



# PARENT READING GUIDE

**What parents need  
to know about  
reading skills and  
struggling readers**

# Introduction



One of the most important things your child will learn in school is how to read. Literacy is a crucial way we access and interact with the world around us. Everyone needs the ability to read in order to function in our modern world. As our world has become more automated, and the internet more integrated into all of our lives, the importance of reading has grown. Today reading skills are necessary for everything from ordering food, to booking appointments, to finding employment, and it remains the gateway to information and higher learning.

Despite being a key skill in our society, most children will not learn to read on their own. Learning to speak and listen is a natural process that typically developing children learn by being immersed in oral language; **learning to read is not, and must be taught** (Wolf 2008, Dehaene 2009). This is because the written code that represents our spoken language is a human invention that must be taught from one generation to the next. Although some children “crack the code” quite easily, being immersed in a print-rich or language-rich environment will not be enough for most students to learn to read. While some students will learn more easily than others, every student benefits from explicit, systematic, and sequential instruction of the code (Moats 2020).





@school

# Did You Know? The FACTS about reading

Written by Stacey Rickman

## Learning to read is **NOT** a natural process - reading must be taught.



Our brains are prewired for speaking and listening, but not for reading and writing (Wolf 2008, Dehaene 2009). While some students will learn to read more easily than others, all students benefit from explicit, systematic, and sequential literacy instruction to “build the reading brain.”

## Any student can have trouble learning to read, not just students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia.



All students learn to read at different rates because the acquisition of the foundational skills necessary for reading develop along a continuum (Moats 2020a, Seidenberg 2017). Some students require significantly more instruction than others to “crack the code” (Spear-Swerling 2022).

## Learning to read continues long after Grade 3.



Once students are reading with fluency in later primary grades, reading instruction focuses on accurate decoding of complex multisyllabic words, morphology, spelling, building background knowledge, reading comprehension, and writing. Students are constantly learning to read and write with increasing ability well into high school, and beyond.

## We all decode, or “get the words off the page,” in the same way.

All readers learn to read by matching the symbols on the page to the sounds they represent and blending these sounds together to form words (Dehaene 2009, Moats 2020a).



## Learning to read begins long before Grade 1.



Oral language, the foundation for learning to read, begins to develop the moment we are born. Print concepts (such as reading from left to right and from top to bottom on a page, in English) develop when adults read to children and explore books and other texts together in a print-rich environment. In kindergarten, formal literacy instruction includes developing an awareness of how words are made of sounds (phonemic awareness) and how those sounds are represented, in predictable ways, by letters (phonics).

## We know how to teach reading so that close to 95% of children can become proficient readers.

Reading is the most studied cognitive process in humans. Reading is well understood within the fields of cognitive science, neuroscience, educational psychology, and speech-language pathology. When all students are taught to read using evidence-based methods, we can expect 95% of them to experience success (Moats 2020b).



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# PART 1: The Struggling Reader



It is not uncommon for some students to have a **harder time with letter sounds** than their peers, which can affect all areas of reading and writing, including spelling, word recognition, vocabulary development, and comprehension.

A condition, such as a learning disability (LD) in reading, can make it harder for a child to learn the necessary skills to read. Learning disabilities are **brain-based difficulties** that reflect impairments in one or more of the psychological processes. The majority of students with identified LDs struggle with some aspect of reading. In fact, it is estimated that 89% of individuals with LDs have an LD in the area of reading (Fitzer & Hale, 2015).

It is important to remember that if your child has a reading disability, this does not reflect on their intelligence or their potential. It just means they may have to work harder than their peers to learn and demonstrate their learning.

Whether your child has been identified as a struggling reader or formally diagnosed with a learning disability, everyone learns to read by building the same foundational reading skills.

**When taught to read in science-based, systematic, and explicit ways, approximately 95% of students can learn to read (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009).**

Without evidence-based intervention strategies, the problems your child is experiencing learning to read can grow, and the gaps between your child and their peers will get bigger.

