PHONICS

Sadlier School
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERIES

Phonics Assessment

Wiley Blevins, EdD

Sadlier School
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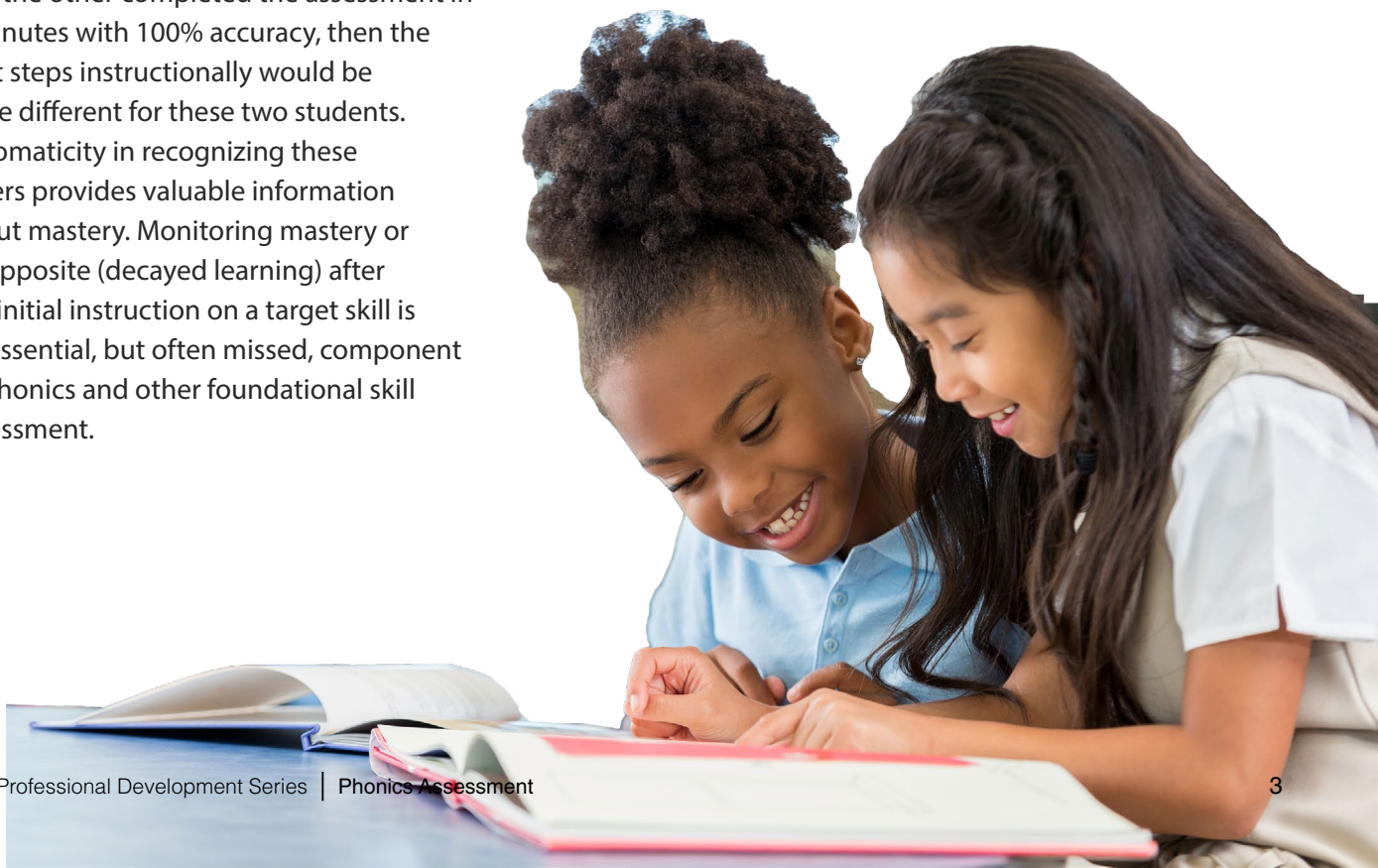
WHY ASSESSMENT MATTERS

We often hear the phrase "assessment drives instruction." Yet, many assessments students take have limited effect on the instruction they receive because either the assessment results don't arrive in a timely fashion, they are not granular enough for you to use the assessment data, or you don't have the "next steps" information and resources to impact learning. So, what kinds of assessments are needed for effective phonics instruction and how can they be used?

