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2025

# When it Comes to Reading: A Great Start Keeps Kids in the Race!

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Sure, teaching kids to read gives them an essential life skill and the "Science of Reading" is the right place to start. But it takes more than phonics to master literacy. This Spotlight delves into what else can be keys to helping them on their journey. We will discuss the importance of **oral language and conversation, sentence structure,** and **what classroom practice should look like for young English learners.**

Vanessa Solis/Education Week via Canva

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# Want to Improve Early Reading Comprehension? Start With Sentence Structure

By Sarah D. Sparks

"Avoid the passive voice" is a favorite maxim of writing teachers. But for young learners, exposure to passive construction—and other more complex sentences in spoken language—may help children develop reading comprehension.

A new study on early language finds that preschool and kindergarten-aged children who have been exposed to a wider array of spoken language had better comprehension of the passive voice and other complex sentences, and they were quicker to correct misunderstandings, than peers with smaller receptive language.

The study, which appeared in the Royal Society's Science journal, was conducted by Malathi Thothathiri, an associate professor of speech and hearing science at George Washington University, and two research partners.

Thothathiri and her colleagues asked 4- and 5-year-olds who had not yet developed fluent reading skills to listen to a series of active and passively constructed sentences ("the boy kicked the ball" versus "the ball was kicked by the boy," for example), and point to a picture that described the action.

In a separate task, the researchers used eye-tracking technology to measure how quickly students identified which of the two pictures described a spoken sentence.

"The thing about sentence processing is that it happens moment to moment," Thothathiri said. "Our brain's predicting what's going to come next, on the fly. So as we're hearing 'the ball is ...,' the brain's already interpreting that, and that's where the trip-up comes in. That's normal—even adults do that—but adults have mature brains and executive functions, so they can correct that mistake, whereas younger children sometimes actually interpret it incorrectly."

In the moment, she found, children with higher executive function skills—like working memory (the capacity to hold and remember information for short-term problem-solving) and planning—were quicker to correct their initial misunderstandings of a passive sentence.

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> **"Teachers need to recognize the frequency of exposure to different sentence structures matters."**
>
> **MALATHI THOTHATHIRI**
> Associate professor of speech and hearing science
> George Washington University

But just improving students' executive skills didn't improve their comprehension over time. Rather, comprehension was linked to what Thothathiri called a "virtuous spiral" of exposing them to broader and more diverse language and sentence structure, while also developing children's memory and other executive skills.

"Teachers need to recognize the frequency of exposure to different sentence structures matters," Thothathiri said. "We don't go around speaking in passive voice or in complicated sentences that often, but in books, you often find these more complicated sentence structures. And the brain is a statistical learning machine—the more that it's exposed to something, the less difficulty people have with that thing." ■

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# Spellcheck Won't Cut It. Here's Why Kids Need Spelling Instruction

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Spelling lists. Spelling tests. Spelling bees. Adults of a certain age who remember anything about elementary school likely recall spelling as central to their literacy instruction. That's not necessarily true anymore.

Spelling's prominent role in literacy instruction has dwindled significantly in recent years. Hundreds of schools and districts have dropped spelling tests and explicit spelling instruction from their curriculum, according to a 2021 report from Educational Psychology Review, and spelling no longer appears on all state standardized tests.

Even as "science of reading" mandates sweep across the country, requiring schools to use evidence-based methods for teaching young students how to read, spelling rarely is mentioned in the conversation. Some skeptics of spelling instruction cite the advent of spellcheck technologies, including artificial intelligence, as proof that students no longer need to know how to spell. But literacy experts ardently disagree.

"Spelling is a highly accurate window into children's understanding of language and literacy," said Molly Ness, a reading researcher and teacher-educator at City University of New York, Brooklyn College. "It's so predictive of their understanding of how words work and the synchrony of spelling, vocabulary, and word knowledge."

> **"Spelling is a highly accurate window into children's understanding of language and literacy."**
>
> **MOLLY NESS**
> Reading researcher and teacher-educator
> City University of New York, Brooklyn College

As longtime spelling authority Richard Gentry sees it, the absence of spelling in literacy instruction is akin to cutting off one leg of a three-legged stool.

"Spelling kickstarts the process of reading and writing, and it does this by connecting to [brain] circuitry, where the sounds and pronunciation of words already exist in spoken language," said Gentry. "Spelling literally ignites the reading and writing process."

Being able to spell accurately drives reading automaticity, which in turn allows for fluency and, ultimately, greater comprehension, Gentry explained.

"If you can spell a word automatically, and you have the word sound and meaning in your spoken vocabulary, you can map the spellings on the page or screen to your already existing spoken language," he said.

## How spelling instruction waned in relevance

Critics of spelling instruction sometimes point to the ubiquity of technology available to correct a writer's spelling—like spellchecker software and, more recently, AI-powered spellcheck tools—as a reason why students no longer need to learn how to spell.

Some critics also argue that the English language's unpredictable nature makes it too difficult to expect students to become proficient spellers, said Shawna Kay Williams-Pinnock, a lecturer in The Mico University College's department of language, literacy, and literature in Kingston, Jamaica. It's a notion the literacy expert flatly rejects.

