What You Need to Know: Phonics

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What Is Phonics?

Without phonics, words on a page are meaningless symbols. With phonics, symbols become words that students can understand and interpret. Without phonics, there is no reading. With phonics, all the other reading skills become possible.

Definition

> The ability to transform written symbols into sounds.

Another term for phonics is "decoding." Letters on a page are a form of symbolic code, and "decoding" means understanding that code. A student who can break that code is able to sound out the letters and create spoken words. When you look at text and read it aloud, you are decoding. Even when you read silently, you are hearing the words in your head. You are doing phonics.

However, before phonics can make any sense at all, students must have some skill in phonemic awareness. Students must have some understanding that words are made of individual sounds before they can begin learning how those sounds are represented by letters.

Breaking Down Phonics Skills

Like all other reading components, phonics is not a single skill. Phonics is three skills, which together you use to turn written symbols into sound.

> *Synthetic phonics:* producing the sound for each letter or letter combination and then blending those sounds into words. (a.k.a. "Blending") Example: Say the sounds for "D", "O", "R"; now put them together to make a word.
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> *Analogous phonics:* using knowledge of how letter combinations sound in a known word to help decode a new word. (a.k.a. "Comparing") Example: If you already know how to pronounce "ower" in "flower," then you know that "power" likely has a similar pronunciation because it has the same "ower" combination.
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> *Analytical phonics:* memorizing what sounds are associated with various letter combinations in words, and then analyzing words to find those letter–sound associations. (a.k.a. "Remembering") Example: Analyze the word "sleep" for letter–sound associations, remembering that the sound for the "sl" letter combination, the long-e sound of the "ee" combination, and the sound of the "p" letter.

Explaining These Sub-skills

Synthetic phonics: "Synthesize" means combining parts into a whole thing. With synthetic phonics, you synthesize the individual sounds into whole words. Students learning this skill will produce the sounds for individual letters and digraphs (two letters that combine into a single sound, such as "th"). Students focus on the parts of words and blend them together into whole words. Generally, this is the first phonics skill students begin to learn.

Students start by learning sounds that correspond to letters in the alphabet, and then they begin

learning to decode very simple words that have one sound for each letter, which they can blend into a whole word. Once students learn the "k" sound for "C", the "uh" sound of "U", and the "p" sound made by the letter "P", they can sound out each letter in "cup", and synthesize those sounds into a whole word.

Analogous phonics: "Analogy" means comparing something you do not understand to something you already understand. When you recognize how they are similar, you can begin to understand the new thing. With analogous phonics, you recognize a familiar letter combinations in a new word, one that you already know how to pronounce. Then, you use that knowledge to help you decode the new, unfamiliar word.

Students learn this skill through clusters of words have similar letter patterns and combinations, such as "fall," "ball," "call," and "wall." Once they have learned to pronounce the sound of "all" in the word "fall," they can quickly learn to decode new words with the "all" letter combination because they only need to decode the new letters.

Analytical phonics: "Analytical" means examining something new and then breaking it down into recognizable parts. This is the opposite of synthetic phonics because students start with the whole word and then analyze the parts for letter–sound associations they have been taught.

Analytical phonics is necessary when the sounds for the individual letters cannot be synthesized into the correct sound. For example, the sounds of the letters "I", "G", "H", and "T" in "right" cannot be blended into the "ite" sound; you have to memorize the way they sound when written together.

Integrated Use of the Phonics Sub-skills

Phonics experts debate whether synthetic or analytical phonics are better, with research data suggesting that synthetic phonics may be more useful for most students. Experts who take this approach say that instead of tackling whole words, students should focus on letter sounds and blending them together. One argument they make is that the English language has too many sounds and too many ways to represent those sounds in writing. Trying to memorize them all (the analytic approach) is going to be unnecessarily difficult. And this is likely true.

But what they fail to recognize (or admit) is that even with the synthetic approach, you skill have to memorize that certain letters and letter combinations are pronounced in certain ways, which is more in line with the analytic approach.

And then there is the second sub-skill: analogous phonics. It looks like a combination of synthetic and analytical phonics: take a word, break it into known and unknown parts, and then blend those parts together.

The truth is that each of these sub-skills requires a different set of mental processes, each sub-skill contributes to the other two, and good readers use all three. We help students become strong readers by giving them guidance and practice in all three skills.

For synthetic phonics: you break new words into letters and letter combinations you have memorized (analytic), compare combinations with other words (analogous) for clues on how

they sound, and then blend the sounds of those parts into a word (synthesis).

For analogous phonics: you recognize letter combinations within words (analytic), recall other words with that combination and how those words are pronounced (analogous), and then you blend the sounds of the letter pattern with any other letters or letter combinations in the word (synthesis).

