Based on Dr. Blank's
Reading Kingdom™
Reading System

The Reading Remedy

6 Six Essential Skills That Will Turn Your Child Into a Reader

MARION BLANK, Ph.D.

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www.ReadingKingdom.com

Reading Kingdom gets results. Here's what other parents have said:

"Our son has been using Dr. Blank's reading system for over one year. His first-grade teachers indicate that his reading skills are well beyond his peers. He is able to work independently on reading and writing and actively seeks reading as an activity."

—Beth B., mother of a six-year-old

"Thanks to Dr. Blank's reading system our son is at the top of his first-grade class and according to his most recent report card he is 'exceeding the expectations of the school.' Along with his new skills, he has acquired greater self-confidence and self-esteem. As an added benefit, he now loves to read."

—Michael M., father of a six-year-old

"Dr. Blank's system has not only taught my son to read, it has also taught him extremely valuable learning habits that are carrying over to other areas."

—Linda L., mother of a nine-year-old

"My son was in first grade and struggling. We started him on Dr. Blank's programs and within six weeks there was an immediate difference—not only in his ability to read, but in how he felt about himself. He felt very successful and on par with his peers. It's a remarkable system."

—Donna H., mother of a six-year-old

"With Dr. Blank's programs, my son's progress was not only fabulous, but I was always able to keep track of his growing ability to read and comprehend. With other approaches, I never felt I had a handle on how well he was doing."

—Kathy T., mother of a seven-year-old

"My son was four and one-half years old when he began Dr. Blank's programs. We had only recently come to the United States and English was new for him. We were amazed at how quickly he was able to pick it up."

—Ophira H., mother of a five-year-old

"I was just not comfortable with how my daughter was handling reading in first grade. So I started her on Dr. Blank's programs and today I've been told that she is one of the best readers in her class. She's at the top and it's due to Dr. Blank's programs."

—Stephanie H., mother of a six-year-old

"Our son has attention deficit disorder and Dr. Blank's programs made all the difference in his ability to learn to read. It also gave him a good foundation for work in school."

—George R., father of a seven-year-old

"When our daughter was nine years old, we were told that she would have to leave the prestigious private school she was in and go to a school for learning disabled children for two to three years. Miraculously, within just three months' time of starting Dr. Blank's programs, she made enough growth that she was able to stay in the school she was in—and did not need a special school."

—Wendy G., mother of a nine-year-old

"My son has had language difficulties that have limited his progress in school. Dr. Blank's programs have enabled him to organize his language and grow as a reader to a level far beyond his current grade level. He is able to decode unseen material much more successfully than my daughter who learned to read with a strict phonetic method."

—Jane F., mother of a six-year-old

"Before I started Dr. Blank's programs, I had traveled to many 'reading specialists.' Although they helped my son make some progress, he was still unable to read fluently at grade level. Dr. Blank's programs are brilliantly designed, tailor made to fit the needs of different children. It teaches them to read and enjoy without overburdening them. It has given my son a tool for life."

—Shayne F., mother of an eight-year-old

"Thanks to Dr. Blank's system, my son is now reading beautifully. It is responsible for his success in life. He is now graduating university and starting a graduate program."

—Patrick T., father whose son was ten years old when he started the programs

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PREFACE

No other skill taught in school and learned by school children is more important than reading. It is the gateway to all other knowledge.

—American Federation of Teachers

Many people ask me when my interest in reading began. That question takes me back to a Sunday afternoon when I was a kindergartner about five years of age.

That afternoon, as on so many other weekend afternoons, we were visiting one of my many aunts and uncles. On this particular day a stranger came into my aunt's apartment with some papers that he asked her to sign. I was taken aback by the sight of my typically self-assured aunt becoming timid and tentative as she signed an X and then stepped aside so that my father could write his signature underneath.

At first I was confused. Later it was explained to me that my aunt could not read or write. She did not even know how to write her name. All she could do was write an X that was then certified with a real signature by someone who was literate.

I also found out that in my family she was not alone. Several of my older relatives had the same handicap. They had emigrated from a poor and war-torn Eastern Europe as young adults, and they had never had the opportunity to attend school.

The realization was shocking. No one in my family ever talked about it, but time after time the illiteracy problem would appear and have to be dealt with—usually at great personal cost to people whom I held dear.

I was determined to do something about the situation. So at six years of age, when I found that my own dream of learning to read and write was becoming a reality, I decided to teach my newfound ability to my grandmother, whom I adored. She was a phenomenal person. Like so many women of her era, she endured hardships that are unimaginable to today's generation. She arrived in this country as a teenager, alone, without knowing a word of English. She married in her early twenties and was widowed in her early thirties. She worked tirelessly to raise her six children, taking any and all jobs she could get including laundry, housecleaning, sewing, and plucking feathers off chickens in butcher shops. Nevertheless she was jolly, resilient, and totally willing to allow her little granddaughter to be her teacher. Sadly, within a short time she became seriously ill and the lessons ended. Nevertheless that experience deeply affected me. I had started on the path that I was to follow for the rest of my life.

In traveling this path I have worked with thousands of students of all ages and backgrounds. As any teacher will tell you, the students themselves are central to the teacher's own learning, and I am deeply grateful to my students for all they have done to show me the way. Throughout this book I have attempted to outline the key insights I arrived at with their help—insights that form the basis of what is now the Reading Kingdom system.

There is no skill on earth that children want to acquire more than reading. As you use the techniques described in this book with your child, I am confident that you both will experience the exhilaration that reading mastery brings. I extend to you my very best wishes for your journey to success!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout this project I have been extraordinarily fortunate to have had the help of my family. My son Jonathan is a superb writer and thinker, and he has been amazingly generous in making his talents available to me. At every step of the way he has been instrumental in helping me craft this book so that it clearly expresses the ideas I was striving for, to help parents understand both the cause and the cure of reading difficulties. My son Ari is a computer wiz, and he has been central in helping me design the teaching materials so that they are attractive and easy to use. My husband, Martin, is a biophysicist, and although his interests are far afield from reading, he too has been actively involved at every step of the journey. He has listened patiently to my ideas and reviewed endless drafts, always guiding me with wise and thoughtful comments. For years my dream has been to empower parents to lead their children to total mastery of reading. I am forever indebted to my family for providing the skills to help me achieve these goals.

This book would also not have been possible without the children and their families who invited me into their lives and who have made the path to reading immensely interesting and rewarding. Their involvement and enthusiasm have been phenomenal. Often, years after the sessions with their children have ended,

parents call to update me on what has been happening and proudly report on their children's success. Nothing is more gratifying than feeling you have made a difference. The names are far too numerous to list, but special thanks are due to the Gannaway family, whose generous personal and financial support has been central in allowing me to make this material available to you.

Among my deepest feelings of gratitude are those for the educational institutions that have made a difference in my life. When I entered college, this nation was far less wealthy than it is today. Still, educational opportunities abounded. New York City, where I was raised, was extraordinarily generous in supporting its students, and I am one of the many fortunate beneficiaries of its largesse. I had the phenomenal good fortune to attend a fabulous, tuition-free college—the City College of New York. The professors there were beacons, teaching me to analyze "accepted truths" and to seek better alternatives. I have no doubt that they played a central role in the new approach I developed for teaching reading. After college, my good fortune continued with a full fellowship from the University of Cambridge in England. That was followed by a postdoctoral grant from the National Institutes of Health, which permitted me to start my research on language. In this day and age, when I see so many students struggling to manage the expenses of higher education, I feel blessed to have grown up in an age when a farsighted society offered generous support to motivated students. I hope that the work I have done over the many decades that have followed has helped to repay the debt I owe to so many.

INTRODUCTION

It's Official: OUR KIDS CAN'T READ

—New York Post

Now Johnny Can Read If Teacher Just Keeps Doing What He's Told

—Wall Street Journal

Plan to Push Reading in "Head Start" Stirs Debate

—New York Times

U.S. Suffers from Wide Literacy Gap

—Chicago Sun-Times

It's no news that reading problems plague our country. The media have informed us of this over and over again. What *is* news is the extent of the problem—a rate of failure almost beyond belief.

The Startling Statistics

Most people, even those whose children are facing the horror of reading difficulties, are totally unaware of the fact that the problem is not limited to 5 percent, 10 percent, or even 20 percent of the population. The shocking fact is that approximately

40 percent of all children—perfectly healthy, normal children—experience difficulties in learning to read.

It seems impossible to believe that a skill this important could be in this much trouble. But it is. In state after state, the figures for failure hover around the same numbers. For example, in a report titled *The Nation's Report Card: Fourth-Grade Reading 2000,* the National Assessment for Educational Progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) found 37 to 40 percent of fourth graders to be reading "below basic levels," and only 29 percent to 32 percent to be "above proficient levels." Think about it—more children are doing badly than are doing well!

The statistics are shocking: approximately 40 percent of all children have significant difficulty in learning how to read.

Out of the four to five million children who enter first grade each year, approximately one to one and a half million children will have serious problems in this area. Because reading is the single most critical and important skill children will need to succeed in school and in life, failure in this area can be devastating—for the children, their families, and the nation.

All too often the children who struggle with reading are diagnosed as "learning disabled," placing the problem in the child and not in the system. But as a prestigious government report acknowledges, 80 percent of children with learning disabilities are in special education "simply because they haven't learned to read." They are "instructional casualties and not students with disabilities" (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002, p. 25).

We could delve into a whole range of issues that contribute to this horrendous state of affairs. Kids watch too much TV; teachers are overburdened; books cannot compete with high-tech devices. But if you want to cut to the quick, there is a single, simple source: the current teaching of reading rests on a slim set of weak, inadequate techniques that can do nothing more than leave many, many of our children in the dust. As long as these techniques are used, failure is ordained!

Reading education in schools has limited itself to two systems: *phonics* and *whole language.* Phonics, the dominant force, focuses on having children convert the letters on a page into the sounds that become real words. The whole language approach concentrates on providing children with complete, or "whole," books that are deemed to be more "natural," "authentic," and "motivating" than traditionally used teaching materials.

Despite the fact that these inadequate systems have resulted in a 40 percent failure rate, the schools are not trying anything else. It's like hitting your head against a wall. The pain won't stop until you stop the banging! Or as Albert Einstein put it, "There is nothing that is a more certain sign of insanity than to do the same thing over and over and expect the results to be different." As long as current reading techniques are used, the frighteningly high rate of reading failure is ordained!

As long as current reading techniques are used, the frighteningly high rate of reading failure is ordained!

Schools often try to calm the many doubts that parents raise with well-intentioned messages, such as, "Children are different. Just give him time," or, "She's really beginning to make progress," or, "We are using a balanced approach and offering your child everything that will lead to reading success."

Those messages can be deadly. What you sense about the advantages of success in early reading is true. And what you sense about the dire consequences that follow from early reading difficulties is also true. The sad fact is children who do not read well by third grade almost never end up reading well, and as a child grows, reading problems only worsen—it's a snowballing handicap. Without the skills that school brings, job opportunities, job satisfaction, and high earnings often fall out of reach. The average annual income in 1998 for high school graduates was $23,594, but for those who had not graduated from high school, that figure was $16,053 (Newburger & Curry, 2000). For each year in college, the figures rise steadily, so that a college graduate on average earns $15,000 to $20,000 more per year than someone with only a high school degree.

You want to give your child every opportunity, and so you should not accept messages that will not get you to that goal. Now you no longer have to accept those messages. Through the simple tools offered in this book, you will be able to assess for yourself whether your child is indeed acquiring the skills for true success in reading.

If you want reading success for your child, you have to get a handle on what is currently being taught to your child and why it is not working. That is what the first part of this book aims to accomplish. It lets you see clearly that failure in reading is not an unfortunate consequence but rather the inevitable consequence of the dominant modes of instruction. You will also learn what reading actually demands, and you will see all the skills your child is not being taught in school. The essence of what reading demands is conveyed in the Skills of Reading diagram shown here.

The Six Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		*Language Skills*			
Sequencing (letter order)	**Writing (letter creation)**	**Phonology (sounds)**	**Semantics (meaning)**	**Syntax (grammar)**	**Text (books)**

In the first part of this book (Chapters One through Three) you will find out what these skills are and why they are the core of reading.

That is not all the book has to offer. It's frustrating to see a problem with no outlines of a solution. In the second part of this book (Chapters Four through Eight), you will get a full description of what needs to be done in order to take the phonics approach that has failed and transform it into an innovative, comprehensive system that offers a cure for students' reading woes. This solution is Reading Kingdom—the reading system that I have developed over the past four decades.

The Design of Reading Kingdom

Reading Kingdom teaches all the areas of reading through a multilevel system composed of seven programs. The first level contains the two Get Set programs: Sequences in Sight and Letters to Write. These are preparatory programs that teach the physical skills of visual sequencing and handwriting. The remaining five levels—Boarding, Runway, Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring—are reading and writing programs that teach all the language skills needed for literacy.

The fve reading/writing programs are designed so that a set of words is taught, and then a book using those words is presented. This cycle repeats six times within each program.

As you will discover when going through the chapters, true success in reading rests on a broad foundation of skills and hidden abilities. With completion of the final program, your child will have those skills and be prepared to maintain steady progress in the future. Among those skills are the ability to read and write with total accuracy and understanding.

The Reading Kingdom Programs

	Physical Skills		*Language Skills*			
	Sequencing	**Writing**	**Phonology**	**Semantics**	**Syntax**	**Text**
Level 1: The Get Set Programs						
Sequences in Sight	■					
Letters to Write		■				
Levels 2–6: The Reading and Writing Programs						
Boarding			■	■	■	■
Runway			■	■	■	■
Liftoff			■	■	■	■
Airborne			■	■	■	■
Soaring			■	■	■	■

The value of accuracy cannot be overstated. Struggles with reading have become such an accepted part of classroom life that teachers are often unperturbed seeing a child slowly plod through a text, making many errors along the way. This type of reading is comparable to building a house on a cracked foundation. Even when a child is willing to read and reread to correct errors, the process represents an inadequate base that cannot support the reading needed at the higher grade levels. Slow, tedious, and error-laden reading understandably leads to children to hate reading and to avoid it as much as possible. Smooth, accurate reading is the prerequisite for the more complex skills that are to follow. Reading Kingdom provides that foundation.

After reading about the material and deciding that it is right for you, you can choose to take matters into your own hands and teach your child to read and write with amazing effectiveness. The third part of this book provides you with the information you need to create all the programs for use in your home. The system

is designed to be used with and complement any school-based reading instruction your child is receiving.

You can place an order or get more information by visiting

http://www.ReadingKingdom.com

By broadening the scope of what we teach children and the way we teach children, we can give them access to powerful abilities that are inside each and every human being. It is then that the door to reading opens wide. With the right tools, children not only learn to read but do so with total mastery.

I have used this system to help literally thousands of children—strong and struggling readers alike—learn how to read. I have personally witnessed the tremendous positive changes that occur in children's lives when they learn how to read. Now you can use this system yourself.

Your child can easily learn how to read successfully! This book will show you how it's done.

PART 1

Understanding Reading

chapter 1

Teaching Reading

Why Isn't It Working?

Our focus in this chapter is to understand current reading practices and to see why they cause as many problems as they do. Before starting out, it's worthwhile to define some key terms.

Setting Out the Terms

We'll begin with three keys terms: *reading, writing,* and *literacy.* The first two are near-inseparable partners. Technically, the most accurate term to use to describe reading and writing ability is *literacy,* because it encompasses both processes. However, in everyday parlance, you'll usually find the single term *reading* used as a substitute for *literacy.*

Four processes are seen as central to attaining literacy: two (*decoding* and *comprehension*) are associated with reading, and two (*spelling* and *composing*) with writing. Don't be put off if these terms are unfamiliar. As you will see, their meaning is straightforward.

In order to read, you must be able to take the letters on a page (for example, *c-a-t)* and convert them into words (*cat*). The term for that process is *decoding.* Having decoded the words, you then have to figure out the message they are conveying. The term for that is *comprehension.* The two processes are independent of one another. For example, you can easily decode, or read, this string of words: *house if sleep between go red not lost,* but you cannot comprehend these words because they do not make sense within this string.

Writing offers a comparable set of terms. In order to write you must be able to take the sounds of words you speak and convert them into letters. The term for

The Key Terms of Literacy

Reading	*Decoding*—converting letters into words *Comprehending*—understanding what you have decoded
Writing	*Spelling*—producing the letters to represent words *Writing* (*composing*)—creating meaningful messages

that is *spelling.* You also have to be able to take the words you spell and combine them into meaningful messages that others can read. The term for that is *composing,* or *writing.*

In general, reading receives more time and effort in school instruction than does writing. However, poor achievement permeates both—with writing generally showing even more serious deficiencies than reading.

To let you see the problems for yourself, we will go through a brief tour of reading instruction and see what children must deal with on a regular basis.

Looking Back Before Looking Ahead

Despite all the recent attention it has been getting, the issue of reading failure is far from new. Half a century ago an "aroused parent," Rudolph Flesch (1955), wrote a book that took the country by storm, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It.* In it, Flesch railed against the teaching establishment. He made the astounding claim that there were "no remedial reading cases" in most European countries and that there "never was a problem anywhere in the world until the United States," around 1925, switched its method of teaching from the phonics instruction to the whole word method. In the *whole word* approach, children were taught through *look and say* techniques to recognize, or decode, whole words. Flesch likened this approach to reading "English as if it were Chinese," as if each word were represented by a different symbol.

Though attention getting, Flesch's claims about the previous absence of failure were unfounded. The widespread testing needed to substantiate them simply did not exist generations back and would likely have contradicted his claim if they had. Still, the book struck a chord in the many parents who then, as now, were grappling with the ordeal of children struggling with reading. More to the point, Flesch offered a clear, simple answer: go back to basics, and teach children to decode with a solid phonics approach.

Phonics is now the central method of reading education used in our nation. Its hold is so pervasive that the term is almost synonymous with the teaching of reading. Although many variants exist, at their core is the idea that reading is based on sounding out the letters in words. Flesch himself set out a three-part program that starts by teaching children that "single letters . . . stand for single sounds," for example, *t = tuh, b = buh,* and so forth. His program then moves on to more complicated issues, such as the sounds that are "spelled by two-letter or three-letter combinations" (such as *ow* as in *cow, ay* as in *say, chr* as in *Christmas*), and finally to the idea that "some of the letters do not spell one sound but two." For example, the *a* in a word like *cat* is pronounced very differently from the *a* in a word like *watch*. If you've seen your child, or some other child, at the start of reading instruction, you'll find these ideas familiar because they are largely the ones used in classrooms around the nation.

Flesch's views were strengthened and given academic respectability with the publication in 1967 of Jean Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate.* In this book, Chall, a professor at Harvard, evaluated the phonics and whole word positions and, in the end, came down firmly on the side of phonics as a more effective way of teaching reading. Under these pressures, phonics instruction reassumed its long-standing role at center stage. The only problem was that the failure did not stop.

The better results obtained with phonics compared to whole word teaching did not mean that traditional phonics instruction was effective. It was just better than the limited alternative that had been offered.

No one should have expected that it would. Despite Flesch's claims, whole word teaching had not appeared out of the blue. It had emerged as an effort to stem the failures generated by phonics. Unfortunately, the solution had not worked. Whole word teaching proved to be even more ineffective than phonics. That did not mean that phonics teaching was effective. It was just better than the only available alternative.

Back to the Present

Fast forward now to the 1970s. Phonics once again holds sway, and to everyone's dismay, the failure continues. Once again there is a call for reform. This time, rushing in to fill the gap is whole language—a new movement based on a seductive

argument. Abandon the tedium and dreariness of phonics. Instead, cater to children's imagination by providing complete, integrated, appealing books that represent "authentic" experiences and that make reading meaningful and rewarding.

The only problem is that like whole word teaching, whole language teaching causes reading scores to fall even further. So once again, decades later, history repeats itself as educational leaders push for a return to phonics as the remedy for the "new" reading crisis.

A key difference this time is that the great debate has morphed into the great accommodation. No longer are two techniques being pitted against one another for the purpose of declaring a winner and loser. Instead, in a spirit of reconciliation, the two methods—phonics and whole language—have been joined, on the grounds that each supplements the other. The end result is that many if not most children today, under the rubric of *a comprehensive approach* or *balanced teaching,* receive reading instruction that combines phonics and whole language.

Nevertheless, with its stronger techniques and longer history, phonics is almost always the dominant member of the partnership. It has been, and continues to be, the backbone of teaching kids their ABCs. In fact it is so widely taught that it has almost become a synonym for reading instruction. This is in part why the first thing parents typically do when trying to help their youngsters read a word is to say, "Well, let's sound it out. What sound does this letter make?" They do so because that is the way they were taught.

Why, then, are so many children still experiencing such difficulty in learning how to read? It certainly is not from a lack of attention. Seen as critical, reading dominates the school day for the first three to four years of a child's education. What is taught in this time, however, is plagued with problems. The remedies that have been tried over the years have been restricted to variants of methods that simply do not work for a large percentage of the children. No matter how they are repackaged, these techniques don't work. The current problems with reading education are not the fault of the children; they are due to the incomplete methods being used to teach them.

Seeing the World Through a Child's Eyes

A while back some distinguished researchers from Harvard University, in the course of studying children's thinking, realized how difficult it was for them to position themselves so they could understand just how children were viewing the world. In characterizing this gap between the children and themselves, the

researchers said, "It is curiously difficult to recapture preconceptual innocence . . . It is as if . . . mastery . . . were able to mask the . . . memory of things now distinguished" (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956, p. 50). This statement gives voice to a critical point: even though we were once without skills ourselves, once we have learned a skill, it is almost impossible for us to appreciate what it is like for someone who is just beginning.

This results in a serious paradox that besets all teaching, including the teaching of reading. The skill to be taught must be designed by individuals who already possess the skill. Otherwise, the content would be meaningless. But precisely because these persons *have* the skills, they cannot see what the novice really needs to get going.

Fortunately, there is a way out of this paradox. The knowledgeable person must somehow be placed in the position of the novice so that he or she can see the world through the eyes of the person who does not yet have the skills.

To that end much of what follows in this chapter is designed to place *you* in the position of a child who is starting on the path to reading. In other words, you are going to lose your advantages as an expert reader so that you can see the world through a child's eyes.

Although it may seem impossible to lose your reading abilities that quickly, it's not that difficult. All it takes is removing one language component you have long taken for granted. That component is the alphabet. Instead of the usual ABCs, you will be working with foreign symbols. In other words, the letters on a page will be as unfamiliar to you as our usual alphabet is to first-time readers.

In your newly created life as a child, you will go through a set of three exercises that emulate typical methods used in phonics and whole language teaching. The first involves a phonic lesson focused on decoding; the second, a whole language lesson focused on reading; and the third, a whole language lesson focused on writing. Each will enable you to see firsthand what it is about current reading instruction that leads to so much failure.

It's likely that you will find yourself unwilling to complete the work. Many of the colleagues I enlisted in this endeavor got so frustrated that they refused to continue. It's difficult to find yourself stripped of powers you long assumed were yours forever. If that is your experience, do not be upset. Just on its own, it will tell you a great deal about the experience children have in current reading education. So, on that cautionary note, try tackling a typical phonics lesson prepared for children in kindergarten or first grade.

Returning to Our Youth: A Phonics Lesson

This lesson, like much phonics instruction, is aimed at having you use the technique of *sounding out* to decode the words on the page. Sounding out new letters is difficult, and you would be overwhelmed if you had to deal with the entire alphabet. To ease your burden, you have to deal with a set of only nine letters.

We start with the assumption that you have already learned the eight letters that follow, all of which are symbols for consonant sounds (shown in the second row):

Letter	Δδ	Ηη	Λλ	Μμ	Νν	Σσ	Ττ	Ξξ
Sound	*duh*	*huh*	*ell*	*mm*	*nn*	*ss*	*tuh*	*ecks*

In each pair, the letter on the left is uppercase, and the one on the right is lowercase. The letter on the extreme left, for example, is a capital *dee,* the one immediately to its right is a lowercase *dee.* They make the sound *duh* (just like the *d* of our alphabet). The next set of letters contains upper- and lowercase *ayches,* and they make the sound *huh* (just like the *h* of our alphabet). And so on.

Now, in this lesson you are going to learn a new, ninth letter. It is the α and it has the sound *aah.* It also happens to be the first vowel you are going to be using. Because all words must have a vowel and α will be our only vowel in this lesson, keep in mind that this letter will appear in every word.

Now, to our lesson. As in any good phonics lesson, you "simply" have to sound out each letter and then combine it with the sounds of the other letters until you come out with the complete word. Remember, if the sounds don't end up sounding like a real word, try again. All the words are ones you know well. Go ahead and try your skill.

Δαν ηασ αν αξ.

Ηασ Δαν αν αξ?

Σαμ ηασ ηαμ.

Ηασ Σαμ ηαμ?

Δαν ηασ λανδ ανδ σανδ.

Ηασ Δαν σανδ?

Σαμ σατ.

Δαν σατ.

How did you do? How long did it take, and what was it like to sound out twenty-six ultra-short words limited to nine letters of the alphabet? For most people the experience is tedious, error laden, and difficult. Even the simplest real language has too much variation to allow traditional sounding out of letters to yield clear, user-friendly material for the beginning reader. Keep in mind that the task is not impossible. If you have tenacity, you can do it. It is just unpleasant, unrewarding, and demanding. Just as you can plow through the words if you have sufficient determination, your child can as well.

By the way, did you ever finish reading those twenty-six words? If not, here they are for you translated into a more recognizable format:

Δαν ηασ αν αξ.	Dan has an ax
Ηασ Δαν αν αξ?	Has Dan an ax?
Σαμ ηασ ηαμ.	Sam has ham.
Ηασ Σαμ ηαμ?	Has Sam ham?
Δαν ηασ λανδ ανδ σανδ.	Dan has land and sand.
Ηασ Δαν σανδ?	Has Dan sand?
Σαμ σατ.	Sam sat.
Δαν σατ.	Dan sat.

If translating those symbols was hard for you, imagine how it is for a child with no experience of reading. Some kids do learn this way. Some even learn without any instruction at all. You might be one of them. You would find that out in about three to four months. That seems to be the length of time successful children need to sort things out. For this group, after working diligently with material of the sort you just encountered, within a few months the jumble of letters begins to dissolve and to be replaced by real words. That is why many first-grade teachers are heard to remark, "By Christmas, the kids just get it. They start to read, and they zoom ahead."

For many children, though, that is not what happens. The clouds don't disperse. Things only darken further, as failure and despondency take over. Who in their right mind could possibly recommend unpleasant, unrewarding, and demanding tasks as the way to teach five- and six-year-old children? Yet this is what youngsters across the nation are asked to do every day. This fact alone can help you understand the astounding failure rate that marks the reading scene.

In addition, keep in mind that we've restricted ourselves to a range of extremely simple, mostly three-letter words where each letter can be sounded out. For example, with a word like *sat,* you can come up with a sound for each letter: *ss, aah, tuh.* These sorts of words are not at all representative of the words children actually see when they look at real books—even those designed for kindergartners and first graders.

The addition of even a single letter generally makes straightforward sounding out impossible. See, for example, what happens when you sound out each letter in four-letter words like *make, baby, seat, coin, loud,* and *bush.* The problem is perhaps best explained by pointing out that if phonics worked the way it is supposed to, the word *phonics* itself would be spelled *foniks.*

To overcome this problem, traditional phonics rapidly goes beyond sounding out and requires children to memorize hosts of complicated rules. Studies have shown that almost 600 rules are required if you are going to use explicit rules to decode basic English. And even with that astounding number, you will not be able to figure out how to pronounce "many of the most common words in English, like *one* and *have* and *of*" (Gough & Hillinger, 1980, p. 185).

You may have heard of some of the rules that children confront. Two of the most common are the silent *e* rule (where the *e* at the end of a word like *make* is silent) and the double vowel rule (where the double vowel *ea* in a word like *meat* gets a single sound). Not only are these rules tedious to learn, but they turn reading into a laborious process where each word has to be studiously analyzed before it can be deciphered.

