

## Welcome and Overview

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Twenty years ago, I wrote my first book on phonics, *Phonics From A to Z*. When it was published, the field of education was at the height of the “phonics versus whole language” debate. This debate led to an all-out reading war pitting teachers who favored a strong skills instructional approach for beginning readers against those who believed children learn to read primarily through exposure to great trade books, a love of and interest in reading, and some lighter skills work. Of course, this is an oversimplification, but the battle lines were drawn, and teachers were forced to take sides. As a young educator and recent Harvard graduate, I understood why whole language gained in popularity. Following years of skill-and-drill phonics work, teachers craved something fresh and exciting. Along came whole language with its promise that by reading great books to children and getting them interested in reading again, we would solve the reading crisis. Teachers were hungry for an approach that seemed to promise greater student engagement, authenticity of reading and writing experiences, and independence.

Whole language ultimately failed to be the magic bullet that transformed all students into readers. But while it was having its day in the sun, those of us who carefully examined the research that supported explicit, systematic teaching of phonics kept practicing, kept publishing, and endured being pilloried in the media, who loved to present this debate in terms of either-or extremes.

Flash forward to the present: The media, and some in the education field, still continue to pit phonics against other practices within balanced literacy as if it is an all-or-nothing proposition, but the overwhelming research support for phonics turns any media buzz into white noise. More importantly, teachers today are levelheaded and savvy about media spin. They realize that phonics helps students gain access to words, which in turn helps them gain access to meaning. And that is the point of reading—to comprehend the information, to learn something new, to enjoy escaping into the world of a story. Phonics is just a tool to gain that access. Most teachers also understand that students need to be immersed in great literature from the beginning—books that inspire their curiosity about words, expose them to new vocabulary and ideas, and delight them. Effective instruction in the primary grades involves reading hundreds of picture books to, with, and by children along with an explicit phonics program.

I’m not a political person. I don’t enjoy the art of the argument. I like facts. Data. Solid research. Truth. My goal with this book is to provide evidence-based

solutions and options to help you become more efficient at meeting the decoding needs of your early readers. This book is a reflection on decades of my work on phonics—how students break the code and develop a deep understanding of how English words work. I’ve looked at which instructional practices and materials have stood the test of time, which have failed, which need fine-tuning to maximize their potential for helping students achieve greater success, and which are missing from most classrooms.

I understand that education, for complex reasons, is always particularly vulnerable as a profession to all-or-nothing thinking and neck-bending pendulum swings, and as I work in schools providing professional development, I see that phonics can’t shake this skill-and-drill reputation, this notion that it’s going to somehow be damaging to children if they are subjected to weeks and months (even years) of decodable texts and rote instruction. However, the reality is that explicit phonics instruction, when done effectively (i.e., not rote, but active and thought-provoking, instruction), is a transitory phase of learning to read, and never keeps students from reading and engaging with high-quality trade books. In fact, research shows students who received explicit phonics instruction are better able to select and read trade books independently than those who didn’t receive systematic instruction, but more on that later.

So, at its heart, this book is designed to show how phonics and great literature easily and naturally coexist in K–2 classrooms. And beyond that, I want to show you how to best use phonics instruction to meet the decoding needs of your early readers. Some of the things in this book might make a big impact on your teaching; others might not. I offer them only as things to try—things that have worked in other schools and classrooms. My hope is that they will encourage you to think about your phonics instruction in a fresh way. The best teachers I’ve worked with over the years are never satisfied. They are always questioning, always searching, always striving to improve their practices. That is why, I believe, you are reading this book. Hopefully, the ideas presented will create a conversation within your district and among your grade-based teacher teams to challenge everyone who comes in contact with your early readers to push their instruction to its highest level. All of our students deserve that.

One common thread throughout the book is this need to constantly take a step back from our practices and reevaluate them objectively. We have a habit in education of taking an idea, falling in love with it, and digging in our heels even when there is evidence that our original idea needs some modifications. Sometimes we even apply the ideas in ways that were never intended. It’s like

falling in love with bell-bottom pants (you know who you are) and continuing to wear them even when the world has moved on to skinny jeans. It is a look, just not the right one for today.

