

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- In 2006, Ritchey and Goeke warned readers that despite the popularity of the Orton-Gillingham approach and associated programs, not all studies show them to be superior to other resources used for students with dyslexia.
- Even earlier studies (Clark & Uhry, 1995; Moats & Farrell, 1999) that compared phonics instruction with and without some of the common multisensory activities did not show differences in learning outcomes.
- One common issue in these studies is how multisensory is defined and what types of activities fall under the multisensory umbrella.

In the 2020 report *How the Science of Reading Informs 21st Century Education* by the Florida Center for Reading Research, the researchers wrote that teaching using multisensory approaches is often enthusiastically recommended for students who struggle with learning how to read. Although these approaches have "clinical support, there is little scientific evidence that indicates a multisensory approach is more effective that similarly structured phonological-based approaches that do not include a strong multisensory component (e.g., Ritchey & Goeke, 2006; Torgesen, et al., 2001; cf. Boyer & Ehri, 2011)." The report concludes that additional research is needed to determine whether or not these multisensory activities are actually critical to student learning.

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MULTIMODAL INSTRUCTION

So, what can we make of these findings? Hasbrouck, in her 2020 book *Conquering Dyslexia*, writes that "recent research has shown that specialized activities such as writing in the air, tracing sandpaper letters, writing in shaving cream, sound movements and other activities less connected to actual reading and writing fail to enhance learning." She continues to explain that what research supports is **multimodal instruction** (reading, writing, speaking, listening). In this type of instruction, students see a word (visual); say a word—both individual sounds and whole words (auditory, and tactile when tapping sounds); write a word (tactile/kinesthetic); and use a word in text (visual when reading). That is, multimodal instruction is, by its very nature, multisensory. However, the activities that are impactful are directly related to actual reading and writing experiences. Thus, activities removed from authentic practices, such as tracing letters on sandpaper instead of writing letters on paper, should not used because they are less effective.

These recent findings have resulted in some confusion in the educational field. The Center for Effective Reading Instruction (CERI) published guidelines in 2018 to help teachers navigate what sometimes feels like contradictory information. These guidelines advocate the use of multimodal instruction (saying a word, reading a word, writing a word) and state that these activities are characteristic of any strong phonics approach. Furthermore, these multimodal activities are not specifically needed for only students with dyslexia, they are good for all students. Students with dyslexia need more intensity, time on task (reading and writing), and targeted differentiation.

You might be thinking, "No foul, no harm. My students love these activities." The real issue is instructional efficiency. If some of these multisensory activities aren't shown to be as impactful as other lesson activities, how much of each lesson is devoted to engaging students in these activities? Are we using valuable instructional time to do "fun" activities that are less likely to affect student reading growth instead of those activities we know do? With so many students struggling to learn to read, we need phonics instruction that is the most efficient and impactful. We are learning from the research that some of the commonly used activities falling under the umbrella of "multisensory" are neither.

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MULTISENSORY/MULTIMODAL TECHNIQUES IN *FROM PHONICS TO READING*

So, how does this research apply to the instruction provided in *From Phonics to Reading*? The instruction in the program is built on the latest research showing the impact of multimodal instruction. All of these activities engage a student's multiple senses, yet they are focused on a direct connection to authentic reading and writing experiences.

Let's take a closer look at a few examples.

