

# How Do Children Learn to Read?

## A Guide to the Five Components of Reading Instruction

How do children learn to read? In 1997, a national panel was convened to answer this very question. After in-depth research, in 2000 the National Reading Panel submitted "The Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read" at a hearing before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education. The report concluded that for children to read, they must master these five skills: **phonemic awareness, phonics/phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and text comprehension**. Educators have since used this research to drive reading instruction in the classroom. Parents have used these findings to help them support their children's reading development at home.

### Phonemic Awareness

When children have phonemic awareness, they understand that words are made up of a combination of individual sounds. For example, the word "dog" has three sounds, or phonemes, /d/ /o/ /g/. The word "dish" is also made up of three sounds: /d/ /i/ /sh/. If a child understands that the words *dog* and *dish* have the same beginning sound, and can tell you that out of these three words "bus, bun, rug" that the word "rug" doesn't belong, s/he has phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness also includes the ability to blend individual sounds into words and to break words down into their phonemes. The English language consists of 41 phonemes, according to the report.

Though many children naturally develop phonemic awareness through exposure to books and other forms of print, some need extra help developing this skill. Therefore, many primary teachers devote time to phonemic awareness instruction. Playing rhyming games with children, as well as reading them books with alliteration (e.g. Six Sleepy Sheep by Jeffie Ross) or rhyming patterns (e.g. Hop on Pop by Dr. Seuss) can help.



### Phonics/Phonological Awareness

Phonics refers to the relationship between a written letter and its sound. Using phonics, children can attempt to read the unknown word by

focusing on the sound of each letter or a combination of letters. Most adults remember their teachers telling them to "sound it out" when they couldn't read a word. Phonics can also be used to sound out a word when writing. Young children may spell words incorrectly at first, for example, "pmpkn" for "pumpkin."

According to the National Reading Panel report, when children have "phonological awareness," they know that there are patterns within words that can help them read and write. They can use rhyme, beginning and ending sounds, and specific phonemes to read and write. Reading alphabet books with children can help them develop phonological awareness.

Since the English language is complex, and is not fully phonetic (for example, the word *though* is not spelled how it sounds), phonics is only one part of reading instruction.

### Vocabulary

Children grasp that written words correspond to those they hear in spoken language. Research has shown that when words are part of a child's oral vocabulary, they have an easier time making sense of those same words in print. In essence, having a large vocabulary helps children become better readers. If there are too many unknown words in a reading passage, it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the child to comprehend the meaning of the text.

Children learn new words by reading, being read to, listening to and speaking to others, listening to audiobooks, visiting places where they may be exposed to new words (zoos, museums, etc.), studying content areas (science, history, etc.), and through direct instruction. Many classrooms have an area where children can listen to books on tape. Repetition helps children remember new words. Many teachers reinforce vocabulary, spelling, and the recognition of "high frequency words" (words that are present in most reading material) by writing words on notecards and affixing them to a wall in the classroom (known as a "Word Wall") where the students can see them. Teachers also teach vocabulary by calling attention to new words while reading aloud to the class.



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# How Do Children Learn to Read?

## A Guide to the Five Components of Reading Instruction (continued)

### Fluency

“Fluency is the ability to read text accurately and smoothly. When fluent readers read aloud, their expression, intonation, and pacing sound natural--much like speaking,” according to “*The National Reading Panel: Five Components of Reading Instruction --Frequently Asked Questions*” by the NorthWest Regional Educational Laboratory. “Since fluency depends on higher word recognition skills, it helps children move from decoding words to sight-reading...less energy is spent on deciphering each word and more is spent on comprehending what is read.”

According to the National Reading Panel, children develop fluency by reading often, as well as listening to fluent reading (for example, from an older child, adult, or an audiobook). Practicing reading aloud is recommended for improving fluency. Adults can also try “echo reading”--that is, reading a line from a story and then having the child repeat it. When reading independently, it is important for children to select a book that s/he will be able to tackle with success. If a book is too challenging, the child will get snagged on unfamiliar words or difficult concepts, thus hindering their fluency and understanding.

### Text Comprehension

Comprehension is more than just decoding written words--it involves understanding and creating meaning from the text. It is at the heart of what reading is all about and it is a necessary skill for children to learn. It is the foundation for all future learning. Children with strong reading comprehension skills understand story structure, can identify the story’s main idea, ask themselves questions about what they are reading, and make connections between their general knowledge about a subject and the story’s content. They are aware if they do not understand a passage they have just read.

It is recommended that adults support children’s development of comprehension skills long before

they can decode words. Ways to do this include reading aloud to children, then encouraging them respond to the story. Adults might ask children to retell the story, to sequence the main events, to predict what will happen part-way through the book, or to discuss the story and their feelings about it. Providing interesting literature for children to read will likely help them develop a love of reading--one of the most important things we can do if we want children to continue to read as they grow!



**READ!**

**Sources:** “*The National Reading Panel: Five Components of Reading Instruction -- Frequently Asked Questions*” by the NorthWest Regional Educational Laboratory at [www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org); *The Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read* (2000); and the National Reading Panel website at [www.nationalreadingpanel.org](http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org); and *What are Word Walls* by Instructional Strategies Online at <http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/wordwall/>.

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