## **Science-based**

*(sometimes called evidence-based) – Over 40 years of research in education, psychology, and neuroscience has taught us so much about how the brain learns to read. This science has shown us that the foundational reading skills are the same for all people and all spoken languages.*

## **Systematic**

*Students are taught using a carefully planned process where new skills build on previously learned concepts.*

## **Explicit**

*Explicit teaching means that lessons are taught in a clear structured way. This usually starts with a modelling stage, where the teacher shows exactly how the task should be performed. This is followed by a gradual release of responsibility to the students, first in guided practice, where the teacher steps in where needed and then through independent practice, until the student can complete the task alone.*

# What does a Struggling Reader Look Like?

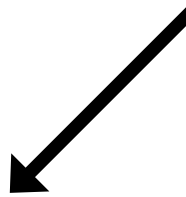
## Preschool:

- Delayed speech
- Difficulty with rhyming, syllables, learning names of letters
  - Frequent mispronunciation of words



## Elementary:

- Difficulty matching letters and sounds
- Unable to identify first, middle, or last sound in spoken words
- Trouble breaking words into syllables
  - Difficulty sounding out
  - Avoidance of reading
- Persistent confusion of letters that look or sound the same
- Inability to form letters correctly
  - Reverse, omit, add, subtract or transpose letters
  - Difficulty with spelling, capitalization, punctuation



## Middle school:

- Slow and laboured oral reading
- Difficulty reading and spelling, especially long words
- Lack of awareness of word structures
- Difficulty with vocabulary and grammar
- Struggles to get ideas on paper



## High school +:

- Struggles to gain knowledge from written material
- Difficulty taking notes
  - Trouble learning foreign languages
  - Slow reading rate

## What happens to students who have difficulty learning to read?

### Can lead to:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| • Low academic achievement             | • Less likely to attend postsecondary                |
| • Low self-esteem                      | • Underemployment                                    |
| • Mental health concerns               | • Poverty  |
| • School avoidance                     | • Homelessness                                       |
| • Increased likelihood of dropping out | • Higher rates of involvement in crime/incarceration |

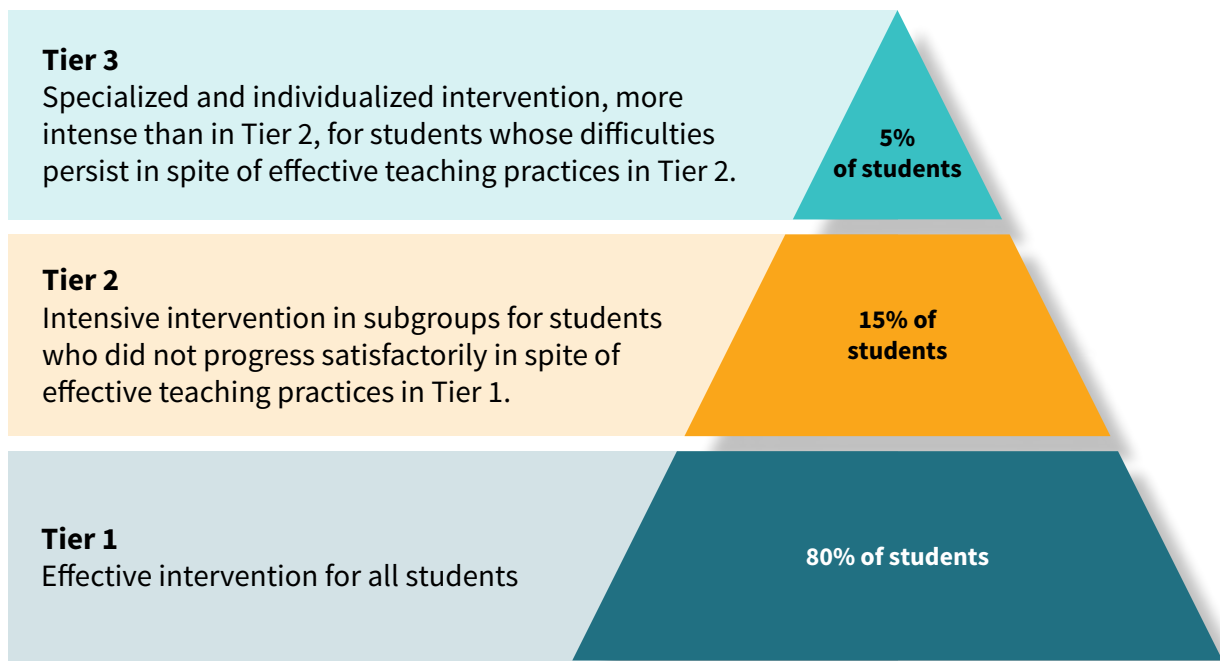
# PART 2: How Reading is Taught in Ontario?