To get a full picture of a student's growing foundational skills (including phonics), multiple tools must be used. These include a comprehensive assessment, frequently administered cumulative assessments, observations made during the student's reading, and periodic assessment of the student's writing.

In addition, looking at a student's foundational skills growth, such as phonics, requires evaluation through two critical lenses: *accuracy* and *automaticity*. For example, accuracy tells us correctness in reading words with specific phonics skills. Automaticity tells us mastery of these skills. Why is this so important? Imagine two students taking a letter recognition assessment. Both students might be able to complete this assessment with 100% accuracy. If you only looked at the accuracy scores, you might proceed with your instruction for both students in the same manner. However, if one student completed the assessment in 30 seconds with 100% accuracy and the other completed the assessment in 3 minutes with 100% accuracy, then the next steps instructionally would be quite different for these two students. Automaticity in recognizing these letters provides valuable information about mastery. Monitoring mastery or its opposite (decayed learning) after the initial instruction on a target skill is an essential, but often missed, component of phonics and other foundational skill assessment.



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TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS

Let's look at the four major ways in which a student's phonics mastery must be evaluated.

Comprehensive Phonics Assessment Survey: Placement

A comprehensive phonics assessment covers a span of skills (across multiple grades) from simple to complex and is a great tool to determine the foundational skill needs of students as they progress through the grades. In order to build a strong reading foundation, we must assess students at each grade to see if there are any skill "holes" in terms of phonics. Then, we can provide targeted instruction to fill those phonics "holes" to strengthen the reading foundation.

Below is an example of a comprehensive phonics assessment in *From Phonics to Reading*™. The skills are organized by type or category of learning, such as short vowels, long vowels, and so on to give you an easy and precise starting point for instruction when rebuilding a student's phonics foundation.

Name _____ Date _____

Comprehensive Phonics Survey: Nonsense Word Reading

A. Short Vowels
1. lat
2. ped
3. sib
4. mog
5. vun
6. fim
7. hep
8. yot
9. rud
10. cag

B. Consonant Blends and Digraphs
1. sheg
2. chab
3. stot
4. whid
5. thuzz
6. bruck
7. cliss
8. smend
9. thrist
10. phum

C. Long Vowels
1. sote
2. mabe
3. foap
4. weam
5. glay
6. shain
7. dright
8. hupe
9. heest
10. sny

D. Complex Vowels
1. doit
2. spoud
3. clar
4. foy
5. jern
6. moof
7. lurst
8. porth
9. stook
10. flirch

E. Word Study (Multisyllabic Words)
1. rigfap
2. churbit
3. napsate
4. readloid
5. foutray
6. moku
7. wolide
8. lofam
9. pagbo
10. plizzles

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From Phonics to Reading, Grade 1