"More regularly spelled words with specific letter-sound patterns exist in English than we think there are," Williams-Pinnock said. "Only about 13 percent of the 400,000 or so words in the English dictionary do not have a regular pattern. The majority can be spelled phonetically."

But for many years—primarily through the 1980s and into the 1990s—the "whole language" movement that dominated literacy instruction downplayed or outright dismissed the importance of teaching students to spell phonetically. Instead, it stressed that students learn to read through exposure to and immersion in books.

In What's Whole in Whole Language, originally published in 1986, the late Kenneth Goodman, who's considered the father of the

### FIVE TIPS TO TEACH SPELLING

- **Make spelling** an integral part of your phonics lesson.
- **Give students dictation** based on the sound-letter principle you're focusing on.
- **Model the thought process** of sounding out words.
- **Make it fun:** Play games, use friendly competition like spelling bees, and incorporate movement.
- **Provide students an opportunity** to learn words they want to know how to spell.

whole language movement, calls for educators to "put aside the carefully sequenced basal readers, spelling programs, and handwriting kits."

A large body of literacy research, however, debunked Goodman's ideas that students learn to read by relying primarily on context clues. It concluded, instead, that skilled readers do rely heavily on knowledge of letter-sound correspondences when learning new words. It's exactly that knowledge that's integral to spelling.

## Strategies for implementing spelling into early literacy curriculum

Spelling instruction should start from the moment you begin teaching students how to decode words, said Williams-Pinnock, who added that it's best taught as part of phonics lessons.

She described it as a three-part process, whereby the teacher introduces the principle of the letter-sound relationship (for example, the short "a" vowel sound), students read together examples of words that share this principle, and then they attempt to spell words with the spelling pattern taught.

In this explicit method of instruction, students apply phonics principles to spelling, as opposed to simply memorizing a list of words, a method denounced by most literacy experts that long dominated spelling instruction.

"We have to move away from rote memorization," said Williams-Pinnock, who notes that when she was in school, she and her classmates would receive a list of words and be expected to commit that list to memory.

"Students need to understand the letter-sound relationships and certain spelling principles and rules that they can then apply in spelling," she said. "You can't expect students to memorize all 400,000 words."

This explicit method of instruction, ingrained into phonics lessons, requires a significant commitment during class time—and it's something that's not emphasized enough, said Gentry. He has reviewed recently published curricula that tout evidence-based literacy instruction—but recommend as little as 20 minutes' worth of spelling instruction weekly.

In elementary school, "they should be doing 20 minutes [of spelling instruction] every day," he said.

The following tips can help early literacy teachers reach that goal. ■

Allison Shelley/All4Ed

A 1st grade teacher speaks with a student about an assignment at Capital City Public Charter School in the District of Columbia.

*Published April 15, 2024*

# Want to Improve Reading Proficiency? Talk to Kids More

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Ask an early educator to explain the science of reading, and phonics will likely headline the response. But phonics, and its emphasis on word recognition, covers only part of the reading-proficiency puzzle. Oral language skills are equally important.

Yet, too often, oral language skills are not getting the emphasis they deserve in early education classrooms, say literacy experts.

Sonia Cabell hopes to help teachers change that.

Cabell, an associate professor in the School of Teacher Education and the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University, believes there's a straightforward way for teachers to improve the oral language skills of young learners, starting as early as preschool: Engage in meaningful one-on-one conversations with students throughout the school day. They don't have to be long or complicated, Cabell explained. In fact, she and fellow educational researcher Tricia A. Zucker co-authored a book that provides a simple framework for time-strapped teachers to have these interactions with students that take as little as a minute but can have long-lasting, positive consequences.

Cabell recently spoke to Education Week about this approach for boosting students' oral language skills The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### Why should teachers focus on improving students' oral language skills?

Unlike reading, which is a secondary skill, oral language is a biological primary skill of humans. So the idea that we're hard-wired to learn oral language does raise the question: Why do teachers have to focus on oral language development? It really is about gaining exposure to the more formal language used by teachers in the classroom—language to which children need exposure in order to read and write proficiently.

### How early should teachers focus on oral language skills?

Some of my own research has shown that the conversations in preschool classrooms relate to children's vocabulary growth and that the language teachers use, and the complexity of that language, matters.

### But, as you point out in your book, *Strive-for-Five Conversations*, the back-and-forth of conversations is critical, right?

That's right. The benefits of going back-and-forth and having multiturn conversations, some call them "serve and return," is well-documented in the literature. The idea is that you're building on what students say and then providing them with another opportunity to be an active participant in the conversation.

### In these multi-turn conversations, what's the ideal number of turns?

The idea is that you try to have five conversational turns with a student: I say something, you say something, and so on. It doesn't take very much time. Each of these conversations takes about one minute of instructional time, but they accomplish a lot.

### How does the 'five-turn conversation' compare with a typical teacher-student exchange?

What tends to happen [in typical interactions] is that I, as the teacher, ask a question, the student says something in return, and then the teacher stops the conversation by saying something like: "Good job!" Most teacher-student conversations stop at that third turn.