For analytical phonics: you study a whole word (analytical), remember the sounds associated with certain letters and letter combinations learned from other words (analogous), recall the sounds of any additional letters and letter combinations, then blend them together into words (synthesis).

As you begin to think about designing instructional activities for phonics, remember that students need all three skills and incorporate them into the activities: sounding out and blending, finding similarities with other words, and applying direct instruction and memorized patterns to study whole words.

Principles for Phonics Instruction

I often describe phonics and phonemic awareness as two sides of the same coin. These two reading components require similar mental processes, although phonics includes the additional element of letter–sound associations. As evidence of the close ties between phonics and phonemic awareness, reading research and success with our reading programs indicate that both reading components rely on the same instructional principles.

Because your brain does similar things with phonics as it does with phonemic awareness, and because a student's brain grasps concepts of phonics and phonemic awareness through similar processes, the same principles will guide effective instruction in both components.

We will look at instructional strategies next, but all effective strategies and instructional activities are based on the same four principles, as follows.

1. Instruction needs to be explicit and systematic.
2. Instruction should focus on only one or two letter–sound associations at a time.
3. Instruction follows a "continuum of complexity."
4. Instruction needs to combine practice with application.

For a more comprehensive explanation of the first three principles, go back and read the principles of instruction for phonemic awareness again. I will discuss them briefly here as a reminder.

Explicit and Systematic Instruction

"Explicit"means you determine particular letter–sound associations to study. Rather than simply wrestling with decoding troublesome words when students stumble across them and then moving

on, you plan instructional activities to target specific relationships.

"Systematic" means you have a plan. Once students master the letter–sound associations you are teaching them now, you already know what you will teach them next. To guide your "system," refer to the continuum of complexity.

One or Two Letter–sound Associations at a Time

This principle is fairly self-explanatory: determine what letter–sound associations students need to learn, and then focus instruction on the next one or two only. Use the continuum of complexity to determine next steps in learning, select one or two relationships to study within the current level of complexity or the next level, and then design instructional activities to teach them explicitly.

If you try to teach more than a few at a time, students will struggle to learn them. However, when you focus on one or two, and when you let students practice them repeatedly, their brains will develop strong neurological pathways, a form of "mental muscle memory." They will be able to use those skills naturally and without conscious effort. This is how students develop automaticity, i.e., mastery.

Combine Practice with Application

The various instructional strategies described below will help you design effective instructional opportunities for students to master the letter–sound associations. They will help students learn to recognize letter and letter combinations and turn them into sounds. But that is not enough.

Students need to put their fledgling skills into practice...**immediately**.

This means applying the instruction to real, meaningful text. No reading skill is useful until it is applied to meaningful text. Similarly, students strengthen their new skills by using them with text. In this way, students have both a purpose for learning phonics skills and an opportunity to practice those skills.

Does this mean that students will be able to "read" everything that is appropriate for their grade level or age? Of course not. But neither should they wait to read real text until they have mastered all of the phonics skills. As students begin to learn phonics skills, at any level, they need to see how they can apply those skills and how those letter–sound associations are used in text—whether or not they can read the entire text independently.

Following this instructional principle, you will engage students in activities that focus on phonics skills, followed by activities using meaningful text, followed by phonics skills again, followed by text again, followed by.... Back and forth, higher and higher.

Continuum of Complexity

Some phonics skills are easier for students to grasp than others, and some letter combinations are easier to decode than others.

In general, single-letter sounds are less complex than sounds made from multiple letters. Blends are less complex than digraphs, and digraphs are generally less complex than trigraphs.

Do not assume that students at a certain age or grade already understand simple skills or that they are ready for more complex skills. Start with the easy skills and move up the continuum until you reach skills that challenge students. In this way, you help students develop the foundational skills they need to understand more complex letter–sound associations.

The list below demonstrates the typical continuum of skills, from simple to complex. This is a general guide that reflects phonics skills from most simple to most complex.

Students may be at different places on the continuum, and they may find higher skills (though not much higher) easier to grasp than lower skills depending on their level of exposure to text and prior instruction. Because of these issues, students may progress through these skills differently than they are represented here. Regardless, this is a good general continuum.