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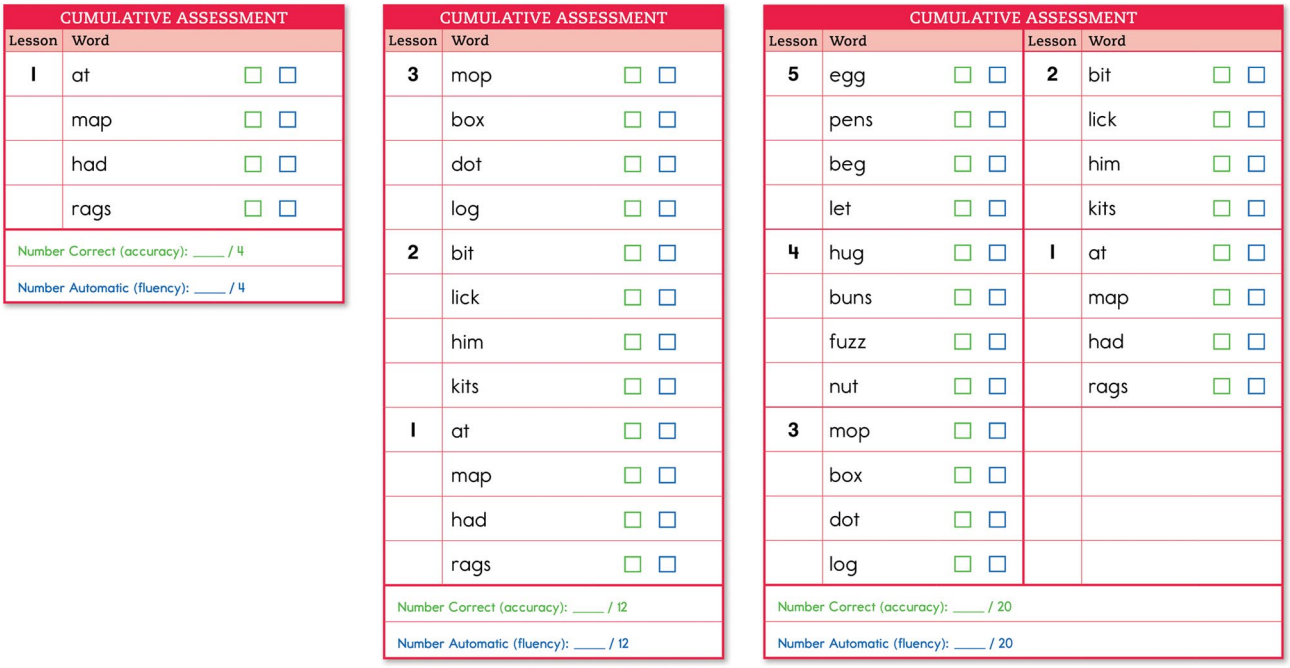
Cumulative Phonics Assessment: A Check for Mastery and/or Decayed Learning to Make Course Corrections

Assessment of phonics skills must be done over an extended period of time to ensure mastery. Weekly assessments focusing on one skill often give "false positives." That is, they show movement toward learning, but not mastery. If the skill isn't worked on for subsequent weeks, learning can decay. Cumulative phonics assessments help you determine which skills have truly been mastered and are now being transferred to new reading situations. Cumulative assessments monitor mastery and/or decayed learning in real time. They are a critical phonics instructional tool and fluency check.

Below are examples of cumulative phonics assessments in *From Phonics to Reading*. The student is assessed on the week's skill, as well as on skills from the previous five weeks. You assess a few students each week, cycling through students every 3–4 weeks. (Assessing all students each week is too time consuming and not necessary for this assessment.) Then, the assessments are looked at over a span of time. For example, you can trace the Week 1 phonics



CUMULATIVE ASSESSMENT

Lesson	Word
1	at
	map
	had
	rags

Number Correct (accuracy): ____ / 4

Number Automatic (fluency): ____ / 4

CUMULATIVE ASSESSMENT

Lesson	Word
3	mop
	box
	dot
	log
2	bit
	lick
	him
	kits
1	at
	map
	had
	rags

Number Correct (accuracy): ____ / 12

Number Automatic (fluency): ____ / 12

CUMULATIVE ASSESSMENT

Lesson	Word	Lesson	Word
5	egg	2	bit
	pens		lick
	beg		him
	let		kits
4	hug	1	at
	buns		map
	fuzz		had
	nut		rags
3	mop		
	box		
	dot		
	log		

Number Correct (accuracy): ____ / 20

Number Automatic (fluency): ____ / 20

From Phonics to Reading, Grade 1

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skills across three assessments. This allows you to monitor changes in accuracy (increased checks indicate accuracy, decreased checks indicate decayed learning) and automaticity (increased checks over time indicate mastery/fluency). This provides you with the information needed to make immediate course corrections and meet class and individual student needs before instructional issues become too big.

Observations During Reading (including comprehension work)

Listening to a student read is certainly one of the best indicators of a student's growing mastery of phonics skills. Periodically keep records of student errors while reading. Jot down words they struggle with. Examine the list and ask yourself:

- Are there specific previously taught phonics skills that aren't being consistently applied?
- Is the student struggling with high-frequency words that have irregular spelling patterns?
- Are there too many words in the story with skills the student hasn't been taught?