Educators have over the years become increasingly aware of the many children who lack the skills to allow current phonics instruction to work. Instead of seeking a new approach that meets the needs of these children, they have tried to change the children to meet the needs of phonics. They have developed training in what is called *phonological awareness,* the skills deemed to be the precursors for phonics instruction. In this method children are taught various types of sound analysis. They are taught to rhyme (for example, "Say a word that rhymes with *man.*"), to dissect the sounds of words (for example, "What would *bend* sound like without the *b?*"), and to break words apart (for example, "Clap for how many syllables there are in the word *opening.*").

But after the phonological awareness training has ended, the children are still left to confront what I just asked you to do. They must decode unfamiliar

symbols, carry out seemingly endless sound–symbol associations, pay attention to minute details, and blend the many different sounds they come up with in the right sequence (all of which is commonly known as *reading!*).

You already have these phonological awareness skills, but you may have noticed that they didn't help you read the passage in an unfamiliar alphabet. Similarly for many children, even when they have developed the phonological awareness skills, reading is still fraught with difficulty. Endless sounding out doesn't work for them.

Additionally, today's children, accustomed to high-impact TV and video games, are at an even greater risk of failure than their parents and grandparents. To put it bluntly, students of previous generations were used to being bored. Phonics was anything but exciting, but in that respect it did not differ from the many tedious tasks children were typically expected to carry out. For example, children routinely had to accomplish long memorization tasks. A homework assignment might have been to memorize Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and then recite it the next day before the entire class.

Such diligence-demanding skills are totally beyond the ken of many of today's kids. The occasional sounding out of words is manageable and helpful, but repeated sounding out is a difficult chore, and children often cannot stay the course. The result is kids who do not learn how to read successfully.

Returning to Our Youth: A Whole Language Reading Lesson

As I explained before, phonics is generally not the sum total of children's instruction today. They are also exposed to the techniques of whole language. Now I'm going to ask you to take a short whole language lesson, to see if that method works any better.

The whole language approach focuses on a different aspect of language. Instead of concentrating on the dissected *sounds* of words, it provides children with complete stories, or *texts.* You will hear whole language proponents maintaining that stories are more "natural," "authentic," and "motivating." If you provide children with such stories, the thinking goes, their reading will naturally blossom.

In an effort to keep the material as simple as possible, a common technique in whole language is to use *predictable reading* material, in which small sets of words and phrases are repeated, as in the following passage (Segment 1). This is a typical lesson for a beginning reader in kindergarten or first grade.

Segment 1

Black bear, black bear, what can you see?

I can see a green bird looking at me.

Green bird, green bird, what can you see?

I can see a gray duck looking at me.

This rhyming verse, consistent with the whole language philosophy, is certainly more entertaining than the "Dan's ax" and "Sam's ham" passage used for the phonics lesson. Nevertheless, it shares the phonics aim of smooth decoding, or using the right words for various groups of letters. However, rather than repeating a letter, like the α in the phonics lesson, this approach repeats words and themes (for example, "what can you see? I can see a . . . looking at me").

To see how this works in practice, read Segment 1 until you have it memorized. Then move on and read Segment 2. It contains the same words—but in our foreign alphabet. Now you'll see how easy it is to read predictable texts.

Just repeat the sentences you have memorized, making sure to match each spoken word to the appropriate written word (for example, say "black" while looking at βλαχκ, and "bear" while looking at βεαρ, and so forth).

Segment 2

Βλαχκ βεαρ, Βλαχκ βεαρ, ωηατ χαν ψου σεε?

Ι χαν σεε α γρεεν βιρδ λοοκινγ ατ με.

Γρεεν βιρδ, γρεεν βιρδ, ωηατ χαν ψου σεε?

Ι χαν σεε α γραψ δυχκ λοοκινγ ατ με.

See? You're *reading,* just as lots of children do when they start memorizing stories that are read to them on a regular basis.

But what exactly have you learned? To find out, let's use the identical fifteen words but put them in a different order. OK, give it a try. Try to read Segment 3.

Segment 3

Δυχκ! δυχκ! Χαν ψου σεε?

Με, με? Σεε ωηατ?

Χαν ψου σεε α γρεεν βιρδ?

Ι χαν σεε α βλαχκ βιρδ.

You may have found that the decoding of Segment 3 posed some difficulties. That is certainly the case for many children. The use of this predictable reading method often leads to a laborious, error-filled reading of the text. Further, in this situation you may not even have the advantage of sounding out because you may not have been taught the sounds of the individual letters. That is why whole language teaching on its own fares less well than phonics. Neither is ideal, but phonics provides more systematic tools for dealing with new material.

The problems of whole language are obvious even when a text is limited to just fifteen words. With the inevitable introduction of more material, the difficulties soar. You will hear whole language proponents maintaining that the inherent appeal of well-written stories will automatically lead children to master the reading process. As you have just seen for yourself, it doesn't work out that way.

The presentation of stories early in reading instruction means children can often prematurely face a much wider range of words than they can manage. So while traditional phonics offers children tedious rules that are difficult to apply, whole language leaves them stranded without the controls a learner needs to master a new terrain. The number of words in any meaningful text is simply too great for the majority of novice readers to handle effectively.

In case you are interested, here is the translation of Segment 3:

Segment 3 Translation

Duck! duck! Can you see?

Me, me? See what?

Can you see a green bird?

I can see a black bird.

Returning to Our Youth: A Whole Language Writing Lesson

Whole language instruction is not confined to reading. In contrast to phonics, this approach rightly places enormous value on writing. Writing is, if anything, more difficult to teach than reading, and parents and educators alike are concerned about the extent to which it has been neglected.

There are good reasons why phonics downplays writing in the early grades. Imagine a young child wanting to express a relatively simple idea such as, "My dog is sick." Imagine further that the child is totally willing to abide by the phonics rules that have been taught. In this case the writing of this single idea could legitimately end up as, "Mie dawg iz sik," or as "Mye daug iz sic," or as any number of other variations. From a phonics point of view, it would be almost impossible to explain to the child why his or her writing is "wrong."

Whole language gets phonics off this uncomfortable hook. It says that children should not be constrained to use what adults have determined is *correct* spelling. Instead, they should be allowed, indeed encouraged, to use *invented spelling.* As captured in the title of an influential book (Bissex, 1980) on this topic, *Gnys at Wrk* (meaning "genius at work"), in this technique children write words in whatever way they feel is appropriate.

Many, if not most, schools today use phonics as the basis for teaching reading, and whole language as the basis for teaching writing. So for the final exercise, I am going to ask you to try out some whole language writing techniques.

Here is a typical writing lesson from the early grades that once again employs the foreign alphabet we've been using in these exercises. The teacher starts by saying:

> Let's try some writing. I'd like you to use the words we've been reading like these—
>
βεαρ	βιρδ	γρεεν	δυχκ	σεε	γραψ
bear	bird	green	duck	see	gray
>
> —to express your own ideas and experiences. To help you with other words, here is the whole alphabet:
>
> α β χ δ ε φ γ η ι φ κ λ μ ν ο π θ ρ σ τ υ ϖ ω ξ ψ ζ

Remember, all your ideas are important. Feel free to say anything you'd like. Just make sure, in the space below, to write at least three sentences using the new words you've learned—along, of course, with other words you need to make meaningful sentences. For example, if you want to write the word *fly,* you can write φλψ. But don't feel constrained. You may also use the invented spelling technique of whole language, in which you can create your own spelling and write the words in whatever way seems comfortable. [In other words, you may do just what young children do when they write *puld* for *pulled, wantid* for *wanted,* and *grl* for *growl.*]

Τηισ ισ μψ στορψ **(This is my story)**

_____

_____

_____

It's tough going, isn't it? When you have to keep creating words that you don't know, the process is slow and grinding. Schools will proudly boast how they teach children to love writing. If you speak to the children, though, you will hear a far different message. For the novice, the goal is often to do anything to get by. Children cope by writing the shortest sentences they can think of, by reusing the same types of sentences, and by spelling words in a haphazard manner. Each session works to ingrain patterns of poor writing that can haunt students for the rest of their lives.

Sorting Out the Means and the Ends

The experiences in this chapter may have been uncomfortable, but I hope you got to complete one or two of the tasks. Only through firsthand experience can you begin to sense the problems of current methods of instruction and to see why they are the source of so much failure.

These problems in no way deny the value of the goals that phonics and whole language have set for themselves; these goals remain on target. If children are to master reading, they must learn how to decode words smoothly. That's what makes phonics central to any effective method of teaching. Things go awry when we imagine that current sounding out techniques are the way to go in reaching that goal.

Similarly, if children are to master reading, they must know how to read books knowledgeably and write texts effectively. That's what makes the focus on meaning in whole language so important. Once again, however, that goal should not be equated with having to accept the complex and insufficiently structured materials that have been used in that approach. The goals of phonics and whole language approaches are correct. Their methods are failing.

The goals of phonics and whole language are correct. It is the methods that are failing.

The question is, What are the alternatives? The next chapter provides an answer.

chapter

2

What Reading Really Requires

The Six Essential Skills

In the last chapter we saw that the problems of phonics and whole language do not stem from their goals. Both systems aim for children to master processes that are absolutely essential to literacy. But that is not the same as saying that these goals are complete. They aren't. Literacy demands far more than both systems offer, even when they are combined. The essence of what reading demands is conveyed in the Six Skills of Reading diagram.

The Six Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		***Language Skills***			
Sequencing (letter order)	**Writing (letter creation)**	**Phonology (sounds)**	**Semantics (meaning)**	**Syntax (grammar)**	**Text (books)**

In this chapter you will find out what these physical and language skills are and why they are the core of reading. We will start by fitting the two major systems of reading instruction into the Six Skills of Reading diagram. Phonics focuses on placing sounds on letters so that you can convert them into real words. The processing of sounds falls under a language category known as *phonology.* (This is where

the name *phonics* comes from.) Phonology is one of the six skills listed on the diagram. The whole language approach focuses on providing children with complete stories. The processing of stories falls under a language category known as *text,* which is also one of the six skills listed on the diagram.

When we apply this information to fill in the appropriate boxes on the Six Skills of Reading diagram, we see that even when phonics and whole language teaching accomplish their objectives, they are still woefully inadequate. When combined, they still cover only two of the six areas that children need to master for effective literacy.

Phonics and Whole Language and the Six Skills of Reading

	Physical Skills		*Language Skills*			
	Sequencing	**Writing**	**Phonology (sounds)**	**Semantics**	**Syntax**	**Text (books)**
Phonics						
Whole language						

The end result is that these two reading systems leave children with huge gaps in learning. All the empty spaces in the diagram are skills that your child is currently *not* being taught.

When these abilities are left untaught, the inevitable outcome is endless error. It is no wonder so many children say they "hate reading." Incomplete and inadequate teaching leads them to experience reading as a pit of failure. As their self-esteem plummets, they do whatever it takes to avoid reading.

It is no wonder so many children say they "hate reading." Incomplete and inadequate teaching leads them to experience reading as a pit of failure that should be avoided at all costs.

It doesn't have to be that way. Over the past four decades I have developed a new approach to reading. This system teaches children *all six skills* required for successful reading, and it does so in a way that promotes accuracy, avoids error, and is easy for parents, teachers, and children to follow. What these skills are, and why they are the core of reading, is what this chapter is all about.

The Physical Skills

This section focuses on the two physical skills of reading: *sequencing* and *fine motor skills.* In learning to read, children have to transfer the language they have been speaking to the language they are seeing. In other words, reading is language. Like any language system, it requires particular physical skills. In the realm of spoken language, those skills involve our ears (so that we can listen to language) and our mouths (so that we can produce language). In the realm of written language, the comparable skills involve our eyes (so that we can read the language) and our hands (so that we can write the language).

Kids use their eyes and their hands for years before they approach reading. So instructional programs have assumed that they will simply bring these skills to reading and writing, and minimal effort is made to teach the skills that form the physical base for literacy. For many children, this neglect has meant reading failure.

No one would deny that literacy rests on a base of physical skills, but it is taken for granted that these skills will develop on their own. After all, kids use their eyes and hands for years before they start to read. So it has seemed reasonable to assume that they will simply carry over these skills to reading and writing. That is why you almost never see the physical aspects of literacy discussed in any book on reading instruction.

But even though some kids pick up these skills, many do not. Unfortunately, the consequences for those children can be reading failure.

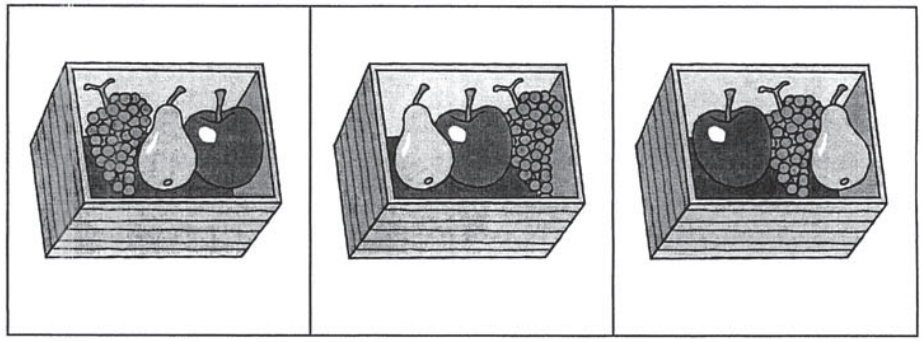
We should not be surprised when this happens. The fact of the matter is that the ways our eyes and hands perform in reading are radically different from the ways they are used in other activities. We'll start by looking at the way we use our eyes.

Component 1: Visual Sequencing

The Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		
Sequencing	**Writing**	

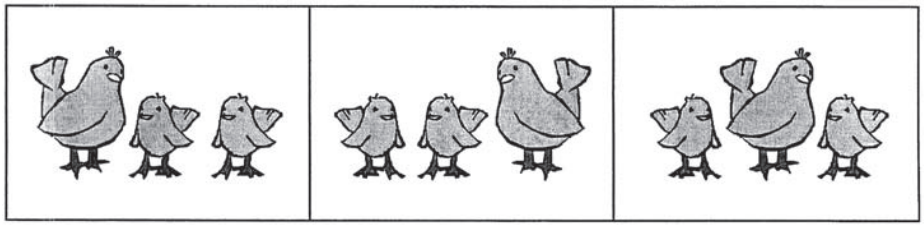
From birth, human beings are enormously skilled in visual processing. Even a toddler can effortlessly recognize thousands of objects. But in all that recognition the viewer consistently dismisses one aspect of the visual world. To see what this aspect is, take a look at these pictures:



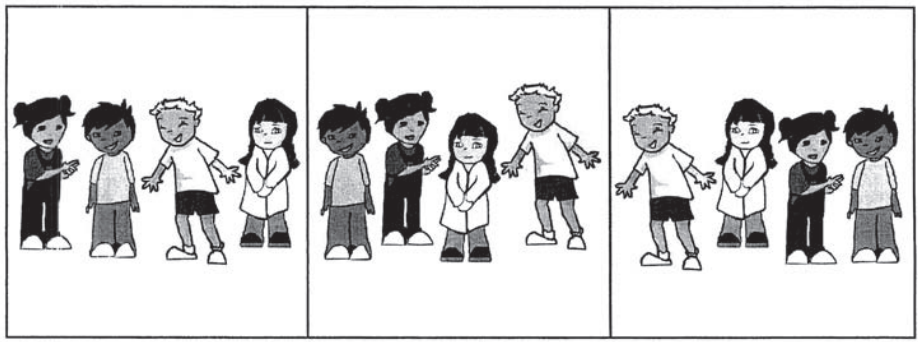
If we were asked to name any one of these pictures, we would be likely to say something like "a box of fruit," or "some fruit in a box," or "a bunch of fruit." The words we used would not reflect any awareness that from one box to the next the fruits are shown in different sequences.

This fact of everyday visual life is present from the smallest to the biggest of clusters. We can see it in a two-element cluster like this:

a three-element cluster like this:



or a multi-element cluster like this:



From the earliest days of our lives, we learn to identify clusters of objects while paying no attention whatsoever to the left-to-right sequence of the units within the clusters. In the case of the bird and her fledglings, for example, we are likely to say, "The pictures show a mother bird and her two babies." We would not dream of describing the sequence by saying, "Well, in the first picture, there is a mother bird with two babies on the left, while in the second picture, there are two baby birds with their mother to the right." Our description stays the same whether any particular bird is to the left or to the right of its family members. This approach to visual information provides a fast, efficient, and effective means of handling tasks in the everyday visual world. Imagine how awkward it would be if we always had to describe objects in terms of their relation to other objects.

A New Way of Seeing. With the introduction of reading, our habitual approach must be dramatically transformed. Suddenly, the dimension that has never mattered becomes critical. Just like objects, letters appear in clusters. But these clusters completely change their identity depending on the sequence of the units they contain. For example, consider the following words:

cars	scar	arcs
spot	pots	stop

In each row, the units contain the identical four letters (*a-c-r-s* in first set, and *o-p-s-t* in the second). Nevertheless, we know that the words in each set are different in every possible way—in the sequence of their sounds, the meaning they

represent, and the ways we are expected to spell them. They are different words not because they contain different letters but because the identical letters they contain appear in different sequences.

The examples of this are endless. Here are a few more (reading downward in each pair of rows):

left	from	rats	pans
felt	form	star	span
rat	table	trains	scare
art	bleat	strain	cares
cat	plane	nest	sour
act	panel	sent	ours

Reading English is marked by an unalterable fact: it requires us to scan each and every element in a cluster of letters from left to right. Further, it is our only major activity demanding left-to-right visual sequencing. Nothing in a child's prereading life prepares him or her for these demands. Indeed, thousands of encounters up to this point have taught the child to ignore left-to-right sequencing. This means that the child not only has to learn a new skill but also has to undo a pattern that is one of the deeply embedded habits of everyday visual life. Until the child overcomes those habits, or at least abandons them in dealing with the world of print, he or she will not become an effective reader.

Reading is our only major activity demanding left-to-right visual sequencing.

As always happens, some children cue in readily to this new fact of visual life. For many other children, though, the shift can be confusing and painful. Forced to cope, they come up with a variety of mechanisms, such as learning to swap individual letters so that a word like *stop* may at times be *stop,* but equally often it may be *tops* or *spot* or some other meld of letters. In some cases children simply revert to their old pattern of ignoring left-to-right orientation, leading them to be labeled with the damning, but inaccurate, label of "reversing" what they see. That is not what they are doing. Just as you were not seeing the set of birds backward if you described the middle picture (where the babies are to the left of the mother)

as "a mother bird and her two babies," they are not seeing words backward. They are simply continuing patterns that, until now, have served them well in handling visual input.

You may be thinking that left-to-right sequencing is so obvious a prerequisite skill for reading that it must be part of the curriculum. Surprisingly, it isn't. Currently, neither the phonics nor the whole language approach systematically teaches children the way visual sequencing works in the world of words, and there is no supplementary system that provides children with this essential skill. As a result, many children have great difficulty in this area.

The Need to Teach Sequencing. I discovered the importance of visual sequencing in the 1960s, when I was studying how fourth graders with and without reading problems dealt with complex visual matching tasks (Blank, 1978). In these studies the kids would see a pattern such as this:

They would then have to pick out its identical match from one of three patterns like the following:

Contrary to all predictions the children scored extremely well, with no differences between those who were ranked high in reading and those who were not. It was only when I asked the kids how they approached the activity that differences appeared. The differences were dramatic. The good readers, on the one hand, systematically worked in a left-to-right sequence, treating the sets of symbols just the way they treated sets of words. The kids who had reading problems, on the other hand, used a range of non-sequence-based strategies, such as noticing whether the shapes on the two ends matched the model. After four years of reading, left-to-right scanning had *still* not become the way they viewed sequenced patterns.

I then saw that for reading instruction to be effective, it must teach visual sequencing. Further, ideally, that teaching should occur before children are asked to read actual words. If real words are used when sequencing has not yet been established, the children will scan them using their established non-sequence-based patterns, thereby setting in place an inappropriate system. My subsequent research has confirmed these findings.

The Reading Kingdom system uses a simple but highly effective method that teaches children the rules of visual sequencing in reading. This is accomplished through the Sequences in Sight program, which uses activities that are designed to expand children's visual-processing strategies. Once children have completed these activities, they have a solid foundation from which to approach reading on a visual level.

Sequences in Sight is one of two preparatory programs that teach the physical skills needed for reading. Although the figure will vary according to the number of sessions conducted in a week, most children complete the Sequences in Sight program in three to five weeks, and they are then set to deal with the real words they are going to encounter in reading. This program and its major features are described in Chapter Four.

Not all children need to go through the Sequences in Sight program. You need to implement it only if a brief skills check that you carry out shows that your child needs to develop the visual sequencing skill. As with all the components of the Reading Kingdom system, if the skills are already in place, bypass the program. In this way the system is tailored to each child's individual needs. Children never waste time relearning skills they have already mastered.

Component 2: Motor Skills

The Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		
Sequencing	**Writing**	

Written language has two faces. There is the language we take in from others; that process is reading. There is also the language that we produce for others; that process is writing. The production of written language calls on the second key physical skill we will be considering. It is the area known as *fine motor skills.*

Motor Skills Develop Slowly. Behaviors such as tying shoelaces, cutting food with a knife, and writing the letters of the alphabet with their demands for small, delicate, coordinated hand movements represent the essence of fine motor skills. Every time

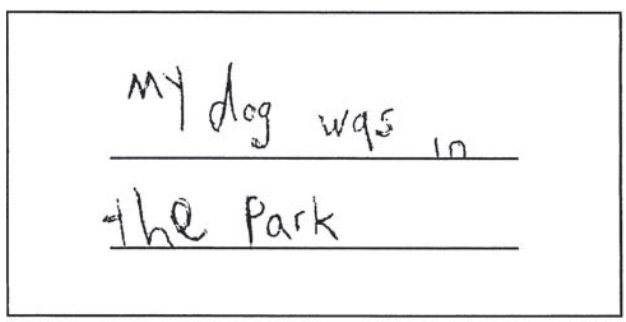
parents urge their five- or six-year-olds on with statements such as, "Come on, you need to learn to tie your shoelaces," they're urging them to improve fine motor skills.

The fine motor system develops very slowly, with many children experiencing difficulties throughout the primary grades. In some areas, advances like Velcro for sneakers have rendered certain delays irrelevant. So far, though, there is no Velcro for handwriting. If children are to produce written messages, they have to form the letters on their own, using the traditional paper-and-pencil materials that have been with us for centuries. (Even the computer does not allow kids to bypass motor demands. If they are to get letters onto the screen, they need to use the set of fine motor skills required for manipulating the keyboard.)

Fine motor skills are absolutely essential to the creation of letters. In the realm of literacy, those motor skills are known as writing.

Motor Skills and Handwriting. Once they enter kindergarten, children regularly face demands for writing. Teachers spend a lot of time, for example, on having children learn to write their names. These activities involve producing the letters of the alphabet, because no writing can take place without them. The slow pace of motor skill development, however, means that for many children the writing activities occur before the necessary skills are in place.

That is why children's early writing looks so immature. The letters are uneven, letter size varies in a seemingly random fashion, and the lines on the page are ignored.



The difficulties are obvious and undeniable. Current conventional wisdom, however, views them without concern. They are seen as signs of a normal developmental

progression that will be taken care of by time. Once again, an essential physical skill that underpins literacy is expected simply to emerge by itself.

The limitations of this approach are obvious. Imagine trying to become an expert at any physical activity—golf, tennis, baseball—without careful, deliberate instruction. That is precisely why so many kids have problems in this area.

When writing is not fluid and easy, it becomes a draining process that many children detest. Handwriting problems left unaddressed at the outset lead children to develop poor habits that can haunt them the rest of their lives. That is why the S f be joh L johe pn system addresses motor skills at a very early stage through the Letters to Write program. Within a few weeks children develop the skills they need to form letters in a smooth, automatic manner. Once that is achieved, they can focus on what they are writing instead of on the physical act of writing itself. The Letters to Write program is described in Chapter Five.

The Language Skills

With the physical skills in place, the stage is set for the move into language itself. Using language is an extraordinarily complex behavior composed of thousands of abilities. Typically, these abilities are clustered into four areas:

1. *Phonology*—the sounds of words
2. *Semantics*—the verbal concepts, or ideas, that the words convey
3. *Syntax*—the grammar that strings words together
4. *Text*—the messages we send and receive through books, articles, notes, signs, and so on

Each of these abilities needs to be taught if a reading system is to provide children with what they need.

Component 3: Phonology

The Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		*Language Skills*	
Sequencing	**Writing**	**Phonology**	

We'll start with the area of *phonology.* Of all the areas of reading, this is the one that has received the most attention. Phonics, which is an offshoot of phonology, refers to the specific skill of sounding out letters to form words. Its influence, however, has been so great that the term *phonics* has almost become synonymous with reading education.

Certainly, the ability to recognize and reproduce the sounds that letters make in forming different words is an essential skill of reading. Problems arise, however, when (1) that is the only skill that is taught, and (2) that skill is taught in ways that create their own set of problems for the beginning reader.

The Limitations of Sounding Out. These problems arise from a couple of key roots. If you concentrate on short, simple words, such as *cat, bin, pot,* and *sand,* the sounding-out process is often doable, but it is slow and tedious. When there are many words, the situation becomes unsustainable. You saw that for yourself if you carried out the foreign-symbol reading exercise in the previous chapter. Sounding out is not a feasible system for use on a steady basis.

Then there is an even more serious root issue. Straightforward sounding out works only in a very limited domain. The pronunciation of English letters is too rife with irregularities to offer children a clear, simple sounding-out system they can use. For instance, how do you explain to a beginning reader that the same letters can have quite different sounds in different words? Consider these examples:

- The *o* of *oven* compared to the *o* of *opera*
- The *ea* of *head* compared to the *ea* of *great*
- The *y* of *happy* compared to the *y* of *fly*
- The *at* of *cat* compared to the *at* of *water*

And so on. The list is seemingly endless. The fact is, English is a very difficult language to sound out.

Phonics has addressed the inherent problems of sounding out by imposing hundreds of rules. They are cumbersome, demanding, and imprecise, but the system sees no other way to keep going. In the case of words with double, adjoining vowels, for example, children are taught that "when two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking." This means that, when two vowels combine, the first vowel is not short (like the *e* sound of *egg*) but long (like the *e* sound of *beat*).

In the case of words where the final letter is an *e* (such as *bate, mane,* and *fine*), the silent *e* rule is employed. This means that the *e* at the end of a word has no sound but changes the first vowel to a long vowel sound.

The Rules: A Quagmire for Learning. One immediately obvious problem with these rules is that a vast number of exceptions exist for each one. In the case of the double-vowel rule, for example, we find many double-vowel words where the rule does not hold, including *good, head, boil, ouch, loud, lion,* and *said.* Similarly, many of the most common four-letter words ending in *e,* such as *come, give, love, done,* and *move,* do not obey the silent *e* rule. With so many exceptions, it is difficult to see how the rules themselves can be called rules.

Less apparent but equally important, these rules distort the left-to-right sequencing needed for reading. A child can apply each rule only by scanning a word—first, from left to right and then from right to left. For example, with the silent *e* rule, until you scan to the end of a word and determine whether an *e* is present, it's impossible to know whether to make the vowel short (as in *mad*) or long (as in *made*).

m a d e
→ → →

Then, if (as in the case of *made*), a final *e has* been identified, the child must go back in a right-to-left scanning pattern to return to the beginning of the word in order to begin the final round of left-to-right scanning, where the *a* is sounded out according to the rules.

→ → →
m a d e
← ← ←

So—simply to see if the rule needs to be used—children have to mesh two methods of scanning: left-to-right scanning, which is critical in reading English; and right-to-left scanning, which is confusing and counterproductive in English. Instead of reading, children are forced to engage in a slow, laborious, error-prone task that disrupts left-to-right scanning. The vital skill of visual sequencing is sacrificed to maintain an incomplete system of teaching.

The silent *e* rule is just one of hundreds, many of which cause distortions in visual sequencing. This naturally leads to further reading problems, especially for children who were already having difficulty with sequencing.

The Reading Kingdom reading programs have been designed to avoid the problems associated with traditional sounding-out techniques. They provide children with simplified sound-blending techniques that apply to any words they see. In addition, all words are taught without the imposition of rules that violate the left-to-right sequencing that is central to reading. These techniques, outlined in Chapter Six, are present in all five reading programs of the Reading Kingdom system: Boarding, Runway, Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring. Although all the programs share the same techniques, the content becomes progressively more complex with each advancing level. Measuring your child's skill at the outset will tell you which of the reading programs represents the right starting point for him or her.

