

# Learning to Read and Write in English—It’s Complicated!

BY PATRICIA M. CUNNINGHAM, Ph.D.

Here is a conversation that took place between me (AKA Gram) and my three grandsons—Colin, age 4; Sean, age 7; and Kevin, age 9. Colin and I are baking snickerdoodles. The older boys are in another room reading.

*Gram: When your daddy was a boy, snickerdoodles were one of his favorite cookies, and your daddy liked to help me bake them. Some day, Colin, you will be grown up, and you can teach your kids to make snickerdoodles.*

*Colin: But Gram, I don’t know how.*

*Gram: Well, you know how to crack the eggs and mix the dough and make balls and roll them in cinnamon sugar, and I will email you the recipe so you know how much of each ingredient to use.*

*Colin: But Gram, I can’t read.*

*Gram: You can’t read now, but you will be able to read when you are grown up. In fact, you will begin to learn to read next year in kindergarten.*

*Colin: So, how do you read?*

*Gram: Well, you have to figure out the words.*

*Colin: How do you figure out the words?*

*Sean (chiming in from the other room): You just sound them out!*

*Colin: But how do you sound them out?*

*Kevin (the “know it all” big brother): Actually, Sean, you can’t sound out all the words. A lot of them you just have to remember.*

Argument ensues between Kevin and Sean about whether or not you can sound out most of the words. Colin and I put the snickerdoodles in the oven to bake, and I change the conversation to a less complicated topic!

I begin this paper with that anecdote because many adults, like first-grader Sean, view reading as a simple process of learning how to sound out words! Fourth-grader Kevin, however, realizes that reading is not that simple! I was not able to explain to four-year-old Colin “how we read,” but in this paper I will try to sort out the complexities and convince you that there is no simple, quick, and easy way to teach children to read.



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“There is no simple, quick, and easy way to teach children to read.”

### ENGLISH IS NOT SPANISH!

How many of you speak Spanish? Even if you don't speak Spanish, you can probably read aloud in Spanish if you know the sounds vowels make in Spanish:

a = the sound you hear in aha

e = the sound you hear in egg

i = the sound you hear in tea

o = the sound you hear in goat

u = the sound you hear in June

Try reading this simple sentence aloud.

*Tengo un gato mascota.*

In Spanish, the vowels have one and only one sound no matter where they are in the word! So, if you know the sounds of the letters, you can simply sound out the words—letter by letter. You will sound like you are fluent in Spanish—with just one problem. You won't have any idea what you have just read! You won't know that

*Tengo un gato mascota* means “I have a pet cat.”

In English, the vowels all have a variety of sounds depending on what follows them. The letter *a* commonly represents the sounds in *and*, *made*, *agree*, *art*, *talk*, and *hair*. Further complicating matters, there are many common words such as *coat* and *eat* in which the *a* has none of these six common sounds! The situation gets even more complex when you are trying to spell words in English. The long *a* sound, for example can be spelled *a-y*, *a-i*, or *a-consonant-e* as in the common words *may*, *made*, and *wait*. The fact that the vowel sound can be spelled in different ways is the reason that English has so many words that sound exactly the same but have different spellings and meanings (homophones), as in the sentence:

The maid made the bed.

Anyone who has tried to learn another language realizes that it is a very complicated process.

Imagine the difficulty native Spanish speakers must have learning English when their expectation is that the vowels will always have the same sound! In English, there is predictability in the sounds of the vowel but only when you look at the vowel and the letters that follow. The vowel *o* can have the sounds you hear in the common words *boy*, *not*, *coat*, *out*, *look*, *school*, and *more*. Once you can read these words, however, and know to look not just at the vowel but the vowel and the letters that follow, you can decode lots of other words including *toy*, *joy*, *spot*, *knot*, *goat*, *float*, *shout*, *spout*, *fool*, *cool*, *store*, and *chore*! Most one-syllable words can be decoded by looking at the vowel and what follows it, which we call the spelling pattern.

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### MANY COMMON WORDS DON'T FOLLOW THE PATTERN!