The answers to these and other questions can inform your next steps. So, for example:

- If the student struggles reading words with previously taught phonics skills, continue to add and reinforce these skills during blending, dictation, and word-building exercises. Engage the student in more targeted practice during small-group lessons and read (and reread) additional decodable texts.
- If the student struggles with high-frequency

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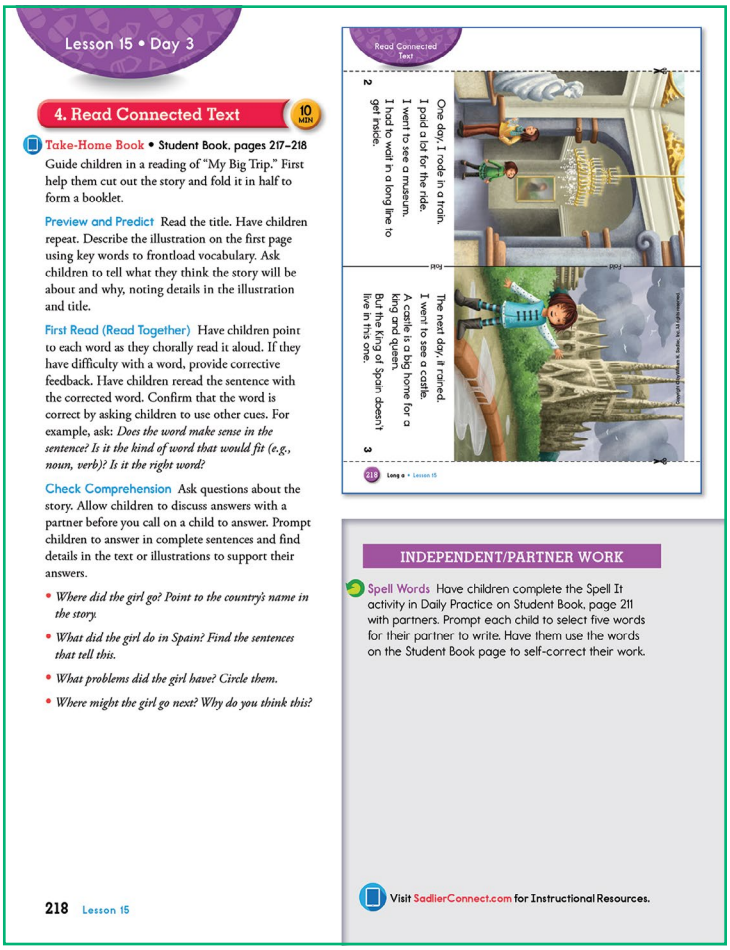
words that contain irregular spelling patterns, continue to review these words using the Read/Spell/Write routine. During the Read portion of the routine, make sure that you guide the student in orally segmenting the word. Then point out the known sound-spellings of the word to highlight the part of the word the student needs to memorize. For example, "Let's tap the sounds in the word *said*: /s/ /e/ /d/. How many sounds do you hear? Let's look at how *said* is spelled. You already know some of these spellings. The letter *s* stands for the /s/ sound at the beginning of *said*. The letter *d* stands for the /d/ sound at the end of *said*. What's left? The letters *ai* in the middle stand for the /e/ sound in this word. These are the letters we will need to remember when spelling the word *said*."

- If the text contains too many words with phonics skills the student hasn't learned, use more controlled decodable text to help build mastery of taught skills and increase the student's confidence in reading. Confidence builds joy in reading. Struggle and failure can lead to a dislike or avoidance of reading. The texts early readers read can greatly influence how they feel about reading and their ability to tackle new texts.

In addition to listening to students read, it is critical that students recognize that all reading is about understanding. Pay close attention to the questions provided with the decodable stories. They range from simple recall to higher-order thinking questions. These questions require students to reread the text and support their answers with evidence. These questions provide valuable information regarding how students are processing the text and their level of comprehension. The follow-up writing to the decodable stories further deepens students' comprehension as they are required to reread the story and share in writing their growing understanding of the key ideas or storyline.