The rules of phonics require children to intermesh left-to-right scanning (which is critical in reading English) with right-to-left scanning (which is antithetical to reading English). The vital skill of visual sequencing is sacrificed to maintain the rules prescribed by the teaching method.

Component 4: Semantics

The Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		*Language Skills*		
Sequencing	**Writing**	**Phonology**	**Semantics**	

Semantics refers to the concepts, or ideas, that words convey. In entering this domain we are moving from sounds (which lie at the core of phonology) to meaning (which lies at the core of semantics).

The Words of Speaking Versus the Words of Reading. Well before they start reading, kids have vocabularies consisting of thousands of words. By kindergarten

age they can easily express and understand complex words like *penguins, vacation, exercise, delicious, special, jaguars, restaurant, dangerous,* and *suppose.* But the decoding, or reading, of these long, multisyllable words is clearly beyond these children's reading capabilities. It is rightly taken for granted that the words children see in books have to be simpler than the words they speak.

The problem is that this restriction has been extended to the point that it works against effective learning. To see how, let's consider some of the issues children face.

The Long Wait for Words. In traditional phonics not only do the words have to be simple, they have to be *decodable.* That is, a child should previously have been taught the sound of any letter in a word that he or she sees. However, because the learning of letter sounds is difficult, only one is taught at a time. To do more would bring on failure. (You may recall how difficult the foreign symbol exercise was when you had to deal with nine new letters at one time.) This pacing means that children wait weeks, often months, before seeing the letters in meaningful words.

To picture the situation, imagine that the first four letters a child has learned are *a, c, g,* and *o.* Limited to these letters, you can't do much in the way of words. Among the few possibilities are *cog* and *gag,* which are not even likely to be part of children's vocabularies. In short, semantics, or the reading of meaningful words, is practically nonexistent in the early months of instruction.

It isn't until the children have completed about nine letters that a small corps of words begins to form. Let's assume, for example, that *t, e, i, s,* and *f* have been added to the *a, c, g,* and *o* the children have learned. These new letters open up a range of words such as *fat, sat, cat, sit, fit,* and *tag.* (Other possibilities exist, such as *coat, ice,* and *cage,* but they cannot be included because they involve the still-to-be-taught vowel rules.) It's hard to convey much of a message when your choices are limited to this set of words. The closest you can come to an actual sentence with the nine letters we now have is *fat cat sat* or *fat cat sit.*

Only when children have completed the sounds for about half the alphabet, a process that can take from three to six months, does anything resembling real sentences appear. In one reading program, for example, after having been taught the thirteen letters *a, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, l, o, s, t, u,* children are asked to read the following sentences, focused on the new (fourteenth) letter, *b.*

Bill has a soft bed.

Bob bit the hot dog.

Bob has a big belt.

Bud has a cut leg.

Bill fell off the sled.

Bud tugs the big bag.

—Rowland, 1995, workbook 14

As you can see, these sentences do offer words like *big, bag,* and *bed,* but most of the *b* words are children's names (*Bill, Bob, Bud*), and each is used more than once. This is done because the available letters still do not yield enough real *b* words, leaving first names as the only option for increasing their number. For this reason, early readers are replete with children's names composed of three letters (like *Pam, Sam,* and *Dan*).

This practice, however, violates the way children use words in their everyday lives. When unfamiliar people appear on the scene, children do not refer to them by their first names. Instead, they identify them through phrases they have been using from the time they were toddlers, phrases such as *the boy, a kid,* and *those girls.* But those natural terms don't fit the sounding-out rules the kids are being taught, so they are avoided in reading instruction.

This is but one example of the many ways in which reading materials distort the semantics that children are accustomed to. After waiting weeks and months to see meaningful words, the sentences children see have only passing similarity to the language they actually use.

Early reading material is notable for its weak semantics. Having been kept from meaningful words for weeks and months, children finally see sets of sentences that present a language with only passing similarity to the language they actually use.

Some children can deal with the problematic semantics that confronts them in early reading materials. Others have a much harder time of it. These difficulties can be remedied if semantics is not relegated to the shadows but is made a key skill in learning

how to read. Because they are not restricted to oversimplifed sound patterns, the Reading Kingdom reading programs open up the range of words children see, and allow words to be combined in ways that ft the natural language patterns children use. From the very first sets of stories, children see much broader—and more meaningful—combinations of words than are usually found in instructional programs for young readers. In Chapter Six, you will see how semantics, or the meaning of words, is dealt with in the five reading programs of the Sfbejoh.Ljohepn system.

Component 5: Syntax

The Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		*Language Skills*			
Sequencing	**Writing**	**Phonology**	**Semantics**	**Syntax**	

The fifth key skill is *syntax,* or the grammar that allows us to link words together to form meaningful sentences. Like so many of the other skills, syntax has been given short shrift in children's reading education.

The Two Groups of Words. To understand why syntax has received little attention, we need to understand an important distinction that exists between words. Although we don't think about it much, the words of our language fall into two major groups. The first group, called *content words,* refers to words such as *girl, turn, made, happy, beat, fast, cloud,* and so on. They are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, and they are the central units in semantics. They represent an enormous group, because there are hundreds of thousands of content words (estimates range from 500,000 to 1,000,000). New entries are also steadily appearing—100 years ago, no one would have been using such words as *astronaut, radar, television, Internet,* and *Google.*

The second group, the *noncontent words,* consists of all the words outside the noun, verb, adverb, and adjective groupings. It includes articles, prepositions, and pronouns, such as *the, is, was, but, there, for, to, what, he, it,* and *they.* (The verbs in this group, such as *is* and *was,* do not convey specific concepts that are found in

verbs such as *run, eat,* and *fly.*) The noncontent group also contains the *part words* that we add to content words, such as the *-s* added to plurals (as in *rocks* and *dogs*), the *-ing* added to verbs (as in *going* and *sitting*), and the *-ed* used for creating past tense (as in *played* and *wished*). Although these difficult-to-define words abound in everything we say and read, their total number is tiny—there are only about 200 in all, and of these, only 100 or so are commonly used. (Most of us can get along quite well without words like *thence, whence,* and *heretofore.*)

The noncontent words play a key role in syntax, because it is almost impossible to create a sentence without them. Even the title of that quintessential phonics-based book *The Cat in the Hat* (Dr. Seuss, 1976) draws three of its five words from the noncontent category.

The Content of Noncontent Words. Despite their label, noncontent words are far from lacking in content. Consider, for instance, the way in which the presence or absence of a single noncontent word transforms the meaning of the following sets of sentences:

The man looked **at** the painting.

The man looked **for** the painting.

The kids walked the dog.

The kids walked **to** the dog.

That is **the** principle for us to follow.

That is **no** principle for us to follow.

Although noncontent words play a critical role in language, their elusive meanings have made them seem difficult to teach. That is one reason for their neglect. Another reason is that from a traditional phonics viewpoint, these words are highly problematic. They present major exceptions to the sounding-out method on which the system relies. For instance, if these words played by the rules, *was* would be spelled as *wuz, who* as *hoo, he* as *hee, they as thay, of* as *uv,* and so on. In the face of these rule violations the only recourse in traditional phonics is to teach children to regard such words as "exceptions." The feelings against them are so strong that some instructional programs teach children to label them with terms that suggest intentional wrongdoing, such as *outlaw words* and *renegades.*

***Children are taught to regard the noncontent words as "exceptions." If these words played by the rules,* was *would be spelled as* wuz, who *as* hoo, he *as* hee, they *as* thay, of *as* uv, *and so on. The feelings against these words are so strong that they are labeled with terms that suggest intentional wrongdoing, such as* outlaw words *and* renegades.**

Thus relegated to the background, noncontent words are given almost no teaching time—with the result that children steadily encounter difficulties in decoding them. One teacher humorously expressed her frustration in teaching these words by writing a paper for her colleagues that she titled "Teaching Were, With, What and Other 'Four-Letter Words'" (Cunningham, 1980).

The treatment that noncontent words receive runs counter to the role they play in reading. Amazingly enough, the 100 or so most common noncontent words occupy the majority of any page of print you will ever see in the English language—whether the book is for a first-grader or a college student. Here are two sample texts: one from an early primary-grade reader and another from a college textbook. In each case I have placed the noncontent words in bold type.

A Reading Passage: First- or Second-Grade Level

The baby wolf **is** eight week**s** old **now. She no** long**er** drink**s her** mother**'s** milk. **She** sniff**s and** lick**s at the** mouth **of an** adult wolf. **This is how she** ask**s for** food. **The** adult spit**s up some** food **for the** little wolf. **This may not** sound good **to you. But it is** perfect food **for a** grow**ing** baby pup.

—Batten, 1998, p. 20

Total words: 60

Total noncontent words: 32

Percentage noncontent words: 53%

A Reading Passage: College Level

In consign**ing this** manuscript **to a** desk drawer, **I am** comfort**ed by the** behavior **of** baseball player**s. There are no** pitcher**s who do not** give **up** home run**s, there are no** batter**s who do not** strike **out. There are no** major league pitcher**s or** batter**s who have not somehow** learned **to** survive giv**ing up** home run**s and** striking **out.**

—Brownstein, Weiner, & Green, 1994, p. 41

Total words: 59

Total noncontent words: 35

Percentage noncontent words: 59%

The noncontent words invariably occupy 50 percent or more of every page. This rule holds true no matter what book, newspaper, magazine, or other form of text you look at.

The relevance of this truth to the teaching of reading is apparent. Noncontent words represent a huge core of what children have to read from the moment they start reading. Think about it: 100 words make up 50 percent or more of every page you will ever read in your life. To put it another way, if we teach children these 100 words, they will be able to decode half of the words they see!

That of course is not the message children currently receive. Paradoxically, they are told that the majority of words on any page of text that they will ever read in their entire lifetimes are exceptions. Needless to say, that doesn't make much sense. Its primary effect is to create a major obstacle that stands in the way of children's developing the language awareness needed for accurate decoding.

Telling children that a majority of the words they see on a page are "exceptions" doesn't make much sense. Its primary effect is to create a major obstacle that stands in the way of their developing the abilities needed for accurate decoding.

Noncontent words attracted my interest about thirty years ago when I became aware of the different roles these words played in spoken and written language. In written language it was common knowledge—later supported by scientific studies (Tunmer & Hoover, 1992)—that many children had inordinate difficulty with these "little words." The source of the difficulty was rarely if ever tied to the neglect that marked the way in which they were taught. Instead the difficulties were taken as proof that the words were, indeed, troublesome exceptions to the system that were bound to plague both children and teachers. They were, and continue to be, an accepted and expected barrier in early reading instruction.

In spoken language, however, things were quite different. A landmark study had been carried out at Harvard University documenting the stages toddlers go through in learning to speak (Brown, 1973). After spending the first stage expressing simple relationships through content words, such as *big dog* and *Mommy fix,* they move into a stage where they do something quite amazing. While still tiny tots, they spend months figuring out how to insert into their simple two- and three-word utterances the noncontent words and part words such as *the, a, -ing* (as in *sitting*), *-ed* (as in *looked*), *in, on, -s* (as in *cookies*), *my,* and *that.* Though no one has, or could have, told them about it, the toddlers sense something that evades the consciousness of even very sophisticated adults: they recognize that for speaking and understanding language the noncontent words are essential, and so they devote considerable amounts of time and effort to the mastery of these words.

The contrast between spoken language and written language was striking. School-age children on the one hand were being directed to spend almost no time on the noncontent realm, and their reading was suffering. Two-years-olds on the other hand were spending a lot of time on that very same area of language, and their spoken language was blossoming. I was convinced that if reading instruction could emulate the time and effort toddlers put into the noncontent realm, the payoff could be enormous.

Giving Noncontent Words a Place in Reading Instruction. The role of noncontent words is not limited to dominating every page of text—although that fact alone makes them worthy of our attention. These words are also critical to understanding and using the grammar, or syntax, of our language. Reading

instruction must be designed to move the powerful class of noncontent words out of the shadows to which they have been relegated and into the foreground, where they can illuminate the whole process of reading. That's why Sfbejoh Ljohepn makes them a key part of the instruction. It is the only reading system that does this. As you will see, all five of its reading programs are designed to devote as much time and attention to the noncontent words as to the content words. However, to convey their unique properties, they are taught by different methods.

Noncontent words occupy 50 percent or more of every page of text a person will ever read in a lifetime. They are also critical to the processes of syntax. That's why *Reading Kingdom* ***makes them a key part of the instruction. It is the only reading system that does this.***

Chapter Seven describes the complete set of training activities used to teach the words in the noncontent domain.

Component 6: Text

The Skills of Reading

Physical Skills		*Language Skills*			
Sequencing	**Writing**	**Phonology**	**Semantics**	**Syntax**	**Text**

The final component we will consider in this chapter is *text,* the way words and sentences are combined to create complete, meaningful messages (Halliday & Hasan, 1980). You are probably most familiar with the term through the word *textbook,* but *text* includes a wide range of books and other language materials. In terms of reading, the texts children experience fall into two groups:

1. *Books designed to be read to children.* These books play an important and highly pleasurable role in kids' lives. Most children love to have stories read to them, and even though these books are not often part of formal reading instruction, the listening experience leaves children eager to learn to read.

2. *Books designed for children to read on their own.* These books, which are part of children's reading instruction, ideally should allow children to accomplish their dream of independent reading. Unfortunately, they often have fundamental flaws that lead to the opposite result. The children face repeated failure that causes their motivation to vanish into thin air—to be replaced by dark clouds of fear, tension, and misery. Children who start out loving books can begin to avoid them like the plague.

ONE PARENT'S ACCOUNT OF HER CHILD'S DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Before Michael got into kindergarten, he was one of the most cheerful children I had ever seen. He had so many interests, but books were among his greatest love. He adored being read to and he relished retelling the stories that were read to him. In first grade, all that changed. He began to avoid books. The teachers registered some surprise at his "lack of interest in the ABCs." Still, they assured me that all children were different, and with a child as bright as Michael, things would definitely "begin to click."

My concerns were somewhat different. I saw a striking personality change overtake my son. His formerly alert and cheerful manner was being replaced by a shy, moody, insecure presence. He became less and less willing to engage in any of the literacy-based activities of the class, and his independence declined. By the middle of first grade, the teachers were no longer so sure that things would eventually click. They advised me to put Michael in a *pull-out* program where he, and several of his classmates, would receive special attention in reading.

We did it. It didn't help. My husband kept accusing Michael of "not trying," and Michael got gloomier and gloomier. When the word *reading* came up, his face would darken and he would blurt out what became his mantra, "Don't talk about it. I *hate* reading."

Although it may seem that books should be a central element of reading instruction, both phonics and whole language, albeit for different reasons, pay scant

attention to the books they offer children. Phonics adherents see the decoding of words as essential, so almost all the training is on individual words. It is taken for granted that once children can decode the individual words they will automatically transfer these skills to the books they see—so long as the words are decodable (that is, so long as the children have been taught all the sounds contained in the words).

The Quantum Leap to Books. There is, however, an enormous difference between what children see on the pages when they are learning to decode words and what they see on the pages when they are reading books. Most decoding training takes place via worksheets, where, to make things as clear as possible, a few words are widely spaced across a page. A typical exercise might appear as follows:

> **Directions:** *Read the words and then in the space next to each one, write a word that rhymes.*
>
> hot _____
>
> pin _____
>
> can _____
>
> lid _____
>
> mad _____
>
> rag _____

This sort of task places limited demands on children. Even for kids who don't recognize a single word and who have to resort to sounding out each one, the situation is manageable. They can take as long as they want to figure out a word. No matter how much time it requires, it still has no effect on the word that follows. So even very slow sounding out does not hold up the rest of the work.

The introduction of books represents a quantum change, for even the simplest texts pose far more complexity than words in isolation. For a start, *easy readers* have what amounts to a lot of words for a child. Books for the earliest levels of reading will often proudly advertise that they contain "only thirty words!" To experienced readers that seems like a very small number. To a child at the start of the process that many words can be overwhelming.

Should you have any doubts about how thirty or so words can seem like an avalanche to a novice, just recall your experience with this twenty-six-word foreign-letter passage in Chapter One:

Δαν ηασ αν αξ.

Ηασ Δαν αν αξ?

Σαμ ηασ ηαμ.

Ηασ Σαμ ηαμ?

Δαν ηασ λανδ ανδ σανδ.

Ηασ Δαν σανδ?

Σαμ σατ.

Δαν σατ.

Remember that for children who have not yet learned to read, the letters that appear on a page can be as foreign as the ones in this passage are to you. Even if a child recognizes 80 percent of the words in a book instantly, 20 percent still have to be sounded out, resulting in decoding that is repeatedly marked by long pauses. During those pauses the child is likely to forget the words that came before. This pausing, plodding process has a relatively minor effect on worksheets, with their sparse number of words, but it has a devastating effect on texts. When the child perceives many of the words as unconnected units, the flow of the message is blocked. This experience is precisely the opposite of the way a text should be read and comprehended.

Further, although worksheets are almost bereft of noncontent words, texts are not. For example, in a story focused on the letter *h,* the child may see the following text:

Ted has a hat.

Tig gets Ted's hat.

Tig hid the hat.

Ed has Ted's hat.

Did the hat fit Ed?

Ed slid. Ted's hat fell.

Doll slid.

Doll hit the hat.

Ted's hat is flat.

At last, Ted has his hat.

Ted's hat is odd.

Ted is sad.

Ted left his hat.

Ted has the flag.

Ted is glad.

—Rowland, 1995, workbook 12

Though every attempt has been made to minimize the noncontent words, eighteen of the sixty words, or 30 percent, are still from that group, and an additional five words have noncontent part words, like *-'s* (indicating possession), for a total of 38 percent. When, as in a story, you have a message to transmit, those words cannot be avoided. Because their word training has downplayed noncontent words, children lack the skills to deal with them effectively when they appear in real text.

Equally important is the peculiarity of the text children are often given. Just read the previous example aloud, and you will see how weird the language sounds. People in real life simply do not express ideas in the way that text does. So after having finally reached the realm of text, children see stilted writing that is fundamentally lacking in meaning.

The large total number of words, the large number of noncontent words, and the stilted meaning are but three of the many factors in traditional phonics training that leave children unprepared to deal with even the simplest phonics-based texts they are given to read. Words are arranged in books in ways that do not mirror the training the children receive, causing books to trigger high rates of failure.

Phonics-based texts present children with language that does not mirror the training they have received. There are too many words, too many noncontent words, and too stilted a language, and children cannot decode these texts with the ease that is needed for competent reading.

The Reliance on Questionable Assumptions. Despite its emphasis on books, the other major system of reading instruction—whole language—also fails to provide the texts that children need. Adherents of this approach view children as already possessing, in their spoken language abilities, a rich inner base for effective reading. All the children need is the opportunity to experience appealing, authentic books, and their natural talents will take them the rest of the way.

That is why books used with whole language instruction are not specially designed for teaching. Indeed, it is a tenet of whole language that books should not be artificially created to teach particular patterns. Rather, they must be "authentic" and must contain the natural language that can arouse children's interest and imagination.

Those books are often wonderful to read *to* children. However, they are not wonderful for children to use in their learning. Authentic books are both longer and more complex than phonics-based texts, and they invariably engender even higher rates of error. Whole language supporters are generally not perturbed by these errors. They view them as part of the learning process. Children, though, do not view them in the same light. Like Michael, they rightly see them as irrefutable signs that they do not know how to read, and their only defense is to avoid the pain by avoiding reading.

As with the other reading skills, reading instruction must be reconfigured so that text plays a major and appropriate role. Children should see meaningful, connected language, and they should be taught the skills that allow them to read that language easily and effortlessly. The thirty books of the S fbejoh Ljohepn system accomplish this goal through a number of features, including

1. Tightly controlling the initial books so that the number of words they contain is far fewer than in other systems.
2. Teaching, to high levels of mastery, all the words that will appear in a book, so that children never see words they do not know.
3. Systematically introducing the language structures found in authentic books, so that children will be fully prepared to deal with those books in the shortest possible time.

Chapter Eight describes the way these books are structured to achieve these goals.

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

To get a fuller sense of how the system works, here are answers to the questions that parents most frequently ask about Reading Kingdom.

1. Who is the program for?

   Reading Kingdom is aimed at children in the general school population or those who will be going into the general school population. The program is designed primarily for three groups:

   Young children who are four and one-half years of age and up whose parents want them to get into reading in a smooth, problem-free way and have a leg up in school. If your child has been attending preschool or kindergarten, then the program is likely to suit him or her well.

   . Children in the early primary grades of school whose parents want them to attain the highest possible level of skill in reading, writing, and comprehension so that they shine in all aspects of literacy.

   . Children in the primary grades who are, often inexplicably, experiencing difficulty in learning to read.

2. At what age can I start the program with my child?

   I recommend starting the program when your child is about four and one-half to five years old. If you do, smooth patterns of reading are established at the outset and school performance is greatly improved. The basic requirement is that your child should, without strain, be able to work on tasks for fifteen to twenty minutes at a time.

3. Until what age can the program be used?

   Reading Kingdom can be used with children of any age who have been experiencing problems with traditional teaching. However, it is best if the program is used up through about fourth grade.

4. How long does the program take each day?

   Each day's lesson takes only fifteen to thirty minutes, depending on which lesson you are doing and your child.s profciency with that particular task.

5. How many sessions should there be in a week?

   The more frequent the sessions, the faster the progress. Children who are not yet in frst grade should use the program at least four times per week. Children in frst grade and up should use the program at least fve times per week, and, if possible, they should use it every day.

6. Where does my child start in the system?

   One of the major advantages of Reading Kingdom is that your child works only on the skills he or she has not yet mastered. In other words, the system is designed to start a child off at exactly the right level and go at a pace that fts his or her needs. As a rule, children who have no reading skills, or very limited reading skills, start with the Get Set preparation programs. Children who have some reading profciency start with one of the language and reading programs that best fits his or her level of skill. The actual determination is made more precisely using the guide in Section Three of this book.

7. How long does it take for my child to complete the program?

   The length of time your child will need to complete the Reading Kingdom system varies depending on your child's skills. To complete the entire set of programs takes about fifteen months, assuming your child is completing approximately fve sessions a week. Some children can take a little longer (up to one and a half years). Many children, who already have some reading skills, can often complete the programs they work on in as few as three to six months.

8. What level of reading will my child achieve?

   With completion of the fnal program, your child will be reading at about third-grade level. Of even greater importance, he or she will have a broad set of skills that will improve learning in all other areas. Among these are the ability to read with total accuracy, to attain fuent decoding, to develop accurate writing, and to achieve full understanding. These skills not only supply reading mastery, but of equal importance, they also supply the sense of confdence that effective reading requires.

9. Can the program be individualized for my child?

   Absolutely. That is another great feature of . Once you have started the programs, there are regular Progress Checks that tell you exactly what lessons your child needs to carry out. In the Get Set programs, once your child learns the skills he or she needs, you are shown how to move up to the next level. In the Boarding, Runway, Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring programs, before each word is taught, your child is asked to complete a mini skills check by writing the word that is coming up. If he or she writes it correctly, the program moves on to the next word. So all your child's time is focused on learning material not known and not on what has already been learned.

10. *How do I know if my child is making progress?*

You will notice obvious progress almost immediately. You will see your child easily completing and remembering many reading and writing tasks. Further, the programs are designed to have you carry out Progress Checks on a regular basis. They are accompanied by guidelines that tell you how to move on, based on the results you have obtained.

11. *How does Reading Kingdom fit with the program my child is using in school?*

Reading Kingdom works extremely well with any other program your child may be using. As your child masters the hidden abilities of reading, all his or her learning skills improve, and so classroom performance and grades are naturally improved as well.

12. *My child has a learning disability. Can he or she use the program?*

Although Reading Kingdom has been designed for children with typical abilities, children with learning disabilities can definitely benefit from it.

13. *I am worried about my child's progress with learning how to read, but my child's teacher tells me not to be concerned. She says "children are different," and she assures me that I should be patient. Should I be?*

Should you be patient while your child has difficulty with the single most important skill he or she needs for learning in life? No, obviously not! Although the common, well-intended advice is to be patient, it is not wise to follow it. Even if your child's skills were to even out in a couple of years, during that lag, your child is steadily comparing himself or herself to peers and is coming up short. The damage to morale and self-esteem cannot be overestimated. Additionally, as schools track students' progress, they are often categorized in ways that can have lasting negative consequences on their education. Why not offer your child every opportunity for success? There is no advantage in waiting for things to clear up and every advantage in helping your child succeed right now.

chapter

3

The Hidden Abilities in Reading

In addition to the six skills outlined in Chapter Two, effective reading rests on a powerful, but often overlooked system. It is best introduced through an example created by George Bernard Shaw, the renowned Irish playwright. As a passionate champion for literacy, he long fought for spelling reform. He was troubled by the many irregularities that exist in the English language. As evidence he took the word

fish

and justified spelling it this way:

ghoti

He explained that he was employing *gh* as it is used in the word *enough* for the sound of *f, o* as in *women* for the sound of the *i,* and *ti* as in *nation* for the sound of *sh.*

Shaw's proposed spelling makes a funny point—but for our purposes it also conveys another message. As clever as Shaw's example is, readers intuitively know that it could never exist in reality. We would simply never find a person who would ever pronounce *ghoti* as *fish.* At the same time, almost no one can explain precisely why *ghoti* can't be *fish;* people "just know" that it can't.

What they cannot verbalize are the implicit rules of English spelling, which preclude pronouncing *ghoti* as *fish* because

The *gh* pair can have an *f* sound but not when it starts a word—then it has a hard *g* sound, as in *ghost.*

The *o* can have the *i* sound but not in a one-syllable word.

The *ti* can have the *sh* sound but not without an adjoining *on.*

Our Amazing Hidden Abilities

Even though readers can't verbalize these and other rules, they can sense them and use them. In other words, hidden from their awareness but always working for them is a set of abilities that enables them to read and write in an easy and effortless manner. I call these skills *hidden abilities.*

We can find hidden abilities in all aspects of reading. For example, consider the following sentences:

We ought to **record** that he broke the **record.**

A large farm was used to **produce** the **produce.**

The dump was so full that it had to **refuse** the **refuse.**

I had to **subject** the **subject** to a series of tests.

The soldier decided to **desert** in the **desert.**

This is not the time to **present** the **present.**

Each sentence contains *homographs*—identically spelled words—that you decided, without hesitation, to pronounce differently. The key to these different pronunciations lies in the noncontent words that we discussed in the previous chapter, and knowing that key is one of our many hidden abilities.

Always working for successful readers is a set of hidden abilities that makes reading smooth, easy, and automatic.

One of the identically spelled words in each sentence was preceded by the word *the.* This cued you to expect the next word to be a noun—because *the* regularly precedes nouns. That led you to give the word the pronunciation it has when it is a noun. The other, identically spelled, word was preceded by *to.* This cued you to expect the next word

to be a verb—because *to* regularly precedes verbs. That, in turn, led you to give the word the pronunciation it has when it is a verb.

Knowing How, Without Knowing Why

What exactly are these hidden abilities? Although they resist definition, the examples we just went through illustrate their essence. They are the skills that allow us to create amazingly intricate constructions with language without ever being aware of the reasons responsible for what we are doing.

They are also skills we have never been explicitly taught. No matter how much phonics instruction you received, for example, no one ever told you to use non-content words to help you determine the pronunciation of homographs when you see them in sentences. Instead, in the course of your learning to become a skilled reader, totally outside your awareness, you developed these hidden abilities and have been using them for years. They are extraordinarily powerful because they enable you to know exactly how you should proceed through the channels that reading demands without ever knowing why you are doing what you are doing.

Hidden abilities are the backbone of effective reading. They even enable us to overcome the many rules of traditional phonics that would hobble us if we actually applied what we have been taught. For example, if you ask a typical reader what sound the letters *ph* make, you will invariably be told that they make the sound *f.* The hours of traditional phonics training show their power. No other answer ever comes to our minds. Nevertheless, if we are skilled readers, when we come upon words like *uphill* or *shepherd,* we do not pause for even a second to wonder if we should consider saying *ufill* or *sheferd.*

Similarly, despite months of instruction in first grade, when we were taught that *at* is pronounced like the *at* of *cat,* we would not for a moment think of using that pronunciation in other words containing that letter combination, such as *great, attend, patrol, water, fatigue, station, watch, data, matrix,* and so forth. (If you're drawn to statistics, you might find it of interest that in over 70 percent of words with the letters *at,* those letters are not pronounced the way our first-grade teachers told us they were.)