One hundred words account for almost half of all the words we read and write (Fry, Fountoukidis, and Polk, 1985). Ten words—*the*, *of*, *and*, *a*, *to*, *in*, *is*, *you*, *that*, and *it*—account for almost one-quarter of all the words we read and write. When children at an early age learn to recognize and automatically spell the most frequently occurring words, all their attention is freed for decoding and spelling less frequent words and, more importantly, for processing meaning. In order to read and write fluently with comprehension and meaning, children must be able to automatically read and spell the most frequent words. As the store of words they can automatically read and spell increases, so will their speed and comprehension. Learning to read and spell these high-frequency words is difficult, however, because many of the most frequent words are not pronounced or spelled in logical ways: If *the* were pronounced like other words with the same spelling pattern, it would rhyme with *he*, *me*, and *be*; *to* would rhyme with *go*, *no*, and *so*; *said* would rhyme with *maid*

and *paid*; and *have* would rhyme with *cave* and *wave*. If *they*, *was*, and *come* were spelled logically, they would be spelled the way many children spell them—*t-h-a-y*, *w-u-z*, and *c-u-m*. Children must learn to read and spell the most frequently occurring words because these are

“Children must learn to read and spell the most frequently occurring words because these are the words they will read and write over and over.”

the words they will read and write over and over. Many of these words cannot be decoded, and if you spell them logically, you will often be wrong!

### THE PATTERNS THAT WORK FOR SMALL WORDS DON'T WORK FOR BIG WORDS!

Once children learn to automatically read and spell the high-frequency words and the patterns that work for most short words, they can read most texts that are written at a first- or second-grade level. But as they read harder text, they encounter a lot of “big words”—words with seven or more letters such as *musician*, *pollution*, and *international*. These polysyllabic words don't follow the patterns students have learned to use to decode and spell one- and two-syllable words. When writing, they often spell big words with the patterns they have learned for spelling shorter words.

*butefull vacashun awsum difrunt*

There are patterns we all use to decode and spell big words, but these are not the simple rhyming patterns used to spell small words. Most big words are smaller words with prefixes and suffixes added to the beginning or end. When these affixes are added, they often require changes in spelling or pronunciation. Many teachers have noticed something they call the “fourth-grade slump,” in which children who were good readers and

willing writers in the primary grades start to struggle with reading and resist writing. In order to be good readers and writers in the intermediate grades and beyond, children must learn the morphemic patterns that enable us to decode and spell the new words encountered in text.

### READING AND WRITING IN ENGLISH—IT'S COMPLICATED!

So, as I realized when Colin asked me how you read and how you figure out the words, it's complicated! Fourth grader Kevin was right when he told Sean that a lot of the words cannot be sounded out. To become a good reader and writer in English, you have to:

- Learn the spelling patterns used to decode and spell most one- and two-syllable words.
- Learn to automatically read and spell the most-frequent words, many of which do not follow the patterns.

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- Learn to decode and spell polysyllabic words using the morphemic patterns of prefixes and suffixes.
- Develop oral reading fluency—the ability to identify most words quickly and accurately—and to read at an appropriate rate with appropriate expression.

In the remainder of this paper, I will summarize what research tells us about how comprehensive literacy instruction can enable all our children to develop a strong reading and writing foundation.

“Using a variety of approaches to phonics instruction seems to be particularly important for children who struggle with reading.”

### PHONEMIC AWARENESS IS IMPORTANT TO SUCCESS IN BEGINNING READING.

One of the understandings that many children gain from early reading and writing encounters is the understanding that words are made up of sounds. These sounds are not separate and distinct. In fact, their existence is quite abstract. Phonemic awareness has many levels and includes the ability to hear whether words rhyme, to know what word you would have if you removed a sound, and to blend and segment words (Ehri and Nunes, 2002; Norris and Hoffman, 2002). Phonemic awareness seems to be developed through lots of exposure to nursery rhymes, alphabet books, and books that make words sound fun. Although children may be able to learn some letter sounds before they develop phonemic awareness, phonemic awareness must be present before children can manipulate those sounds as they try to read and write words.