Lesson 15 • Day 3

4. Read Connected Text 10 MIN

Take-Home Book • Student Book, pages 217–218

Guide children in a reading of "My Big Trip." First help them cut out the story and fold it in half to form a booklet.

Preview and Predict Read the title. Have children repeat. Describe the illustration on the first page using key words to frontload vocabulary. Ask children to tell what they think the story will be about and why, noting details in the illustration and title.

First Read (Read Together) Have children point to each word as they chorally read it aloud. If they have difficulty with a word, provide corrective feedback. Have children reread the sentence with the corrected word. Confirm that the word is correct by asking children to use other cues. For example, ask: *Does the word make sense in the sentence? Is it the kind of word that would fit (e.g., noun, verb)? Is it the right word?*

Check Comprehension Ask questions about the story. Allow children to discuss answers with a partner before you call on a child to answer. Prompt children to answer in complete sentences and find details in the text or illustrations to support their answers.

- *Where did the girl go? Point to the country's name in the story.*
- *What did the girl do in Spain? Find the sentences that tell this.*
- *What problems did the girl have? Circle them.*
- *Where might the girl go next? Why do you think this?*

218 Lesson 15

Read Connected Text

2

One day, I rode in a train.
I paid a lot for the ride.
I went to see a museum.
I had to wait in a long line to get inside.

3

The next day, it rained.
I went to see a castle.
A castle is a big home for a king and queen.
But the king of Spain doesn't live in this one.

218 Long a • Lesson 15

INDEPENDENT/PARTNER WORK

Spell Words Have children complete the Spell It activity in Daily Practice on Student Book, page 211 with partners. Prompt each child to select five words for their partner to write. Have them use the words on the Student Book page to self-correct their work.

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From Phonics to Reading, Grade 1

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ANALYSIS OF STUDENT WRITING

Writing is one of the most valuable and underused tools to evaluate a student's growing mastery of phonics skills. Writing lags behind reading for our early learners. So, students will learn phonics skills and will generally master them faster than they can consistently apply them in writing. Using this understanding, if you notice a student consistently using a phonics skill in writing, such as final *-e* (words with *a_e*, for example), then you know that this student can read these words in connected text.

Activities such as dictation (guided spelling) and word building help to accelerate students' use of previously taught phonics skills in writing. They focus students' attention on these new phonics patterns. Writing about the decodable readers as a follow-up provides students with targeted opportunities to apply the newly taught skills. For students needing extra support, they can refer to the decodable story. The more targeted writing experiences students have during phonics lessons, the greater the likelihood they will accurately and consistently apply these skills to express ideas and information learned when writing.

So, what can you do?

- Periodically (e.g., once a month) collect samples of a student's recent writing. These can include follow-up writing to the decodable readers, free writing in their writing journals, and writing assignments during your standard writing curriculum.
- Create a checklist of the phonics skills you have taught up to that point. Scan the writing samples for consistent and accurate use of those phonics skills.
- Circle those that are consistently and accurately used. Place a check mark beside those needing additional instruction and practice.
- Use your findings to modify whole-class dictation exercises (if you observe some common issues) or form small groups based on specific needs and offer more dictation and word-building practice using these skills.