Furthermore, we are not the least bit bothered by having broken the rules we so assiduously memorized in the primary grades. Our hidden abilities let us sense that these rules represent a miniscule, imprecise sampling of the skills that actually have to be applied if we are going to read effectively.

In language research it's long been recognized that hidden abilities are central to the remarkable skill young children show in learning to speak. Starting with a dozen or so words at about one year of age, youngsters at age five have a vocabulary consisting of thousands of words that they combine in complicated sentences. They do all this without the benefit of anyone teaching them the rules for saying what they learn to say. Their progress comes from steadily using their hidden abilities to crack the complex code that swirls about them.

Although this is an accepted fact of spoken language, it has never been an accepted fact of written language. Indeed, it is assumed that in this respect the two systems are dramatically different. As noted by David Elkind (1987), a leading developmental psychologist, "If learning to read was as easy as learning to talk . . . many more children would learn to read on their own. The fact that they do not, despite being surrounded by print, suggests that learning to read is not a spontaneous and simple skill" (p. 32).

But the fact is that learning how to speak properly is not as easy as we might assume. For instance, children do not do well if the language they have to depend on for learning to speak fluently comes out of a television. They need a parent or teacher who steadily adjusts his or her language so that it matches the child's level of understanding. Each and every day children observe many models and receive vast amounts of feedback that convey the patterns underlying all components of spoken language. This astonishingly elaborate and comprehensive system provides the basis for the hidden abilities of speaking.

Nothing comparable has ever been offered to children in the teaching of reading. When it is provided, as it is in S fbejoh L johepn , the hidden abilities develop, just as they do in spoken language, and children then have the basis for truly effective reading.

How Some Kids Do It on Their Own

At this point you may be asking how the 60 percent of children who succeed in reading on their own do it without having this type of support. Although no firm answer can be offered to that question, research in reading has provided us with some clues.

Some individuals have remarkable skill in linking words with things they see. In the literature this is referred to as *naming ability.* They are the ones who rarely if ever have to face the annoying tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon. That's the unpleasant experience of wanting to name something but being unable to come up with the word. It seems to be stuck on the tip of your tongue.

Individuals with good naming ability are born with this skill, and in the first few years of their lives they use it for learning words easily and using those words to identify the things and people they see. When reading appears on the scene, this skill gives them an enormous advantage. Just as they can easily come up with the names for objects they see, they can easily come up with the names represented by the words they see. This lets their reading move at a fast pace and with high levels of accuracy. That's an enormous benefit. They simply bypass the slow, plodding reading that so many other kids have to endure.

Other individuals have great skill in visual memory. After looking at something once, they know it for life. The advantage this gives them in reading is phenomenal. It doesn't matter how they initially link the words they see with the words they hear. If they are receiving whole language teaching, someone might tell them the words; if they are learning phonics, they might sound out the words on their own; if they are watching TV, they might see the words in a commercial. Regardless of the source, they have to do this only once or twice. Having seen a word and then having been told what it "says," they do not have to analyze it or ponder it again. They see words clearly in their heads and can spell them with great ease. Repeated experiences of drearily sounding out the same word over and over again never become a part of their lives.

Still other individuals have the ability to do what has been termed "going beyond the information given." With minimal input they see the patterns that others develop only after many more experiences. When they apply these skills to reading, they are way ahead there too. Whereas others may be confused by all the "exceptions" they see on a page, these children are not in the least bit disturbed. They are not the ones who ask the teacher, "But why isn't *great* pronounced as *greet?* You told us the double-vowel rule, and so it should be *greet*." These children are immune to the weaknesses and distortions of the rules they have been forced to memorize. None of their strength with words is conscious. In much the same way that children with other hidden abilities operate, they are adept at taking the experiences they have with a few exception words, such as *sure, come, love,* and *bread,* and coming up with groupings in their heads that reflect real language as opposed to the rules they have been taught.

Each of these abilities puts a child ahead in reading. For those few fortunate individuals who have more than one hidden ability, their reading will benefit even more. They are among the ones who never require formal instruction at all. When teachers talk about children like this, they often say such things as, "He'd have learned to read if he'd been raised in a closet." That's not quite true, of course. All

kids need some input. However, relative to other children, the help that children with these abilities need is minimal.

In this respect reading is no different from any other skill. All abilities, from tennis to math to art, come more easily to some children than to others. That's why some kids on the baseball field are called *naturals.* What is important is that all children can get to a high and competent level of performance—if they are given the tools they need.

With programmed reading instruction that fosters their hidden abilities, children easily learn how to read and achieve their full potential.

That is what Sfbejoh Ljohepn does. It fosters the hidden abilities that are the backbone of truly effective reading. The system combines all the techniques and insights I have developed in forty years of working with children from every background and walk of life. Time and again, I have seen how, given the right tools, children can easily learn how to read and can achieve their full potential. By using this system, children gain the foundation needed for masterful reading. The door to reading opens wide!

PART 2

Teaching Reading

chapter

4

Teaching Sequencing

The Skills of Reading

Sequencing	Writing	Phonology	Semantics	Syntax	Text

The heart of the Reading Kingdom system is its teaching programs. In this chapter you will find out how the physical skill of sequencing is developed.

Let's start with a simple fact of reading: if you are going to read English, you have to scan left to right. That's what you just did in reading this sentence. If we didn't adhere to this left-to-right rule, we could read right to left, or part left to right and part right to left or in any number of other combinations. This could result in your reading, for example, the word *right* in the first sentence in this paragraph as *right, ghirt, rhtig, thgir,* or *ghitr,* and you might start reading the complete sentence as *reading you fact simple Let's with have to English start,* or even, *fi uoy Let's thiw a edaring inggo ouy.* You get the idea. Without the left-to-right rule there are countless possibilities. With the left-to-right rule there is only one.

Left-to-right scanning is such an accepted fact of reading life that it may seem pointless to raise it. But even though you take it for granted, it is a skill you had to learn at some point when you were a child. In other languages words may be read from right to left or top to bottom. Children in countries using these other patterns must learn to sequence their reading and writing differently.

Reading: A Unique Way of Seeing the World

Although it is obvious that left-to-right sequencing is required for reading, far less obvious is the fact that reading (and here I include the reading of mathematical symbols) is the only visual activity requiring this skill. Everything else we perceive with our eyes can be scanned in a variety of directions without altering its meaning.

As we saw in Chapter Two, in looking at objects in the real world, people for the most part ignore the left-to-right sequence as it relates to identifying what they see. So just imagine being a child who has spent the first four to five years of his or her life learning to overlook the left-to-right sequence of objects and who then enters school and suddenly confronts a new world in which the sequence of objects (letters) forms the very basis of understanding. Once children begin learning how to read, even minute changes in the left-to-right sequence become critical. This awareness of sequencing is how a child can tell the difference between

b	d
p	q
pot	top
tea	eat

The issue of sequencing became prominent in the 1920s through the pioneering work of a physician, Samuel Orton (1928). Creating the term *strephosymbolia,* meaning "twisted symbols," he maintained that difficulties in sequencing were central to reading problems. This led to the view that *reversals* (such as seeing *b* for *d,* or *saw* for *was*) were a sign of neurological dysfunction and dyslexia.

Over the years this idea was discounted, as many children, not simply those with dyslexia, showed signs of reversing words and letters in early reading. So the notion of reversals as a telltale symptom was abandoned, to be replaced by the idea that failures in sequencing were a normal part of development. Currently, the dominant view of sequencing in reading education is that children will "pick it up." So even though it is a critical skill required for reading, it is never taught in a systematic manner. As happens with many skills, some kids do pick it

Despite the fact that left-to-right sequencing is a critical skill required for reading, it is never taught in a systematic manner.

up without instruction. But with no effort made to assist those who are having difficulty, many children are also left behind.

The Results of Not Seeing Sequence

Sequencing issues extend into realms generally not thought about even though they have profound consequences for reading. Seeing the letters of a word in the correct sequence is only a first step. If the sequence is to be useful, it must stay in the child's mind once the word has disappeared from view. If that fails to happen, the child has no means of recognizing the word when it reappears.

Imagine, for example, a child who does scan left to right and sounds out each letter in a word like *spot.* For that activity to pay off, the sequence now has to be retained in his or her mind. Should that not happen, when this sequence of letters appears again the child has no means of determining what the word is. All he or she can do is to repeat the tedious sounding-out process to determine, once again, the word in view.

These problems are a direct consequence of current instruction. Having failed to recognize the importance of retaining visual sequences, it has created no place for this skill in the curriculum. As a result, failures in word recognition have become the accepted norm in reading.

Worried parents often bring up this issue with teachers because they are, rightly, troubled to see their children not recognizing words they have seen over and over again. Typically, the parents are assured that over time the laborious sounding out will automatically be converted into the instant word recognition that true reading demands. For far too many children this does not happen.

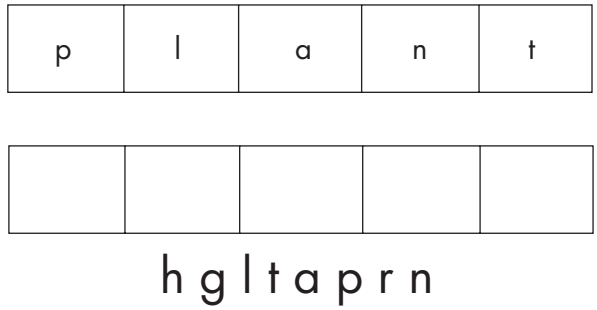
The retention of letter sequences may be so poor that children fail to recognize words they have just sounded out. That's why you may see them sounding out a word even when they completed sounding out the same word just seconds before in the line above. This is comparable to having to relearn the names of simple, basic objects such as *cookie, chair, bed,* and *dog* every time you see them. Without a solid memory for visual sequences, reading is a grinding chore.

Because children are not taught how to remember the sequences of letters in words, they do not recognize words they have seen before. Failures in word recognition make reading unbearable. But the pattern is so widespread that, instead of being viewed as a problem, failures in word recognition have become the accepted norm in reading.

How Is Your Child Doing?

This section offers you a way to see if your child has developed the visual sequencing needed for reading. If your child is consistently and accurately reading and writing at least twenty-five words, you might want to skip this section, because he or she has probably developed the necessary skills. But if your child has not started reading or is at the very beginning of the process, you might want to try the following set of activities.

Step 1. Prepare some small blank cards on which you and your child can write letters. As in a Scrabble-like game, set out two rows of these small cards, one above the other, on which your child sees something like the following activity for the word *plant:*



Each of the cards in the top row contains a letter of the word, with the letters combining to form the complete word. Under the bottom row, there is a larger set of letters that includes all the letters in the word *plant* and also some letters that are not in that word.

Step 2. Using the bottom letters, your child has to copy the word *plant.* Do not name the word or the letters. Simply say, "Start here [*pointing to the first blank card on your child's left*], and use the letters to make this word." Now watch what your child does and record it by writing down the order in which your child enters the letters. Make sure not to offer any corrections.

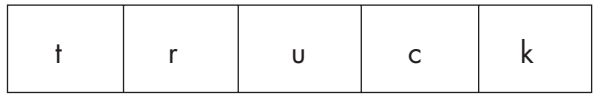
Step 3. Repeat this activity with the words *robot, jump, start, walk,* and *candy.* For each word, write down what your child does.

Step 4. If, on three or more of the words, your child enters the letters in any order other than the left-to-right sequence, it is likely that his or her left-to-right sequencing

is problematic. This is so even if the final product is spelled correctly. For example, in copying the word *plant,* your child might enter an *a* in the middle position, then a *t* in the end position, and so on, but even though the letters are in the right boxes, they have not been entered in left-to-right sequence.

When that is the case, you can stop the activity because you have the information you need. Your child will benefit from the sequencing training offered in the Sequences in Sight program. However, if your child does show perfect left-to-right entry of the letters (that is, with the word *plant,* the *p* is entered before the *l,* the *l* before the *a,* and so on), move on to steps 5 through 8, which involve hiding the model from view.

Step 5. Ask your child to look at another word, such as *truck:*



Step 6. Using a blank sheet of paper, cover the word *truck* so that it is hidden from view. Then, show the blank cards with letters underneath, as illustrated here:

Point to the first blank card on your child's left and say, "Start here, and use the letters to make the word you just saw." Again, offer no guidance and avoid naming the word or the letters. You want to see what your child does independently.

Step 7. Repeat this activity with the words *plane, trip, house, talk,* and *going.*

Step 8. If your child, on at least four of the hidden words, consistently starts at the left and proceeds to the right, entering all the letters correctly, then you have strong evidence that he or she has the sequencing skills needed for reading. If, however, that is not what has happened, you have still acquired important information. Even though your child saw the word only seconds before, once it is out of sight, he or she has no solid memory of it. There is no need to view this as a source of concern. What you have done is to spot one of the key skills your child needs for reading success. You can then move on to provide the necessary training, which is simple to carry out.

What Children Need to Learn

In trying to teach any skill, we always face the temptation to try to resolve the problem by simply telling the child what to do. In the case of teaching sequencing, we might want to say to the child, "Start paying attention to left-to-right direction."

That is not the way to go. Sequencing skills, like the other hidden abilities of reading, do not develop through learning explicit rules. Children may easily spout the rules, but they will have little or no effect on what they do. The necessary abilities emerge only through repeated, carefully constructed exercises that establish smooth, automatic scanning patterns. Further, if possible, the training should take place prior to the teaching of actual words. Unless it does, children will of necessity apply their available but inappropriate scanning skills to the words that they first read and write, thereby setting in place methods that do not work. To develop the necessary skills, carefully constructed exercises are provided at the very start of reading via Sequences in Sight—the program in the Reading Kingdom system that teaches visual sequencing.

Before learning more about the Sequences in Sight activities, it is useful to understand what children will not be doing in this program. At no point in the program will they be working with familiar letters. This may seem strange, because the end goal is for them to recognize the sequence of the letters in actual words. There is, however, a good reason for avoiding familiar letters. Familiarity actually works against the development of effective sequencing.

Parents who have watched their children studying for spelling tests have probably unknowingly experienced this phenomenon. The students dutifully memorize lists of words by repeatedly saying a word and then naming the letters it contains. The students might sound like this:

help	aych ee el pee
help	aych ee el pee
help	aych ee el pee
start	ess tee ay ar tee
start	ess tee ay ar tee
start	ess tee ay ar tee
join	jay oh ie en
join	jay oh ie en
join	jay oh ie en

This effort seems to yield some short-term benefits. On a test given during the week of their studying, children may even achieve a 100 percent correct score. But if they are asked two or three weeks later to write or spell the same words, they have often completely forgotten how.

This result is not surprising. For the vast majority of people, memory of sets of disconnected items rapidly disappears. For example, recall the times you have looked up a number in a telephone directory and diligently held it in mind—until you dialed it. Once that was done, you forgot the number. We simply do not hold that sort of information in mind. That's why naming of letters has no long-term payoff for word recognition.

How then do we teach children to use and retain sequences of letters? Odd as it may seem, it is best to start by avoiding letters that can be easily named. When children have to retain sequences of letters for which they have no names, they are drawn to visualization—which is precisely what we wish to achieve.

Still, from as young as two years of age, children practice letter naming. It's probably the most common educational activity. So where are we to find unnamable letters?

The answer is to be found in the foreign symbols we used in the earlier chapters. They show us that there are many letters in the world that are unfamiliar to us, letters whose names we've never heard. When the goal is visualization, these foreign symbols are perfect. They have all the properties of real letters because they are real letters. At the same time, because they are foreign, we do not have names for them.

Key Features of the Program

The use of unnamable foreign symbols is one key component in teaching visual sequencing. It is combined with several other features that enable children to develop the hidden abilities responsible for effective sequencing. These features involve using materials that mirror key aspects of reading without requiring actual reading. In particular these materials

- Introduce short left-to-right sequenced patterns that smooth children's introduction to this feature of print. Sequencing is so novel that even sequences of just two elements can be problematic. Therefore the initial training starts with short patterns, which will be easiest for your child.
- Involve sequences that must be held in memory, so that the child retains a visual image of the sequence. It is only through activities that demand memory that children begin to retain the unique sequences needed for reading.

- Present sequences that increase in length until they involve at least four symbols. Most words contain at least this many symbols so any training patterns should as well. Unless children can scan sequences of this length, they will not be able to retain the words they will regularly confront.

To see these guidelines translated into operation, it is useful to look at the sorts of activities your child will be dealing with when the program is put into action, as described in Part Three of this book.

Level 1

At the outset your child sees two rows of symbols, with the top row presenting a short, two- or three-symbol sequence. In the example that follows, the sequence in the top row contains two symbols (δ ϕ). The bottom row contains the same two symbols along with additional ones.

δ ϕ

γ δ ϕ λ

You point to the top row and say, "Look at these." Then you point to the first symbol on the left in the bottom row and say, "Find the ones down here that are the same as the ones at the top." Your child needs to point, in the correct left-to-right order, to the same two symbols in the bottom row that appear in the top row.

This type of activity is repeated, over several sessions, until your child displays a high level of skill. At that point your child has become familiar with the first of the hidden abilities outlined in this chapter. He or she is scanning, in left-to-right order, short sequences with elements that are difficult to label.

Level 2

At level 2 of the Sequences in Sight program, memory is introduced. You can see how this is accomplished by completing the following activity example yourself. First, look at the sequence of symbols. Once you feel you know what the sequence is, cover the symbols so you can no longer see them.

ψ π σ

Now, without looking back, move on to the example that follows this sentence, and select, in left-to-right order, the symbols you just saw in the previous example:

ψ γ π σ λ

At this point you are working from memory. When you can't see the original model, the only way you can make the correct selection is by retaining an image of the original pattern. It is not an easy task, but with a bit of effort kids can do it. What is more, they see it as a challenging game that they are motivated to conquer. With its mastery, the base for remembering sequences of visual elements is in place—ready to be used with real words.

Level 3

Once your child has become accustomed to using memory for sequences involving two and three symbols, the patterns increase to four symbols. Although four is just one more than three, it represents a quantum leap in difficulty. So when the longer patterns are introduced, the teaching reverts to direct matching with no demands for memory. In other words, both lines of symbols appear simultaneously (as they did in level 1). A four-symbol task might appear as follows:

δ ϕ δ θ

δ θ ϕ λ δ θ

Level 4

In the final level of the program, your child returns to using memory—this time for all the sequences, whether they consist of two, three, or four elements. At the conclusion of this step your child has achieved the sequencing skill necessary for effective reading of actual words.

Depending on your child's rate of progress, the sequencing skills program generally takes from three to five weeks to complete. Keep in mind that all children do not go through the program. It is implemented only if a skills check, like the one described earlier in this chapter, indicates that your child needs to develop these skills. As with all Reading Kingdom programs, when your child already has the skills taught in a program, you can bypass that program. The key throughout is to meet your child's individual needs. Children never go through the tedium of relearning skills they have already mastered. However, if they do need a set of skills, the programs offer them the full range of teaching that allows their abilities to blossom.

We now move on to Chapter Five and an examination of the teaching of handwriting—the second set of physical skills that prepares your child for reading.

chapter

5

Teaching Handwriting

The Skills of Reading

Sequencing	Writing	Phonology	Semantics	Syntax	Text

Over the years I have seen hundreds of children who are bright but still struggling to produce their ABCs. Their problems are rarely caused by their lack of familiarity with the alphabet. Like most American kids, they have had endless experience with letters, and they know them well. Instead, their troubles arise when they have to create, or write, the actual letters when they are asked to do so.

All sorts of problems emerge. Big letters, like *k* and *h,* may be made small, and small letters, like *i* and *c,* may be made big; letters that should stay on the line, like *s* and *a,* may float up in space, and letters that should cross the line, like *g* and *p,* may rest on it.

In addition, inconsistency seems to be the rule rather than the exception. Children regularly produce the same letters in different ways and at times end up with identical letters having almost no resemblance to each other across the lines.

This goes against everything that handwriting should be. Like any motor skill, if it is to be useful, it has to be executed with smooth, automatic, efficient, and consistent movements. Imagine what would happen if every time you drove your car, you changed the way you did things. It would not only be annoying and confusing but in the end your driving would be disastrous. That essentially is what many children experience when they write, and it has profound effects on their progress in literacy.

Parents often spot the problems their children are having, but the conventional wisdom advises them to "stop worrying, because children will develop the skill over time." The reality, however, is that poor habits, once established, are unlikely to change. In fact, it takes more effort to unlearn a bad habit than to learn the behavior correctly in the first place.

Nevertheless, the resistance to setting up effective handwriting training runs deep. Ironically, the resistance stems from practices that were put in place in the hope of making kids like writing more, rather than less.

When Good Intentions Go Awry

When public education began, during the nineteenth century, training in handwriting was emphasized, generally not under the most pleasant of circumstances. The schools, dominated by the strict Victorian values of the time, were poorly equipped, joyless places, where children were typically required to perform dreary, repetitive tasks. Endless penmanship drill fit neatly into the system—not because it was in the children's interests but because it was one of the easiest and cheapest activities to carry out.

Around the turn of the twentieth century more child-friendly attitudes were advanced, championed by leaders such as the noted American philosopher and educator John Dewey. Over the next few decades progressive education began to take hold, and with its ascendancy came a strong reaction against the harsh practices that had dominated classroom instruction. A guiding motto became "drill is kill," conveying the message that learning was harmed rather than helped by relentless, boring repetition. Handwriting, as a prime representative of boring activity, was greatly affected. Essentially, sustained penmanship practice was halted. Since then, teaching of handwriting has largely been light, unsystematic, and optional.

We are witnessing the results of this change today. Generally, the amount of time given to handwriting training and the sequencing of that training are left totally to the teacher's discretion. This has resulted in a steady and marked decline in the teaching of this skill, to the point that penmanship instruction time for children in the first three years of school averages a scant five to ten minutes a week. This is scarcely sufficient to develop the smooth, fluid movements that effective handwriting requires.

There is little to suggest, moreover, that things will improve in the foreseeable future, because teachers are receiving the message that the area is not significant. Kate Gladstone, a champion of handwriting reform and National Director for the Annual American Handwriting Competition, states that over 95 percent of the top

education colleges do not offer any training in handwriting (personal communication, July 24, 2005).

Writing Demands Increase

Ironically, as handwriting has been downplayed, writing itself has been emphasized, owing to the whole language movement. A key goal in this approach is to have children write about their experiences as early as possible—even in the years prior to first grade. The idea is that interest in writing is far more productive than drill in handwriting and that children will produce effective letters if they have an "authentic" reason to send a message. So handwriting is embedded in "real" writing; that is, writing that has meaning. Children can write any way they choose—the smooth, effective production of letters is inconsequential. The aim is to have them produce messages they want to convey. The belief—which is totally without foundation and in violation of everything we see—is that with practice, handwriting will steadily improve. The reality is that children left to their own devices produce handwriting that is endlessly variable and phenomenally inefficient.

As the teaching of handwriting has declined, demands for writing have increased—even at the kindergarten level. The end result is that children are left to their own devices, producing handwriting that is endlessly variable and highly inefficient.

This outcome is unavoidable, because the current situation forces children to grapple simultaneously with two skills: handwriting, a physical skill, and composing, a language skill. Each is challenging to a new student, making it difficult to get both of them correct. Typically, the kids concentrate very hard on what they want to say and attention to the construction of the letters themselves falls by the wayside. Required to carry out extended writing activities before they have mastered handwriting, the children can respond in no other way than by resorting to immature skills. With repeated practice these immature approaches become ingrained and increasingly hard to overcome.

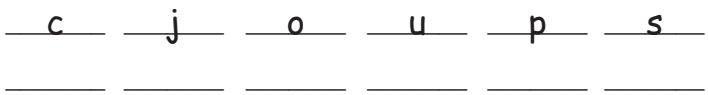
As children encounter repeated frustration in trying to produce readable writing, their enthusiasm evaporates. The end result is a near epidemic of poor handwriting. Even worse, many young pupils begin to talk about "hating" to write, and to devise ways to avoid it. The misery that begins to surround this activity is reflected in one handwriting program's title—*Handwriting Without Tears,* by Jan Olsen.

It doesn't have to be this way. What children need are solid techniques that simplify the process of letter recognition and construction. This chapter introduces those techniques. The fact is that the key skills of letter recognition and construction can be learned easily with the right methods.

How Is Your Child Doing?

At this point you may already be certain that your child would benefit from training in handwriting. You've watched him or her write often enough to know that help is needed. If that is the case you can bypass the remainder of this section because you have the information you need. However, if you are wondering how to judge your child's writing efforts, you might want to try the following short set of activities to help you make a determination.

Step 1. Start by taking a blank sheet of $8\frac{1}{2}$-by-11-inch paper and placing two rows of lines on it. Then, as shown here, on the top row of lines, print the letters *c j o u p s.*



Step 2. Once you have the paper prepared, sit with your child and provide him or her with a thin marker or pencil. Point to the *c* and, without naming it, say, "Here is a letter." Then point to the blank line under the *c,* and say, "Now make one just like it down here." Do not offer any guidance or corrections. Continue in this way until your child has reproduced all six letters. As your child creates a letter, note whether he or she starts the letter at its top or starts it from the line and then goes up.

Step 3. When your child has finished, score each letter on the following points:

Point A: starting point. The letter has been produced by starting at the top.

Point B: placement. The letter is placed correctly relative to the line (the letters *c, s, u,* and *o* must touch the line; the letters *j* and *p* must "break" the line and go below it).

Point C: size. The size of the letter is similar to the size of the model letter you produced (it is neither significantly bigger nor significantly smaller).

Point D: shape. The letter has the correct shape (*c* is rounded; *j* has a straight line ending in a curve; *o* is circular; *u* has an open, cup shape; *p* has a straight line with a circular shape in the appropriate place; and *s* has two curves in correct orientation to each other).

Use a form like the Chart for Scoring the Letters for evaluating each letter on the four points. Enter a score of 1 when the letter meets a point; leave the box empty when the letter does not meet that point. There is obviously a level of subjectivity in the scoring. The goal is to try to be as objective as possible but don't be overly concerned. Just let your first impression guide you, because it usually is right.

Chart for Scoring the Letters

	Letter					
	c	**j**	**o**	**u**	**p**	**s**
Point A						
Point B						
Point C						
Point D						

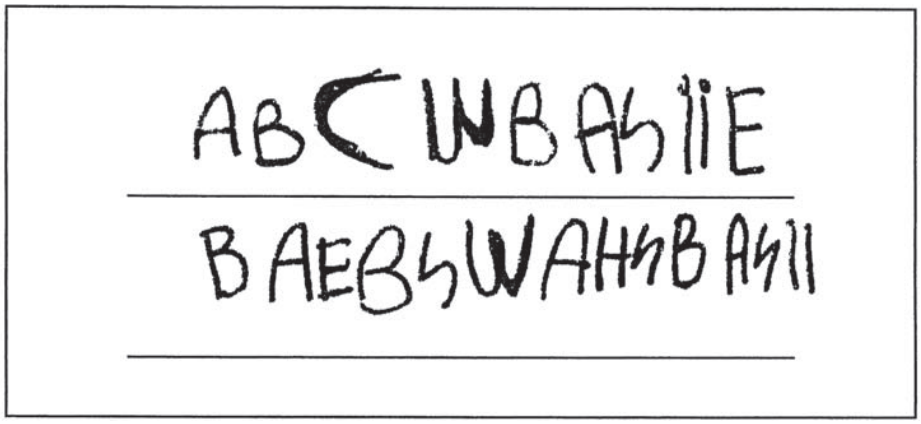
If your child achieves a score of 20 or more points, it is likely that his or her handwriting skills are up to the mark for effective handwriting. However, if your child's score is below 20, it is likely that he or she will benefit from the handwriting training offered in Letters to Write—the program in the Sfbejoh Ljohepn system that teaches handwriting.