## The Tiered Approach

**No single way of teaching will ever work for all students.** This is why the Ontario Ministry of Education advocates for the use of what it calls the “Tiered Approach” in teaching. This is sometimes referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI) outside of Ontario.

Instead of waiting for a student to fail an assessment, or the entire grade, before getting extra help, the tiered approach allows educators to respond to children’s needs as they happen.



**Tier 1:** All students are taught using sound, evidence-based teaching practices designed to allow all students to succeed.

**Tier 2:** If students fail to learn a particular concept, or struggle to learn it, they may be moved to Tier 2, which is intense and focused, small-group instruction. If a student grasps the concept, they will return to the general Tier 1 learning environment.

**Example of Tier 2 reading support:** *small group phonemic awareness lessons, one-on-one reading time with the teacher*

**Tier 3:** Students who continue to fail to make progress in Tier 2 are moved to Tier 3. This last tier is typically comprised of intensive individual instruction.

**Example of Tier 3 reading support:** Empower Reading Program, moving the student to a special education classroom.

# PART 2: How Reading is Taught in Ontario?



## The Right to Read Inquiry

The Supreme Court of Canada released a unanimous decision in 2012, recognizing that learning to read is not a privilege but a basic and essential human right.

### The Court said:

*“...adequate special education...is not a dispensable luxury. For those with severe learning disabilities, it is the ramp that provides access to the statutory commitment to education made to all children...”*

Almost 10 years later, on February 28, 2022, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) released the findings of the Right to Read inquiry and their recommendations for improving literacy instruction in Ontario ([click here to access the OHRC Right to Read Executive Summary and Key Recommendations](#)). The report revealed that methods used to teach reading to students in Ontario have been seriously flawed. The report states that:

*“Ontario’s public education system is failing students with reading disabilities (such as dyslexia) and many others, by not using evidence-based approaches to teach them to read” (OHRC, 2022a).*

By implementing the recommendations of the OHRC at the foundational classroom level, educators can improve reading scores and skills, while significantly reducing the need for Tier 2 and 3 supports.

The Right to Read report provided **over 150 recommendations** to improve how reading is taught in Ontario.

### Core Recommendations of the Report:

1. Changes should be made to curriculum and instruction to teach word reading in an evidence-based way.
2. Students in Kindergarten through to Grade 2 should be screened twice a year to identify struggling readers.
3. All reading interventions should be evidence-based and provided to **ALL** students who need them.
4. Accommodations such as assistive technology should be accessible to all students, however they are NOT a substitute for teaching students to read.
5. Professional assessments should be timely, based on clear criteria, and the selection process should account for the risk of bias students may experience due to their cultural, linguistic, racial, or economic background. **Professional assessments should never be required for interventions or accommodations.**

# PART 2: How Reading is Taught in Ontario?

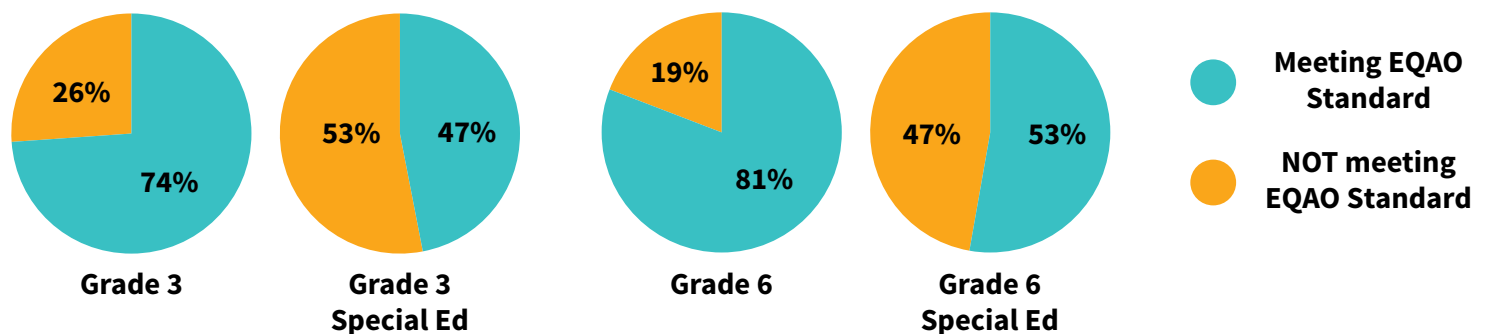


## Current State of Reading in Ontario

The most effective approach to teaching children to read has been a subject of intense debate over the years. While some believed that exposure to books and being read to would be sufficient for children to acquire reading skills, this method proved inadequate for all children. Consequently, many students were left struggling and unable to keep up with their peers.