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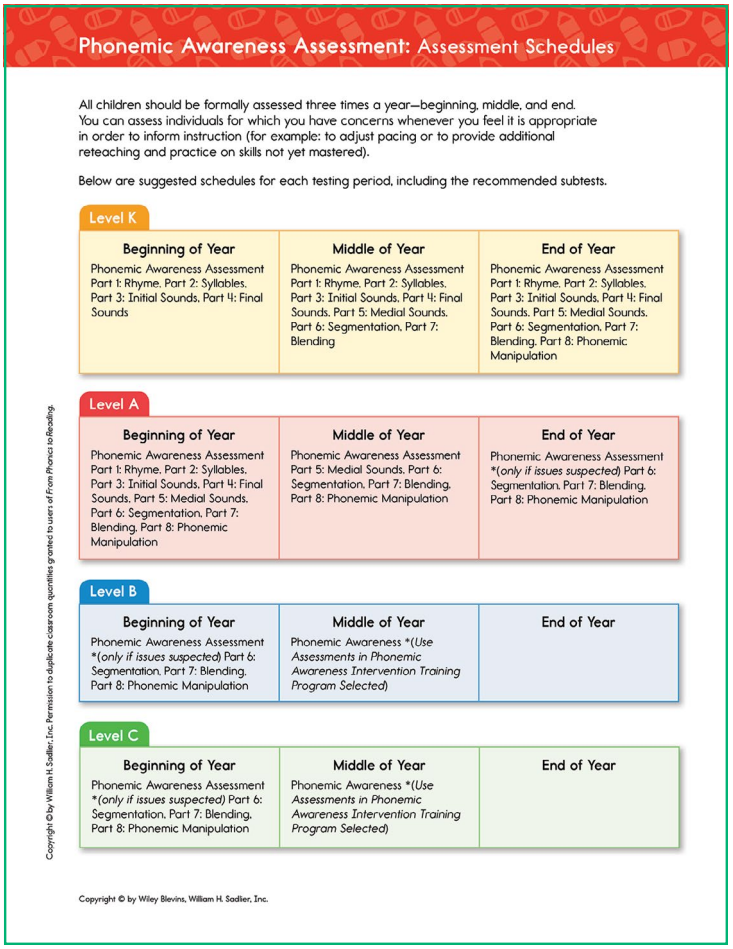
ASSESSING OTHER FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Phonics isn't the only foundational skill that needs to be assessed for our early readers and writers. Most state standards include other skills such as phonological awareness, concepts of print (e.g., reading left-to-right and top-to-bottom, understanding words are separated by spaces), and fluency. These also need to be frequently monitored.

Concepts of Print: Reading from left-to-right and top-to-bottom and understanding that words are separated by spaces in text are fairly simple concepts for students to grasp and are acquired easily when frequently modeled in early reading and writing instruction. Observation is the best way to assess a student's understanding of these basic concepts of print. For example, ask a student to track the print (point to each word) while reading. Model as needed if the student struggles. Reinforce spacing between words while writing and model during shared and interactive writing exercises.

Phonological Awareness: In order to read and write, students must understand that words are comprised of discrete sounds and be able to blend, segment, and manipulate those sounds. Blending and segmenting are a focus of early reading and writing instruction because they are so tightly connected to beginning reading and writing growth. For example, if a student cannot orally blend sounds to make a word, they will not be able to sound out a word while reading text. Likewise, if a student cannot orally segment the sounds in a word, the student will struggle writing words



Phonemic Awareness Assessment: Assessment Schedules

All children should be formally assessed three times a year—beginning, middle, and end. You can assess individuals for which you have concerns whenever you feel it is appropriate in order to inform instruction (for example: to adjust pacing or to provide additional reteaching and practice on skills not yet mastered).

Below are suggested schedules for each testing period, including the recommended subtests.

Level K

Beginning of Year	Middle of Year	End of Year
Phonemic Awareness Assessment Part 1: Rhyme, Part 2: Syllables, Part 3: Initial Sounds, Part 4: Final Sounds	Phonemic Awareness Assessment Part 1: Rhyme, Part 2: Syllables, Part 3: Initial Sounds, Part 4: Final Sounds, Part 5: Medial Sounds, Part 6: Segmentation, Part 7: Blending	Phonemic Awareness Assessment Part 1: Rhyme, Part 2: Syllables, Part 3: Initial Sounds, Part 4: Final Sounds, Part 5: Medial Sounds, Part 6: Segmentation, Part 7: Blending, Part 8: Phonemic Manipulation

Level A

Beginning of Year	Middle of Year	End of Year
Phonemic Awareness Assessment Part 1: Rhyme, Part 2: Syllables, Part 3: Initial Sounds, Part 4: Final Sounds, Part 5: Medial Sounds, Part 6: Segmentation, Part 7: Blending, Part 8: Phonemic Manipulation	Phonemic Awareness Assessment Part 5: Medial Sounds, Part 6: Segmentation, Part 7: Blending, Part 8: Phonemic Manipulation	Phonemic Awareness Assessment *(only if issues suspected)* Part 6: Segmentation, Part 7: Blending, Part 8: Phonemic Manipulation

