

Sadlier School

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Phonics Instructional Guide: Multiple Tiers for Success

Wiley Blevins, EdD

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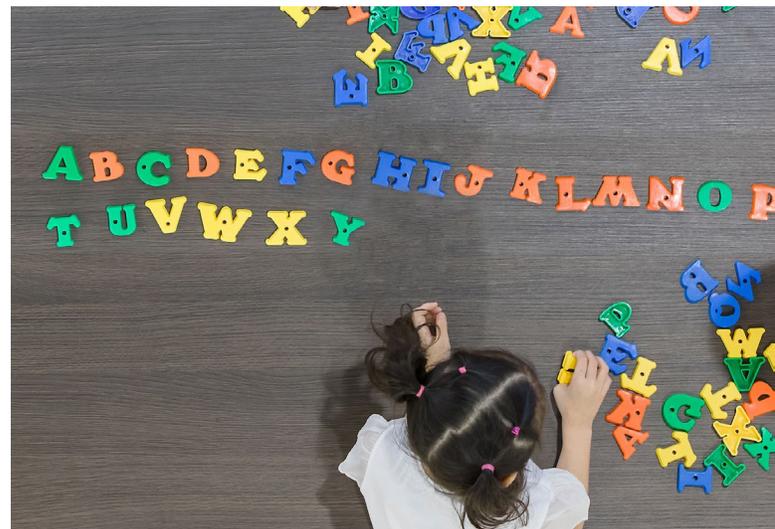
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TEACHING PHONICS BASED ON THE SCIENCE OF READING

English is an **alphabetic language**. We have 26 letters in our alphabet. Alone and in combinations, these letters and spellings stand for the 44 sounds in English. Phonics instruction is the teaching of these spelling-sound correspondences. Learning the basic phonics skills we typically teach in Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 gives students a tool to access, or sound out, approximately 84% of the words in English text. That's a powerful tool!

Strong phonics instruction starts with a **defined scope and sequence** that serves as the spine for the instruction and all associated activities. This scope and sequence must be developed to progress from easier to more complex, separate the teaching of confusing letters and sounds, and contain a **built-in review and repetition cycle to ensure mastery** of taught skills so students can transfer them to all reading and writing demands. This **application of the phonics skills to reading and writing** is essential because it is in this application where the learning “sticks.” This application begins with the reading of **controlled, decodable texts** and dictation, or guided spelling, wherein the teacher models how to transfer a student's growing phonics skills to writing letters, words, and sentences as well as writing about the decodable texts read to deepen comprehension.

The two words most closely associated with this 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 (Adams, 1990).



TEACHING PHONICS BASED ON THE SCIENCE OF READING

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. **Systematic does NOT mean that all children receive the same phonics instruction on the same day at the same time and ONLY that instruction.** Students need to receive both grade-level instruction during whole-group lessons (with differentiation and modifications for some students, described below), and targeted small-group instruction that supports specific needs. For example, students may have small-group instruction to address a lack of mastery of previously taught skills (for below-level students), reinforce current skills (for on-level students), or accelerate students along the phonics scope and sequence (for above-level students) if the students have already mastered the week's focus skills. That is, this small-group instruction meets students where they are.

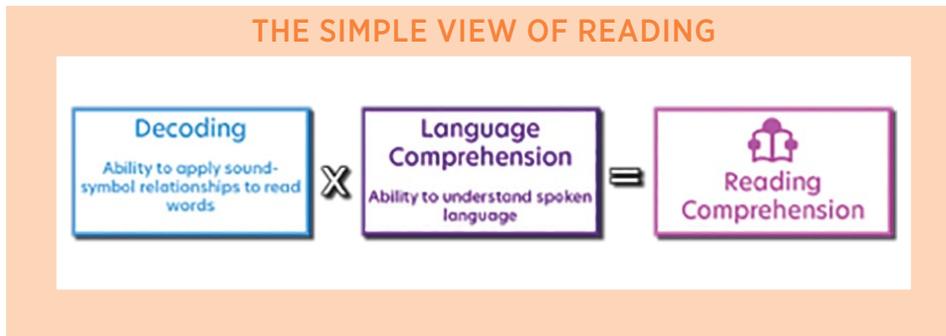
The best phonics instruction is also **active, engaging, and thought-provoking.** Students are playing with letters and sounds and discussing what they observe about how words work to deepen their understanding of our alphabetic system to read. Phonics instruction involves talk. It involves observation. And, it involves tons of application to authentic reading and writing experiences.

The recent national conversation around the **Science of Reading** clarifies the important role of phonics in early reading development. As we collect information from multiple disciplines—including educational researchers, cognitive scientists, speech pathologists, and so on—we are broadening and deepening our understanding of what comprises the most effective early reading instruction. Two older models of reading have been re-introduced to teachers to clarify that instruction: The Simple View of Reading by Gough and Tunmer, and Scarborough's Reading Rope.