Most Simple to Most Complex

- Naming the letters of the alphabet
- Producing the most common sounds for each letter beginning with the short sounds of vowels and consonants
- Recognizing and writing single letter–single sound associations
- Producing less common sounds and long sounds for vowels
- Recognizing and writing common V-C and C-V words (example: “to,” “at”)
- Recognizing and writing common C-V-C words (example: “bug”)
- Recognizing and writing common consonant digraphs (example: “sh,” “th”)
- Recognizing and writing common C-V-C-C words (example: “lamp”)
- Changing letters in simple words to produce new words (example: “car” to “far”)
- Recognizing and writing common digraphs that produce the same sound (example: the “sh” sound in “motion” and “shop”)
- Using known letter combinations to blend sounds into new words through word clusters (example: “BL-ank,” “BL-ow,” “BL-ack”)
- Recognizing and writing vowel digraphs with repeated vowels that produce single sounds (example: “ee,” “oo”)
- Recognizing and writing vowel digraphs of different vowels that produce single sound (example: “bean,” “hair”)
- Recognizing and writing less common multi-letter letter combinations that produce single sounds (example: “ough”)
- Recognizing and writing less common digraphs that do not produce the sounds of the letters (example: “knife”)
- Breaking multi-syllabic words into syllables and sounding out, then blending the syllables
- Recognizing and writing various ways that phonemes can be written (example: “door,” “four,” “more”)
- Recognizing patterns for when vowels are produced by long or short vowel sounds (example: “ape” vs. “always”)
- Recognizing the sounds of Greek and Latin roots in words

- Producing the sounds of non-English letter–sound associations (example: “foyer,” “ciao”)

What Works for Phonics Instruction

As just described under instructional principles, you want students to go back and forth between direct instruction and application. The first four strategies listed below focus on direct instruction of phonics skills.

Six Sample Strategies for Teaching Phonics

- Word clusters
- Sight words and phonics
- Matching words with meanings
- Word analysis
- Guided oral reading
- Writing

Word clusters: As with word clusters for phonemic awareness, students study, compare, contrast, sound out, blend, etc. words with similar letter–sound associations. Because children generally begin learning to identify rhymes long before they begin decoding, you will likely begin with simple words that rhyme, such as “car,” “jar,” and “far.” Many words in these simple sets are known as C-V-C words, meaning Consonant-Vowel-Consonant.

As students begin to grasp those simple words, you may begin to work with clusters of words that have similar starting sounds, then middle sounds. Following the continuum of complexity, you will eventually introduce clusters of words with similar sounding digraphs and trigraphs, and with silent letters. Then, you and the students will move to clusters of words that have same sounds but very different letter combinations to produce those sounds, such as “laid,” “played,” and “grade.”

Sight words and phonics: Sight words and phonics are related, but they are not the same.

With sight words, students are taught to automatically recognize whole words, meaning they memorize and can recall that a certain set of letters makes the sound of a particular word. Instruction in sight words, typically some type of recall drill, does help students develop automaticity in word recognition, and it can contribute to reading text. But it still isn’t phonics.

Rather, with phonics, students are learning to decode—to sound out words. This is different than whole word recognition.

The point, however, is that although sight words and phonics are different, students will benefit from both and instruction should include both.

Matching words with meanings: Many students can sound out words in text but have no idea what the text passage is about. I call these students “word callers.” They can perform decoding and call out the words, but they do not have any idea what those words mean. This is frustrating

for students and does not lead to reading comprehension. The missing pieces are vocabulary knowledge and, to some degree, comprehension (but mainly vocabulary). Decoding is only useful if children know the meanings of words they are decoding!

With this strategy, students study the meanings of words that they are decoding. Obviously, most simple words do not need any vocabulary instruction. However, as students begin to encounter more advanced words or words that are related to various topics or school subjects, they will need vocabulary instruction to help them understand what they are reading when they find those words in text.

Word analysis: Some words are long and complicated, but if we study them, we see that they have parts we already know. Rather than being intimidated by those long words, we often find we need only to figure out the unfamiliar parts. Strong readers do this automatically, but younger or weak readers need help separating the known and unknown parts.

Many children look over a piece of text and say, "This is too hard!" We cannot let children say—or think—that. When children feel intimidated by text they have been asked to read, they will have an emotional reaction that will limit their ability to learn. (See chapter 1, section 6: "Create a safe environment" for more about emotions and learning.)

As the teacher, your job is to help students learn the habit of finding the parts they already know. Then, you help them sound out the new parts. Sometimes, the familiar parts are one- or two-letter combinations, but very often they are recognizable patterns, such as "tion" or "ough." For example, the word "thoroughness" is a tough word, but when we analyze the word, we see that it has a couple of common patterns "ough" and "ness." The new part is "thor." Once students sound out that part, they can blend all three parts together to say the entire word. They may surprise themselves by being able to read such big words.

Guided oral reading: Guided oral reading is one of those across-the-board great instructional strategies. It is useful for oral language, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Although there are several ways to do guided oral reading, it generally looks like this for phonics.

1. The student reads aloud to the teacher (or another student), who is listening and reading along silently.
2. The teacher makes note of any words on which the student stumbles or demonstrates difficulty with decoding.
3. Once the student finishes reading the passage, the teacher helps the student sound out the troublesome words, and together they study those words through decoding and blending.
4. The teacher and student may read the passage aloud together a few times.
5. Once the student can correctly decode those words, the student attempts to read the passage aloud again.