Level B

Beginning of Year	Middle of Year	End of Year
Phonemic Awareness Assessment *(only if issues suspected)* Part 6: Segmentation, Part 7: Blending, Part 8: Phonemic Manipulation	Phonemic Awareness *(Use Assessments in Phonemic Awareness Intervention Training Program Selected)*	

Level C

Beginning of Year	Middle of Year	End of Year
Phonemic Awareness Assessment *(only if issues suspected)* Part 6: Segmentation, Part 7: Blending, Part 8: Phonemic Manipulation	Phonemic Awareness *(Use Assessments in Phonemic Awareness Intervention Training Program Selected)*	

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From Phonics to Reading, Grade 1

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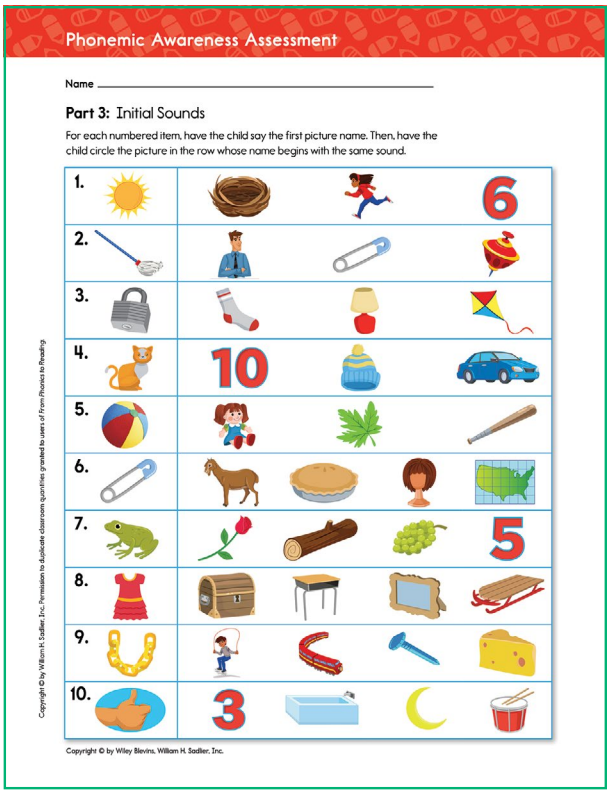
because beginning writers think about the sounds in words and attach a letter or spelling to each sound in order to write it.

As students progress in their skills, phonemic manipulation tasks (phoneme substitution, deletion, addition) play a crucial role. These skills continue to develop in students past Grade 1 where most state standards end the instruction in phonemic awareness and are connected to a student's ability to remember words (through a process called orthographic mapping). That is why it is so critical to assess these skills in Kindergarten and Grade 1 for all students and continue that assessment in Grades 2 and 3 for students who may be struggling to see if these underlying skills are an issue.

You will find a battery of phonological awareness assessments and a schedule of assessing in *From Phonics to Reading*. Below are some samples.


Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Name _____

Part 3: Initial Sounds

For each numbered item, have the child say the first picture name. Then, have the child circle the picture in the row whose name begins with the same sound.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

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Fluency: Phonics fluency needs to be assessed at the letter, word, and sentence level.

Letter Fluency: Letter fluency needs to be assessed in Kindergarten. Use your district-created letter assessment or create one by writing the letters in random order. Blevins (2016) suggests a letter naming and letter sound assessment sequence based on current research (Phillips et al, 2012; Piasta et al, 2014) that places the letters in a sequence from easier to more complex. When assessing letter names, put a checkmark next to the letter if named correctly and circle it if it is named automatically (without any pause). Repeat for letter sounds.

Word Fluency: The Cumulative Assessment at the end of each week (described in an earlier section) in *From Phonics to Reading* offers the best word reading fluency check. The frequency of these checks and their cumulative nature allow you to quickly determine mastery versus decayed learning so that instructional modifications can be made before bigger reading issues develop.

