



PRIMARY PHONICS®

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Since the 1960s, each decade has been marked by a pivotal research project that has sought to identify the best method for teaching young children to read. In her classic work, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, Jeanne Chall (1967) synthesized the research on meaning emphasis and code emphasis approaches and concluded:

A code emphasis tends to produce better overall reading achievement by the beginning of fourth grade than a meaning emphasis At about the end of the first grade (or the beginning of the second grade), meaning-emphasis programs tend to affect comprehension and vocabulary test scores adversely, mainly because the child does less well in word recognition (p. 137).

Chall's conclusions were bolstered by the USOE-funded Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading (Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1997). This project pooled the findings of 27 independent studies that were conducted from 1964–1967 under the direction of Bond and Dykstra to establish “which of the many approaches to initial reading instruction produces superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of first grade” (p. 348). The researchers concluded:

No one approach is so distinctly better in all situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively.

There are, however, many indications that no matter what the underlying method is, word study skills need to be emphasized and taught systematically. This is best shown by the superiority of the approaches, which augmented the basal readers with a phonetic emphasis as compared to basal readers as usually taught (p. 416).

With successive decades, comprehensive reviews of the research on the efficacy of beginning reading programs have essentially corroborated and extended Chall's and Bond and Dykstra's seminal findings:

Becoming A Nation of Readers (Commission on Reading, 1985):

Classroom research shows that on the average, children who are taught phonics get off to a better start in learning to read than children who are not taught phonics (p. 37).

Beginning to Read (Adams, 1990)

. . . the vast majority of program comparison studies indicate that approaches including systematic phonics instruction result in comprehension skills that are at least comparable to, and word recognition and spelling skills that are significantly better than, those that do not. Furthermore, approaches in which systematic code instruction is included alongside meaning emphasis, language instruction and connected reading are found to result in superior reading achievement overall. And these conclusions seem at least as valid for children with low reading-readiness profiles as they are for

Primary Phonics® comprises 80 decodable storybooks available as both print and eBooks, several types of workbooks, 4 teacher's manuals, and 2 audio CD's. The 80 proven, illustrated storybooks use words containing the phonic elements taught in accompanying workbooks. As soon as students have learned the short vowel a, taught in the first pages of *Workbook 1*, they can read the first storybook, *Mac and Tab*. Each story contains only those words learned in the workbooks being studied.



All students can benefit from this program, which permits them to progress at their own speed. A set of 10 storybooks goes with each of the 6 workbooks or can be used independently. Two more sets of storybooks can be used for additional practice. The workbooks are progressive in difficulty with constant review to reinforce previously learned material. Used in combination with the storybooks, *Primary Phonics* introduces reading comprehension at the earliest level of phonetic understanding.

their better prepared and more advantaged peers (p. 49).

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burn & Griffin, 1998):

There is converging research support for the proposition that getting started in reading depends critically on mapping the letters and the spelling of words onto the sounds and speech units that they represent. Failure to master word recognition impedes text comprehension....Kindergarten Instruction should be designed to provide practice with the sound structure of words, the recognition and productions of letters, knowledge about print concepts, and familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading and writing. First grade instruction should be designed to provide explicit instruction and practice with sound structure that lead to phonemic awareness, familiarity with spelling-sound correspondences and common spelling conventions and their use in identifying printed words, "sight" recognition of frequent words, and independent reading, including reading aloud. A wide variety of well-written and engaging texts below the children's frustration level should be provided (pp. 321–322).

While many of these researchers acknowledged the drawbacks associated with the studies they reviewed (poor research designs, the use of the laboratory versus the classroom, varying assessment instruments, and so on), the convergence of the data in favor of systematic phonics instruction is quite compelling. In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) completed a meta-analysis to "assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read" (p. 1–1). It provided further affirmation for the use of systematic phonics instruction with young readers.

More recently, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI, 2010), which has been adopted by a vast majority of states, describes, among other things, the Foundational Skills, which lay the groundwork for literacy, and

are in harmony with the contents of *Primary Phonics*. "Demonstrate understanding of... features of print;...spoken words, syllables, and sounds;...grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words; read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension" (CCSSI, p. 15-17).