### How can teachers extend these conversations?

Based on whether the student responded correctly, partially correctly, or incorrectly, you think about how you as the teacher might scaffold them. For instance, if the student responded correctly, you might scaffold them upward, providing them with an additional challenging question. If they answered incorrectly, you could scaffold them downward by helping them to come to a more correct answer. You might do that by reducing the choices they have or you might ask them to fill in the blank, pushing them to give you another turn. It's that piece of sticking with that child that seems to not happen very frequently.

### Are these conversations designed to be one-on-one?

Yes, but they can take place in a whole group as well. For example, in book reading, you ask guiding questions, telling students before you begin reading: "I want you to think about this."

During this exercise, teachers are encouraged to use [Popsicle] sticks—every student will be thinking about the question because they all know their name could be called. Then you read the book and come back to that earlier [guided] question. You pick one Popsicle stick out of the group and take at least five conversational turns with the student you call on. You can then ask that same guiding question to three other kids.

### Do many teachers balk at all the classroom time these conversations could take?

We're not saying that every conversation has to be a five-turn conversation. But we are saying: Deliberately have these conversations with each child every day.

### Which students benefit most from these five-turn conversations?

Research has shown that it's those students who have lower-language skills or who are English learners or who are shy and who won't come to the teacher and say, "I want to talk to you about something"—they typically have fewer conversations with their teacher in class. They aren't getting the same practice with oral language skills because they aren't asking for it. The five-turn conversation is a way for teachers to make sure the learning is equitable.

### What is your message to teachers who think this approach is not worth their time?

We don't want teachers to see this strategy as rigid. But we do want to encourage teachers to be more deliberate about their conversations with students. We're asking teachers to make a marginal shift in what they're already doing, which is having conversations with kids all day long. We also see this as a way for teachers to give students a language boost without actually saying: "Now, we're going to do an oral language lesson." ■

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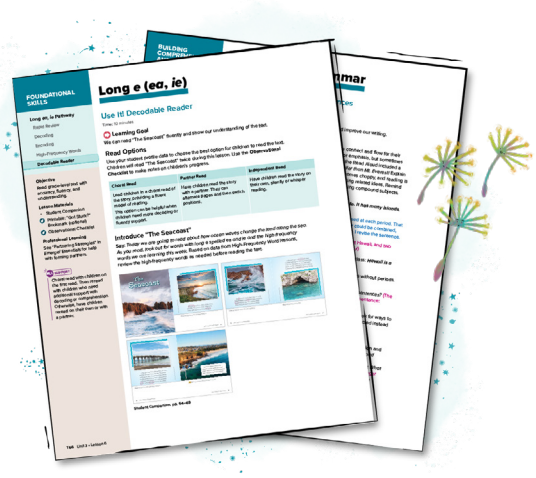


*"We considered the clear evidence from the field of reading science on the skills that support the development of reading, spelling, and writing, and the McGraw Hill team carefully planned how these skills are taught, reviewed, and built upon in the new curriculum."*

***—Dr. Katie Pace Miles***

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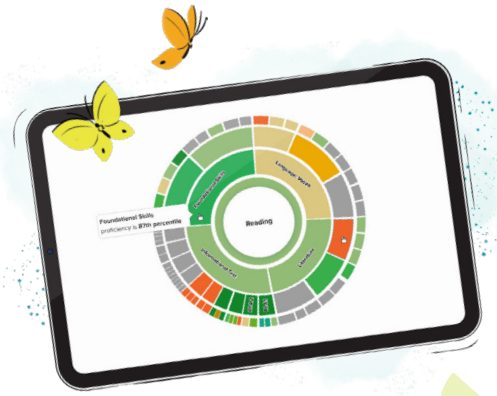

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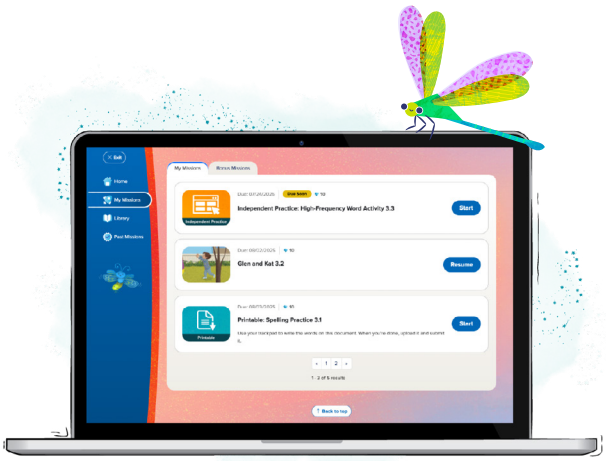


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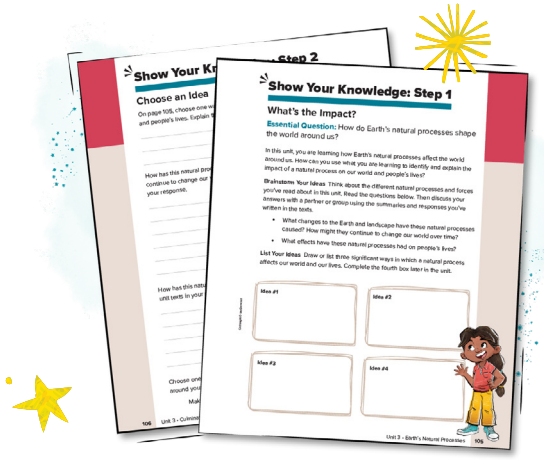


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# The Science of Reading and English Learners: 3 Takeaways For Policy and Classroom Practice

By Sarah Schwartz

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Young English learners face a two-fold challenge in learning to read.