I also feel strongly that we shouldn't stake our professional identity on any one particular idea, philosophy, or method. Rather, we should stake our identity on the pursuit of being the best teacher, literacy coach, principal, or administrator we can be. That requires us to be open and flexible in our understanding as new information presents itself, but having a strong enough foundation in early reading that we can process that information, filtering out what isn't strong or useful, ignoring hype, and demanding data. A teacher with a strong foundation is less likely to sway with the pendulum.

**If you are a new teacher**, or perhaps one who was trained in the No Child Left Behind era, and currently working with a curriculum that comes with intense pressure to get students to Common Core State Standards grade-level benchmarks, then I want this book to provide you with the basics to build the strongest phonics foundation possible and filter through the activities and routines provided in your curriculum to select the best, toss out those that are ineffective, and modify those that aren't working to capacity.

**If you are a veteran teacher**, and perhaps one who feels forced to use a phonics program that isn't meeting the needs of your students, then this book will be a benefit because it reiterates what you know about strong instruction and prompts you to explore ways you can fine-tune that expertise, giving you the data to modify faulty instructional materials and practices with confidence.

**If you are a principal**, either looking at K–2 student test data that concern you or ready to upgrade professional development for teachers around phonics and early reading, then this book will be an aid because it's organized to facilitate collegial conversations focusing on the seven distinct and essential aspects of successful phonics instruction and the 10 common reasons instruction sometimes fails. The book also provides brief, succinct overviews of phonics background research and key instructional routines for you to refer to when evaluating teachers' instructional effectiveness.

**If you are a coach**, I encourage you to use this book to organize differentiated support for your teachers. Throughout the book, you'll find Day Clinic pages that facilitate teacher self-reflection and provide in-class activities for teachers to try, examine, and reflect on.

**For all readers,** I hope that this book provides the answers you’ve been looking for as to why your students in Grades K–2 are not meeting and/or exceeding expectations despite your efforts and resources. These answers have deep roots in the research of others but, perhaps more importantly, in my own professional experiences in the field. For me, the three words that best describe quality phonics instruction are *active, engaging,* and *thought-provoking*. I hope that these three words can also be used to describe this book and your exploration of phonics instruction.

## IMPORTANT NEW BRAIN RESEARCH

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We should always put our stake in the firmest ground possible (i.e., a deep understanding of what works as evidenced by solid research and classroom application), remembering that this stake is not in cement. An exciting aspect of being teachers is that we are always learning. New research continually provides insights into how to best meet our students’ needs. For example, in the past several years, brain research has been providing exciting insights into how we learn and has forced us to reexamine our practices in light of these new understandings. A recent brain research study out of Stanford revealed that “beginning readers who focus on letter-sound relationships, or phonics, instead of trying to learn whole words, increase activity in the area of their brains best wired for reading” (Wong, 2015). That is, words learned using letter sounds activate the left side of the brain. This is where the visual and language regions of the brain reside. Words learned using a whole-word method activate the right side of the brain. This is significant because left-brain activation during reading is characteristic of skilled readers and is generally lacking in both children and adults who struggle with reading. The researchers described it as “changing gears” while reading. When you focus your attention on different aspects of a word, you activate, or amplify, different parts of your brain. So cool! And it is fascinating that we can now map the brain activity when students read and learn using different teaching methods and practices. Brain research is also suggesting that the learning pathways can be altered with specific methods. This has remarkable potential for teaching and learning.