- **Word Building (Reading and Writing):** In this activity, students are provided a small set of letter cards that they will manipulate to build a series of words (tactile/kinesthetic). Students begin by hearing the word to be formed (auditory/listening), repeating it (auditory/speaking), building the word with the letter cards (tactile/writing), and reading the word in print (visual/reading).
- **Word Sorts (Reading):** In this activity, students read a series of words (visual/reading) and sort them into piles based on common spelling patterns (tactile/kinesthetic/visual discrimination). Then they read the words in each pile (auditory/visual, speaking/reading) and engage in a conversation regarding their observations about what the words in each pile have in common.
- **High-Frequency Words (Reading and Writing):** The Read/Spell/Write routine asks students to listen to a word (auditory/listening), repeat it aloud (auditory/speaking), isolate the individual sounds (auditory, listening/speaking), spell the word aloud (auditory/speaking), then write the word on paper (tactile/kinesthetic, writing). In subsequent lessons, students engage in other activities, such as the Read/Build/Write activity.
- **Handwriting (Writing):** Students are introduced to the new letter-sound through a rhyme or poem (auditory/kinesthetic, listening/speaking), and then are taught how to form the letter (tactile/kinesthetic, writing). Next, they practice writing the letter on paper—a more authentic experience—as they say the letter's sound (tactile/kinesthetic, writing, auditory/speaking).
- **Reading Decodable Text (Reading):** When students read decodable text, they engage in a visual activity (reading) while they whisper read (auditory/speaking).

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This chart shows exemplar multimodal activities from one week's lessons in From *Phonics to Reading*, Level A.

Activity	Reading (Visual)	Listening/ Speaking (Auditory)	Writing (Kinesthetic/ Tactile)
Oral Blending Level A, Lesson 1, Page 9		X	
Learn and Blend Level A, Lesson 1, Page 9	X	X	X
Blend It Level A, Lesson 1, Page 9 and Interactive Instructional Resource*	X	X	X
English Learners – Sound Transfer Level A, Lesson 1, Page 9	X	X	
English Learners – Vocabulary Level A, Lesson 1, Page 9		X	X
Read, Spell, Write Level A, Lesson 1, Page 10	X	X	X
Read Connected Text – Interact with the Text Level A, Lesson 1, Page 11 and Interactive Instructional Resource	X	X	X
Word Sort Level A, Lesson 1, Page 12 and Interactive Instructional Resource	X	X	X
Phonemic Awareness – Oral Segmentation Level A, Lesson 1, Page 13	X	X	X
Sound-Spelling/Blending Level A, Lesson 1, Page 13	X	X	X
High Frequency Words, Review Level A, Lesson 1, Page 13	X	X	
Dictation, Think and Write Level A, Lesson 1, Page 14 and Interactive Instructional Resource	X	X	
Think and Write Intervention Level A, Lesson 1, Page 14 and Interactive Instructional Resource	X	X	X
Word Building, Make New Words Level A, Lesson 1, Page 14 and Interactive Instructional Resource	X	X	X
Read Connected Text – Take-Home Book Level A, Lesson 1, Page 15 and Interactive Instructional Resource	X	X	X
Independent Practice – Read and Write Level A, Lesson 1, Page 18	X		X

** Interactive Instructional Resources can be found on SadlierConnect.com*

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With all phonics instruction, the goal is rapid student mastery of the basic English code. That requires us to take a more careful look at the types of activities the research has proven to be effective versus those that are fun but have less or no impact. Ask yourself, "Is this activity directly connected to actual reading and writing? Or, is this an activity that takes students away from reading words and sentences or writing with a pencil on paper?" If the answer is "yes" to the latter question, how much instructional time is used engaging students in this activity? *From Phonics to Reading* was designed for high-impact instruction using research-based routines with one goal—teaching students to read effectively, efficiently, and fluently.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wiley Blevins is the author of Sadlier's new *From Phonics to Reading* for Grades K–3.

This program is a comprehensive foundational skills program that incorporates *Seven Key Characteristics of Strong Phonics Instruction*.

Embedded professional development along with a critical review and repetition cycle make early reading mastery possible for every student.

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Wiley Blevins has taught elementary school in both the United States and South America. A graduate of Harvard Graduate School of Education, he has written more than 15 books for teachers (including *Phonics from A to Z*, *A Fresh Look at Phonics*, *Building Fluency*, and *Teaching Nonfiction*), authored elementary reading programs, conducted research on topics ranging from fluency to using decodable text, and regularly trains teachers throughout the United States and Asia.

His current interests include using adaptive technology and working with districts to correct instructional and material deficits. Wiley lives in New York City and also writes children's books.

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