They need to learn how to map spoken sounds to written letters, the phonics skills that allow them to decode words on the page, just as native English speakers do. But at the same time, they're also developing new language skills in English—knowledge that's essential to their ability to understand written text.

How to address these dual priorities was the subject of an Education Week webinar on March 4. Two experts in the field discussed a joint statement, authored by advocates for the science of reading and advocates for English learners, that outlines guiding tenets for classroom practice.

The statement is the result of a sustained, and sometimes challenging, collaboration, said webinar guests Martha Hernandez and Kari Kurto.

Hernandez is the executive director of Californians Together, an organization that supports English learners in California's schools. Kurto is the director of the National Science of Reading Project at the Reading League, a group that works to advance the understanding and use of evidence-aligned reading instruction.

The document grew out of shared concerns, they said. Some in the English learner community worried that science of reading policy had neglected emergent bilingual students' specific needs, prioritizing decoding skills at the expense of oral language development. Science of reading advocates wanted to address any misconceptions that the movement was only about phonics—an essential foundational skill for all readers, but not the endpoint of reading instruction generally.

Hernandez and Kurto spoke with Education Week about how the joint statement can inform teaching and assessment, what the groups agree on, and where differences of opinion persist. Read on for three highlights from the conversation.

## 1. Implications for classroom practice

The joint statement outlines some broad areas of agreement in what classroom practice should look like for young English learners who are learning to read.

Explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills—phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and encoding—are necessary, said Kurto. But they're not the only components of a comprehensive literacy program. "When we're reading, we're reading language. We will only comprehend when that's language that we know," she said.

A host of other language and literacy goals are also essential, said Hernandez. For example, English learners need instruction in English language development, vocabulary, content knowledge, and effective expression, she said.

Teachers should leverage students' home language when possible to make connections to English, she added, and professional development and materials should prioritize English learners' unique needs—not tack them on as an afterthought.

Exactly how and when to teach phonics—how letter symbols correspond to written sounds—was also a topic of conversation.

Some English learner advocates have argued that phonics instruction has to be embedded in context, said Kurto. This is an approach in which students mainly practice the letter-sound correspondences they struggle with while reading whole texts, rather than learning these correspondences in a systematic and explicit sequence.

"I just have not seen the research to support that," Kurto said, referencing the idea of favoring this context-based approach. There's more research to support that phonics skills can be taught in isolation, she said. Still, she added, for children to fully store a word in their long-term memory, it's essential to also understand the word's meaning.

## 2. Identifying students who struggle

Even with well-planned instruction in a whole class setting, some students may need extra support. Identifying these children requires strategic assessment and careful interpretation of data. For English learners, there are additional considerations that teachers should keep in mind, Hernandez and Kurto said.

Some English learners may struggle to read because they have trouble decoding words, while others might not have the English language proficiency to understand what they're reading, said Hernandez. It's important that schools and districts train teachers to differentiate between these two issues, she said.

Kurto echoed this point: Just as schools should take a comprehensive approach to literacy learning, they should take a comprehensive approach to data analysis, she said.

"There are just as many students that are speakers of other languages that will struggle

with word reading skills, and I think our students deserve that instruction that meets their specific needs," Kurto said.

Still, she added, culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments for English learners and emergent bilingual students can be hard to find. Kurto referenced resources for planning and choosing assessments collected on the Reading League's website. The topic will also be featured in sessions at the group's annual conference this April, she said.

### 3. Differing perspectives on reading mandates

While the joint statement outlined agreement on instructional best practices, Hernandez and Kurto offered differing perspectives on how to ensure those practices make their way into classrooms.

In California, recently proposed legislation would mandate that elementary teachers take a state-approved training in evidence-based reading methods, and that schools choose reading curricula from a state-approved list. Decoding Dyslexia CA, an organization that aims to support dyslexic students in the state's schools, championed the measure, along with the advocacy groups EdVoice and Families in Schools.

The bill is similar to science of reading legislation enacted in other states, but if passed, it would represent a stark departure from California's tradition of local control—allowing districts to make their own decisions about materials and methods.

Californians Together is opposed to the legislation, said Hernandez.

"The state-mandated approach, in our opinion, is not the direction," she said. "And I think we need to separate the content and the implementation mechanisms proposed by the particular legislation, which we feel are very concerning. We disagree with the way of making this happen."