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

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I’ve organized *A Fresh Look at Phonics* into two major sections. **In the first section,** I examine the key characteristics of strong phonics instruction. While

most teachers have some or all of these in place, I offer guidance in fine-tuning that instruction to take it to the next level and increase student reading growth. The characteristics I explore include

1. **Readiness skills:** I examine the two best predictors of early reading success—phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition—and their role in beginning phonics instruction.
2. **Scope and sequence:** I examine the characteristics of a strong scope and sequence that builds from the simple to the complex in a way that works best for student learning.
3. **Blending:** I examine the main strategy for teaching students how to sound out words, its various forms, and how to enhance blending work to provide deeper, richer, more differentiated decoding practice.
4. **Dictation:** I examine how to best transition students' growing reading skills to writing through all-important guided spelling activities.
5. **Word awareness:** I examine two key aspects of word awareness for early readers—word sorts and word building—and how they solidify and consolidate students' understanding of how English words work.
6. **High-frequency words:** I examine how best to teach those high-utility words that are irregular based on common sound-spelling patterns or need to be taught before students have all the phonics skills to access them through sounding out.
7. **Reading connected text:** I examine the power of the types of text we use in early reading instruction and the impact decodable text has on early reading and writing growth, as well as motivation to read.
8. **You, the teacher:** I point out how the power and impact of the above characteristics depend on them being implemented by a skilled, informed teacher and explain how to build teacher capacity through differentiated professional development.

In this first section, each characteristic of strong phonics instruction is examined from several vantage points. Some of you will encounter this information fresh (e.g., preservice teachers, beginning teachers, or experienced teachers new to the primary grades); others will have years of experience using some or all of these

instructional routines, procedures, and techniques in their classrooms. Therefore, each characteristic will be explored by

1. Examining the background information associated with each characteristic so you have a solid understanding of its research base
2. Looking at best practices associated with each characteristic and ways to identify if you have these in place in your classroom
3. Exploring key issues and pitfalls associated with each characteristic that often stand in the way of its effectiveness as a teaching tool
4. Giving you an opportunity to engage in activities associated with each characteristic to identify ways in which it might assist you in your teaching and deepen your understanding of its instructional benefits
5. Providing you with ways to take each characteristic to the next level if you already have the basics in place and want to fine-tune your instruction to maximize student learning

**In the second section,** I examine the 10 most common causes of phonics instructional failure. These causes are based on my observations and work with school districts in which I have been asked to compare test data with instructional materials and practices when there is a disconnect. That is, I delve in to find the root causes of failure when schools have what they believe are strong instructional materials teachers are routinely implementing, yet the test scores associated with phonics skills and early reading show students are not making adequate progress. This can be perplexing for a teacher, school, or district because, on paper, it doesn't make sense. What I've discovered is that, in most instances, there isn't one main cause of this systematic breakdown. Rather, a combination of these causes can create a perfect storm of failure to the great disappointment of caring, committed teachers. To avoid this, I've outlined the 10 major causes and ways to avoid or fix them:

1. Inadequate or nonexistent review and repetition
2. Lack of application to real reading and writing experiences
3. Inappropriate reading materials to practice skills
4. Ineffective use of the gradual release model
5. Too much time lost during transitions

6. Limited teacher knowledge of research-based phonics routines and linguistics
7. Inappropriate pacing of lessons
8. No comprehensive or cumulative mastery assessment tools
9. Transitioning to multisyllabic words too late
10. Overdoing it (especially isolated skill work)

In this section, I draw from some of the material in the first section and review it as needed. In fact, you will find a fair amount of repeated information in this book. That is because I know the book will be the kind of resource you dip into to explore specific areas of interest. Plus, it never hurts to hear the same thing multiple times!

This second section requires a great deal of reflection on your classroom practices and an intense examination of your classroom materials. It's the kind of challenging thinking that can really affect teaching and learning, and I applaud you for jumping in and taking that challenge. Our students deserve us to be at our best, deserve the strongest materials and instructional practices, and deserve all this delivered by someone who deeply cares about giving them the tools to be successful readers, writers, and lifelong learners. That defines a teacher. It is a responsibility we've all accepted. And we are proud to do so!

I wish you the best of luck as you continue to transform your classroom practices and hope that this book will spark discussion and thought.

Enjoy.



Wiley Blevins