In their recent article titled "CCSS-ELA: Suggestions and Cautions for Implementing the Reading Standards," Valencia and Wixon say this about adhering to the Foundational Skills: "Here we suggest close attention to the grade-level skills under the headings of Print Concepts, Phonological Awareness, Phonics and Word Recognition, and Fluency. The developmental research base for these foundational skills is well established, and the Grade-Level Standards for these Foundational Skills are helpful in determining a general scope and sequence for instruction" (Valencia and Wixon, 2013). This is essentially the scope and sequence of *Primary Phonics*.

Primary Phonics is a time-tested systematic, phonics-based early reading program for students in kindergarten to grade 2. Focusing on these Foundational Skills, *Primary Phonics* covers all the basics of phonics instruction, with a robust amount of practice to ensure mastery for all students.

The Foundational Skills for K–5 state that students should be able to "Demonstrate understanding of... grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words; read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension." *Primary Phonics* does this in a systematic way.

Primary Phonics begins with instruction in the consonants, followed by short vowels, long vowels, silent e, digraphs, blends, and additional phonics and word study skills. A unique feature of *Primary Phonics* is that as soon as students have learned the consonants and a single short vowel, they are able to read an engaging Decodable Reader independently. This provides powerful motivation, especially coming as it does so soon after beginning to learn to read.



The Student Workbooks give students extensive practice with every concept. Each student can work at the right pace, while having ample opportunities for reinforcement.

In the words of the CCSS, "...good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know...." The ability to provide as much or as little practice as needed is one key to the success of *Primary Phonics*. Students who struggle can get extra practice with the *MORE Workbooks*, which provide additional coverage of the same phonic concepts as the *Workbooks*.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness, one of the best predictors of early reading, is defined by the NRP as "the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken words" (pp. 2–10). A child who can say the word *cat* and then segment it into three phonemes (*c-a-t*), or can isolate the first sound in the word *dog*, or can blend the sounds in *p-o-p* and pronounce *pop* is a child who is phonemically aware. The young child can do all of these tasks without any knowledge of sound-letter correspondences (that is, she doesn't have to know that the letter *p* represents the /p/ sound). Rather it is the child's knowledge of the underlying sound structure of oral language that is key.

It is important both to distinguish between phonemic awareness and phonics and to recognize the reciprocal causation (Snow et al., 1998). Phonics is the study of sound-symbol relationships for the purpose of decoding words. When children are presented with the *written* word *rig* and are asked to decode it, they must use their phonics knowledge—command of sound-symbol correspondences as well as their ability to blend these individual sounds—in order to succeed. Thus, as readers encounter phonics instruction, phonemic skills continue to strengthen (Ehri, 1979). Phonemic awareness, then, is both a prerequisite to and a result of learning to read. Some phonemic awareness

skills such as phonemic blending must precede learning to read; other skills such as phonemic deletion may be an outcome of learning to read (Ehri and Wilce, 1980; Juel et al, 1986; Perfetti et al., 1987).

The powerful distinction between phonemic awareness and phonics is illuminated in a study by Connie Juel (1988), who traced the literacy development of 54 low-income, culturally diverse children. Juel set out to ascertain whether children who were poor readers in grade 1 remained poor readers in grade 4 and to identify the factors that contributed to their lack of improvement. The children's phonemic awareness was tested at the beginning and end of each school year. At the end of the year they took decoding tests, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and the WRAT. Reading instruction consisted of a combination of a basal program that included instruction in sight words, context clues, and phonics, and a synthetic phonics program in grades 1 and 2. Juel found that, indeed, children who were poor readers in first grade remained poor readers in fourth grade. She also found that "the children who became poor readers entered first grade with little phonemic awareness" (p. 440). The mean scores of good first grade readers actually exceeded the mean scores of poor readers at the end of third grade. The majority of poor readers could not decode all the pseudowords at the end of grade 4. Recall that these poor readers learned to read in a basal program, supplemented with a synthetic phonics program in grades 1 and 2. As Snow et al. (1998) point out:

Phonics, in short, presumes a working awareness of the phonemic composition of words. In conventional phonics programs, however, such awareness was generally taken for granted, and therein lies the force of the research on phonemic awareness. To the extent that children lack such phonemic awareness, they are unable to internalize usefully their phonics lessons. The resulting symptoms include difficulties in sounding and blending new words, in retaining words from one encounter to the next, and in learning

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Primary Phonics focuses on phonemic awareness skills such as phoneme isolation, the ability to isolate sounds in words; phoneme segmentation, the ability to break words into individual phonemes; and phonemic blending, the ability to merge phonemes into words.

to spell. In contrast, research repeatedly demonstrates that, when steps are taken to ensure an adequate awareness of phonemes, the reading and spelling growth of the groups as a whole is accelerated and the incidence of reading failure is diminished (pp. 55–56).

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) reaffirmed the centrality of phonemic awareness to reading acquisition, concluding that training in phonemic awareness “improved children’s ability to read and spell in both the short and the long term” (pp. 2–28). Likewise, the CCSS stresses the importance of phonological awareness—including rhyming, blending, segmenting, isolation, and substitution—in its Foundational Skills at the kindergarten level (2010, p. 15).

Primary Phonics takes into consideration the challenge facing young children who, for the first time, are asked to manipulate the sounds in spoken words. It does so by presenting young readers with a variety of opportunities to analyze the sequence of speech sounds in words. *Primary Phonics* focuses on phonemic awareness skills such as phoneme isolation, the ability to isolate sounds in words; phoneme segmentation, the ability to break words into individual phonemes; and phonemic blending, the ability to merge phonemes into words

For example, in the *Consonant Book*, children say the name of a picture (e.g., *seal*), isolate the initial sound (/s/) and record the letter on the line provided (_eal). Children encounter one new sound every second page, while continuing to reinforce previously learned sounds. When children move to the *Primary Phonics* workbooks, they continue to complete phoneme isolation activities, but at increasing levels of difficulty. For example, they isolate not only initial sounds of pictures but also final sounds as well as both initial and final sounds. Moreover, children encounter phonemic segmentation activities in their *Primary Phonics* workbooks. They examine the picture of a bug, for example, segment the sounds in the word, *b-u-g*, and then find the correct spelling of the

word from a choice of words (e.g., *bun, bug*), and record each letter on the designated line under the bug’s picture. It is only after children have experience phonemically isolating sounds in words and segmenting words that they are asked to apply sound-symbol correspondences and then blend these sounds in exercises with minimal picture support. For example, children using the *Primary Phonics* workbooks must decode the phonemically regular words, *cat* and *hat*, in the sentence, “Is the cat in the hat?” in order to answer “yes” or “no” on the line. They answer four such questions by examining the two pictures at the top of the page. On other pages, children must decode target words as well as read some sight words (the, is, in) and then unscramble the words to create a sentence. Thus, *Primary Phonics* offers systematic instruction in phonemic isolation, phonemic segmentation, and phonemic blending for every new phonic skill presented.

The Panel alerts teachers to the fact that kindergartners and first graders will vary in their phonemic awareness abilities and urges them to assess children’s capabilities and offer appropriate instruction (pp. 2–6). The CCSS also recognize that instruction should be differentiated.

Phonics

The NRP concluded that “systematic phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children’s growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction . . . when it begins in kindergarten or first grade before children have learned to read independently” (pp. 2–92, 2–93). Such instruction was particularly effective for at-risk children and disabled readers (pp. 1–133). Phonics is one of the Foundational Skills of the CCSS, and regarding phonics, the standards say the students must “know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words” [RF3] (CCSS, p. 15). These include knowing and applying the consonants, long and short vowels, blends, consonant digraphs, vowel teams (including digraphs and diphthongs),



and decoding two-syllable words, among many others. *Primary Phonics* proceeds from early consonant knowledge to teaching consonant blends and digraphs, as well as the varieties of long and short vowels, special sounds, such as *r*-controlled vowels, and more sophisticated vowel concepts.

Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

RTI grew out of the reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA removes the federal requirement to use the aptitude/achievement discrepancy in order to identify students with learning disabilities. Instead of waiting for students to fail on high-stakes tests before providing services, schools can provide a more intensive level of instruction when a student's response to research-based general classroom instruction is unsatisfactory.

Current models of RTI favor a three-tier approach to prevention: Tier 1: Primary Prevention; Tier 2: Supplemental Instruction; and Tier 3: Intensive Instruction. According to Vaughn and Roberts (2007), as many as 20% to 30% of students will require supplemental Tier 2 instruction to prevent reading difficulties. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education and the Council of Administrators of Special Education, in a White Paper on RTI, suggest that approximately 5% of students will need more intensive Tier 3 instruction (NASDSE and CASE, May 2006).

It is common to hear the terms RTI and MTSS used interchangeably. However, the newer MTSS framework, adopted by more than 40 states, is a more comprehensive model, aiming to meet both the academic and behavioral needs of *all* students by providing a continuum of multiple supports. RTI, with its tiered approach to instruction and intervention, where Tier 1 is instruction for all students, is a part of the larger MTSS. This puts *Primary Phonics* squarely in place as part of both initiatives (NCLD, 2012).

Tiered Instruction Using the *Primary Phonics Teachers' Guides*

Using the appropriate *Primary Phonics* teacher's guide (K, 1•2•3, 4•5•6, or the Intervention Guide and Blackline Masters) in conjunction with the *Primary Phonics* student materials enables teachers to provide tiered, differentiated instruction for a broad range of learning needs.

Grade-Level Instruction

K *Primary Phonics Teacher's Guide K*, which is used with student *Workbook K*, provides a detailed instructional plan for teaching 18 consonants and their corresponding sounds. Lessons can be taught to one child, a small group, or a whole class. The letter sounds that a child finds difficult can be reviewed by repeating lessons or by using the resources listed at the end of each lesson. For example, teachers can use the *Consonant Workbook* to reinforce a Tier 2 student's ability to decode consonants. If further consonant practice is needed with Tier 2 or Tier 3 students, teachers can use the *MORE Consonant Workbook*. The *Picture Dictionary* provides practice with picture-word matching for approximately 2,500 words, and the *Color Workbook* reinforces color sight words and offers grapho-motor practice.

Grades 1–2 *Primary Phonics Teacher's Guide 1•2•3* provides a systematic, focused program for teaching the beginning phonics skills most often taught in first grade, while *Teacher's Guide 4•5•6* continues the program with the phonics skills most often taught in second grade. These guides, which accompany *Primary Phonics* Storybook Sets 1–6 and Workbooks 1–6, are well suited as Tier 1 programs within a general classroom and for supplemental Tier 2 instruction. Each lesson covers phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, automaticity, comprehension, and reading in context. Differentiated instruction activities are built into every lesson. Tier 2 students who achieve mastery with relative ease may need only a couple of instructional opportunities for skill

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The Primary Phonics Intervention Guide and accompanying Blackline Masters, used with the Primary Phonics storybooks, provide targeted Tier 2 and Tier 3 intensive instruction.

mastery. Tier 2 students who need more fluency practice can read *Primary Phonics* Storybook Sets 1A and 2A to review, with new material, the phonic elements they learned in Sets 1 and 2. Tier 2 students can listen to audio recordings of the storybooks on *Storybooks CD's 1•2•3* and *4•5•6* as they read along in their books, while other students may first read the storybook independently and then reread it for fluency along with the audio recording. *Comprehension Workbooks 1–6* provide additional optional comprehension practice to differentiate learning for advanced students.

Intervention

Students requiring intervention, like their on-level counterparts, are well served by *Primary Phonics*. In fact, the CCSS set goals for all students, including those needing intervention, stating: “The Standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations” (p. 6). Likewise, the CCSS recognize the importance of the teacher’s professional judgment in choosing these interventions, stating, “Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards” (CCSS, p. 4). *Primary Phonics* is an ideal program for the teacher and staff needing to provide both on-level and intervention instruction.