What Children Need to Learn

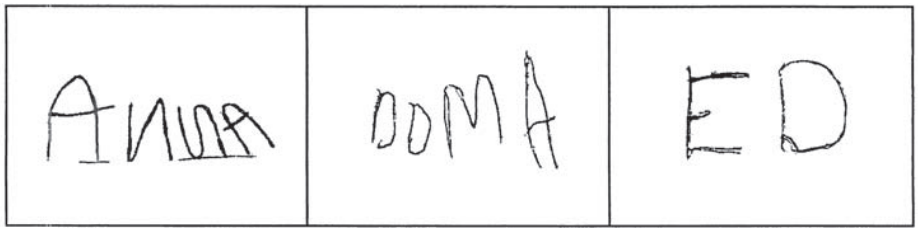
As you learn about the Letters to Write program, you may find yourself surprised at not seeing components that you have come to expect as part and parcel of handwriting activities. There is a good reason for their omission. Despite their prevalence, they work against children's progress. It's useful to understand what these commonplace components are.

The Capital Game: Rethinking the ABCs

The first component is a familiar one in initial letter training. You can see it at work in the example shown here, which was created by a highly motivated four-year-old.



If you're familiar with young children's writing, this writing sample seems perfectly fine. You are probably neither surprised nor disturbed to see that all the letters are capital letters (they are *uppercase*). As in the following additional writing samples, this is what you have come to expect young children's writing to look like.



But think for a moment about the material children read. That material—just like the vast majority of the material adults read—is almost entirely in small letters (*lowercase*). It's a simple fact of reading: only a tiny percentage of the letters that appear on any page are in uppercase. The following segment from a story for beginning readers illustrates the point.

> Bears are curious.
>
> They are almost always
>
> hungry, too.

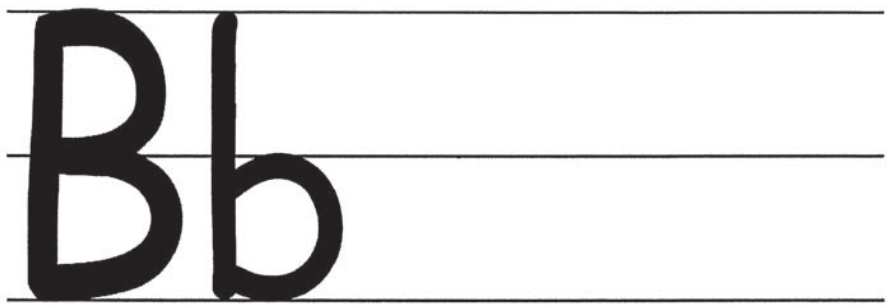
This mother bear
and her cubs
are looking for
something good to eat.

The mother bear
sniffs the air.
Her nose tells her
that bees are living
in the hollow tree.

—Milton, 1998, pp. 4–5

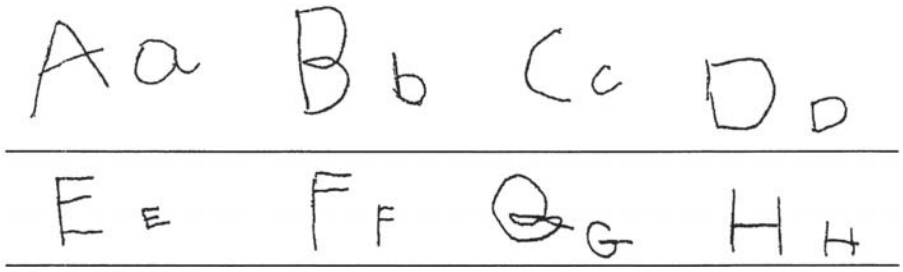
Of the 170 letters in these segments, only 5 are capitals. All the rest are lowercase. As a general rule, fewer than 10 percent of the words on a page appear with even one capital letter, and far fewer than 1 percent of all the letters appear as capitals.

Children's training, though, is set up as though the exact opposite were true. Almost all the alphabet material they are given shows capital letters dominating. Even when lowercase letters are included in the early activities, they often play second fiddle to the uppercase letters. On a typical worksheet, for example, the child first sees a letter in uppercase and, to its right, its lowercase version. The child's task is to make several copies of the letter.



With its prominent position (first in the left-to-right sequence) and its large size, the capital letter clearly conveys the message that *it* is the more important member of the pair. As the following writing sample shows, children get the message. Although the writer started off maintaining the uppercase and lowercase

distinction for the first few letters, by the end of the first line, that distinction is lost. All the letters, big and small, have the uppercase shape.



It is reasonable to teach children that letters have both an uppercase and lowercase format, and that the uppercase format plays a unique role in marking the start of certain letter sequences, such as the first letter in sentences and names. However, when the teaching emphasizes letters that occur only a tiny percentage of the time, children learn to focus on the wrong component and to develop poor habits. The uppercase emphasis is responsible for the erratic patterns many children show in their writing. Instead of confining capital letters to the starting word of a sentence and a few names, children sprinkle capitals liberally throughout their words and sentences. They're showing that they know both formats exist but that they haven't been taught how those formats operate.

A high school student consulted me for help in his essay writing. He showed me samples of his work, with every letter in uppercase. When he was asked about this, he flashed a winning smile as he said, "In the early grades I never could figure out where and when to use capital letters, and I kept getting back my papers with red marks because of all the mistakes. Then in the fourth grade I was able to convince my teacher to let me do all my writing in uppercase. After that the other teachers went along with it, and I have been writing that way ever since."

The current approach to teaching the alphabet has the huge disadvantage of creating a chasm between the process of reading and the process of writing. Essentially, the children's training in reading has them using the lowercase forms of letters, while their training in writing emphasizes the uppercase forms of letters. Instead of the two processes supporting

one another, they are presented as two different systems—with the children left to figure the differences on their own.

For effective mastery the initial teaching should be modified to highlight the similarities between reading and writing, not the differences. This goal is best achieved by downplaying the uppercase and emphasizing the lowercase alphabet. This approach is a key feature of the Letters to Write program. It achieves two major aims: (1) children end up with a unified system for reading and writing, and (2) children are helped to get past barriers that if not overcome will hamper their handwriting for years to come.

In traditional education the early teaching of writing emphasizes uppercase letters, even though fewer than 1 percent of the letters on the pages children read appear in uppercase. This leads to a conflict between their children's reading system and their writing system.

The Order of Teaching: Why C-L-I-O Is Better Than A-B-C

The order in which letters are taught is another key dimension in writing. Which letters should be taught first, and which ones should follow?

Almost always the answer has been to rely on the order of the alphabet itself, just as we and our children hear it in the "The Alphabet Song":

A B C D E F G

H I J K L M N O P

Q R S and T U V

W X and Y and Z.

Now I know my ABCs.

Next time won't you sing with me?

It seems so natural to start with A and end with Z. Practically all handwriting books for children are set up in this manner. Because we are so used to it, it seems to make perfect sense. After all, it is alphabetical order!

To an early reader, though, it doesn't make any sense at all. The key to whether or not a child will produce an accurate letter rests, not with alphabetical sequence, but with the complexity of the letter's shape. Some letters have simple shapes, such as the circle of an *o,* whereas others have far more complex shapes, such as the intersecting diagonals of an *x.*

It just so happens that the first letter in the alphabet, whether uppercase *A* or lowercase *a,* is in the complex category:

- The uppercase *A* requires two diagonal strokes—a type of line that young children typically find hard to master before seven or eight years of age.
- The lowercase *a* requires two strokes (a circular *c* shape on the left and a straight line on the right) that must be carefully aligned. If they aren't aligned, they won't form an *a.* The tight alignment of parts is another feature young children often find difficult.

It simply makes no sense to start letter production with one of the hardest letters for children to write, even if it is the first letter in the alphabet. It's like trying to teach children to walk before they can crawl. The teaching of any skill should build systematically from the simple to the more complex.

The letter *b* is also complex and difficult for children to produce. The letter *c,* in contrast, is fairly simple. Not only is it made with a single line (rather than two different lines), but that single line takes a circular shape. Circles are the first shapes children draw, largely because they are the easiest to make.

The letter a is one of the most complex of all letters. Its position as the first letter of the alphabet is no basis for making it the first letter children should be taught to write.

So the letter *c* is among the first set of letters that is taught. In that set as well are all the other letters that are composed of single, unbroken strokes—the simplest type of stroke for a child to produce. These letters are *l, i, o,* and *j.*

Further, in contrast to the typical setup in writing practice, in this program a page is never devoted to a single letter that the child is to repeat over and over again. Instead, across any page the letters steadily change. After producing a *c,* for example, the child might be asked to make a *j,* and the letter after that might be an *o.*

This interweaving mirrors a key aspect of real words—the letters constantly change. A child never sees a word like *aaaa* or *bbbbb.* Even the simplest three-letter words contain varied letters (such as *c-a-t, d-o-g, k-i-d, r-u-n,* and so on). By having to deal with this feature from the outset, children are better prepared for the writing of real words.

At the next level, letters with more complex shapes are added. These are letters such as *f, t,* and *e,* which involve two or more shapes that have to intersect with one another.

Following that, letters like *a, b, h,* and *m* are added. These are among the most complex letters to produce, because they require retracing, or repeating, part or all of a line that has already been made. For example, in constructing an *h,* after making the long vertical line, the child has to go up part of that same line to complete the ∩ shape that has to be added.

All of this means that in the Sfbejoh Ljohepn handwriting program, the teaching is organized not by the alphabet but by the complexity of the letter shapes. The end result is learner-friendly material that makes the writing process easier, faster, and smoother.

The Naming Game: Rethinking the *Ayes*, the *Bees*, and the *Cees*

Another traditional given in teaching children the alphabet is the naming of letters. Letter naming occupies vast amounts of time in the preschool and kindergarten curriculum. In some programs children are not even permitted to move on to handwriting until they have demonstrated the ability to name every letter.

Ironically, learning the names of the letters is totally unnecessary for a child who is learning how to read! In reading, children have to recognize the letters. They do not have to name them. Recognition is independent of naming. For example, we all can recognize people we see on a regular basis, such as cashiers in supermarkets, without ever knowing their names. Similarly, a child can learn how to read perfectly well without ever learning the names of letters. A child needs to learn to recognize the letters and to know the sounds they make.

Despite the emphasis it receives, learning the names of letters has nothing to do with learning how to read. A child can learn to read perfectly well without ever learning the names of letters.

There is nothing wrong with children learning the names of letters, if they want to do it and it comes easily to them. From the point of view of teaching, however, there is no need to require children to learn, or use, the names of letters. So this program has been designed to have the child learn to write effectively, without imposing the unnecessary requirement of learning the names of the letters.

Being There

Generally, when children are asked to write, they are given pages containing models of the letters, and they are asked to copy or trace these letters. Again, this is such an accepted practice that it seems unassailable.

Like many other accepted practices we've been considering in this book, however, it doesn't work. The fine motor skills of writing are intricate, and children need steady and immediate feedback on the work they are producing. A young child does not benefit from incorrectly producing a whole page of letters and then being told that the work needs to be changed.

You will find it far more effective to sit with your child and, for each letter, to provide the information he or she needs to produce it. This is best accomplished by modeling, by creating the letter while your child is watching. In this way your child can see the precise manner in which the letter is produced and then follow that pattern in creating the letter independently.

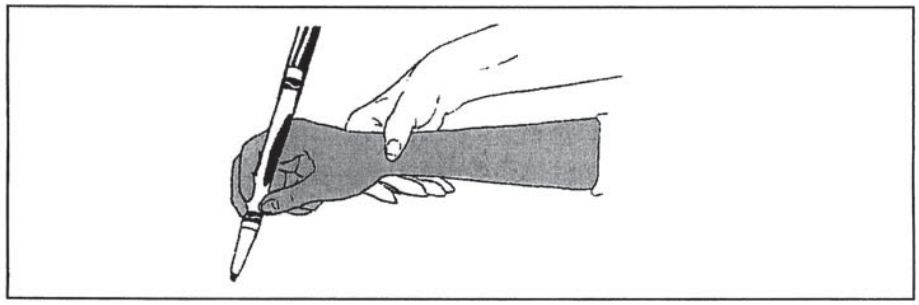
Even with the simplest letters this process is invaluable, because it helps children with the many decisions they must make. Should the line of a letter start at the bottom and go up, or should it start at the top and go down? Should the circular motion for a letter like *o* start with the left side or the right side? Should a letter like *p,* which crosses the line, be made in a continuous stroke or not? Because modeling—without a word—readily answers questions like this, it is one of the most productive means of encouraging effective learning.

Supporting the Hand

The next point we are going to consider may come as something of a surprise, because, in my experience, it is almost never used in teaching handwriting. Specifically, you might find it extremely useful to support your child's wrist when he or she is writing.

As I pointed out in Chapter Two, the act of writing calls on a range of intricate motor skills that without the proper techniques can be hard to master. Children, particularly those under six years of age, can have trouble maintaining the necessary physical stability without giving up on something else. That something else is usually the smooth execution of the letters. With the wrist supported, stability is ensured, and the child is free to focus on the central issues—namely, shape and movement. (Incidentally, if your child makes a lot of tongue and mouth movements when writing, it's a strong sign that hand support will be useful.)

As shown in the accompanying illustration, the support is provided by lightly placing your palm under your child's wrist, with your index finger under his or her thumb. If your child is right-handed, sit to your child's right and use your left hand to provide the support. If your child is left-handed, sit to your child's left and use your right hand to provide the support. As your child's wrists and hands become stronger with age, he or she will no longer require the support.



Although the benefits can be impressive, some parents resist the suggestion for wrist support. Typically, their first reaction is, "But he can do it on his own!" That's true. However, much better letters are produced when the wrist is supported. In addition, the support pays off in the long run because the child will have more effective handwriting when he or she starts to write independently.

Key Features of the Program

The many inefficient practices associated with handwriting instruction have given the task of writing a less than desirable reputation. All of this can be changed through simple, systematic teaching. I have seen, over and over again, parents who are amazed and delighted at how easy it can be to get their children to write effectively and who in the process also see their children take great pride in their writing accomplishments.

The systematic instruction is not, and should not be, boring. Effectively organized and presented, the lessons can be limited—in terms of both the daily time required and the total length of time needed to complete the process. In Reading Kingdom the daily letter-construction sessions generally run under ten minutes, and the total handwriting program process is completed in about four to six weeks.

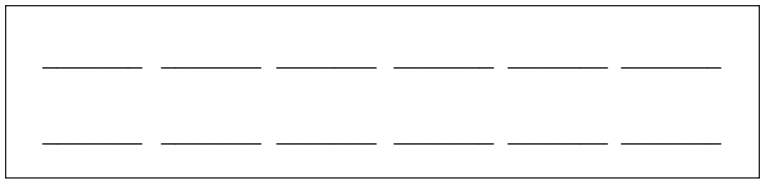
The key program features that allow effective handwriting to be achieved include

- Emphasizing lowercase, not uppercase, letters
- Sequencing letters from simple to complex shapes, and not in alphabetical order
- Avoiding naming of the letters
- Developing consistent patterns for producing the letters
- Supporting your child's hand

All the work is carried out on an $8\frac{1}{2}$-by-11-inch worksheet with two rows of lines, as shown in the following example. For each letter the adult models the

letter on the top row, and the child immediately reproduces the letter on the bottom row.

Worksheet for Writing Letters



The S fbe joh L johe pn handwriting program contains five levels.

Level 1

In the first level the child learns the letters *c, i, j, l,* and *o,* that is, letters that are restricted to single strokes and simple shapes.

Level 2

At the second level the double-shape letters *e, f, k, s,* and *t* are introduced. All the letters from level 1 are maintained as well. Each of the new letters is drawn in two separate steps, so that the child has the chance to focus on the way each of the strokes is constructed.

Level 3

The letters used in level 2 continue, but in level 3 all are now produced in a single step.

Level 4

In level 4 all the remaining letters—*a, b, d, g, h, m, n, p, q, r, u, v, w, x, y,* and *z*—are introduced. Many require retracing, which means going over part or all of an already drawn line. As in level 2, these letters are constructed in two steps. All the letters from the previous levels continue to be produced as well.

Level 5

Your child is now constructing all the letters of the alphabet in a single step. He or she is ready to use these skills in writing real words and sentences.

chapter

6 Teaching Content Words

The Skills of Reading

Sequencing	Writing	Phonology	Semantics	Syntax	Text

Once the physical skills are in place, your child is ready to move on to reading and writing words. Words, or more accurately one group of words, have long been at the center of reading instruction. These are the content words—the ones we're used to thinking about as *words.* They are primarily the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs of our language, such as *cat, run, big,* and *really.* In this chapter we'll cover the way in which content words are taught in the five Reading Kingdom reading programs: Boarding, Runway, Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring.

Figuring Out the Words

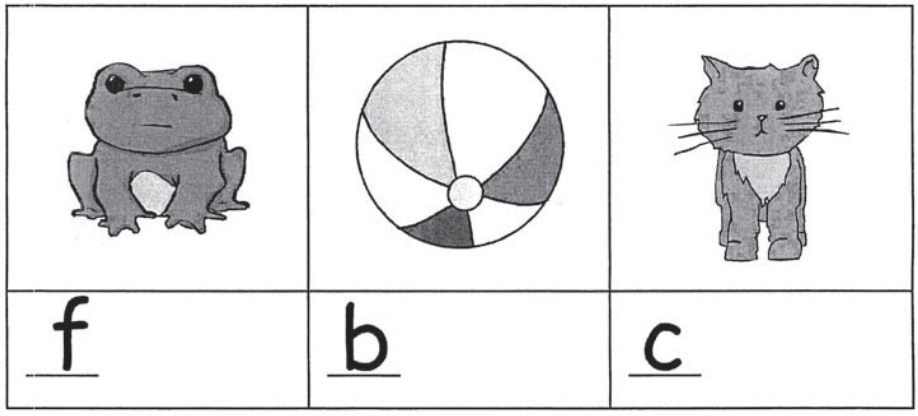
When a child is just starting to read, a page of print looks like little more than an array of meaningless squiggles. For reading to happen, the child has to transform that jumble into meaningful words. Most of the teaching time in the primary years is aimed at having children master this aspect of reading.

Invariably, the route to success is deemed to rest with sounding out. It's such an accepted method that virtually everyone, from parents to teachers, when

confronted with a child who is stumped by a word, will encourage him or her by saying, "Just sound it out."

As with so many of the accepted practices in reading, advice that seems simple and obvious often doesn't work. The troubles generally do not appear at the outset, when the teaching is focused on having children link single letters to particular sounds (learning, for example, that the letter *b* is the sound *buh,* the letter *c* is the sound *cuh,* and so on).

If you are familiar with the worksheets children are given, you are likely to have seen the type of task illustrated in the following example, where the goal is to have the child identify the beginning sound of each picture and then enter the letter representing that beginning sound.



Moving from One to Three

Once single sounds are learned, the teaching moves on to blending sounds so as to form complete words. That's where the trouble begins. Logically, the step up from one sound is two. That would mean taking two letters, such as *a* and *t,* and seeing the way they combine. Logical as it may seem, this rarely occurs. Why? Because in the traditional sounding-out approach, the two-letter words of our language are fraught with problems. In a high percentage of cases, as you can see by looking at words such as *go, do, be, to, of, by, no,* and *he,* the words do not follow the "rules." If they behaved as they should, *go* would be spelled *goe, be* would be spelled *bee,* and so on.

So invariably, the step after sounding out one letter is to sound out three letters—or at least particular sets of three letters. Because children have been taught to work with the principle that "every letter should be sounded out," many three-letter words have to be avoided. Many common words—like *say, buy, ate,* and *egg*—are in this excluded category. If each letter were sounded out, none of these words would end up sounding the way it is supposed to. Instead, words are carefully selected to represent what have been termed *consonant-vowel-consonant words.* These are words that start and end with a consonant, and have a vowel as the middle letter. Some common examples are *cat, fan, hop, fat, sit, pan,* and *bed.* For the sake of brevity, they are often referred to as *c-v-c words.*

Blending: No Easy Matter

Even with all these controls the jump from one to three letters is huge. Generally, when isolated consonants are sounded out, a vowel sound appears with the consonant sound. That's why a *c* comes out as *cuh,* a *d* as *duh,* a *g* as *guh,* and so on. Each letter essentially has two sounds: the sound of the consonant itself (for example, *c*) and the sound of the vowel that follows (for example, *uh*).

So in sounding out a three-letter word like *cat,* a child actually ends up with five sounds (*c-uh aa t-uh*). No matter how many times those sounds are said, and no matter how quickly they are said, they do not combine to say *cat.* Two of the vowels (the *uh* of *cuh* and the *uh* of *tuh*) have to disappear before the letters can be blended to form an actual word. The child has to somehow extract *cat* from this array of relevant and irrelevant sounds.

Comparable problems hold for many of even the simplest words, such as

puh ii guh for *pig*

duh aw guh for *dog*

tuh ah puh for *top*

In all these cases children can get to the actual words only by viewing the sets of sounds as rough approximations—as a collage in which the actual words are embedded. The process is complex and demanding, and it promotes errors. For example, here is the way a reporter studying children's reading problems described one child's effort to decode the word *under:* "First-grader Sarah Strandmark

studies the word in her illustrated reading book. The letters u and n are familiar. She's stumped by the d-e-r. Slowly, she strings the letters like pearls on a strand. 'U-u-n-n-n . . . under,' she says, smiling as the jumble of letters reveals itself as a word" (Moore, 2003, p. A1).

With a single word the process is slow and tedious—even when a child knows most of the letters and has to figure out just one or two of them. Still, diligent, motivated children like Sarah can make the effort when only a few words are involved. When there are lots of words, however, as there are in even the simplest page of text, the situation becomes unsustainable. You saw that for yourself if you carried out the foreign-symbol reading exercise presented earlier. The typically used methods of sounding out are simply too cumbersome to be useful.

When adherents of traditional phonics are challenged on this score, they typically react by saying that sounding out is only a means to an end, with the end being the real goal of decoding—namely, instant word recognition.

The phrase *instant word recognition* refers to the quintessential skill of effective reading. Good readers—even those who are no more than six or seven years of age—almost never sound out the words on a page. Instead, they look at words, including words they've never seen with letter patterns they've never been taught, and instantly recognize the words that the letters represent. That is what instant word recognition is all about. When this wonderful, essential, and miraculous skill emerges, it is a clear sign that a child has developed the hidden abilities required for decoding words in print.

Adherents of traditional phonics assure us that instant word recognition is bound to follow after sufficient practice in sounding out has taken place. This is simply not the case! If it were, we would not be witnessing the astounding error rates that currently prevail. From kindergarten on, the vast majority of schools in our nation teach children to sound out, and for far too many children this is simply a path to failure.

How Is Your Child Doing?

You may have seen the telltale evidence of sounding-out failures for yourself. If your child has already experienced several months of reading instruction and is still laboriously sounding out, the likelihood is that he or she is in danger of developing reading problems. To help you determine whether this is the case, you might like to carry out the following set of activities with your child. (Remember, this mini skills test is only for children who are already doing some reading. Do not give it to your child if reading instruction has not yet started.)

Step 1. In this step you are going to be looking for one key ability: whether your child decodes a word correctly via instant word recognition or via sounding out. Start by creating two identical sheets with the following group of set 1 words.

Words for Your Child to Read: Set 1

mat	pin	sit	fan
bug	nap	pet	cut
pot	den	hip	leg

Show one of the sheets of paper to your child; point to each word in turn, saying, "Try reading this word to me." Though you may be tempted, do not offer any help, guidance, or correction. Your goal is to see what your child is doing on his or her own in decoding. However, if your child is stymied by a word, then supply the word by saying, "This is _____ [*name the word*]. Try the next word."

Step 2. As your child reads a word, place a checkmark (✓) next to that word on your sheet if he or she instantly identifies it correctly (that is, if without sounding out, your child immediately says the word). If your child offers any other type of response, do not place a checkmark next to the word. These other responses might include sounding out the word, taking a long time to identify the word, coming up with the wrong word, or simply offering no response.

Step 3. Total the number of words with checkmarks. If your child is reading reasonably well at this level, he or she should have achieved at least ten ✓s. Anything less shows that your child is still struggling with the earliest level of decoding.

Months of work go into c-v-c words of the type you just used in step 1. Many children can begin to do these words easily, but then they get stuck on decoding more complex words. If you want to see whether your child is extending the earliest decoding skills to other words, try step 4.

Step 4. Here, you are again going to be looking to see whether your child decodes via instant word recognition or via some other method. Although still representing words from primer-level books, the words used in this step are ones that go well beyond the c-v-c pattern. Start by again creating two identical sheets, this time with the following group of set 2 words.

Words for Your Child to Read: Set 2

fly	rest	swim	doll
rock	plant	help	make
clean	truck	think	mice
happy	robot	puppy	tongue
animal	hungry	daisy	penny
funny	rainbow	people	open

Then follow the same procedure as in step 1 above.

Step 5. Once again, on your sheet place a checkmark (✓) next to each word that your child instantly recognizes and reads correctly.

Step 6. Total the number of words with checkmarks. In evaluating the results, use the following guidelines:

- If your child has completed at least half of first grade, he or she should have at least eight ✓s.
- If your child has completed almost all of first grade or is in the beginning of second grade, he or she should have at least sixteen ✓s.
- If your child is well along into second grade or beyond, he or she should have at least twenty-two ✓s.

If your child fails to meet these criteria, do not be discouraged. All these words are in the Reading Kingdom programs that you can easily teach to bring your child to high levels of skill.

At the same time, do not be misled by well-intentioned professionals who will tell you that it is unrealistic to expect your child to have the level of proficiency I have outlined. People have become so accustomed to poor levels of reading that they have come to see them as normal and acceptable. They are not! It is well known that children who start out with problems of this sort have a high expectancy for reading failure throughout their lives. There is no need for your child to be among those tragic statistics.

Decoding Words: Finding Another Way

To enable you to see how Reading Kingdom fosters skilled, automatic decoding, we'll go over two of the techniques that are used in the system.

Simplifying Sounding Out: Bit Blends

As we discussed above, many children are stymied when the activities shift from sounding out single letters to blending three letters. Fortunately, there is no need to make children jump that big a divide. Far simpler solutions are possible through using *bit blends*—a technique unique to the S fbe joh L johe pn system. In place of having your child sound out the full word, you supply the initial blend. That leaves your child with the more manageable task of attaching the single sound of the final letter.

If your child is already reading, you can get a sense of how bit blends works by creating some simple materials. Let's assume your target word, the word you want your child to decode, is *girl.* Create a sheet that on one side has this cluster of letters:

gir

and on the other side has this set of words:

gird girl

Showing the side with *gir* to your child, say, "This says *gir.*" Then turn the sheet over and say, "Now find *girl.*" Then give your child additional practice training by repeating the task, each time using a different set of the following words:

gill girl

gift girl

give girl gig

gird giddy girl

You can try this approach with words your child has never seen, including more complex words. For example, consider the word *start.* After you show your child the word *star* and say that "this says *star,*" your child then has to find *start* in the following sets:

stare start

start stash

stay start state

start stamp strait

You may have noted that all the words in all the sets start with letters identical to those that start the target word. This helps children overcome a major obstacle that defeats accurate decoding. Because traditional sounding-out techniques can be so onerous, children develop the strategy of bypassing them; instead, they guess at words based on the first one or two letters they see. It's easy to understand why a child will resort to this practice, but it ultimately destroys any hope of effective decoding.

By starting the words in each set with the same letters, the bit blends technique overcomes this major obstacle. After working on a few words, children realize that scanning only one or two initial letters is useless and that they must scan further into each word to get at the letters that matter. As correct scanning patterns get established, the misleading first-letter guessing strategy drops away.

The bit blends technique eliminates many of the problems raised by traditional sounding-out techniques. It enables children to experience steady success in combining sounds to form words and at the same time leads them to overcome strategies that interfere with reading success.

Instant Word Recognition

As we discussed earlier, the ultimate goal in reading is instant word recognition. That's what you are doing in reading this page. You are not sounding out each and every word. If you were, just as you had to with the foreign symbol exercise, you would drop the book in a flash.