TEACHING PHONICS BASED ON THE SCIENCE OF READING

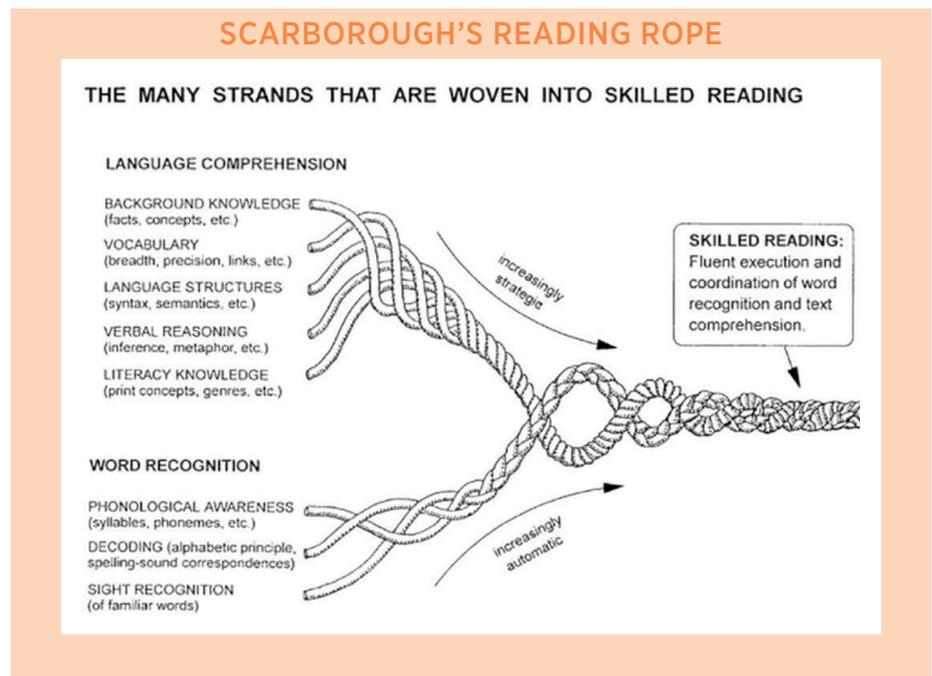
The Simple View of Reading explains that reading comprehension is a product of decoding (all the work teachers do with phonics) and language comprehension (e.g., vocabulary and background knowledge). One without the other does not help produce skilled readers who can readily understand the texts they need to tackle at each grade level.



Gough & Turner, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990

Scarborough's Reading Rope clarified the Simple View of Reading. It illustrated how, as students become more fluent in their word recognition skills (e.g., through phonics) and more strategic in using their language comprehension skills, these skills begin to intertwine—creating skilled, fluent readers capable of comprehending more complex texts.

Both of these models of reading highlight the critical role phonics plays and emphasize that phonics alone is not enough. In addition, the phonics instruction we deliver must be based on our awareness of grade-level reading demands while simultaneously meeting students where they are.



The image, courtesy of the author, originally appeared in the following publication: Scarborough, H.S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), Handbook for research in early literacy (pp. 97–110). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

TIER 1 INSTRUCTION

Why Whole-Group Phonics Instruction Matters for All Students (and How to Differentiate It)

All students must be introduced to grade-level content, including each grade’s key phonics skills. Too often students who haven’t mastered previous grades’ phonics skills are stuck in grade-level instruction that is not differentiated and unnecessarily frustrating for them, or placed along a phonics continuum based on their instructional needs and only receive that instruction. This lower-level phonics instruction is often provided at a slow rate, preventing students from gaining access to all their grade-level skills. This ensures these students continue to the next grade behind, and further so. While it is essential that we address learning holes in students’ foundational skills (see the small-group instruction section below), we must also expose these students to the grade-level skills. But how do we do this when they are so far behind? We differentiate the instruction and modify our expectations of their learning outcomes during the whole-group lessons.

For example, the Blending Lines in *From Phonics to Reading* are created with built-in differentiation. The first lines are easier, and the review lines contain the previous skills that below-level and on-level students are still working on. When working with above-level students, present the challenge lines that introduce and reinforce skills further in the phonics scope and sequence to better meet their instructional needs. For students who are below level, hold them accountable for only the first one or two lines of words in the Blending Lines activity. That is, ask them to practice reading only those lines. For all subsequent Blending Lines activities (e.g., circling words with a target spelling pattern or writing sentences using the words), have these below-level students refer to these lines only.

When engaging students in Dictation or Word Building exercises during whole-group lessons, begin with words from these first two blending lines to better support below-level students’ needs. As you continue with more complex words in the

Introduction

Learn and Blend
 Directions: Listen and join in.
 A as in ant.
 A as in late.
 A as in apron, pay, and wait.