Every year since 1996, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) has administered standardized tests to all Grade 3 and Grade 6 students attending publicly funded schools in Ontario. These tests of literacy and math skills are meant to provide a snapshot of student learning and indicate whether students are meeting the provincial standards.

Although the science of reading has shown us that about 95% of students are capable of learning to read, results from EQAO tests show that we are not reaching those numbers in Ontario.



EQAO results for students with special education needs may be even lower than the graphs above implies. This is because many students with learning disabilities or other special education needs are either exempt from taking the EQAO test or are able to take the test with accommodations. By excluding students who would score poorly on the test or allowing students to use accommodations that may compensate for their weak literacy skills, such as a screen reader or scribe, the EQAO may be artificially enhancing literacy scores.

The EQAO results also show a noticeable achievement gap for students from racialized backgrounds, such as First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Black, and Latinx students, as well as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These results indicate that the EQAO test might not be an equitable practice.

The way that reading is currently taught in Ontario varies by board, school, and even teacher. The OHRC's Right to Read report has recommended that all school boards begin providing science-based classroom reading instruction. Having province-wide consistency means that regardless of their location in Ontario or the school they attend, all students will have equitable access to high-quality literacy instruction. In addition, the OHRC has recommended that when school boards provide reading interventions, they should be offered as early as possible and should be proven effective.

Not being a good reader means you are not a motivated reader...

**Grade 3:** 44% of students reported they liked to read  
**Grade 6:** 42% of students reported they liked to read

...and leads to low reading confidence

**Grade 3:** 38% thought they were **not** a good reader  
**Grade 6:** 33% thought they were **not** a good reader



Taken from: IDA Ontario (2021). Lifting the Curtain on EQAO Scores. <https://www.idaontario.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/LiftingTheCurtainOnEQAO69747.pdf>



## PART 2: How Reading is Taught in Ontario?



### How is Reading Assessed?

How do we know who is a good reader and who is a struggling reader? In the past you may have been told that your child reads at a specific grade level. But what does it mean to read at a Grade 2 level? And what skills do we need to build to bump that student up to Grade 3 level?

Instead of using reading tests that indicate the “grade-level” of the reader, the Right to Read report states that “Ontario needs to standardize early screening and make it universal (applied to every student) and **based on the reading science**” (p. 35, OHRC, 2022).

Universal screenings are very brief, standardized measures that quickly and efficiently identify a student’s current skills and identify which students are at risk. Students are assessed on several indicators of early literacy skills appropriate for their age and grade.

Screening students early (between Kindergarten and Grade 2) helps to catch struggling readers before they start experiencing significant difficulties that may impact their academic futures. This reduces the need for professional intervention from psychologists or speech-language pathologists and more intensive special education supports later on.

Students who fall at or below predetermined benchmarks are deemed “at risk” and will likely need additional support to allow them to meet future goals. Students who are at risk might need additional assessment to pinpoint the skills that they need to work on.

### Important Reading Facts:

- *Reading is based on a series of skills that build upon one another. This means that you can assess the building blocks of reading long before a student is able to sit down and read a book from start to finish, even before they can read a single word or sentence.*
- *The earlier that intervention is received to help build reading skills, the more effective it is.*



# PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



Unfortunately, many people have difficulty developing the skills necessary for successful reading. It is important to understand these skills and to recognize if your child is having difficulty with them, **it is not because your child is not trying**. Rather, it is because the physiology of a child’s brain can make reading an extremely difficult task.

Whether there is a learning disability present or not, everyone learns to read by building the same foundational reading skills. These skills usually begin to develop before school starts.