"This does not mean that we are opposed to a comprehensive, research-based literacy approach," she said, adding that guidance on instructional methods should come from the state department of education, rather than legislation.

But Kurto said that mandates are sometimes necessary to effect change.

"With local control, sometimes the only thing to move those really deep-seated knowledge and beliefs that are not aligned with the science of reading is through a mandate or legislation," she said. "I worked at a state department of education. A lot of folks thought that we had a lot more power than we did—we did not. You can guidance the heck out of people, but sometimes it does take additional efforts." ■

*Published February 23, 2023*

# 3 Takeaways About the Connection Between Reading and Writing Instruction

By Sarah Schwartz

Learning how to write well can make students better readers. Study after study has shown that when children are taught how to write complex sentences and compose different kinds of texts, their ability to read and understand a wider variety of writing improves too.

"We need to be thinking about reading and writing reciprocally," said Dana Robertson, an associate professor of reading and literacy in the School of Education at Virginia Tech.

Robertson spoke about the research base behind reading-writing connections during an Education Week forum last week, featuring researchers, teachers, and district leaders, about writing and the "science of reading."

The term refers to a movement toward more explicit, systematic approaches to reading instruction—approaches that studies have shown can help students become better readers.

Researchers say that there are connections between evidence-based methods in reading and writing. Students can also benefit from structure in writing instruction, too—explicit teaching about how to construct sentences, paragraphs, and essays.

## What is the 'Science of Reading?'

In a science of reading framework, teachers start by teaching beginning readers the foundations of language in a structured progression—like how individual letters represent sounds and how those sounds combine to make words.

At the same time, teachers are helping students build their vocabulary and their knowledge about the world through read-alouds and conversations. Eventually, teachers help students weave these skills together like strands in a rope, allowing them to read more and more complex texts.

Most teachers in the United States weren't trained in this framework. Instead, the majority say that they practice balanced literacy, a less structured approach that relies heavily on teacher choice and professional judgment. While the majority of students in balanced literacy classrooms receive some phonics instruction, it may not be taught in the explicit, systematic way that researchers have found to be most effective for developing foundational reading skills.

VIDEO: Writing and the Science of Reading Forum Panel Discussion: How does Writing Intersect with Reading?

Students are generally "reading" short books of their choice very early on, even if they can't sound out all the words. Teachers encourage kids to use multiple sources of information—including pictures and context clues—to guess at what the text might say.

"We can use text structure and these graphic organizers to understand our reading process, and we can use this same kind of processes for thinking about how we're planning our writing to organize our ideas in a logical way," Robertson said.

Christina Cover, a high school special education teacher in New York City, discussed in last week's forum how she teaches some of these structures. The lessons have helped her students "talk about writing in a specific and focused way," she said.

Read on for practical tips and takeaways from the forum discussion. And check out the video of the panel above to watch the conversation in full.

## In the early stages of reading and writing, word chains can help link letters and sounds

In a word chain activity, a teacher says a word that students then break down into phonemes, or individual sounds. The students encode these phonemes into letters, writing down the word. Then, they reverse the process, reading the word aloud by blending the sounds together. Finally, the teacher asks them to change one sound in the word—cat into bat, for example. And the process repeats.

The activity helps link spoken sounds to written letters, but also the processes of reading and writing words, said Robertson. "We need to be thinking both [about] linking sound to letter but also letter to sound," he said.

## As students gain fluency with fundamentals, make sure they also have opportunities to apply them

Students need to be fluent with foundational writing skills—letter formation, handwriting, and often typing. They need direct instruction and repetition, said Robertson. "But we can't do that without also giving them ample opportunity to apply it in writing with lots of practice, for actual purposes to create meaning," he said.

Cover, the special education teacher, teaches at a transfer school—designed for students who have dropped out or need to make up credits. Many of her students need support with sentence-level writing, so she has started doing "Mechanics Mondays." Every week, she teaches a specific sentence-level writing skill: avoiding fragments or run-on sentences, posing questions, using conjunctions and appositives—noun phrases that modify other nouns.

"I introduce those topics, talk about why it's important to learn them, share definitions, examples. I model, work with the students, and then they go off to practice the skills on their own," Cover said.

So far, she's already noticed some changes in students' shorter writing samples—there are fewer students ending sentences with prepositions, for example. "We hope that will transfer into their longer-form writing," Cover said.

## Writing assignments should be tied to the 'purpose of learning'

When students are writing about text, different types of assignments bear different dividends for students' reading comprehension, Robertson said. For example, when students summarize, they can recall a wider range of ideas about the text, but their understanding is more superficial. When they do analytic tasks, like comparing arguments, they're working with a narrower range of ideas—but they're exploring them in more depth.

One isn't necessarily better than the other, said Robertson. It depends what teachers want students to achieve.

"The writing tasks that we're asking students to do in response to texts have to [align] with the purpose of learning," he said. ■

E+/Getty

*Published January 17, 2023*

# How Does Writing Fit Into The 'Science of Reading'?

By Stephen Sawchuk

In one sense, the national conversation about what it will take to make sure all children become strong readers has been wildly successful: States are passing legislation supporting evidence-based teaching approaches, and school districts are rushing to supply training. Publishers are under pressure to drop older materials. And for the first time in years, an instructional issue—reading—is headlining education media coverage.