Grades 1–6 The *Primary Phonics Intervention Guide* and accompanying *Blackline Masters*, used with the *Primary Phonics* storybooks, provide targeted Tier 2 and Tier 3 intensive instruction. The phonetic coding system at the core of the *Intervention Guide* has proven to be successful for individuals and small groups of students in grades 1–6 who have not responded to more traditional synthetic phonics program. Its multisensory approach combines three modalities: visual (printed, decodable *Primary Phonics* storybooks and blackline masters for

coding and written practice); auditory (sounds heard and practiced in class, both in isolation and in words); and tactile (written codes students apply to each isolated sound and within words, phrases, and sentences). In addition, each lesson that introduces a new phonetic code reinforces previously learned codes embedded in phrases and sentences in the new lesson, so that students have multiple opportunities to practice and review their phonic skills.

To monitor progress, teachers can use students’ completed BLM pages as written feedback to monitor student progress in coding letters and words (BLM A), followed by phrases and sentences (BLM B). By identifying where mistakes have occurred (at the letter, word, phrase, or sentence level), teachers can successfully tailor small-group instruction to the skills students most need to work on. For example, if a student has successfully coded consonant digraph *sh* in isolation, but has made mistakes in coding *sh* at the word level, the teacher can provide additional isolated letter practice. Additional ways of differentiating instruction include the following:

- Students who are progressing well in coding and decoding but need more written practice can be asked to write selected *Primary Phonics* storybook sentences on a Dictation Reproducible.
- The *Primary Phonics* workbooks, which are referenced as optional materials in the *Intervention Guide*, can be used for additional focused practice with word/picture matching for each phonic element.
- *Primary Phonics* Storybook Sets 1A and 2A provide additional opportunities for students to practice fluency, reading in context, and the phonics skills taught in the first twenty lessons.
- Students can reinforce sound/symbol relationships by listening to the storybooks on audio recordings (*Storybooks CD's 1•2•3* and *4•5•6*) as they read along in their books, or by listening as they use the eBook version of the storybooks.



Primary Phonics Workbooks

The NRP stated that “the hallmark of systematic phonics programs is that they delineate a planned, sequential set of phonic elements, and they teach these elements explicitly and systematically” (pp. 2–89). *Primary Phonics* meets this mandate for systematic instruction. For example, in *Workbook K*, children are introduced to a sequence of consonant letters and corresponding sounds. Each lesson follows the same instructional sequence across four workbook pages. To illustrate, in the first lesson, the consonant *h* is introduced as follows:

Page 1: The children are introduced to the new letter name (printed in bold at the top of the workbook page) and are asked to write this letter six times. The teacher then explicitly teaches the corresponding sound of the letter and asks the children to practice this new sound-symbol correspondence by examining pictures beginning with the *h* sound and circling the corresponding letter of the picture label.

Pages 2 and 3: The children examine a silly picture (two page spread) that contains many words beginning with the letter *h* and are asked to point to these objects as the teacher reads a story about the events in the picture. The children then phonemically isolate the first sound in various pictures and record the letter *h* on as many of the *h*-objects as they can identify.

Page 4: The lesson ends with an auditory discrimination task in which the teacher pronounces the names of two pictures and instructs the children “to write an *h* on the one that begins with the sound of *h*.” There are a total of 8 sets of pictures per page.

When children finish *Primary Phonics Workbook K*, they move to *Primary Phonics Workbook 1*. After they have completed the first 26 pages of this workbook, they are ready to begin the *Primary Phonics* storybooks.

Primary Phonics Storybooks

The 80 *Primary Phonics* Decodable Readers—available as both print and eBooks—cover all the phonics skills and provide practice applying them in connected text. As Mesmer notes, “The goal of using decodable text, like the purpose of using any other scaffolded text, is to move children directly into independently reading texts with no controls” (Mesmer 1999, p. 140). The eBooks, with their full audio, provide yet another level of scaffolding, as children can listen to them and hear fluent reading and correct pronunciation, a help to struggling readers and students learning English. (The Decodable Readers are also available as CDs.) Another advantage of eBooks is that students who need to read books at a lower level than their peers can enjoy the anonymity of reading while getting the extra practice they need.