## Pre-Reading Skills

Long before children can read words, they are learning about reading and writing just by being exposed to books and being read to. These skills are often grouped together into a concept called “print awareness” which includes understanding:

- That written text conveys sounds that can be spoken
- That text contains information
- Spacing, capitalization, and punctuation marks
- The direction of text. For example, in English, we read left to right, but other languages may have different conventions (i.e.,) (Hebrew: right to left, Japanese: top to bottom then right to left)

During this time, children are also building their listening comprehension and their motivation to read. By reading aloud to children, we can establish reading as an enjoyable pastime while also introducing new words and concepts.



# PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



“The goal of reading is to understand and make meaning from what is read.”  
(*Right to Read* | Ontario Human Rights Commission, p. 20)

Reading comprehension, or the ability to understand the meaning of printed text, is made up of two components: decoding and oral language comprehension.

This formula is referred to as the Simple View of Reading (*Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990*). It is shown as a multiplication equation to underscore that if either of the components is missing, reading comprehension is not possible.

For some words, especially those that are very common or don't follow regular rules for pronunciation (for example: the, was, etc.), memorization is a good strategy. However, there are far too many different words in any language to memorize them all. That's why we need a strategy when encountering a new word: decoding.



## Decoding

**Decoding** is the process of turning written words into the corresponding spoken word. It is also known as ‘sounding out’.

Decoding, also known as word recognition, is a process that relies on the underlying skills of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and alphabet knowledge.

**Note:** The opposite of ‘decoding’ is ‘encoding,’ a.k.a. spelling. Strong readers are able to turn symbols into sounds (reading) and sounds into symbols (spelling).

You may hear teachers talking about decodable texts. These books are designed to encourage sounding out, only using words that use letter/sounds the students have learned. This way your child is relying on skills that they have already learned to read the text, rather than guessing at what the text says. This also means your child is less likely to get overwhelmed and more likely to enjoy their time reading.

# PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills

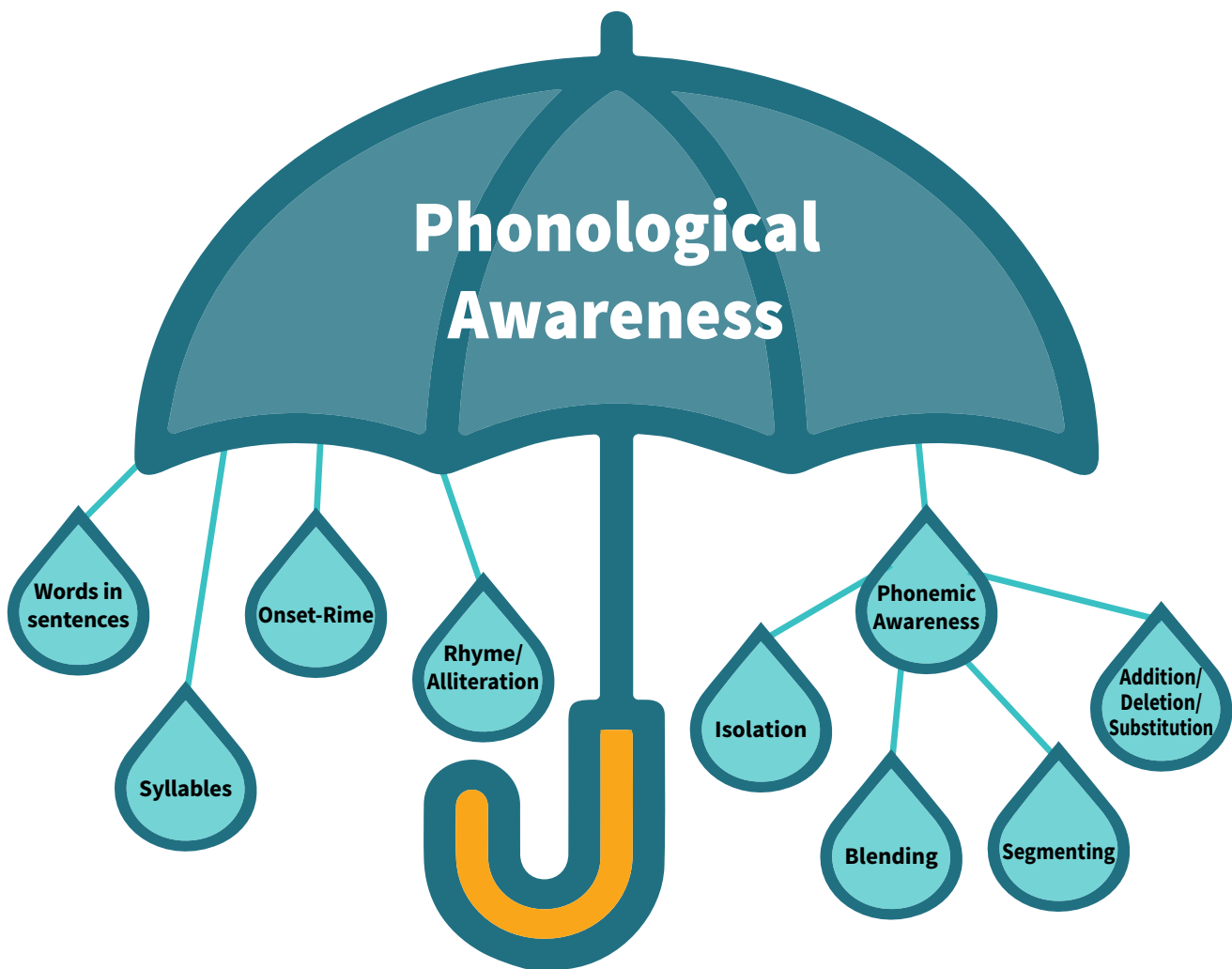


## Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that refers to the ability to think about the sounds that make up spoken language. It includes being able to:

- Hear and break sentences **down into individual words**
- Hear and break words **down into syllables**
- Hear and break syllables **down into** smaller chunks, called **onsets and rimes**  
(e.g., *pat* can be broken down into the onset “p” and the rime “at” and *slip* would be broken down into “sl” and “ip”)
- Notice and understand **rhymes**
- Notice **alliteration** (i.e., Five fluffy foxes)

Phonological awareness is a strong predictor of future reading success. Being able to break words down into their smaller components is the only way to learn to sound out words.



# PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



## Phonemic Awareness

Also included under the umbrella of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness.

**Phonemic awareness relates to the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the smallest units of sound (phonemes) in human speech that make up a specific language.**

In The English alphabet has 26 letters that represent 44 phonemes (speech sounds). Some letters make more than one sound (i.e., The letter C can be pronounced as /s/ or /k/, and both sounds are present in the word “circle”). Sometimes combinations of letters are used to represent a single sound (sh-, ch-, etc.), and sometimes words contain letters that make no sound at all (silent letters). This can make learning to read very difficult.

In order to successfully learn to read, children need to be able to:

- **Match** phonemes - the ability to identify words that begin with the same sound.
  - ▷ Q: Do “cat” and “car” start with the same sound or different sounds?
  - ▷ A: Same sound
- **Isolate** phonemes - the ability to isolate a single sound from within a word.
  - ▷ Q: What is the first sound in the word “mat”?
  - ▷ A: /m/
- **Blend** phonemes - the ability to blend individual sounds into a word.
  - ▷ Q: What happens if we add a /s/ sound to the beginning of the word “tint”?
  - ▷ A: “stint”
- **Segment** phonemes - the ability to break a word into individual sounds.
  - ▷ Q: How many sounds make up the word “car”? How many sounds make up the word “cash”?
  - ▷ A: “car” has 3 sounds /k/ /a:/ /r/, “cash” has 3 sounds /k/ /ae/ /sh/
- **Manipulate** phonemes - the ability to modify, change, or move the individual sounds in a word.
  - ▷ Q: What word do we get if we change the /s/ sound in “sink” to an /r/ sound?
  - ▷ A: “rink”

# PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



## Alphabet knowledge

Once a child can hear, identify, and manipulate the sounds in words, the next step is to match those sounds with the written symbols our language uses to represent sounds. This is known as “**alphabet knowledge**”, which, at its simplest, is knowing the names and sounds of all the letters.

Alphabetic knowledge is taught through phonics, a systematic and structured way of teaching the relationships between the sounds and symbols used by our language. **Phonics** first teaches children the sound or sounds made by each individual letter, then gradually introduces more complex combinations, where vowels and letter combinations can affect the sounds being made.