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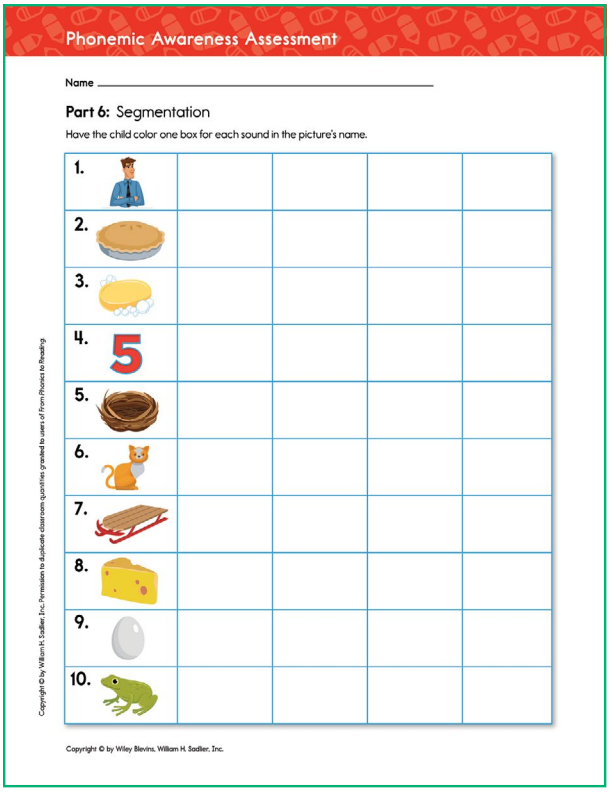
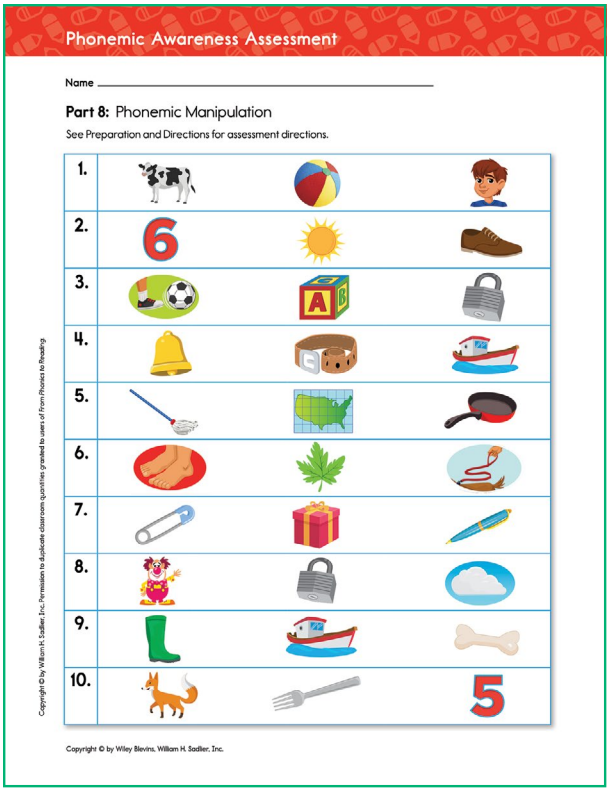
Sentence Fluency: Listening to students read is the ideal way to assess reading fluency at the sentence level. Grade-level reading rates are available from Tindal and Hasbrouck (2017) based on one-minute reads. These can be used to determine which students are reading at rates below-, on-, or above-level. While most schools have existing reading fluency passages for assessment, you can create your own using grade-level texts students haven't read. These "cold" reads should reflect grade-level phonics standards in terms of coverage and be both fiction and informational. You can also use previously read decodable texts in *From Phonics to Reading* as "warm" reads with a higher expectation for accuracy and automaticity.

The frequent and varied assessments available in *From Phonics to Reading* can provide you the essential information you need to monitor students' foundational skills growth in a way that is responsive to each student's needs. It is through these impactful assessments that we can truly inform instruction to build a strong foundation in early reading and writing.





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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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7 Key Characteristics of Strong Phonics Instruction **eBook**

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Research Basis for From Phonics to Reading: **A Research Study on the Effects of Using Decodable Texts with Systematic Phonics Instruction**

Influential Reading Group Makes It Clear: Students Need Systematic, Explicit Phonics, **EdWeek**

Phonics Instructional Guide: Multiple Tiers for Success **eBook**

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