By carefully selecting text passages that use the various letter–sound associations being studied, the teacher helps students apply the direct instruction to meaningful text.

Students enjoy this strategy because it gives them an opportunity to keep trying until they get it right. If you provide sufficient time to activities that use this strategy, students will succeed.

Writing: Writing is not reading, but writing can help students develop their phonics skills. If you recall from the continuum of phonics skills, most of the skills include "recognizing and writing." These two skills are closely related. With recognizing, students turn text into spoken words; with writing they turn spoken words into text. In both cases, students are using and practicing letter–sound associations.

Writing activities do not automatically help students improve their phonics skill. On the other hand, they give students opportunities to practice and refine their skills. They also give you the opportunity to identify letter combinations that may be difficult for the student and to provide instruction. When a student asks, "How do you spell [some word]?" your first response can be "What sounds do you hear?" followed by "And what letters can spell those sounds?" Keep track of those letter–sound associations that cause difficulties. You can use them for further instruction.

Sample Activities for Phonics

Strategy	Sample Activity Types	Phonics Sub-skills
Word Clusters	Finding rhymes / Rhyming poetry	Synthetic
	I-Spy	Analogous
	Quick erase / swap	
	Odd word out	
	Word searches in text	
Sight Words and Phonics	Sound timelines	All sub-skills
	Flash cards	
	Identifying site words in text (circle, clap on words, etc.)	
	Sound timelines	
	Call-and-response blending	
Matching Words with Meanings	Word analysis for roots	Analogous

	Graphic organizers	Analytical
	Vocabulary substitution	
	Vocabulary study prior to reading	
Guided Oral Reading	Guided oral reading	All sub-skills
	Choral reading	
Word Analysis	Syllabification	Synthetic
	Sound searching	Analytical
	Word grouping by letter combinations	
	Call-and-response blending	
	Quick erase/swap	
Writing	Rhyming Poetry	Analytical
	Journaling	

What Does Not Work for Phonics Instruction

Many activities used for phonics instruction either do not address phonics or are, at best, minimally effective. Following are common types of ineffective instructional activities for phonics. My recommendation: avoid them.

Strategy	Reason Why It Does Not Work
Incidental Instruction	The research is clear: systematic and explicit instruction works; incidental instruction does not. You have to know what you need to teach, and you have to focus on the phonics skills rather than wait for students to make a mistake and then address the problem.
Reading Drills / Flash Card	Flash cards have their place in phonics instruction, particularly for analytical phonics and developing word recognition automaticity. However, timing

Speed Drills	students and counting the number of correct or incorrect words is not instruction. It is assessment, and it sets up students for failure.
Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)	SSR does not require students to turn text into sound, so it does not require phonics. It might help strengthen existing skills by increasing familiarity with words, but it certainly is not instructional.
Computerized Instruction	I will call this one a "maybe." Computerized instruction may include asking students to click on the word they hear (speech to words) or to identify words that have/do not have certain sounds. On the other hand, it does not address the primary phonics skill, which is decoding text: accurately reading words aloud.
Round Robin Reading	Round robin reading is having students reading aloud one at a time. The first student reads the first part, and then the next student reads the next part, and so forth. In addition to being a frustrating and painful experience for weak readers, round robin reading does not provide any instruction in the phonics sub-skills. Do small-group guided oral reading instead.
Worksheets	Another "maybe." In general, worksheets are not a useful tool for helping students sound out words, though they might be useful for helping students identify words with particular sounds or within a word cluster. They might increase familiarity with groups of words, but they do not address the primary phonics skill, which is decoding text.

Companion Reading Components

Phonics skills are best taught when combined with instruction in the following three reading components. As you are helping students learn phonics skills, also provide instruction in these components.

Phonemic Awareness: Phonemic awareness skills contribute to phonics skills. Both reading components relate to the sounds within words. Whereas phonemic awareness only addresses the sounds in words, phonics addresses the letter–sound associations that students need for decoding. To grasp phonics and build their phonics skills, students have to be able to identify sounds in words.

Vocabulary: In the subsection above on matching words to meanings, I discussed how phonics is worthless if students do not know the meanings of words they read. Indeed, phonics only helps

students read if they know the meanings of words. Provide instruction in vocabulary while providing instruction in phonics—do both at the same time. Help students learn what words mean as they study specific sound–letter associations. Then, as they read meaningful text, they will be able to decode the words and understand what the text.

Comprehension: Once students are able to decode the words, and once they understand what the words mean, they can begin to analyze the text itself. Saying the words aloud correctly is not enough to get to improved comprehension; they have to understand the meanings of words. Similarly, understanding the meanings of individual words is not sufficient. Now, they need to put it all together and study the text. This is when phonics finally becomes reading.