Of course, on occasion, when we meet unusually challenging words we do resort to sounding out. For example, when we have to deal with a word like *synecdoche* (which is on a reading test precisely because almost no one knows it), we would be bound to sound it out. There seems to be no other way to go. Unfortunately, as so often happens, the sounding-out approach fails, because *synecdoche* is pronounced *sih-neck-doe-key*—another one of the many exceptions that

permeate our language. [In case you're wondering, *synecdoche* is defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,* Fourth Edition as "a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole (as *hand* for *sailor*), the whole for a part (as *the law* for *police officer*), the specific for the general (as *cutthroat* for *assassin*), the general for the specific (as *thief* for *pickpocket*), or the material for the thing made from it (as *steel* for *sword*)" (2000, p. 1755).]

But the *synecdoche* experience is rare. Even with words we've never seen, we do not resort to sounding out in the vast majority of cases. This probably contradicts what you have been led to believe, but it is nevertheless the case. To get an insight into what most of us actually do in decoding new words, it's useful to try a word you've never seen before to see what you do with it.

For example, take the nonsense word *thop.* If you're like most English speakers, in reading this new word you instantly and unquestioningly came up with a pronunciation that rhymes with *hop* and starts with the soft *th* sound (like the *th* in *thin* and *thank*). It seems so obvious. What you probably did not consider at all is that English has two *th* sounds—the soft, or unvoiced, *th* that you chose and the heavier, or voiced, *th* heard in words like *the, this, there, although,* and *then.* (If you're having difficulty differentiating these two sounds, put your hand in front of your mouth and say *thin* and then say *there.* With *thin* you should feel a flow of breath across your hand; with *there* you should not.)

Now, if you are really sounding out new words, why did you not give a moment's consideration to the other *th* sound, which you have encountered far more times than the *th* sound that you actually chose? Pick up any book, for example, and it won't take you more than a sentence or two to find a voiced *th* word, such as *the* or *this.* However, you're likely to search long and hard before finding a page with an unvoiced *th* word, such as *thin* or *thumb.*

The frequencies of various words in print have been calculated, and the differences are astounding. For example, considering some common voiced *th* words, we find that out of approximately five million words of text, *the* appears 373,123 times, *this* 23,301 times, and *there* 15,194 times. In contrast, considering some common unvoiced *th* words, we find the comparable numbers for *think* to be 4,746, for *things* 1,828, and for *thin* 611 (Carroll, Davies, & Richman, 1971). If the voiced *th* so far outnumbers the unvoiced *th,* why did you not even consider using it for *thop*? Surely this seems counterintuitive.

The answer rests not with the sounding-out skills you've been taught but rather with the hidden abilities that are really behind your effective reading. Years of

experience have taught your unconscious mind that the voiced *th* is associated with noncontent words—words like *the, this,* and *there,* whereas the unvoiced *th* is associated with content words, words like *thin, thank,* and *thimble.* These hidden abilities have also led you to recognize that new content words (such as *astronaut, dot-com,* and *cell phone*) are steadily being created, whereas noncontent words are not. The latter form a fixed, or "closed," class, with no new entries. So, totally out of your awareness but with perfect accuracy, you classified the new word *thop* as a content word and assigned it the pronunciation that goes with those words.

An old proverb holds that "the fish is the last one to discover water." It captures the idea that we can be unaware of some of the most powerful forces around us. This is certainly the case with phonics. Phonics is a vital factor in decoding words, but it is our hidden phonic abilities that provide an effective framework for decoding. They allow readers to innately understand the key clusters in English and the sounds that those clusters represent. That's why, after looking at a word once, experienced readers have "got it." For some children these skills come easier than for others. But given the right tools every child can figure them out. Bit blends is one of those tools. Repeated encounters is another.

Repeated Encounters

Repeated encounters means exactly what it says. The teaching material is designed so that a word appears again and again and again. At the same time, in a departure from typical reading education, your child learns only one new word in a session. Through a series of varied activities, that word is taught approximately thirty to forty times. These various repeated encounters give your child the familiarity he or she needs to attain instant recognition of a word.

For example, in one activity—*Spot 'n Sort*—children see sets of words one line at a time, and in each line the new word may appear more than once, once, or not at all. The number of correct choices is intentionally varied to lead your child to process the information as fully as possible. (In contrast, in situations where there is a single correct response, children stop looking as soon as they think they have found the right choice.) This activity is set up so that your child has to cross out all the words that are *not* the target word. In learning the word *eat,* for instance, your child might see the following matrix:

ape	eat	sit	bus
fly	ate	eat	eat
each	early	put	ear
tea	even	eat	seat
soon	boy	eat	eat
eat	meat	girl	ear

Your child does not need to know the other words. Nevertheless, he or she does have to scan carefully in order to distinguish the target word from the other words. For example, *ear* has the same two starting letters as *eat, tea* has the same letters but in the wrong order, and *seat* also has the same three letters and in the right order but with an additional letter at the start. All the activities are arranged so that you provide your child with immediate feedback to correct any errors he or she makes.

The nontarget words have been chosen to help children overcome the systematic error patterns that they fall into in learning to read. For example, when children accept *tea* or *ate* as the equivalent of *eat,* they are working on the assumption that clusters with the same letters can be viewed as representing the same word.

You might be wondering where these systematic error patterns come from. After all, no one ever instructed children to use them. Proponents of direct phonics instruction view these spontaneous strategies as "one of the mysteries of written language acquisition" (Templeton & Bear, 1992, p. 13). In reality, it would be more of a mystery if children did not come up with these strategies. We human beings have an unending need to make sense of the input we face. So when children first confront words, they apply patterns that seem reasonable. Given their experiences with objects in their prereading life, it's only natural for them to think that if one set of letters is nearly the same as another, the sets are likely to be equivalent. A plant, for example, can drop one or more leaves and still be the same plant. When a word drops or exchanges even a single letter, however, it is not the same word. Unlike most other visual material children have learned to deal with, words require minute attention to sequence and detail.

The material in Reading Kingdom has been crafted to overcome the error patterns that interfere with successful reading. If you find that your child displays some of these patterns, don't get nervous. It is not a weakness in your child; it is a weakness in the instruction he or she has received. Once you adopt appropriate teaching materials and techniques, you will see that these patterns quickly fade away.

Immediate feedback combined with tightly controlled materials is central to the Reading Kingdom programs. It is a key factor in enabling children to figure out the rules that underlie the hidden abilities of reading.

Spelling Words

Up to this point we have been considering ways to help your child read, or decode, the words on a page. An equally important skill is the ability to write, or spell, those words.

Spelling represents an area that has long aroused strong feelings. A century ago inaccuracy in spelling was seen as nearly sinful, and errors were a clear sign of poor breeding. Back in the nineteenth century, for example, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his daughter: "Take care that you never spell a word wrong. Always before you write a word, consider how it is spelled, and, if you do not remember, turn to a dictionary. It produces great praise to a lady to spell well." Imagine talking to some teachers from that era and telling them that in a few generations accuracy will be seen as not only unnecessary but undesirable. They would probably think you were insane.

When Wrong Is Right

That was then, and this is now. With the appearance of the whole language movement, demands for rigor came to be seen as impediments to learning. That left accurate spelling by the wayside. If you are familiar with current school practices, you've seen the effects in the "invented spelling" phenomenon, which encourages children to write with any spelling they choose. The goal is to avoid doing anything that might inhibit their getting their ideas onto the page as easily as possible. Because accurate spelling is one of the big inhibitions, it has to be abandoned.

The victim in this approach is not just spelling but also reading. For example, "only" a single letter is responsible for the difference in meaning between the sentences in each of the following sets:

He charged the battery.	He changed the battery.
She saw the word.	She saw the world.
We found the tool.	We found the toll.
They liked the team.	They licked the team.

Accustomed to seeing the patterns of their invented words, children are unprepared to see accurately the patterns in the words others write. Accurate spelling is the handmaiden to accurate reading. When it is not there, reading suffers mightily.

Because phonics adherents place so much stress on accuracy in reading, you might expect them to be uncomfortable with inaccuracy in spelling. Surprisingly, they are not. They justify their position by claiming that the mistakes are simply signs that spelling has developmental stages and that as children go through these stages the errors will eventually resolve (Ehri, 1992).

If you have observed the spelling skills of real children in the real world, you know that this does not happen. For huge numbers of children, even those who can read fairly well, spelling is a disaster zone. This is not a fault of the children. It is a reflection of the complexities of English and the inadequacy of sounding-out rules for dealing with these complexities.

On one occasion a parent consulted me about some concerns her daughter's first-grade teacher raised. Amy's reading and writing skills were excellent, but the teacher was bothered because the little girl wanted her writing to be accurate. So she would at times ask how to spell correctly any word she was unsure of. When told to put down whatever "seems right," she kept insisting on knowing the correct spelling. At that point the teacher called in the parent because she felt that the child's creative spirit was being blocked by a concern with being correct.

Aside from a very small group of words, almost any English word can, from a sounding-out point of view, be spelled in a variety of ways. Consider a four-letter word such as *tall.* Applying just a few of the sounding-out rules, it could be spelled *taul, tawl,* or *taull.* For a child who does not have a solid visual image of this word, there is no way to distinguish between correct and incorrect spellings.

As words increase in length the complexities mount and the possibilities continue to multiply. To get a sense of what a child beginning to read has to face, consider the following lists of five-letter words and two-syllable words, drawn from a book designed for children in the first and second grades (Bokoske & Davidson, 1993).

Five-Letter Words	Two-Syllable Words
tease	turtle
shark	dolphin
close	tiny
throw	picture
drown	angry
fight	gentle
learn	million
built	circle
raise	letter

Following the phonic rules, each word could be spelled in a wide array of possibilities. For example, *tease* could be *teas, teese, teaz, teez,* or *teiz; turtle* could be *tirtel, turtel, tertel, tertil,* and so on.

The complexities of English spelling are indeed considerable. They will never be resolved, though, by permitting children to write with error. Allowing errors to go uncorrected leads only to further errors.

How can accurate spelling be achieved? The answer rests with structuring the teaching so that it deals systematically with two components: the number of letters in words and the role of memory in writing words.

Bigger Is Better: Going Beyond Three Letters

In mathematics there is an interesting distinction between the numbers we recognize immediately and those we know only through deliberate counting (Dehaene, 1999). For example, children under one year old can distinguish between small

quantities even though they are not able to count: given a choice between two candies and three candies, they'll choose the three. But when the same children have to choose between six candies and seven, they cannot distinguish between these two larger quantities. In general, young children can discern, without counting, differences in quantities up to four. After that, if they are going to identify a difference, they have to count.

A similar principle operates in the domain of words—except that (in my experience) the critical number is three. With words of two and three letters, children can spell without much effort because they seem to be able to easily grasp that number of letters. The spelling of those words, however, does little to foster the spelling of longer words. It is only when children have to produce words with four or more letters that they develop the skills that foster hidden abilities.

The hold that traditional phonics has on reading education means that those longer words have consistently been avoided because they do not fit the simple sound-letter correspondences children are taught. So in the early months of instruction, although *bit* is fine, *bite* is not; although *bed* is fine, *bead* is not; and although *pin* is fine, *pint* is not. All those four-letter words lend themselves to a *range* of possible spellings.

That is why, even after months of instruction, in traditional phonics activities such as the sample spelling task that follows, the words are systematically limited to those with three letters:

A Sample Early Spelling Activity

wig	pig
pan	man
bed	led
bug	rug

—Rowland, 1995, workbook 24

The months of early instruction are critical. They set the basic patterns for literacy that your child will have forever. By restricting initial spelling tasks to short, three-letter words, the teaching almost guarantees spelling failure for the words that follow.

Among its effects, this approach leads children to feel intimidated when they finally meet the longer words. One time I was working with a first-grader who, like

his peers, had spent months on three-letter words. When he happened to see the word *helping* on a piece of paper, his eyes opened wide, and he then proceeded to count the letters—"one, two, three, four, five, six, seven." When asked if he could read the word, he quickly said, "No, that's seven letters." Caught up in a fear of length, he could not even begin to conceive of the possibility that he could manage the word. There is no reason, other than limited teaching, for conveying the message that longer words are unconquerable. Patterns like these can easily be prevented from ever taking hold by structuring the material to introduce longer words right from the outset.

This philosophy is reflected throughout the Reading Kingdom reading and writing programs. Because the system requires no explicit rules, kids are free from the outset to learn words that are longer than three letters. Even in the level 1 reading program, the children learn four- and five-letter words like *girl, bird, rest, swim, talk, plane,* and *robot.* Over the course of the five programs, increasingly complex words are added so that the child becomes comfortable with a wide range of relatively long single-syllable and multisyllable words.

The activities are set up so in a variety of ways to ensure the accurate visual analysis needed for correct spelling. In one activity—*Find 'n Fill*—for example, children go through a series of steps where they have to (1) find the incomplete words that can become the target word, and (2) in left to right order, add the missing letters so that the spelling of each instance of the target word is complete and accurate. In the following material, for example, the child's goal is to find and fill in the word *rocket,* as often as it appears.

p l__ n __	r__ __k e t	m__ __	r__c k s
f l__	b__s	r__ __d	r o__k__ __
r__o t s	r__c__e__	w__l__	p__ __t s
r o__ __e t	p l__n e	r o__ __	h__ __s e
s o__ __ e t	r__ __k e t	b o__k	r e__d

In addition to getting children past the three-letter barrier that has for so long held up early reading instruction, longer words offer other advantages. Words like *rocket* introduce your child from the outset to phonic features that permeate words, without the need for your child to memorize confusing and difficult rules. In the

case of *rocket,* for example, the child is exposed to the fact that the single *k* sound may be represented by a letter combination (*ck*) rather than by a single letter. With other words the combinations might be different (for example, the *ch* of *such,* the *ou* of *ground,* the *ea* of *head*), but the principle is the same. The controlled, steady presentation of these sorts of features is central in enabling your child to develop the hidden abilities of accurate decoding and spelling.

Using Memory to Attain Accuracy

Accurate spelling is best achieved when children can picture in their minds all the letters in a word. When activities are confined to ones where the words are always in view, this internal picture need never develop. For example, imagine having to write a long word like *elephant.* With the word in view, for each letter a child can just keep looking back to the model till the word is complete. The source of the information is the model rather than an internal picture in the child's head.

In the work I have done over several decades, I have found that techniques that emphasize memory are the most effective way to get children to visualize words in the way effective spelling demands. Also, the program activities are set up so that your child has to work with sentences in which the new words are integrated with words already learned. In one activity—*Symbol Search*—for the target word *cold,* your child might see

That ____⊇____ is ____•____ very ____⊗____.

⊗ = cold ⊇ = food • = still

In this activity your child first finds the word that each symbol represents (for example, ⊇ means that *food* is the word to be inserted). Then the word is covered, and from memory, your child enters it in the sentence. Once the fill-ins are completed, your child reads the sentence. Then the words of the entire sentence are covered, and using memory again, your child writes the sentence from dictation.

If there are any errors, you briefly pause the writing and show the original sentence again. Then, starting from the first word, your child resumes writing until the entire sentence is written correctly—in the absence of the model. In other words, high levels of performance are required, but your child gets all the time and information needed to attain that high performance.

Comprehending Words

Along with decoding and spelling, a third major component is required in teaching words. It concerns comprehending, or understanding, the meaning of the words. Oddly enough, this critical area has largely been taken for granted in early reading instruction.

For decades the conventional wisdom has been that children, through their years of speaking, come to school knowing the meaning of the words they will encounter. The only thing they are seen as lacking is the "character recognition device" (that is, knowing the letters) and the ability to convert the characters into a "systematic phoneme representation" (that is, to sound the letters out) (Gough, 1972, p. 346). In other words, in this view there is never a need to worry about whether the words will be comprehended. In contrast there is no such confidence about decoding, because children do not know how to sound out the letters. That is why sound analysis, rather than meaning, is considered the important skill to teach.

Unfortunately, the concentration on sounds has led to creating pages of words that contain a distorted language, unlike anything the children know. To see this, we need only return to the passage about Dan and Sam introduced in Chapter One:

> Dan has an ax.
>
> Has Dan an ax?
>
> Sam has ham.
>
> Has Sam ham?
>
> Dan has land and sand.
>
> Has Dan sand?
>
> Sam sat.
>
> Dan sat.

This passage, like any well-constructed phonics passage, is governed by the principle that all words must be decodable. In other words, every word that the child sees should be one he or she is able to figure out by applying the letter-sound combinations taught up till then. At the point where a child sees this passage, he or she will have learned nine letters—*a, d, h, l, m, n, s, t,* and *x*—and indeed, every one of the words stays within the constraints of this set of letters.

Words by Themselves Versus Words in Text

The problem is not with the individual words. Each one of them is understandable. Children will have no trouble knowing the meaning of *land* or *sand* or *sat.* The problems stem not from the meanings of the individual words but from the meaning of the total passage. Like so many other passages in early phonic readers, the total passage is meaningless.

Just try saying the passage aloud, and you will see what I mean. If you hear that someone has an *ax,* you would never expect the next idea to be that someone else has *ham.* And after hearing that someone has *land* and *sand,* you would never expect that the next idea to be that the person *sat.* In real-life speaking and writing, ideas are not put together in this way. Sentences are supposed to connect and link to form a coherent message. This linking is completely absent from the passage about Dan and Sam.

We will discuss the concept of connected ideas at greater length in Chapter Eight—the chapter on text. The key point here is to recognize the problems that phonics instruction has caused owing to its limited view of comprehension. In restricting comprehension to the comprehension of individual words, phonics has forced children to deal with endless passages that are essentially incomprehensible. As a system of instruction, it dooms children to failure in the vital area of comprehension.

Selecting Words to Suit the Story

Freed from the straitjacket of having to use ultrashort words restricted to particular sets of letters, S fbe joh L johe pn is able to combine words in the ways that meaningful messages require. The messages of greatest interest to children are stories. Those stories determine the sets of words that will be taught. For example, in a story about a baby bear wanting some food, it is reasonable for certain words to appear, words like *baby, sad, food, berries, find,* and *saw.* These words are needed to create such sentences as, "The baby bear was so sad. He wanted some food, but he could not find any. Then he saw some berries. He ran to them . . . ." Any meaningful story demands that the sets of words connect in ways that fit our natural use of language.

The strategy in S fbe joh L johe pn , therefore, is to use words that permit meaningful texts to be constructed. All the content words in the programs have been selected on this basis. Once selected they are then individually taught through the techniques outlined earlier (such as bit blends, repeated encounters, and so on).

In this way children learn how to read effectively, to write accurately, and to comprehend the words they will be reading in the stories they will shortly be given.

A book is presented after each set of approximately ten words (both content and noncontent) has been taught. Each book contains all the new words in addition to relevant words previously learned. With texts structured in this way, children are easily and naturally familiarized with every word they encounter.

Using a Range of Categories

Meaningful stories naturally call on content words from the major grammatical categories of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, and all these types of words appear in the five levels of the reading system. Nouns are needed for the characters, objects, and events in each story (for example, *boy, house, water, rain, moon, rocket, computer*); verbs are needed for the actions that the nouns carry out or experience (for example, *run, fall, cry, try, talk, rest*); adjectives are needed for the characteristics of the nouns (for example, *sad, happy, cold, nice, salty, true*); and adverbs are needed for modifying the actions (verbs) and characteristics (adjectives) (for example, *really, very, much, such*).

The story-word process enhances both the skills and motivation underlying reading. Freed from the usual word restrictions, the stories in S fbejoh Ljohepn are more interesting than the texts children typically see at the start of reading. At the same time, they are simple enough that a child can experience total success. Additionally, the wide-ranging words prepare children for the variability that is inherent in "real" books.

Key Features of the Programs

The following list summarizes the key features of the programs that teach the content words:

- Blending of sounds is consistently required, but in order to enhance success, it is simplified through the technique of bit blends.
- Each word is taught through repeated encounters that convey all its components, including decoding, spelling, and comprehension.
- Accurate spelling is required from the outset. To avoid the limitations that overreliance on three-letter words creates, many of the words are longer and more complex than those in other early reading programs.

- Words are selected not on the basis of conceptual simplicity alone but also on their potential to combine to form meaningful ideas.

Answering Two Common Questions

Parents and educators often raise two questions:

1. Given the focus on words, does the Reading Kingdom approach to teaching mean that children have to be taught each and every word they are learning?
2. Does it matter which words are selected?

The answer to both questions is no. The content of the teaching is based on individual words, but the techniques of the teaching are aimed at having the children develop the hidden abilities that are the basis for truly effective reading. As long as the words take into account issues such as length, meaning, and grammatical category, the particular words do not matter.

The key is to orchestrate the presentation of the words so that children become versed in the key letter patterns of English. Once that happens, independent decoding and spelling of new words automatically starts to emerge. Indeed, many parents report that within a few months of starting this system, their children are reading and writing words they've never been taught. What these parents are witnessing is the emergence of the hidden abilities that are the basis for truly effective reading.

chapter

7 Teaching Noncontent Words

The Skills of Reading

Sequencing	Writing	Phonology	Semantics	Syntax	Text

Noncontent words—the words we will be focusing on here—are all the *little words* of our language that do not appear to have any direct meaning unto themselves. How do you show someone the meaning of words like *the, but,* and *if?* They seem to be from another world compared to the content words, which are easy to demonstrate, like *puppy, run, soft,* and *quickly.*

What We Know About These Words

Although they may be difficult to define, the noncontent words are the glue that binds the content words together. They are critical to the syntax, or grammar, of our language. To start, let's take a look at what we know about them.

- Currently, there is considerable disagreement in educational circles about precisely which words to include in the noncontent category, and there is even disagreement over what to call them. At times you might hear them referred to as *functors* and at other times as the *little words.* In general, they can be viewed as the words that are left over after you have taken away all the nouns, main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs of our language.

- Some noncontent words are not complete words but rather word particles that are attached to the content words. Such units, often referred to as *morphemes,* include endings like *-ing* and *-ed,* which allow us to change verbs like *go* to *going* and *jump* to *jumped;* the plural ending *-s,* which allows us to change nouns like *kid* to *kids;* and the *-er* that allows us to take verbs like *teach* and transform them into nouns like *teacher.* So, on any page, many words are combinations of content words and noncontent word particles. Most plurals, such as *boys, houses, cats,* and *pens,* represent that combination. (A few plurals, such as *men, children, sheep,* and *fish,* are exceptions because they do not take the plural *-s*).
- All the noncontent words together—whether whole words and part words—represent a tiny fraction of the half million to one million words estimated to be in our language. There are under 200 noncontent words in all, and many of them, such as *whence, thence,* and *heretofore,* are rarely used. Consequently, there are only about 100 noncontent words that we hear and see on a regular basis.
- Although some of the noncontent words are little used, others are used constantly. Imagine what it would be like to try to use English in the absence of words like *the, is, he, was, they, but, or, and,* and *then.* The fact is that these words make up 50 percent or more of every page of text we read throughout our lives.
- Noncontent words are a wonderful bonus for reading instruction. After learning only 100 common words, children are able to read the majority of words on any page of print they will see for the rest of their lives. No other single element that can be leveraged in the teaching of reading comes close to the effectiveness of noncontent words in assisting children to "crack the code" and become good readers.
- Another major bonus is that once children learn the role of the noncontent words, they gain a better intuitive understanding of the syntax, or grammar, of English. Such understanding is an essential part of the foundation of a reader's hidden abilities.

Despite their potential in the teaching of reading, noncontent words have been shunted aside by existing systems. The theoretical positions these systems have taken do not allow them to do otherwise.

For whole language proponents, whose chief goal is to have children experience meaningful stories, concentrating effort on the abstract, noncontent words seems a distraction.

For phonics proponents the noncontent words are among the much-decried *exceptions.* According to the rules of phonics, a word like *was* should be spelled *wuz, of* should be spelled *uv, he* should be spelled *hee,* and so on. The end result is that these words receive minimal teaching time, which leaves children with two major disadvantages. They fail to acquire the necessary solid base of noncontent words, and the lack of attention conveys the message that these words are unimportant.

How Is Your Child Doing?

If your child is past kindergarten and experiencing steady instruction in reading, it is worthwhile for you to see how well he or she is doing with this vital group of words. You can do this by carrying out the following activity, which requires reading a set of the most common noncontent words.

Step 1. Start by creating two identical sheets with the following set of sentences:

Can she do some of this?
They are not here now.
Who is there for us?
Some others also like that.
But he does want more!

You will be folding the paper so that your child sees only one sentence at a time. So make sure to leave enough space between the sentences.

Step 2. Arrange the paper so that your child sees only the first sentence, and say, "Try reading this to me." Do not offer any help, guidance, or correction, because your goal is to see what your child is doing in independently decoding noncontent words. If your child fails to read a word, do not supply it. Simply point to the next word and say, "Try this one."

Step 3. As your child reads the words, on your sheet place a checkmark (✓) next to every word that he or she recognizes correctly and immediately. This means that there should be no noticeable delay in identifying the word. The words we are considering here should be instantly decoded; when they are not, it is a sign that your child needs support.

Step 4. When you have completed the first sentence, move on to the second sentence. Once again, arrange the paper so that your child sees only one sentence at a time. As in step 3, place a checkmark next to the words read correctly and immediately. Continue in this manner until all the sentences have been completed.

Step 5. Total the number of checkmarks. These words are some of the most basic noncontent words, and their mastery is essential for successful reading, even at the earliest stages. In evaluating your child's results, use the following guidelines:

- If your child has had four to six months of reading instruction, he or she should have achieved at least fifteen ✓s on the set of twenty-six words.
- If your child has completed almost a year or more of reading instruction, he or she should have achieved at least twenty-two ✓s on the set of twenty-six words.

If your child fails to meet these criteria, he or she can benefit significantly from the teaching offered in the S fbejoh L johepn system. All the words in the five sentences used here are from the first two reading programs, the Boarding and Runway programs. Additional noncontent words are taught in the three higher-level programs: Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring. At the end of all five levels, your child will have mastery of the full complement of the most commonly used noncontent words, including such words as *were, would, when, because,* and *which.*

Reading Kingdom takes a unique approach to the small, but vital, group of noncontent words. It makes them a central focus of the teaching, equal in time and effort to the focus on content words. As you will see when you work with your child, the payoff for taking this approach is enormous.

As in teaching content words, three critical processes—decoding, spelling, and comprehension—must be taught.

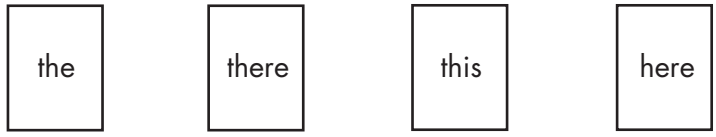
The Path to Decoding

It has long been accepted that noncontent words cannot be decoded by following traditional phonic rules. For example, with a word like *have,* which ends in *e,* the rule to use would be the silent *e* rule, where the *e* has no sound but "makes" the first vowel *long* (as occurs, for example, with the sound of the vowel *a* in a word like *lake*). Were you to apply this rule to *have,* you would end up with the wrong word.

With the traditional rules not working, the decoding must take place without the usual phonological supports. The typical solution is to use what is termed *sight*

word, or *whole word,* teaching, where the child learns the word by recognizing it as a whole, rather than by dissecting it down to its elements. This is similar to the logo recognition even very young children use when they see the big yellow arches and shout out, "Hamburger!" The sign has an obvious meaning to them, but it is not based on sound-symbol correspondences. Rather, there is a visual association. Any symbol that McDonald's might have chosen would still elicit the "hamburger" response. The sound, or spoken word, has nothing to do with the image seen—there is no way to sound out a logo.

Sight word, or whole word, teaching relies on techniques such as flash cards, where the teacher employs a cluster of cards, with each card containing one word, such as the ones you see here:



As each card is held up the children are asked to decode, or read, the word it displays. The aim is to have them recognize each one as a whole word, without making any effort to break it down according to phonic rules.

This approach, which provides children with no specific guidance, is notoriously weak. Too many of the words look alike, and for all but the best readers, inefficiency and errors plague the decoding of what educators have come to accept as "confusable high frequency words" (Krieger, 1981).

Although the sounding-out route is closed off, we can use techniques far more effective than flash cards to teach children how to decode the noncontent words.

Placing the Words in Context

One of the reasons noncontent words have the name they do is that they seem so meaningless. Some speed-reading programs even instruct their students to bypass these words entirely.

After all, what is a *but* or a *the* or an *an?* The idea that they lack of meaning, however, really holds only when the words are read in isolation. As soon as they are combined with other words, meaning comes into play. The sentences displayed earlier (such as, "Can she do some of this?") are good examples of what amalgamation accomplishes. Every one of those words is a noncontent word, yet in combination they have a definite meaning.