Blend It
 Directions: Chorally read the words.

INTRODUCE

1.	ran	rain	plan	plain	sad	say
2.	may	pay	play	say	stay	stray
3.	pail	sail	tail	trail	train	brain
4.	chain	tray	faint	nail	paint	raise
5.	"Rain, rain, go away," yelled Gail.					
6.	I had to wait all day for the train to come.					

REVIEW

7.	go	she	hope	cute	ride	same
8.	bring	ranch	chop	sink	pitch	when

CHALLENGE

9.	rain	rainbow	day	birthday
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Daily Practice
 Directions: Do one activity each day. Then check the box.

- Build Fluency** Read the words each day by yourself and to a partner.
- Mark It** Circle all the words with *ai*. Underline all the words with *ay*.
- Spell It** Have a partner say each word. Write the word. Check your answer.
- Write About It** Use the words to create a story. Draw a box around the words from the list that you used.

Lesson 15 • Long a **211**

From Phonics to Reading, Level A

activity for your on-level students, you can stop and direct below-level students to engage in an alternate activity, such as building the already dictated words with word cards to give them additional practice with that smaller word set. The goal is that these students learn a small set of words with the target phonics skill that they can access when reading and writing—but not be held accountable for the larger word set that might be overwhelming. For example, students can and should learn a small set of high-utility Long A words such as *play*, *say*, *day*, *rain*, and *pain*, during the whole-group lessons that week, while you are still working on their mastery of short vowel phonics skills from earlier in the phonics scope and sequence.

For the reading of the week’s decodable texts, have your below-level students listen to and follow along with the story read using the audio supports available. Students can listen to the story multiple times and follow along with the text before the whole-group lesson so they can better engage in the whole class reading, conversation, and writing about the text. With these students, practice reading only a portion of the story, such as a page or paragraph.

These differentiations to whole-group lesson ensure students are introduced to grade-level skills, but appropriately modify their learning expectations and decrease the cognitive load and frustration.



TIER 2 INSTRUCTION

Why Small-Group Phonics Instruction Is Necessary (It’s Where Intervention Begins)

Small-group time is when you reinforce the week’s target phonics skill to make sure on-level students stay on track, provide targeted instruction for below-level students to address deficits in previously taught skills, and accelerate learning for students who have already mastered the week’s focus skill.

From Phonics to Reading offers several tools to assist you. The Comprehensive Phonics Survey and Phonemic Awareness Assessment are designed to help you determine skill needs. The Comprehensive Phonics Survey is organized around skill categories (e.g., short vowels, long vowels, blends, and digraphs) to give you an instructional starting point with students. Look back at the phonics scope and sequence in your grade or the previous grade(s), and place students along that phonics continuum. Be careful to adjust the pace of this instruction based on how students are reading and writing words with the skills. It will be unnecessary to spend an entire week on some of the skills if students are showing competence with the skills. Other skills might require more than a week. Keep in mind, the built-in review and repetition cycle in the program allows you to move on, knowing that students will continue to get work with that skill in the subsequent weeks in purposeful and meaningful ways. In addition, the weekly Cumulative Assessments give you on-the-spot tools to determine mastery of taught skills and help you detect learning decay so you can quickly adjust the instruction before more serious learning issues develop.

For above-level students, use the Comprehensive Phonics Survey to place them further in the scope and sequence and begin instruction there during small-group time. During whole-group lessons, you might wish to have students read the decodable texts on the initial day of instruction to confirm mastery, but don’t require them to reread it on subsequent days. Instead, use that time to meet with these students to work on more complex skills.

Name _____ Date _____

Comprehensive Phonics Survey: Nonsense Word Reading

A. Short Vowels	B. Consonant Blends and Digraphs	C. Long Vowels
1. lat	1. sheg	1. sote
2. ped	2. chab	2. mabe
3. sib	3. stot	3. foap
4. mog	4. whid	4. weam
5. vun	5. thuzz	5. glay
6. fim	6. bruck	6. shain
7. hep	7. cliss	7. dright
8. yot	8. smend	8. hupe
9. rud	9. thrist	9. heest
10. cag	10. phum	10. sny

D. Complex Vowels	E. Word Study (Multisyllabic Words)
1. doit	1. rigfap
2. spoud	2. churbit
3. clar	3. napsate
4. foy	4. readloid
5. jern	5. foutray
6. moof	6. moku
7. lurst	7. walide
8. porth	8. lofam
9. stook	9. pagbo
10. flirch	10. plizzles

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HOW DOES THE PROGRAM ADDRESS INTERVENTION?

For on-level students, small-group time offers you an opportunity to keep them on track for grade-level reading success. The small-group suggestions in the teacher's edition focus on high-impact activities ideal for small-group lessons, such as rereading decodable texts, engaging in word building and dictation, and so on.