Readers need to be able to:

- **Name** the letters of the alphabet
- **Make the corresponding sound/sounds**
- **Recognize and recreate letters** (upper case and lower case, across different fonts)

*A great way of testing a child’s alphabetic knowledge is by having them **sound out nonsense words** like “dag” or “lish”. These words follow the same pattern as English words, but there is no chance the student already learned this word. Therefore, you are only testing their decoding skills, not their background knowledge.*



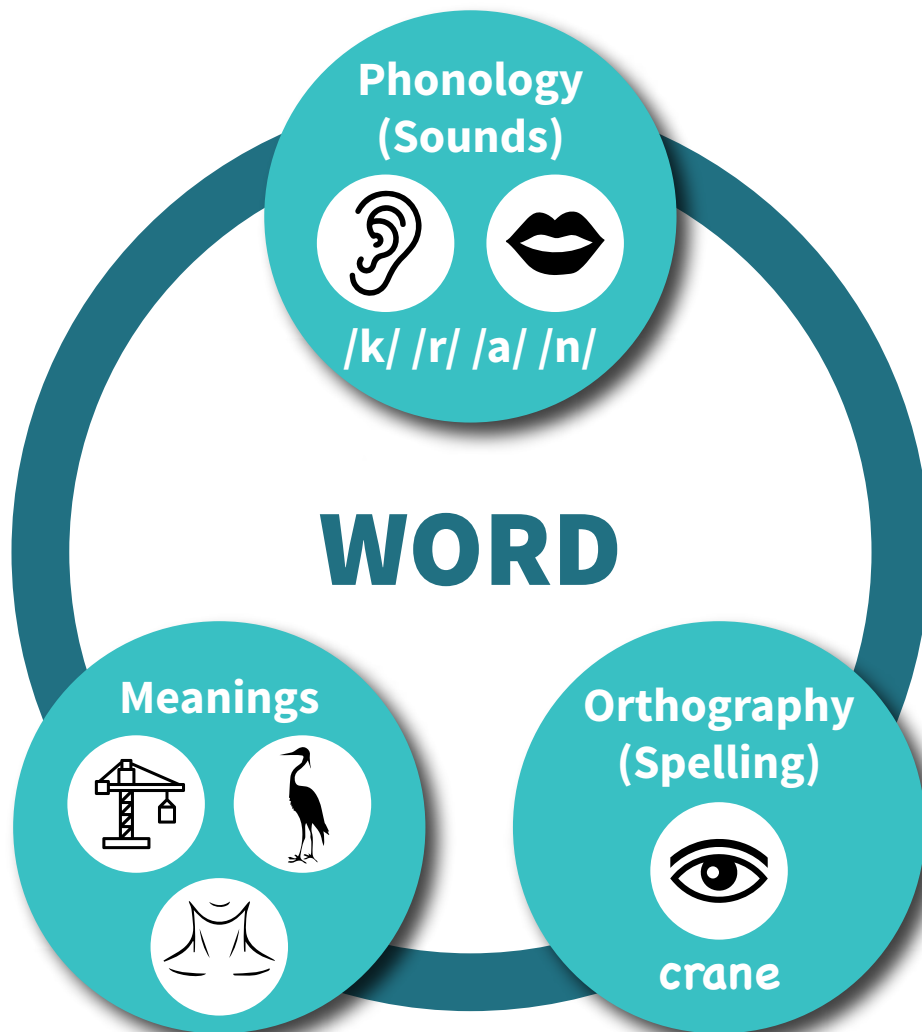
# PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



## Language Comprehension

In addition to understanding the connections between sounds and symbols (decoding), readers need to know the meanings of words. Every word, no matter what language you are reading or speaking, has 3 forms: a **sound**, a **spelling**, and a **meaning** (or **multiple meanings**). To become a skilled reader, a child must be able to link these three forms of the word in their mind.

### 3 Forms of a Word



Sources: Moats, 2009; Nation, 2001

## PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



### Morphology

Whereas **phonemes are the smallest units of sound in a language, morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in a language** – either in whole words or in parts of words.

For instance, the word *unzipped* has three morphemes: 1) the prefix *un-* which means “not” or “opposite”; 2) the root or base word *zip*; and 3) the suffix *-ed*, which indicates that this was an action done in the past.

Knowing root words, prefixes, and suffixes helps readers break words down into their parts so they can be sounded out. Readers are also often able to predict the spelling, pronunciation and meaning of unknown words based on the individual morphemes included in the word.

Teaching morphology can begin very early but continues throughout the academic years and beyond, for example learning the Latin and Greek roots of certain words can help tremendously in the study of science and medicine.





# PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



## Vocabulary

Consider reading in a foreign language (e.g., “Dov’è il bagno?”). Although you may be able to decode and sound out the words (Doh-veh eel bahn-yoh?), unless you speak Italian, you don’t have the necessary vocabulary to understand what you have read (“Where is the bathroom?”). The sounds are not connected to any meaning for you.

Young children learn most new words **indirectly**, through hearing new words used in context – either in direct conversation, listening to adults read, or through television/movies. As they get older, children also increasingly learn new words through reading on their own.

Some vocabulary needs to be taught **explicitly and directly** – and this is particularly true for students with LDs. There are two types of direct instruction in vocabulary:

- the direct teaching of specific words
- teaching children phonological and morphological strategies for learning new words

### Vocabulary skills can be supported in the classroom and at home by:

- Pointing out when new words are encountered in books
- Using kid-friendly definitions
- Linking definitions to the child’s experiences or interests
- Connecting spoken and written forms of words
- Using lots of repetition

### Signs that a child is struggling with vocabulary:

- difficulty using newly learned words
- frequently using non-specific terms (e.g., ‘stuff’, ‘thing’, ‘place’)
- difficulty using language flexibly (e.g., using a different word with similar meaning)
- misunderstanding of figurative language and phrases (e.g., ‘it’s raining cats and dogs’)
- using only most commonly named items in a given category (e.g., plane/boat instead of helicopter/kayak)

*(Adapted from Gould & Schwartzentruber, 2022)*

Once children can read and comprehend words in isolation, they must learn the rules of linking these words together in sentences and paragraphs. This involves learning how words affect each other and how they are bound by the rules of grammar.

## Syntax

Sometimes simply referred to as grammar, syntax is the set of rules that dictate the ways in which words and phrases can be combined into sentences and paragraphs. It is essential to use correct syntax in order to communicate messages that are meaningful and easy to understand. From an early age, syntax influences the way in which children communicate spoken language. As they age, the importance of syntax extends to written language as well. In fact, syntax has been shown to be a predictor of writing success, which in turn impacts success in higher education and employment later in life (Daffern et al., 2017; National Commission on Writing, 2004).

Adults too, learn new words all the time:

ex.: **Filipendulous** – Suspended by, or strung upon, a thread.

You may have even guessed the meaning as the word contains the word *pendulous* From Latin *filum* (thread) + *pendulus* (hanging).

You may have just learned a new word.

Most children need to hear a word up to 17 times to understand it and begin to use it. A student with an LD may need **twice** as many exposures.



## PART 3: Foundational Reading Skills



### Fluency

**Reading fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with proper expression, to understand the content that is being read.** Fluency depends on all the reading skills we have previously covered: print awareness, phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, morphology, vocabulary, and syntax. As children practice and master the skills involved in reading, more and more things become automatic. Children will eventually begin to recognize common words almost instantly.

Fluency is important to understanding and remembering what you have read. When all of your mental energy is spent trying to decipher the sounds that make up a word, there's not much space left for comprehension. Since the end goal of reading is to gain information from text, understanding is key!

Frequently reading out loud, especially reading the same story over and over again, is the best way for your child to improve their fluency.



# Conclusion



To become successful readers, children need to be taught in **science-based, systematic, and explicit ways**. They also need opportunities for repetition, practice, and feedback from their teachers.

## **If you think your child is struggling to learn to read:**

- Meet with your child's teacher and/or principal to discuss your child's current reading skills and deficits and possible interventions
- Verify with the teacher/principal that these interventions are science-based, systematic, and explicit
- Ask if your child needs to be moved to a more intensive form of intervention (i.e. moved from Tier 2 to Tier 3)
- Ask whether your child should be formally assessed for a learning disability or if an IEP should be written for your child
- [Reach out to your local chapter of the LDAO to find community-based support](#) (i.e. extracurricular reading programs or tutoring)



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### LD@school Resources

Learning to Read and Write Using Decodable Texts, *written by Karyn Bruneel, Superintendent of Education, Bruce-Grey Catholic District School Board* (<https://www.ldatschool.ca/learning-to-read-and-write-using-decodable-texts/>)

Learning to Read: The Importance of Both Phonological and Morphological Approaches, *By Dr. Deborah Berrill, Professor Emeritus, School of Education & Professional Learning, Trent University*  
(<https://www.ldatschool.ca/phonological-morphological-approaches/>)