That's why the presentation of isolated words, as occurs with flash cards, is so ineffective. It is only by seeing the words in relation to other words that the child can easily recognize that a noncontent word is present.

Reading Kingdom takes advantage of this fact by having children identify each noncontent word to be learned in the context of sentences. One activity—*Detect 'n Select*—uses a search paradigm, asking your child to find a particular noncontent word. In the Detect 'n Select example that follows, the target word your child searches for is *you.*

You can stay here. You do not have to leave. We have room for you and some of the other people. Will you stay? We hope you will.	What are you doing here? I thought that you were going to the game. Why are you here? If you want, you can still get to the game.	Which one of you has a car? If you have a car, please tell us. You could help us a lot with your car. So I will ask again: Do any of you have a car?

In keeping with the principle of repeated encounters, these segments of text provide the numerous repetitions that are vital to fast, accurate recognition. The range of sentences also provides a child with the chance to notice other features associated with the word being taught. In the case of *you,* these sentences show that like other pronouns, *you* is commonly associated with the *helping* verbs, such as *can, do, have,* and *are.* Children do not have to be able to read any of the words in the text except the target word to notice this feature of *you.* They only have to home in on that target word. Still, once they begin to realize that they do know large numbers of the words, invariably their hidden phonic abilities lead them to recognize the words that link with other words.

Capital Matters

When sentences are used, another feature of noncontent words is revealed. In real text, over 80 percent of sentences start with a noncontent word. You can see this pattern in the three selections from books that follow: the first is aimed at children in the early primary grades, the second at children in the mid-primary grades, and the third at adults.

A Selection from a Book for the Early Primary Grades

Once there was a town named Pompeii. **Near** the town was a mountain named Vesuvius. **The** people of Pompeii liked living by the mountain. **It** was a good place to grow grapes. **It** was a good place to raise sheep. **And** it looked so peaceful. **But** the mountain was really a dangerous volcano. **It** was like a sleeping giant. **If** the giant woke up, it could destroy the town. **Did** the people know about the danger? [Kunhardt, 1987, pp. 4–5.]

Ten of ten sentences start with noncontent words = 100 percent.

A Selection from a Book for the Mid-Primary Grades

After the Revolutionary War most people in America were glad that they were no longer British. **Still,** they were not ready to call themselves Americans. **The** last thing they wanted was to become a nation. **They** were citizens of their own separate states, just as they had always been: each state different, each state proud of its own character, each state quick to poke fun at other states. **To** Southerners, New Englanders might be "no-account Yankees." **To** New Englanders, Pennsylvanians might be "lousy Buckskins."

But to everyone the states themselves were all important. "Sovereign states," they called them. **They** loved the sound of "sovereign" because it meant that they were their own bosses [Fritz, 1987, p. 7].

Eight of nine sentences start with noncontent words = 88 percent.

A Selection from a Book for Adults

Until 1932 he did no more than think. **He** had other work and nuclear physics was not sufficiently interesting to him. **It** became compelling in 1932. **A** discovery in physics opened the field to new possibilities . . . . **On** February 27, 1932, in a letter to the British Journal *Nature,* physicist James Chadwick . . . announced the possible existence of a neutron. (**He** confirmed the neutron's existence

> in a longer paper . . . four months later . . . .) **The** neutron . . . had no electric charge, which meant it could pass through . . . and enter the nucleus. **The** neutron would open the atomic nucleus to examination. **It** might even be a way to force the nucleus to give up some of its enormous energy [Rhodes, 1986, pp. 23–24].
>
> Nine of nine sentences start with noncontent words = 100 percent

When tasks are structured to help children realize this unique role that noncontent words play in sentences, they also structure children's hidden abilities, abilities that then lead children to decode noncontent words, rather than content words, as the start of most sentences.

The starting words of sentences present another interesting feature. They always begin with a capital letter. Content words, in contrast, rarely appear with capital letters, with the obvious exception of proper nouns. By structuring the material to foster awareness of this feature, S fbe joh L johe pn provides children with another distinguishing feature to use in decoding and identifying noncontent words.

The content of the Detect 'n Select activity described earlier has been designed to illustrate this feature of noncontent words. As you can see in the search for the word *you,* the first letter of this target word appears in both its uppercase and lowercase forms.

At the same time, the activity is arranged so that your child is never asked to name, or identify, the surrounding words. The goal is for him or her to be able to identify and name, with ease, the single target word (in this case, *you*) in the kinds of contexts found in everyday materials. Because your child may not yet know the other words, it would be counterproductive to ask him or her to decode them. When these sorts of features are carefully controlled, error is kept to a minimum and the base for rapid and accurate decoding is established.

This activity also suits the teaching of part words, such as *-ing, -s,* and *-ed.* In learning to decode these part words your child needs to use particularly careful discrimination, because the part words are embedded within other words. These other words are of necessity content words, and the result is that your child begins to grasp the interplay between content and noncontent words. You can see this in the following Detect 'n Select activity, aimed at teaching the *-ed* ending. In each segment your child has to identify and name the words having that ending (in the first segment the word is *looked,* in the second, *jumped,* and in the third, *walked*).

The man looked into the car for a tool. Then he looked into the truck. He looked and looked but he could not find the tool.

Some boys jumped onto the truck. They jumped on it because it was so high. Some of the girls also jumped on it. It was not good that they did that.

The dog walked behind some rocks. The kids walked there too. All of them walked in that place when they could. It was such a nice place.

The Role of Spelling

For the noncontent words, just as for the content words, spelling is the most demanding of the word analysis skills children have to learn. Content words are difficult to spell because, in terms of the rules, there are just too many possibilities. Noncontent words can be equally hard because it is virtually impossible to sound out most of them. Words like *he, she, they, why, of, want,* and *was* simply do not look the way they sound.

At their core, however, the two groups of words are more alike than different when it comes to spelling. Neither lends itself to the sounding-out rules that children are taught. Children can retain the correct spelling only by forming a clear, stable mental representation of the word. Without that representation, we see endless error. It particularly haunts homonyms (words that have the same sounds but different meanings), such as *where* and *wear; some* and *sum; there* and *their; here* and *hear; by* and *buy*; *for* and *four; your* and *you're; to, too,* and *two;* and so on.

The two major techniques described for teaching the spelling of content words fit with noncontent words as well. They involve the number of letters in words and the role of memory in writing words.

Using Longer Words

As we discussed in teaching content words, traditional approaches have consistently tried to limit the initial words children learn to three letters and particularly to the *c-v-c words* (which start and end with a consonant and have a vowel in the middle, such as *man, run, pin,* and *cat*). Although this restriction actually works against learning to spell, it is a hard one to knock down. It has been used for a long time, and it seems like a reasonable way to keep things simple for children.

Once noncontent words enter the picture, this barrier naturally disappears. Many of the most commonly used noncontent words, such as *this, also, what, that,*

these, there, where, and *which,* require four or five letters. When the ever-present *-ing* is added to any verb, the resulting word cannot avoid having at least five letters and often more (for example, *going, running,* and *sitting*).

So if you are going to teach noncontent words, there is no possibility of limiting the teaching to those with three letters. Fortunately, the techniques of Sfbejoh Ljoifpn are well suited for teaching longer words. In one activity—*Letter In*—the material is designed to help children master spelling by inserting the letters that will complete a word. For the target word *where,* for example, your child sees a matrix such as the following:

	w ___ e ___ ___	___ h ___ ___ e	
___ ___ ___ r e		___ h ___ ___ ___	___ ___ e ___ e
	___ h ___ ___ ___		w ___ ___ ___ e
___ h ___ r e	w h ___ ___ ___		___ h ___ ___ ___
___ h ___ r ___	w h e r ___	w ___ ___ ___ e	

This arrangement is different from the typically used spelling tasks in which children have to repeatedly write the same word in exactly the same way. Identical repetition often lowers attention and lessens learning. In contrast, in the Letter In activity, because the missing letters vary from one word to the next, each experience your child has with the word is different from the one before. This variability increases the level of attention while also leading your child to attend carefully to each of the individual letters in a word.

Calling on Memory

Spelling becomes truly successful only when a word is placed into memory. Several Sfbejoh Ljoifpn activities are set up to help your child internalize the letter patterns in words. One activity—*Cipher Wiz*—presents a number code that when converted into words forms a meaningful sentence. As in all Sfbejoh Ljoifpn activities, the messages contain both the target word and words already mastered, so that there is a steady review of material worked on previously.

The following sentence, designed for the target word *still,* illustrates the format used for the Cipher Wiz activity. The sentence your child will be creating is, "That

kid was very sad, but still she did not cry at all." The material your child sees at the outset appears as follows:

4 5 6 1 3 2 7

_____

_____

1=but still	2=cry at all	3=she did not	
4=That kid	5=was very sad	6=,	7= .

In this activity your child starts by looking beneath the writing lines and finding the phrase that corresponds to the first number—the 4—above the writing lines. In this case, the phrase corresponding to 4 is *That kid.* After your child finds the phrase and reads it, you cover the words. Then, without seeing the model, your child writes the phrase on the line. This process is repeated, phrase by phrase, until the sentence is complete.

You may have noticed that punctuation is a part of this activity, just as it is a part of many of the Reading Kingdom activities. Sentences are critical in teaching noncontent words, and sentences demand punctuation. This stands in striking contrast to most current programs, where punctuation is rarely introduced in the earliest stages of reading. The delay in this aspect of instruction contributes to the notorious difficulties that children have with producing accurate punctuation. Most of them know that sentences need some periods and some capitals, and they toss them around, hoping that they have gotten at least some of them in the right places. The early, systematic introduction of punctuation prevents many of these difficulties from arising.

The Role of Comprehension

We now turn to the issue that has been so central to the neglect of the noncontent words—the consistently held view that these words are meaningless. Given that view, it seems impossible to raise the issue of comprehension. How can you ask a child to understand the meaning of something that is seen as having no meaning?

The Content of Noncontent Words

The answer rests with abandoning the misleading idea that the words are meaningless. Once we free ourselves from that dogma, it is clear that these words *do have* meaning. Consider the following sentences to see how a single change in a noncontent word transforms the message that the sentence is conveying:

The people **that** are leaving are sad.

The people **they** are leaving are sad.

The key problem is not meaning but awareness. For the most part we use noncontent words without awareness. When we speak, content words are the focus of our attention, and in the flow of natural speech the noncontent words seem simply to meld into the content ones. Children are no different from us in this. In fact, if they have not yet learned to read, their lack of consciousness about these words is even greater than ours (because reading brings noncontent words somewhat more to a person's attention than speaking does).

You might get a glimpse into the process if your child is not yet able to read. What you can do is to say a number of sentences, such as

A girl ate the cookies.

The bear jumped in the water.

The little baby was crying.

At the end of each sentence, ask your child to tell you the number of words in the sentence. Most young children will exclude some or all of the noncontent words in their count, so that a five-word sentence (such as, "A girl ate the cookies") will be heard as having three words (*girl, ate, cookies*).

This lack of awareness is the source of some major problems when reading starts, because print presents the noncontent words to us in ways that are very different from the ways we perceive spoken language.

- First, there are noticeable spaces between words, separating the noncontent words from their partners. Instead of hearing a smooth flow where one word glides into the next, the child sees, for example:

  The bird was flying.

  Each word stands by itself, disconnected from the others. It must be read, and understood, without the flow of spoken language that ties words together.

- Second, at the outset decoding is slow, resulting in delays between decoding one word and then decoding the next word. Suddenly a *this* or a *then* is read all alone, and in that isolated state these words do not mean very much. Disconnected from their partners, the words seem anomalous and confusing. Their meanings are revealed only when they are linked with other words.

So it is not surprising that children who are just starting to read make more mistakes on noncontent than on content words. They also take longer to read noncontent words. Because this difference is measured in milliseconds, it is not readily apparent. However, using sophisticated equipment, researchers, including myself, have clearly measured the effect. It is a sign that children have mentally placed content words and noncontent words into separate categories (Blank & Bruskin, 1982).

Within a few months of starting to read, the timing and error differences vanish for children whose hidden abilities emerge quickly. For children who are having difficulties, this does not happen. For them the teaching must be structured to convey the implicit principles that allow effective decoding.

The Right Connections

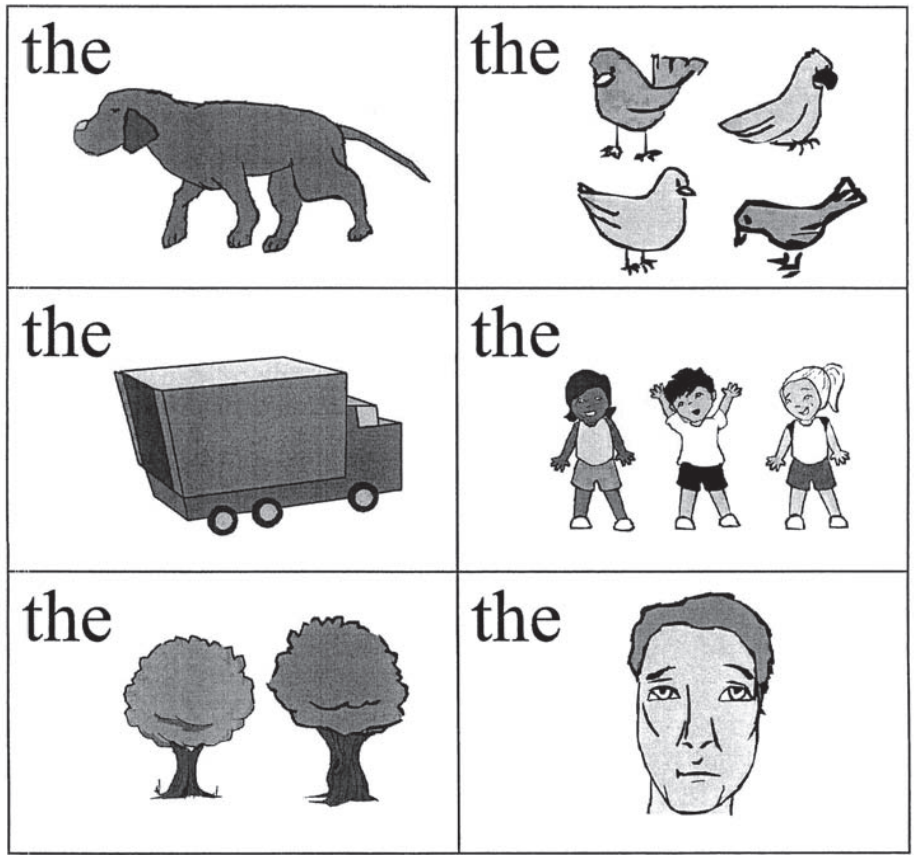
Several program components can help children see the connections that make noncontent words meaningful. One involves the systematic patterns in which these words appear. For example, some words, such as *the, this, an, these,* and *that,* link to nouns, forming combinations like *the kid, this book, an apple, these plants,* and *that toy.* Others, such as *was, have, were, is,* and *are,* link to verbs, forming combinations such as *was going, have seen,* and *were swimming.*

Linguists term these links the *distributional properties* of the words. This term is meant to describe how the words do not appear at random but rather distribute themselves, or position themselves, next to other words in definite ways.

One of the clearest examples of a distributional property can be seen with the most common word in our language—*the.* Its unequaled frequency results from its ability to pair with any noun—singular or plural, masculine, feminine, or neuter. No other *noun connector* has this property. For example, the somewhat similar word *a* attaches only to singular nouns, and it also changes to *an* when the noun starts with a vowel (*a boy,* but *an eagle,* for example). It is worth noting that our unconscious skill in using these words appropriately (such as intuitively saying *an* rather than *a*) is part of our hidden phonic abilities.

When we are teaching *the,* its attachment abilities can be conveyed by showing it with nouns that vary in a number of ways; they can be single objects or multiple

objects, animate figures or inanimate objects, and male figures or female figures, as the accompanying graphic example shows.



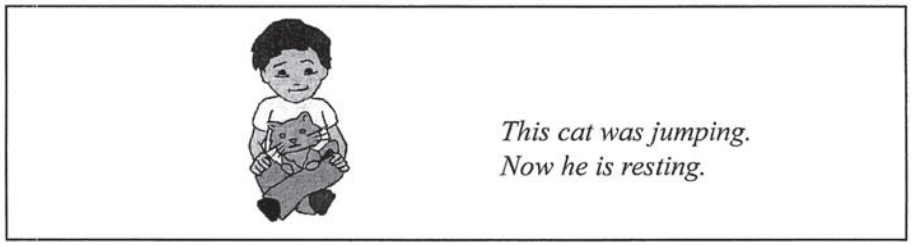
With these pairings, children are reading phrases like *the dog, the birds, the truck, the kids,* and so on. As you can see, by placing *the* next to a variety of pictures, this teaching can take place even when a child cannot read a single word other than *the.* Similar techniques can be used to teach words like *some, more, a,* and *this.*

As children's word base increases, the linkages among words become richer and easier to create. For instance, once children know some verbs such as *walk, run,* and *go,* these content words can easily be linked with noncontent words such as *can, likes to,* and *wants to* (as in *can walk, likes to run, wants to go*). Across the five levels—Boarding, Runway, Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring—your child sees the wide range of combinations that fosters mastery in this area.

Pairing with Pictures

In the examples for teaching *the,* you saw the role pictures can play in allowing a young child to "read" simple phrases even when he or she knows only a few words. Pictures have an even more important role to play in teaching the noncontent words. They are invaluable in imparting the meaning of many noncontent words.

This may seem incongruous—how can pictures be used to reflect words that seem to refer to nothing in particular? But that's a problem only if you keep the words in isolation. Consider, for example, having to teach the word *was,* which as part of its meaning conveys the idea of *past* or *no longer present.* Any attempt to talk about this idea with your child would be boring and potentially confusing to him or her. The situation is transformed, however, when in place of long explanations the child sees a picture of a cat relaxing, accompanied by carefully constructed sentences.



This is an example of the truth of the old saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Interestingly, graphics are even more important in teaching noncontent words than they are in teaching content ones. Words like *bus, coat, happy,* and *boat* may be more fun when accompanied by pictures. However, the pictures are not essential to understanding the meaning of such words because they are simple words that children have used for years. In contrast, pictures are essential in helping children to understand the relatively abstract meanings of noncontent words.

In these situations the graphics are not serving as substitutes for the words. With the cat who is resting after jumping earlier, for example, a child cannot look at the picture and guess the eight-word text that accompanies it. The pictures do not replace reading. Rather, they are tools for transmitting the subtle meanings of noncontent words.

This use of pictures is very different from their common use in early reading instruction. When children are having trouble in decoding, they are often encouraged to "look at the picture" and guess at the meaning. Ultimately, this seemingly

reasonable strategy does not pay off, because most words cannot be pictured. For example, in many sentences that a child might see in early readers (such as, "'I feel sick,' Lewis said."), there is not a single word that can be decoded by "looking at the picture." These limitations apply to a vast range of the content words that children read, including *come, day, like, live, make, play, people,* and *see.*

The use of this well-intentioned strategy leads children to develop one more of the hidden interfering patterns. Guided by misleading instruction, they do look at the pictures and end up reading with high rates of error.

The graphics in S f be joh L johe pn are structured to enable children to get past this bias as soon as possible. For example, the text for the resting cat shown earlier is arranged so that the past tense, non-pictured concept *was jumping* is the first verb the child reads, not the verb *resting.*

Children should not be encouraged to guess at words by "looking at the picture." Because few of the words they read can be pictured, the strategy does not apply to the vast majority of words they see. The advice, though well intentioned, sets them up for failure.

Children who have the strategy of seeking meaning via pictures will often evidence surprise when they come to a word like *jumping,* and they may even ask, "Why does it say 'jumping' when the cat is not jumping? " Within the course of a few words, though, they realize that their strategy of relying on pictures does not work and they abandon it. They then replace matching words and pictures with reading for meaning. So, along with their visual appeal, graphics are useful for transmitting hard-to-convey meanings.

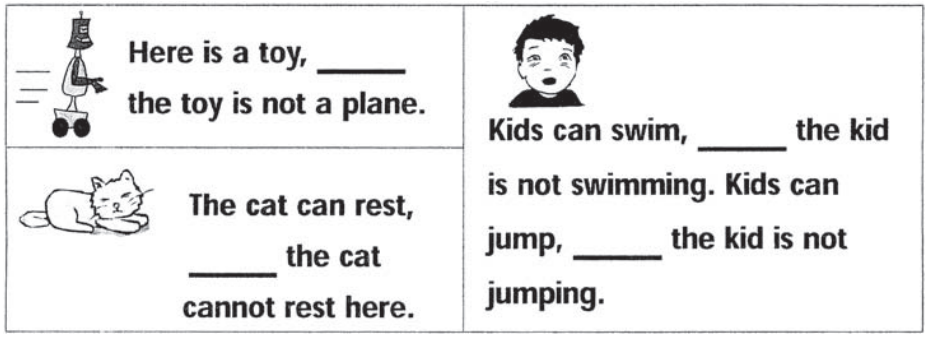
Putting It All Together

The components we have been discussing are integrated into activities such as *Write In to Read*—which contain sentences where the target word is missing and has to be written in. After your child enters the word, he or she reads the entire resulting sentence, so that spelling and reading are combined in sentences that have been carefully structured to convey the meaning of the word. For example, the sentences in the Write In to Read activity shown here are designed to teach the word *but,* and they do so by focusing on the meaning that word has in denying or negating some aspect of a situation.

Target word: but

Write In to Read

What to do: (1) Point to target word. Say, "This is *but*." (2) Cover word. (3) Point to first line in left-hand box below. Say, "Write *but* here." (4) "Read the whole thing." Immediately correct any error. Repeat for each box. (5) Cover boxes. Say, "Now you'll do some more writing." Provide lined paper and dictate words in first box, 1 word at a time. If there are any errors (including capitals and punctuation), stop, show words, cover them, provide fresh paper, and have child redo writing from first word.



This activity has several major features:

- In terms of meaning, *but* has to be able to deny, or limit, something that has been asserted. So other words are needed to create the assertion in order for the meaning of *but* to come across. Words like *is, here,* and *can* are excellent for this purpose because they can refer to simple, present tense conditions that children readily comprehend. For example, in the sentence about the cat, the initial part asserts what the cat is capable of doing (*the cat can rest*). Then the remaining part starts with *but* and moves on to limit what the cat is permitted to do (*but the cat cannot rest here*).
- In terms of graphics, we see the way pictures convey meaning without substituting for words. For example, in the statement *Here is a toy, but the toy is not a plane,* the object being discussed (the robot) is identified first as a member of the general class of toys. The text then moves on to limit the identity of the robot by asserting what it is not (*the toy is not a plane*). The robot itself is never specifically mentioned. It doesn't need to be. Our goal is teaching the meaning of the word *but.* The object best serves that purpose by not being named.
- In terms of mastery, as is always the case, every word in the various sentences has already been taught. By steadily interweaving the known noncontent words with the new, unfamiliar word, the meaning of all the noncontent words is enhanced. For example, words like *here* and *are,* which assert a presence or quality, gain deeper meaning when they link with words that deny a presence or quality.

When the teaching is structured in this way, the rules governing each of the words are steadily conveyed to your child. This is central to helping him or her create the base of hidden abilities responsible for effective reading.

At the same time, your child never has to go through the wasteful and dreary procedure of analyzing and memorizing the rules that control the operation of these words. Indeed, there is every reason to avoid going that route. Traditional phonics is hard for so many children precisely because it requires memorization of all sorts of rules that despite numbering in the hundreds are still only partial reflections of hidden abilities. S fbe joh L johe pn has built these factors into the system, so that every child attains the feeling of effortlessness that is the hallmark of using language in a skilled manner.

Key Features of the Program

To summarize, Reading Kingdom offers these key features in its teaching of non-content words:

- Decoding is taught by highlighting the words in contexts that mirror real texts and that reveal the key properties of the words.
- Accurate spelling is required from the outset, and the techniques are designed to enable children to retain the words in memory.
- Comprehension is emphasized through a series of techniques that include consistently embedding the words in meaningful sentences that reveal the words' essence and using graphics to support meaning.

Having covered the two major groups of words, we can now proceed to the fnal major component in reading instruction—the books that your child reads.

chapter

8 Teaching Through Books

The Skills of Reading

Sequencing	Writing	Phonology	Semantics	Syntax	Text

Learning how to read words and sentences is only a starting point. The obvious goal is to be able to read books. Books represent the heart and soul of reading. Even in this high-tech age, children find those bound sets of pages to hold an almost magical attraction.

Well before they can read, children choose to spend hours with books. They love turning the pages, they love being read to, they love keeping books on their shelves, and they love returning to these books time and time again. Most of all, they yearn for the day when they can read on their own. Using books they have learned by heart, children often pretend to have reached that miraculous point long in advance of actually getting there. The motivational power of books is tremendous.

The Limits of Motivation

The question then naturally arises, if children are so motivated to read, why do so many experience problems? Aren't we taught that if we want something enough, it will happen?

The answer is simple. Motivation is not the whole story. It never has been. It never will be. For many years, though, people were convinced that it might be. Whole language is grounded in this appealing proposition. It maintains that reading happens

naturally if the standard, dreary, drill-type exercises that hold back learning are eliminated and replaced by attractive books that capitalize on children's natural interest.

Sadly, that is not how things work. Any parent whose child struggles with the printed page will tell you the real story. Motivation, like a rainbow, is magnificent. And like a rainbow, it exists only when the conditions are right. With repeated failure, motivation vanishes into thin air—to be replaced by dark clouds of fear, tension, and misery. Children who start out loving books can begin to avoid them like the plague. Children will love reading only if they can read the messages on the printed page easily and effortlessly.

Books: Critical but Neglected

As we discussed in Chapter Two, books—the very core of reading—receive relatively little attention in reading instruction today. For example, in the report on a prestigious, government-sponsored study undertaken for "promoting optimal literacy instruction," you will find the index to contain over 200 references to phonology and related sound analysis activities, but only about sixty references to books of any sort (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Books just do not have anywhere near the clout in reading instruction that you might expect them to have.

Whole language adherents assume that children innately have the capacity to deal with appealing books once those books are provided. As a result, they see no need to carry out an in-depth analysis of how books should be structured.

Phonics adherents see decoding of individual words as essential. It is taken as a given that once children can decode the individual words, they will automatically transfer these skills to the books they see—so long as they have been taught all the sounds contained in the words.

The end result of both these approaches is that many of the books that children are eventually given to read on their own fall short of what children need for success. Instead of supporting the reading process, they present hurdles that contribute to failure.

How Is Your Child Doing?

Before we outline how books should be designed, you probably want to get a measure of how well your child is currently doing in this realm. The most efficient way to do this is to carry out a set of brief writing activities that reflect the sorts of sentences contained in books across a range of levels.

Step 1. Start by preparing three sheets of paper with the following sets of sentences, one set per sheet:

Set 1	**Sentence**	**# Correct**
1.	The kid is not a girl.	_____
2.	Some rockets are flying.	_____
3.	This robot cannot jump.	_____
4.	Can they walk here?	_____
5.	Some more boys are swimming.	_____
	Criterion: 20 correct	Total _____

Set 2	**Sentence**	**# Correct**
1.	That is the only kid who wants to clean this place.	_____
2.	The mice would not move out of the hole.	_____
3.	Which of the two kids pushed the rocks out here?	_____
	Criterion: 24 correct	Total _____

Set 3	**Sentence**	**# Correct**
1.	The girl was never scared to go out by herself.	_____
2.	Do most of the kids know how to read their names?	_____
3.	When the computer went down, the girl really started to yell.	_____
	Criterion: 26 correct	Total _____

Step 2. When you have the material ready, sit down with your child at a desk in a quiet room. Provide blank sheets of lined paper along with a pencil or marker, and say, "I'm going to say some sentences and I would like you to write them. But first, listen." Say the first sentence in set 1. Then say, "Now I'll say it again, one word at a time and you write each word." Dictate the words of the sentence—one word at a time—until the sentence is complete. Do not offer any help or guidance. If your child is unable to write a particular word, say, "Let's move on," and dictate the next word.