### PHONICS IS BEST LEARNED WHEN TEACHERS USE A VARIETY OF APPROACHES.

The question of how best to teach phonics has been debated for over a century. There are a variety of approaches to phonics. Synthetic phonics programs teach sounds first, and children read words that contain those sounds. When children have learned the short sound for *a* and the sounds for *m*, *t*, and *b*, they read the words *am*, *at*, *mat*, *bat*, *tab*, *tam*, and *bam*. As more sounds are added, more “decodable” words are read. The first “stories” the children read contain only words with the sounds they have been taught and a few necessary high-frequency words such as *the*, *is*, and *on*. Analytic programs begin by teaching children some words and then helping children to “analyze” those words and learn phonics rules and generalizations based on those words. Analogic phonics is also based

on words children have learned to read, but rather than teach children phonics rules, children are taught to notice patterns in words and to use the words they know to figure out other words. In an analogic approach to phonics, children would be taught that if you know how to read and spell *cat*, you can also read and spell *bat*, *rat*, *hat*, *sat*, and other rhyming words. In addition to synthetic, analytic, and analogic approaches, Stahl, Duffy-Hester, and Stahl (1998) identify and review research on two “contemporary” approaches to phonics—spelling-based approaches and embedded-phonics approaches. Spelling-based approaches included word sorting and making words. The authors conclude that “both of these approaches seem to be effective as part of overall approaches to teaching reading” (p. 347). Using a variety of approaches to phonics instruction seems to be particularly important for children who struggle with reading. Juel and Minden-Cupp (2000) concluded that the most effective teachers they observed of children who entered first grade with few literacy skills combined systematic letter-sound instruction with onset/rime analogy instruction and taught these units to application in both reading and writing. In summarizing the research on phonics, The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded:

In teaching phonics explicitly and systematically, several different instructional approaches have been used. These include synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, analogy phonics, onset-rime phonics, and phonics through spelling. . . . Phonics-through-spelling programs teach children to transform sounds into letters to write words. Phonics in context approaches teach children to use sound-letter correspondences along with context clues to identify unfamiliar words they encounter in text. Analogy phonics programs teach children to use parts of written words they already know to identify new words. The distinctions between systematic phonics approaches are not absolute, however, and some phonics programs combine two or more of these types of instruction. (p. 89)

### SPELLING INSTRUCTION TEACHES BOTH SPELLING AND READING.

Several recent studies have demonstrated that spelling instruction is effective in helping children learn to decode and spell. Roberts and Meiring (2006) found that first-graders who participated in a spelling approach to decoding were significantly better at

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decoding at the end of first grade than a similar group whose phonics instruction was embedded with literature instruction. These differences applied to children with low, average, and high levels of letter-sound knowledge at the beginning of first grade. The first-graders in the spelling phonics approach demonstrated superior performance on a comprehension test four years later. Graham, Harris, and Chorzempa (2002) found that second-graders experiencing difficulties in learning to spell and given remedial spelling instruction demonstrated significant growth in spelling, writing fluency, and decoding. Weiser and Mathes (2011) did a meta-analysis of studies in which students constructed words from letters or wrote words during phonics instruction. They concluded that children whose phonics instruction included spelling (encoding) words learned to decode much better than children who had systematic decoding instruction alone.

Using a spelling approach to phonics is particularly important for struggling readers. McCandliss, Beck, Sandak, and Perfetti (2003) investigated the effectiveness of Isabel Beck’s instructional strategy, word building, with students who had failed to benefit from traditional phonics instruction. They found that the children who received this word-building instruction demonstrated significantly greater improvements on standardized measures of decoding, reading comprehension, and phonological awareness. Davis (2000) found that spelling-based decoding instruction was as effective as reading-based decoding instruction for all her students but more effective for the children with poor phonological awareness.