In the middle of all that, though, the focus on the "science of reading" has elided its twin component in literacy instruction: writing.

Writing is intrinsically important for all students to learn—after all, it is the primary way beyond speech that humans communicate. But more than that, research suggests that teaching students to write in an integrated fashion with reading is not only efficient, it's effective.

Yet writing is often underplayed in the elementary grades. Too often, it is separated from schools' reading block. Writing is not assessed as frequently as reading, and principals, worried about reading-exam scores, direct teachers to focus on one often at the expense of the other. Finally, beyond the English/language arts block, kids often aren't asked to do much writing in early grades.

"Sometimes, in an early-literacy classroom, you'll hear a teacher say, 'It's time to pick up your pencils,'" said Wiley Blevins, an author and literacy consultant who provides training in schools. "But your pencils should be in your hand almost the entire morning."

Strikingly, many of the critiques that reading researchers have made against the "balanced literacy" approach that has held sway in schools for decades could equally apply to writing instruction: Foundational writing skills—like phonics and language structure—have not generally been taught systematically or explicitly.

And like the "find the main idea" strategies commonly taught in reading comprehension, writing instruction has tended to focus on content-neutral tasks, rather than deepening students' connections to the content they learn.

Education Week wants to bring more attention to these connections in the stories that make up this special collection. But first, we want to delve deeper into the case for including writing in every step of the elementary curriculum.

## Why has writing been missing from the reading conversation?

Much like the body of knowledge on how children learn to read words, it is also settled science that reading and writing draw on shared knowledge, even though they have traditionally been segmented in instruction.

"The body of research is substantial in both number of studies and quality of studies. There's no question that reading and writing share a lot of real estate, they depend on a lot of the same knowledge and skills," said Timothy Shanahan, an emeritus professor of education at the University of Illinois Chicago. "Pick your spot: text structure, vocabulary, sound-symbol relationships, 'world knowledge.'"

The reasons for the bifurcation in reading and writing are legion. One is that the two fields have typically been studied separately. (Researchers studying writing usually didn't examine whether a writing intervention, for instance, also aided students' reading abilities—and vice versa.)

Some scholars also finger the dominance of the federally commissioned National Reading Panel report, which in 2000 outlined key instructional components of learning to read. The review didn't examine the connection of writing to reading.

Looking even further back yields insights, too. Penmanship and spelling were historically the only parts of writing that were taught, and when writing reappeared in the latter half of the 20th century, it tended to focus on "process writing," emphasizing personal experience and story generation over other genres. Only when the Common Core State Standards appeared in 2010 did the emphasis shift to writing about nonfiction texts and across subjects—the idea that students should be writing about what they've learned.

And finally, teaching writing is hard. Few studies document what preparation teachers receive to teach writing, but in surveys, many teachers say they received little training in their college education courses. That's probably why only a little over half of teachers, in one 2016 survey, said that they enjoyed teaching writing.

## Writing should begin in the early grades

These factors all work against what is probably the most important conclusion from the research over the last few decades: Students in the early-elementary grades need lots of varied opportunities to write.

"Students need support in their writing," said Dana Robertson, an associate professor of reading and literacy education at the school of education at Virginia Tech who also

studies how instructional change takes root in schools. "They need to be taught explicitly the skills and strategies of writing and they need to see the connections of reading, writing, and knowledge development."

While research supports some fundamental tenets of writing instruction—that it should be structured, for instance, and involve drafting and revising—it hasn't yet pointed to a specific teaching recipe that works best.

One of the challenges, the researchers note, is that while reading curricula have improved over the years, they still don't typically provide many supports for students—or teachers, for that matter—for writing. Teachers often have to supplement with additions that don't always mesh well with their core, grade-level content instruction.

"We have a lot of activities in writing we know are good," Shanahan said. "We don't really have a yearlong elementary-school-level curriculum in writing. That just doesn't exist the way it does in reading."

Nevertheless, practitioners like Blevins work writing into every reading lesson, even in the earliest grades. And all the components that make up a solid reading program can be enhanced through writing activities.

If students are doing work on phonemic awareness—the ability to recognize sounds—they shouldn't merely manipulate sounds orally; they can put them on the page using letters. If students are learning how to decode, they can also encode—record written letters and words while they say the sounds out loud.

And students can write as they begin learning about language structure. When Blevins' students are mainly working with decodable texts with controlled vocabularies, writing can support their knowledge about how texts and narratives work: how sentences are put together and how they can be pulled apart and reconstructed. Teachers can prompt them in these tasks, asking them to rephrase a sentence as a question, split up two sentences, or combine them.

"Young kids are writing these mile-long sentences that become second nature. We set a higher bar, and they are fully capable of doing it. We can demystify a bit some of that complex text if we develop early on how to talk about sentences—how they're created, how they're joined," Blevins said. "There are all these things you can do that are helpful to develop an understanding of how sentences work and to get lots of practice."