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM ADDRESS INTERVENTION?

Intervention must occur on multiple levels in order to meet the needs of ALL your students. To review:

Tier 2: Students who need additional support each week with the target skill or skills recently learned need Tier 2 support. This is provided in the small-group suggestions listed in each week's lessons. These activities help keep students on track by providing that extra dose of instruction and practice, whether it is word building, dictation, or reading of decodable texts.

Tier 2 and 3: Students who are further behind must be given the Comprehensive Phonics Survey and Phonemic Awareness Assessment provided in *From Phonics to Reading* to determine their skill deficits and to identify the Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention they need. These students are THEN placed along the phonics continuum (which could be in the previous grade, for example). During small-group time or one-on-one support, they are instructed using the materials at that point in the program. As a result, students who are further behind STILL receive the grade-level instruction during whole-group lessons but aren't held accountable for the extent of the content and receive additional support during that instruction. So, for example:

- These students can use online support to listen to the decodable story read to them before they attempt to read it for an extra level of support.
- During the blending exercises, they might only be held accountable for a couple of the Blending Lines instead of the entire list, so they learn a small set of words with the new skill while still working on deficits with earlier skills during small-group time.
- This small-group time should be more intensive—focusing on the blending lines, dictation, word building, and reading of the decodable stories and writing about them.

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM ADDRESS INTERVENTION?

Since the materials in *From Phonics to Reading* are compact and carefully sequenced, the program makes these first two levels of intervention support possible. However, that does require extra student books at each grade level for students reading at these lower levels. Reading specialists and interventionists can then easily place these students along the phonics continuum and intensify the work to accelerate their phonics growth using these compact resources.

Tier 3: Some students will require even more intensive Tier 3 intervention support. For students two or more years below level, you can place them in a lower level of *From Phonics to Reading*. Carefully monitor the pace and specific skill needs. For example, some students might require additional intensive phonological awareness training from a specially designed intervention resource to meet those needs.

These students might also need you to slow the pacing down for a portion of the skills. When meeting with them, focus on smaller aspects of each day's lesson and spread the lesson out over multiple days. So, you might only do blending on one day, word building on another, and dictation on another. However, each day's lesson should follow a similar routine: (1) Begin with a review of previous content (e.g., reread the previously read decodable text and practice saying the sound for each letter/spelling previously taught—through a quick letter-card drill). (2) Present and work on the day's target multimodal lesson (e.g., word building, blending, or dictation). (3) Ensure reading of and writing about controlled texts after the multimodal lesson. This text can be the day's decodable text, the reading of some simple sentences you create containing words with the target skill, and so on.

From Phonics to Reading can meet nearly all of your students' phonics instructional needs, with, perhaps, the only exception being those students with the most severe learning needs. To achieve this goal, the placement, pacing, and flexible use of these materials may vary. All students will benefit from a multi-tiered approach to phonics instruction where whole-group and small-group lessons work in concert to meet their learning needs.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wiley Blevins studied at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Bowling Green State University and has his doctorate in Education. He is an author, educational consultant, and researcher and has taught both in the United States and South America.

Wiley has written over 17 books for teachers, including *A Fresh Look at Phonics*, *Phonics From A to Z*, and *Choosing and Using Decodable Texts*, and he has authored several phonics and reading programs including Sadlier's *From Phonics to Reading*. He also wrote the phonics brief by the International Literacy Association, *Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction* and has penned over 100 children's books. Wiley's current focus is on adaptive technology, differentiated professional development, and children's literature. He is SVP and Associate Publisher at Reycraft Books, a new imprint focused on publishing books by authors and illustrators from under-represented groups.



From Phonics to Reading for Grades K–3, authored by Wiley, is a Tier 1 program that aligns with the Science of Reading research and was recognized as a high-quality foundational skills program by EdReports. See complete review [here](#). Embedded professional development in the program, along with a critical review and repetition cycle, make early reading mastery possible for every student. Wiley has three complementary *From Phonics to Reading* programs: the *Interactive Practice Bundle* for practicing and applying newly taught skills; the *Fluency Booster Practice Book*, which provides a variety of practice for building fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills; and *Interactive Assessments*, offering diagnostic, formative (Lesson), and summative (Unit) assessments in an interactive format online. His newest program is *Building Reading Success with Wiley Blevins*, a Tier 2 & Tier 3 intervention program for Grades K–5. Grounded in the latest science of reading research, it offers a systematic and explicit approach to literacy and seamlessly integrates into any classroom setting.

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[Influential Reading Group Makes It Clear: Students Need Systematic, Explicit Phonics, EdWeek](#)

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From Phonics to Reading, authored by Wiley Blevins, is a research-based foundational skills program aligned with the Science of Reading.

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