Comprehension

Comprehension, described by Dolores Durkin (1993) as “the essence of reading,” is addressed in the *Primary Phonics* program. *Teacher’s Guides 1•2•3 and 4•5•6* include a series of thoughtful comprehension questions for discussion after children read each of the *Primary Phonics* storybooks. These questions tap vocabulary as well as a range of reader responses, with an emphasis on inferential comprehension as well as personal response. A number of vocabulary questions are included to ensure that discussion takes place about words that young readers can decode but may not understand (e.g., a *pen* for animals, a *vet*, a *cut*, to *wade*). Such instruction has been shown to increase comprehension (NRP, 2000). Inferential questions such as “Why did Mac take a nap?” invite readers to push beyond the literal events in the text to examine characters’ motives and actions. Questions such as “If you were to continue this story after the last page, what would you have happen the next day?” require readers to attend to the storyline in order to make reasonable predictions. Particularly

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The *Primary Phonics Comprehension Workbooks* follow the phonetic patterns of the coordinating workbooks and storybooks. The “wh” question words (who, what, why, etc.) become sight words as students independently work through the series. Skills covered are sequencing, recognizing story elements, using context clues, and matching text with illustrations.

By using *Primary Phonics*, teachers can help children internalize the alphabetic principle that letters in written words map the sounds of spoken words in systematic ways.

praiseworthy is the framing of questions in accordance with the story grammar elements (setting, characters, problem, attempts to solve the problem, and resolution) of stories 6 in Sets 2–6. Such questions help readers internalize the global structure of a story, which in turn aids their comprehension. Readers who process stories in terms of its grammar elements demonstrate strong story recall (Stein & Glenn, 1979). The inclusion of personal response questions such as “Have you ever taken an animal to the vet? What was it like?” (p. 14) is also important because comprehension is enhanced when readers are encouraged to link life experiences to literature (NRP, pp. 4–5).

In addition to these comprehension questions, enrichment activities are suggested. For example, after reading and discussing the story *Mac Gets Well*, students are invited to act out the story using stuffed animals for *Mac and Tab*. After reading and discussing *Ted*, students are asked to write a prequel to the story; after *Sails*, children brainstorm ways of making small boats and then build and race their own boats. Other comprehension activities include retelling, making crafts, playing games, and writing responses.

A series of *Comprehension Workbooks*, 1–6, helps students combine phonics skills with using context clues, sequence, and story elements, for example. *The Comprehension Workbooks* include factual as well as inferential questions and activities that correspond to *Storybook Sets 1–6*. To demonstrate understanding, students are asked to match story characters to pictures, circle which event came first in the story given a series of pictures, complete a crossword puzzle about story events, and draw or write a response to a question about the story.

Conclusion

By using *Primary Phonics*, teachers can help children internalize the alphabetic principle that letters in written words map the sounds of spoken words in systematic ways. *Primary Phonics* fulfills the NRP’s mandate for phonics instruction that is systematically sequenced “to provide children with some key knowledge and skills and to insure that they know how to apply this knowledge in their reading and writing” (pp. 2–96).

Effective teachers also understand that the Panel’s caveat that “Phonics teaching is a means to an end” (pp. 2–96) and that it is important to assess children’s proficiency in phonics and provide instruction that meets their varying needs (pp. 2–97). Likewise, the CCSS Foundational Skills are “not an end in and of themselves; rather, they are necessary and important components of an effective, comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines (CCSS, p. 15).

Regardless of the era or the preference for one or more reading pedagogies, reading is, after all, about making meaning from the confluence of a series of symbols on a page and various kinds of literacy tasks and critical thinking. *Primary Phonics* gives young readers the basics they need to ready them for the staircase of text complexity they must climb in order to become proficient readers.



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