As students progress through the elementary grades, this structured work grows more sophisticated. They need to be taught both sentence and paragraph structure, and they need to learn how different writing purposes and genres—narrative, persuasive, analytical—demand different approaches. Most of all, the research indicates, students need opportunities to write at length often.

## Using writing to support students' exploration of content

Reading is far more than foundational skills, of course. It means introducing students to rich content and the specialized vocabulary in each discipline and then ensuring that they read, discuss, analyze, and write about those ideas. The work to systematically build students' knowledge begins in the early grades and progresses throughout their K-12 experience.

Here again, available evidence suggests that writing can be a useful tool to help students explore, deepen, and draw connections in this content. With the proper supports, writing can be a method for students to retell and analyze what they've learned in discussions of content and literature throughout the school day—in addition to their creative writing.

This "writing to learn" approach need not wait for students to master foundational skills. In the K-2 grades especially, much content is learned through teacher read-alouds and conversation that include more complex vocabulary and ideas than the texts students are capable of reading. But that should not preclude students from writing about this content, experts say.

"We do a read-aloud or a media piece and we write about what we learned. It's just a part of how you're responding, or sharing, what you've learned across texts; it's not a separate thing from reading," Blevins said. "If I am doing read-alouds on a concept—on animal habitats, for example—my decodable texts will be on animals. And students are able to include some of these more sophisticated ideas and language in their writing, because we've elevated the conversations around these texts."

In this set of stories, Education Week examines the connections between elementary-level reading and writing in three areas—encoding, language and text structure, and content-area learning. But there are so many more examples.

Please write us to share yours when you've finished. ■

OPINION

*Published March 25, 2025*

# If Literacy Is a Priority, Why Do We Cling to the Wrong Practices?

## Reading, writing, and discussing are at the heart of effective reading instruction

By Mike Schmoker

There were two huge developments in the literacy world early this year. First, the emergence of a phonics program that could impact outcomes "dramatically." Gains for 1st graders from the foundational skills curriculum created by researchers at the University of Florida Literacy Institute were found to be equivalent to an extra year and a half of instruction. If widely and well implemented, UFLI Foundations and programs like it could be game-changers.

The second development is bleak. We've recently learned that reading levels have plunged to historically low levels: 40 percent of our students scored at the "below basic" level in reading on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress, and the gap between low and high readers is wider than ever. This should scare the hell out of educators. Poor readers are more likely to drop out of high school and endure a cascade of negative life consequences.

These developments should wake us up to a gargantuan opportunity. They will certainly test our resolve: Is the ability to read, write, and speak effectively truly a K-12 priority?

Because we've known how to ensure record levels of literacy for some time now. We know, for instance, that students who read ample amounts of grade-level, knowledge-rich text will—inexorably—develop powerful vocabularies and become fluent, competent readers. We already know how to increase reading time and reading stamina. Common sense protocols are available to any teacher who wants to expand daily reading volume (and writing and discussion) threefold or more. One key practice is acquainting students with vocabulary they will need before reading begins. Another is directing students to read and reading to them in manageable and increasingly longer increments, punctuated by peer interaction and writing. These practices will never fail us.

We've also learned that some of the most pervasive literacy practices are counterproductive. We know that teaching multiple ability-based groups while most students work at unsupervised "centers" is likely ineffective. We know that an excessive reliance on worksheets, group work, skills instruction, and screen time supplant core literacy activities—the purposeful reading, writing, and discussion that should pervade the disciplines but don't. We know that off-grade learning materials waste hundreds of hours of school time every year.

Our two-hour literacy blocks represent an especially ripe opportunity for improvement: The dominance of the small-group model greatly reduces time with the teacher. One-hundred and twenty minutes divided by four to five groups (with transitions) means students only receive 20 to 30 minutes of actual instruction. And the literacy centers—on which this model often depends—continue to be rife with the kinds of cut, color, and paste activities that I've observed for decades.

There's nothing new or exotic in these do's and don'ts of highly effective literacy instruction. Students thrive where they are given their due.

But decades on, we have yet to get our literacy house in order. Our priorities lie elsewhere—with confusing, overloaded literacy standards, with ill-conceived programs, or with wholly unproven, often tech-based innovations that seduce us with their newness. Once-trusted literacy organizations are now telling us to "decenter" book reading and essay writing. After all, we're now in the age of "digital literacy."

These infatuations only divert us from the less sexy but guaranteed necessities of literacy acquisition. As Doug Lemov tells us, "Low tech, high text. ... Read and read and read. Write and write and write." I would add: Have students discuss and discuss and discuss what they read and write about. That's how schools like View Park Prep in California, Brockton High School in Massachusetts, La Cima Middle School in Arizona, and others were able to achieve dramatic increases in student literacy in as little as a school year.

Lives are at stake. We can continue to dither while students and teachers wait. Or we can use these two developments as a launching pad for profound improvements in authentic literacy.