## MORPHEMES—PREFIXES, SUFFIXES, AND ROOTS—ARE THE KEYS TO DECODING AND SPELLING MULTISYLLABIC WORDS.

Morphemes—prefixes, suffixes, and roots—are the building blocks of big words. In 1984, Nagy and Anderson published a landmark study in which they analyzed a sample of 7,260 words found in books commonly read in Grades 3–9. They found that most of these words were polysyllabic words and that many of these big words were related semantically through their morphology. Some of these relationships are easily noticed. The words *hunter*, *redness*, *foglights*, and *stringy* are clearly related to the words *hunt*, *red*, *fog*, and *string*. Other, more complex word relationships exist between such words as *planet/planetarium*, *vice/vicious*, and *apart/apartment*. Nagy and Anderson hypothesized that if children knew or learned how to interpret morphological relationships, they could comprehend six or seven words for every basic word known. McCutchen, Green, and Abbott (2008) examined the development of morphological knowledge among older elementary students and the relationship of their morphological knowledge to their decoding ability. They found that morphological awareness continued to develop from fourth to sixth grade and that children’s skill with morphology made a unique contribution to their decoding ability. Carlisle (2010) analyzed 16 studies to determine the value of morphological awareness instruction and concluded that morphological analysis has the potential to contribute to students’ literacy development in phonology, orthography, and word meanings. Goodwin, Gilbert, and Cho (2013) investigated the ability of 213 middle-school students to read 39 morphologically complex words. They found that students’ ability to read a root word such as *isolate* did predict their ability to read a derived word such as *isolation*. Students were less able to use their root-word knowledge when there was a change in pronunciation in the derived word, such as there is in the words *discrete* and *discretionary*.

## FLUENCY IS THE BRIDGE BETWEEN WORD IDENTIFICATION AND COMPREHENSION.

Fluency is the ability to read most words in context quickly and accurately and with appropriate expression (Rasinski, Reutzel, Chard, and Linan-Thompson, 2011). Fluency is critical to reading comprehension because of the attention factor. Our brains can attend to a limited number of things at a time. If most of our attention is

focused on decoding the words, there is little attention left for the comprehension part of reading—putting the words together and thinking about what they mean. In order to read fluently, children must learn to instantly recognize high-frequency words. When you recognize almost all the words, an unfamiliar word gets your immediate attention and you will stop and figure it out (Juel, 1990; Samuels, 2002; Stanovich and West, 1989). Fluency develops when children do lots of reading—including a great deal of easy text. Repeated reading helps children develop fluency because with each reading, their word identification becomes quicker and more automatic, freeing attention for expression, phrasing, and comprehension (Rasinski, 2017). Allington (2009) suggests three reasons some students struggle to become fluent readers. First, much of what struggling readers are given to read is too difficult. Second, struggling readers read much less than more capable readers. Finally, teachers often ask struggling readers to read aloud and then immediately interrupt that reading to correct reading errors. These struggling readers come to rely on the teacher to correct their errors and don't develop self-monitoring strategies.

The National Reading Panel (2000) explains this relationship between reading comprehension and fluency:

If text is read in a laborious and inefficient manner, it will be difficult for the child to remember what has been read and to relate the ideas expressed in the text to his or her background knowledge. (p. 11)

## **BECAUSE LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE IS COMPLICATED, CHILDREN NEED COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY INSTRUCTION!**

Colin is now in kindergarten and (thankfully!) he is indeed learning to read. He is learning the phonics skills Sean told him he needed to sound out words. He is also learning to read and spell the high-frequency words that, as Kevin explained, “can’t be sounded out—you just have to know them.” He is also doing lots of easy reading—both at home and at school—and developing the fluency that is indeed the bridge between word identification and comprehension. Colin’s teacher, parents, and Gram are making sure he gets the comprehensive reading instruction he needs so that, when the time comes, he can read the recipe and make snickerdoodles with his own children!

“Repeated reading helps children develop fluency because with each reading, their word identification becomes quicker and more automatic, freeing attention for expression, phrasing, and comprehension.”

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