How can we seize this moment and turn it to good? For one thing, our practice-oriented education books and journals can more prominently feature frank critiques of common but ineffective practices and routines. For another, they can encourage submissions on how successful schools benefit from practices like the above—accompanied by evidence of measurable student outcomes.

To stay on track, educators should examine every aspect of literacy instruction in the bright light of evidence—and jettison the least effective practices. Moreover, every faculty, district office, and school board meeting should include concrete discussions and celebrations of how best practices are being monitored, adjusted, and improved by teacher teams. This means scrutinizing standardized test scores but more importantly (in my view), local, short-term, written assessments—for single literacy lessons and units.

Why haven't we done this yet? Perhaps grade inflation has sapped the urgency needed to make fundamental improvements to literacy practice—to classroom practice overall. We would do well to remind ourselves, too, that in the areas of both curriculum and instruction, most schools have yet to implement many practices with the greatest scientific backing.

If we act boldly in response to these developments, outcomes will improve apace, perhaps spectacularly. And that 40 percent of below basic readers will shrink precipitously. ■

*Mike Schmoker, a former teacher and administrator, is an author, speaker, and consultant. His most recent books are* Results NOW 2.0: Untapped Opportunities for Swift, Dramatic Gains in Achievement (ASCD, 2023) *and* Focus, 2nd edition (ASCD, 2018).

Vanessa Solis/Education Week via Canva

OPINION

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# Bringing the Science of Reading to Your School? Remember This One Thing

## The science of reading can't succeed without the art of teaching

By Scott Gaynor

Seeing a child curled up with a book as they independently learn to read the words and find the meaning in a story is a heartwarming image. We have been taught that learning to read is akin to learning to talk—if children are exposed to the pictures and words often enough, they will learn to read. But findings from thousands of research studies over the past two decades indicate that this magical transformation is not "magic."

After several years of headlines celebrating "the end" of balanced literacy in favor of the evidenced-based phonemic approach, we are still trying to navigate how to teach our children to read. New phonics-based reading curricula have been implemented in districts across the country, along with advocacy efforts and new legislation. But this is merely the first step in giving our teachers the tools they need to build independent, confident readers.

The "reading wars" have brought to public attention what my colleagues in special education have long known and applied in our schools: that reading instruction must be structured, systematic, backed by science, and fun.

In this biweekly column, principals and other authorities on school leadership—including researchers, education professors, district administrators, and assistant principals—offer timely and timeless advice for their peers.

As the head of a school for children with learning differences, I know firsthand how detrimental reading challenges can be. Many students come to our school at an age at which they should be fluent readers but struggle to read even at the basic level. I also know that when teachers feel confident in the instructional methods, they are best equipped to address the varying needs of the children.

In schools beginning a new reading journey, school leaders need to understand that selecting a curriculum is only one aspect of good reading instruction. We are asking teachers to make this titanic shift and to learn new methodologies and skills on the go.

As an education community, to truly be successful with the transition to the science of reading, we need to make sure there is still room for it to partner with the art of teaching. The art of teaching requires the teacher to see the child at the center of the curriculum.

It is no shock that transitions to the science of reading are sometimes met with frustration, anxiety, and even resistance from some teachers and parents. Overwhelmed teachers risk being yet another casualty of the reading wars. We must make sure not to lose the excitement teachers create in their classrooms during reading lessons. They bring the instruction to life, engage our students, and infuse the joy of reading into our young learners.

Teachers need time outside the classroom for professional development as well as experienced supervision in the classroom to learn and implement a different approach. School districts need the resources to offer expertly led professional development sessions, and teachers need time to devote to developing their new skills.

At my school, our reading instruction is steeped in the evidence-based approach of Orton-Gillingham, the founders of modern-day phonics. The lessons are explicit, systematic, and sequential, but they are also multisensory and engaging. Whether they are chanting along with sound cards or tapping out the individual sounds of a word, students are active participants in the lesson. Building on each prior skill, students take great pride in moving from the individual sounds to whole words to reading full sentences.

Mastery of these skills builds confident readers who are able to find meaning in the text and a love of literature. It takes well-trained teachers to unlock these skills.

Last year, my school partnered with a New York City public school to pilot a 15-week science of reading professional development training for local teachers. This year, we doubled the number of participants and added graduate student participants. By the end of the program, 100 percent of the teachers reported they had already implemented the strategies in their classrooms, with 89 percent reporting an improvement in their students' grasp of phonics.

I believe teachers can solve our reading crisis, but we need to give them the grace, time, and resources to make this shift to the science of reading. Teachers need to be fully trained and skilled in this instructional method, so that they can have the confidence and capacity to continue to bring joy to their lessons.

When teachers are comfortable with the

material, they emanate joy and spark student learning. One of the participants of our professional development program who has been an elementary school teacher for decades recently told us she loves teaching phonics now. Her students are engaged with the lessons and have fun—and so does she. ■

*Scott Gaynor has been the head of school at Stephen Gaynor School, an independent pre-K-middle school for students with learning differences in New York, since 1994. He is an executive committee member for the National Center for Learning Disabilities' board of trustees and previously was an adjunct professor at Bank Street College Graduate School of Education.*

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