Step 3. As your child writes each sentence, circle on your sheet each word he or she writes correctly. To be scored as correct, the word has to be error free. Errors include omitting a letter, introducing a letter that is not in the word, putting a letter in the wrong place, or using the wrong case (the first letter of the first word in each sentence should be uppercase; all other letters should be lowercase).

Step 4. When you have finished set 1, add up the number of correct words to see if your child has met the criterion for that set, which is writing twenty or more of the words correctly.

Step 5. If your child has not achieved the criterion, stop the writing and end the session. If your child has achieved the criterion, move on to set 2 and repeat the process. Continue in this manner until your child fails to meet a criterion or until set 3 is completed. (If you and your child cannot complete the writing in a single session, continue in another session a day or so later.)

Step 6. Evaluate the results using the following guidelines. If your child has met the criterion on

- Set 1, his or her level is about mid-first grade.
- Set 2, his or her level is about mid-second grade.
- Set 3, his or her level is about third grade.

Keep in mind that this assessment is brief and does not cover the full range of skills needed for dealing with text. For example, it gives you no indication of your

child's comprehension. Still, it is useful in indicating whether or not your child is meeting many of the demands of the grade he or she is in. If your child, for example, is in second grade and has met the criterion on set 2, that suggests he or she is moving along at the expected rate. You may also find that your child has advanced skills relative to his or her grade level.

If your child scores below his or her grade level, do not be concerned. Through the Reading Kingdom system, you can provide your child with the success you both long for.

Books involve two major skill components, one that is familiar through our earlier discussions and one that is new. The familiar component is decoding, or translating the printed words into their spoken equivalents. The new component is comprehension, or understanding the message that the words convey.

Ensuring Success in Decoding

As I mentioned above, books have not received anywhere near the attention that they should. Their problems in relation to reading instruction start with the number of words they contain. Admittedly, beginner books are not chockfull of words. But even *easy readers* have what amounts to a lot of words for a child.

When a Little Is Still Too Much

Books for the earliest levels of reading will often proudly advertise that they contain "ONLY thirty words!" To experienced readers that seems like a very small number. But as you will recall from your experience with the twenty-six-word foreign letter passage in Chapter One, for a child at the start of the process, that many words can be overwhelming.

Of course for kids who are "born readers" and can immediately identify the words, the reading is easy. For those who must still rely on sounding out, however, the situation is difficult because of the challenge imposed by sounding out twenty-plus words.

Even when the words are in the end sounded out correctly, slow sounding out poses major problems. Words must be read at a steady clip if their message is to be understood. This is a must for successful reading.

To get
a sense
of what happens
with
slow
reading, try
remembering
the
words
in this
segment when
you
have
to deal
with
gaps
in
space that
partially convey
the
painful
pauses that
mire the
young
reader in
failure.

Slow even though accurate reading is problematic enough. When errors occur, as they inevitably do, the difficulties escalate. Misreading just a single word can render a message incomprehensible. Consider this text:

Ben's friend got a new dog.

His name was Spot.

Spot was very nice and

Ben wanted to play with the dog.

Now consider what would happen if the single word *play* were misread as *pay*. The error is easily dealt with if you happen to be there, listening to your child read aloud. You point out the mistake, your child corrects it, and the reading moves on. If your child is reading independently, though, he or she has no idea where the breakdown occurred. The only solution is to stop, reverse gears, and reread the entire text, hoping to identify what has gone wrong.

An occasional cycle of incomprehension, pausing, and rereading is of no concern once a child's confidence and skill have been established. In the earliest stages, though, when a child is still insecure, errors should be avoided if at all possible.

Small Numbers and Known Words

These decoding problems in beginner books can be minimized by

- Constructing books so they contain fewer words than is typically the case
- Having children learn all the words in a book prior to seeing them in that book, so that slowness and errors are reduced to as close to zero as possible

You can see how these ideas are implemented in the frst book of the Reading Kingdom system, which appears on the next two facing pages. This book is from the Boarding program, and it is titled Some Kids. The book tells the story of a group of children coming together to build a snowman, and it does so with a vocabulary of only eight different words, and a total word count of twenty.

Through the word-training activities completed earlier, the children reading this book know every word that appears, permitting the immediate word recognition that underlies smooth decoding. The child's feeling is one of total triumph.

The number of words children know is steadily and rapidly expanded as the children progress through the programs. In addition, relevant words learned in earlier sessions are incorporated into the new material, fostering integration and review. As a result, at the higher levels, a book may contain over 150 different words and around 400 words in all. You can see the increase in complexity by reviewing a sample of four pages from a book used in the highest level, the Soaring program. In this story—*Not a B, But a Bee*—a baby bee is unhappy because she believes her name is a single letter and not a *real* name.

Book 1: Some Kids

some kids

1

Book 1: Some Kids

some girls,

some boys

2

Book 1: Some Kids

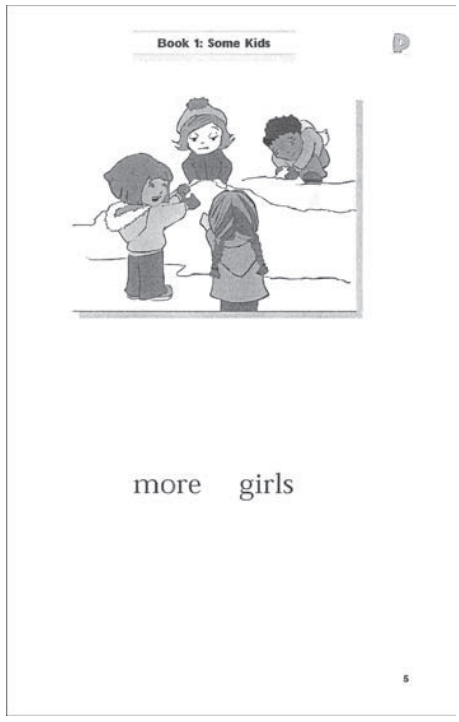
a girl

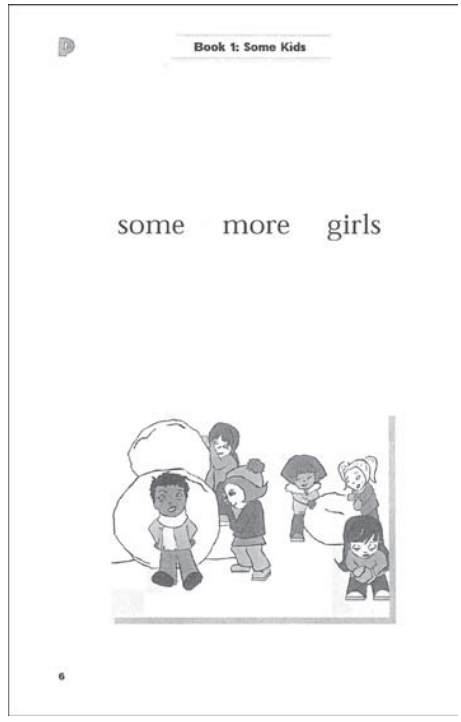
3

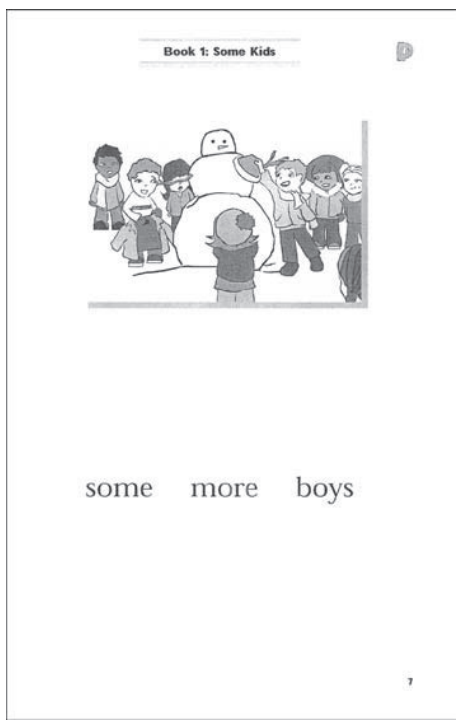
Book 1: Some Kids

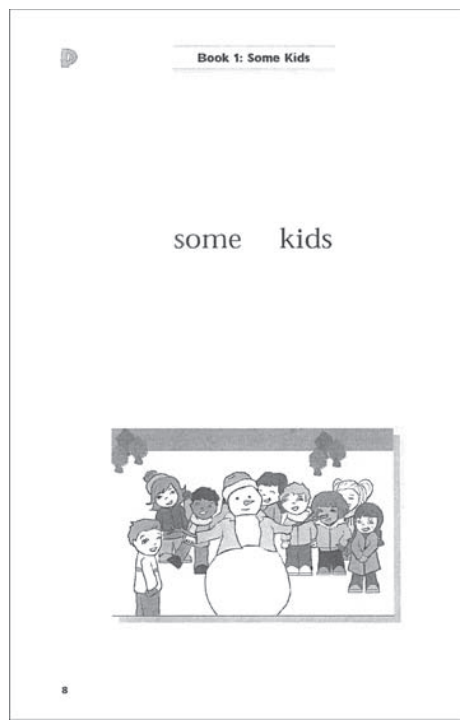
a boy

4


Book 1: Some Kids
more girls
5


Book 1: Some Kids
some more girls
6


Book 1: Some Kids
some more boys
7


Book 1: Some Kids
some kids
8

Book 27: Not a B, But a Bee

Once upon a time, there was a bug. She was like other bugs, and did a lot of the things they did. She would fly, she would eat, and she would drink.

1

Book 27: Not a B, But a Bee

Sometimes she would do things that people did not like. She would bite. But she would only do that when she was scared.

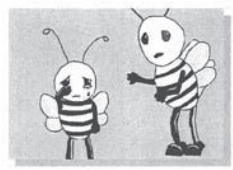
2

Book 27: Not a B, But a Bee

Most of the time, she was a nice, happy bug. Then one day, the bug was not happy anymore. She would not smile. All she would do was cry.

3

Book 27: Not a B, But a Bee



Her mother went to her and asked her why she was crying. She said, "You were such a happy bug. Now your face looks so sad. Can I help? I do not want you to be so sad."

4

Using Real Books

Beginner texts, even when they exceed the optimal number of words, are still quite short. They are so short that it hardly seems worthwhile putting them in a book. That's why many phonics programs present their texts not as independent books but as segments of workbook pages. The consequences are most unfortunate.

Books hold a magical appeal for children that goes far beyond the stories they contain. Reading the identical text in a workbook simply doesn't provide this exhilaration.

To tap into this motivation, the texts children see must be packaged in book form—a linked set of pages that stands alone and contains a complete message. And these books must be offered to children as early as possible. In Reading Kingdom, this goal is achieved by offering the child with no previous reading skills a book after he or she has learned only eight words. Within two weeks of starting to read, your child has the thrill of reading a complete book.

Books hold a magical appeal for children that goes far beyond the stories they contain. For a child, being able to read a book is like winning an Olympic medal. A six-year-old who had been floundering in early reading started the Reading Kingdom programs. Within three weeks, he read his first book. After smoothly and accurately completing its twenty words, he exultantly exclaimed: "I did it! I did it! I read a whole book!"

Anticipating What Is to Come

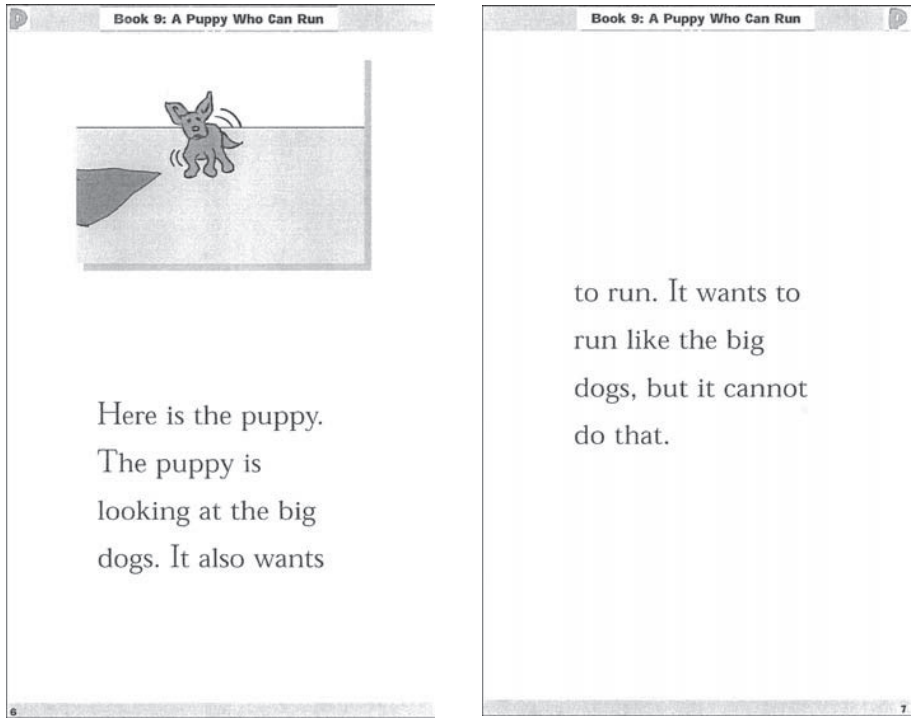
Once I was in the middle of creating a book and so it still lacked some of its illustrations. A child who was just beginning to read happened to pick it up. When he came to a page of text with no picture, he gasped and said, "I can't read that. Those are just words," and he immediately put the book down. Because I knew he had learned the words, I prevailed upon him to try. He reluctantly agreed, ending up with a perfect reading that both surprised and delighted him.

I subsequently found that many children show similar sorts of reactions. Because they are accustomed to pictures accompanying words, pictureless, word-only text frightens them, and this means they are ill-prepared for the shift to the chapter books that appear in second and third grades.

Fortunately, this problem is easy to overcome. Even though pictures are attractive and necessary, there is no reason for them to appear on every page. Sfbejoh Ljohepn books have been designed to provide regular exposure to simple,

pictureless texts that children can easily read, and this prepares them for the text-only books that are shortly to follow.

You can see an example of a pictureless book page in the following two pages from the second level—the Runway program. This book—*A Puppy Who Can Run*—tells a story about a puppy who is too small to run but still wants to run.



Letting Noncontent Words Do Their Work

In the earlier chapters we saw how traditional phonics-based books avoid noncontent words in an attempt to protect children from seeing words that do not "follow the rules." The harm this inflicts on text cannot be emphasized enough. It twists and limits language in ways you would never anticipate.

You have seen here, and probably in your child's homework too, lots of these sentences that aim to restrict words from the noncontent realm. Just to remind you, here is an example of the type of text I am referring to.

Ted has a hat.

Tig hid the hat.

Flit is a bug.

Flit is fast.

Bill has a soft bed.

Bob has a big belt.

Bud has a cut leg.

—Rowland, 1995, workbooks 12 and 14

The problems in such texts are many. For a start, in these texts your child is typically presented with a world of single individuals. Plurals do not seem to exist.

Why do these beginning books depict the world in this way? Surely it's not because children do not understand plurals. Children begin using plurals in their speech when they are about two years old.

It's not children who need to be protected from plurals. It's the reading method that has to be protected. For traditional phonics-based systems, plurals add complications that these systems prefer to postpone. The *s* that attaches to English words to form the plural is another of those pesky *exceptions* that refuse to abide by having a single sound. Depending on the word it attaches to, a final *s* or *es* can be pronounced as *zzz* (as in *dogs*), as *sss* (as in *cats*), or as *ezz* (as in *dishes*).

When sounds become just one of the many components of reading, the difficulties evaporate. Taught correctly, children find it no harder to read *boys* than *boy* or *cats* than *cat.* The benefits for text are clear. The words the children are reading can depict a real world—one where singular and plural coexist. The totally artificial world where plurals have vanished can be avoided.

If you look back to the *Some Kids* book shown previously, you can see that even in the very first book, children in the S fbe joh L johe pn system are shown how to deal with both singular and plural forms. This is simply one example of the way in which the inclusion of noncontent words leads children to decode more meaningful language.

The Comprehension That Books Require

We now turn to the issue of comprehension. Comprehension is critical to the world of books, and it calls on a set of skills totally different from the skills used in decoding. Books must be structured to enable children to master this component. A major source of difficulty for children is that in working with books, they must deal not simply with words and sentences but with sets of sentences.

Connecting Sentences: An Amazing Skill

Children are used to conversations that span large numbers of sentences. The sentences they are used to in speech, though, are unlike the ones they see in early reading books. In these texts the *simplified sound patterns* invariably combine to form a distorted language. I call it distorted because, unlike real language, these texts often do not transmit meaningful messages.

To understand the difficulties, we need to consider a unit of language we've barely dealt with up to this point. It is the unit known as *connected sentences.* That term refers to the fact that meaningful language, whether in books or in conversation, is made up of sets of sentences that connect with one another. Examples of connected sentences are everywhere.

Imagine, for instance, a person entering a room and saying, "It's cold in here," and then following that up with the question, "Could you please close the window?" If this were to happen, you would not be at all confused, because when you put the two sentences together they make sense.

Now imagine a person entering a room and saying, "It's cold in here," and then following that up with, "Do you wear sunglasses?" At the very least, you would be surprised, because the sentences do not make sense together. Although it may seem strange, currently no one—not even the best linguists—understands just how we develop the remarkably sophisticated system that enables us to recognize in an instant when certain sets of sentences "make sense" and when they do not. It is yet another of the seemingly miraculous and hidden abilities that enable us to choose reliably among the infinite possibilities for structuring language.

Human beings have a phenomenal skill in their knowledge of how to connect one sentence to another. As with so many hidden abilities, the ties are invisible, and no one fully understands how they work. But they do work—and because they do, we can use and understand long stretches of language.

Oddly enough, beginning reader books typically offer texts permeated with disconnected and meaningless language. The sentences in those books mirror few of the patterns of language as they are actually used. Instead, in the effort to "simplify" the words, children are offered confusing combinations of sentences.

To see the difficulties, let's reconsider the Dan and Sam text that we discussed in earlier chapters.

Dan has an ax.

Has Dan an ax?

Sam has ham.

Has Sam ham?

Dan has land and sand.

Has Dan sand?

Sam sat.

Dan sat.

In this text the first sentence is *Dan has an ax.* If realistic language were being used, you would expect a second sentence to continue the theme by possibly talking about characteristics of the object (for example, *It is sharp*), Dan's relationship to the object (for example, *He just bought it*), or a comparison between Dan and others (for example, *Sam does not have an ax*).

Given the range of options, we do not know precisely what the next sentence will be. Still, it is a forgone conclusion that when a person has just asserted that Dan possesses an ax, the next sentence would never be one in which that person questions what he or she has just said by asking, *Has Dan an ax?*

With the third sentence, in this example, the juxtaposition gets even more confusing. After saying that Dan has an ax, it would be ludicrous for a person to continue by saying that *Sam has ham.* Reasonable alternatives might be, *Sam does not have an ax, Sam has a hammer,* or *Sam envies Dan.* In a real-life conversation or written text, we might say a lot of different things about Sam within the context of Dan's having an ax, but the chances of our mentioning that Sam has ham are infinitesimally small.

As we proceed through this text, we find that each sentence is plagued with similar problems. *Land* and *sand* are about as disconnected as they could possibly be from *ax* and *ham.* The only justification for linking them comes from phonics—it is either that they share the letter *a* (thereby restricting the words used to a single vowel) or that they end with the same cluster of letters (thereby teaching rhyming). Similarly, the only justification for the strange questioning of each assertion (*Has Dan an ax? Has Sam ham? Has Dan land?*) is that the statement and question use identical words, thereby limiting the number of words the children must deal with.

By disregarding message meaning and focusing exclusively on parameters for individual words, initial reading instruction has allowed itself to present children with books that are inherently meaningless—a surefire way to create confusion. This problem of using disconnected, rather than connected, sentences is not new.

Using Texts That Make Sense

In any text, meaning should always be preeminent. There's no purpose in constructing a book that conveys a meaningless message. Fortunately, when sounds are no longer permitted to dominate the text, the obstacles to meaningful stories vanish. Gone is the need to confine the message to a *cat* and a *rat,* or to *Sam* and *ham.* That is what permits the thirty books of the Reading Kingdom system to have a quality totally different from that of most early reading books. Even in the early levels they mirror the characteristics of published texts—both fiction and nonfiction—and convey the message that texts are meaningful. Anything less is detrimental to children's progress.

To see the richness and meaning that an instructional text can convey, the following illustration shows the last eight pages from a book offered in the fourth level, the Airborne program. Titled *Birds and Flying,* this book exposes children to nonfiction text that lays the groundwork for reading books on science. The theme is that most birds move by flying, but the book then moves on to point out that there are some flightless birds.

This text is quite a step up from the twenty-word text offered in the first book, but children following the Reading Kingdom programs are systematically prepared to advance to this level in a relatively short period of time.

The Ability to Predict

As I said earlier, we do not understand much about the remarkable skills we have for connecting sets of sentences so they make sense, but one factor that does seem critical is predictability.

As a message comes in, people have an amazing power to take that message and predict what is coming next—before it is actually stated. That's why, after hearing "It's cold in here," you are not surprised to hear the question "Could you please close the window?" This skill is based on your hidden ability to predict the kinds of ideas that can sensibly follow one another. This is what is meant by predictability.

Book 19: Birds and Flying

It is a bird. Birds are animals that can move by flying. They do not have to fly all the time and they do not fly all the time. But they can fly any time they want.

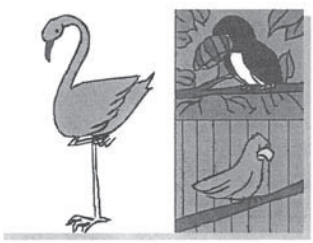
4

Book 19: Birds and Flying

All kinds of birds can move that way. Big birds can fly and small birds can fly.

5

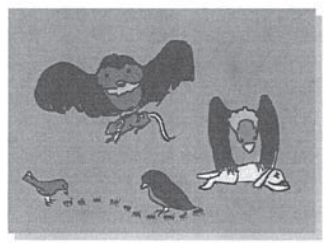
Book 19: Birds and Flying



Birds that stay in hot places can fly, and birds that stay in cold places can fly.

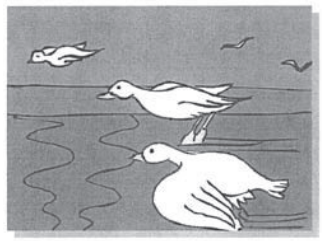
6

Book 19: Birds and Flying



Birds that eat small bugs can fly, and birds that eat big animals can fly.

7

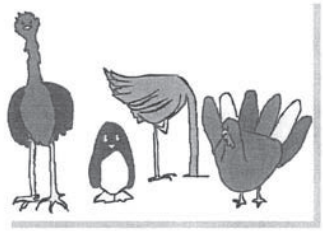


Birds with small legs can fly, and birds with big legs can fly. Birds that go in the water can fly, and birds that do not go in the water can fly.

All those birds have wings, and they use their wings to fly.

Some kids think that all birds can fly. It seems like that. It seems that all birds fly. Still there are some birds that cannot fly.

What birds are those?



Here are some of those birds. Do these birds have wings? Yes, they do. But their wings are very small. Their wings are too small for them to fly. These birds still move, but they do not fly.

Are there still some kids who think that all birds fly? Yes, there are.

But now you can say, "It seems that way and most of them do. But some do not."

Published books—even those for young children—steadily demand this skill. For example, consider the following sequence from the classic tale of the Pied Piper.

> Hamelin was a lovely town.
> It had pretty little houses
> and cobblestone streets.
> And it was next to
> a great wide river.
> But Hamelin had a problem.
>
> —*Hautzig, 1989, p. 5*

In this story, as in any real story, the sentences are marked by enormous variation. Most do not share even a single word, let alone sets of words. But this is how words and sentences appear in real life. Predictability rests not in the repetition of words or sounds but in the meaning that links the sentences together. We accept the combination, "Hamelin was a lovely town. It had pretty little houses and cobblestone streets," because it makes sense. Having heard that a town is lovely, it is reasonable to expect that the town has pretty houses and nice streets. Meaning, not word repetition, is *the* factor that determines the predictability of real sentences in the real world.

Unique Materials: Books to Enact

It has long been known that skill in predicting an oncoming message, or in knowing where "the text is leading" (Snow et al., 1998, p. 195), is a phenomenal advantage in reading, and readers who develop this skill find it far easier to understand what they are reading, and they can read at a faster rate (Blank, 2002). The ability to predict language is phenomenally complex, and children vary greatly in this skill. Further, as with so many of the other skills in reading, this one has been cast aside in early reading instruction, so that nothing systematic is included to help children develop it. In Reading Kingdom this skill is addressed through an innovative technique of having children read books with incomplete messages. These books have gaps in their wording. The holes on the page, just like the holes in a partially completed jigsaw puzzle, stimulate children's natural interest, and they want to fill them in.

Puzzles stimulate visual skills, such as color and shape recognition. Filling in missing words, in contrast, stimulates language skills, such as predictability.

Consider a simple example such as having to come up with the missing word in a text like, "Here is a boy. He ___ ___ walking." Turning to your knowledge of language, you can predict that *is* is the missing word. That is why this method is so effective.

Each of the five reading programs (Boarding, Runway, Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring) in the Reading Kingdom system contains six books. The first, third, and fifth books feature complete texts (*books intact*), and as with conventional texts, your child has only to read the story. The second, fourth, and sixth books at each level have blank spaces to be filled in (*books to enact*), and your child has to complete the missing words before reading the story.

The material that follows from the book *The Bugs, the Kids,* which is used in the first level (the Boarding program) is a sample of this type of innovative text.

There are two ways for children to accomplish the insertions:

1. With material they feel they can predict, they can use the code to confirm each prediction. For example, on the page showing some kids and the text

   Here are
   _____ kids.
   ♥

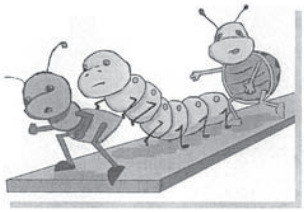
   children might suggest—correctly—that the missing word is *some.* But before writing in that word, they can check their guess by looking at the code at the bottom of the page:

   ∪ = can ♠ = jump ♥ = some ⇐ = the

2. With less familiar material, children can go directly to the code and find the words they need. For example, on the second page, the children see

   _____ can
   ⊃⊃
   _____.
   ♠

Book 4: The Bugs, the Kids

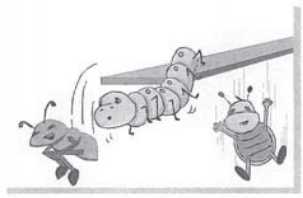


Here are
some _____.
⊃⊃

⊃⊃ = bugs ⇐ = not ♦ = swim

1

Book 4: The Bugs, the Kids



_____ can
⊃⊃

_____.
▲

⊃⊃ = Bugs ▲ = jump ∞∞ = Kids ● = talk

2

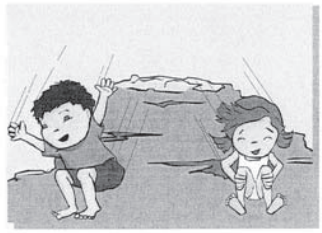
Book 4: The Bugs, the Kids

Here are
_____ kids.
♥

∪ = can ▲ = jump ♥ = some ⇐ = the

3

Book 4: The Bugs, the Kids



_____ kids
⇐

_____ jump.
∪

⊃⊃ = bugs ∪ = can ∞ = not ⇐ = The

> In a situation with a number of possible options, children are better served when they look down at the choices to get the words they need.

In other words, depending on their skill level, in any book and even on any page, children can switch between these two modes of responding. In combination, they allow children, even at the earliest stages of reading, to carry out a sophisticated prediction and completion task in an errorless manner that is invaluable to the learning process.

The Main Idea

The final aspect of comprehension that we will consider can be referred to as the *main idea.* It is the ability to take the set of ideas in a story and succinctly summarize the essence, omitting all but the essential details.

This is a primary goal of reading instruction across the grades. It's the reason why teachers regularly ask students: What was the story about? Can you give me a summary of what you read? or, What was the main idea? In response to these requests, children are expected to "analyze, critique, abstract, and reflect on text" (Snow et al., 1998, p. 10) so as to get at the core of the issues and condense them into brief, coherent statements.

These demands to summarize increase as children advance in their grades. That is why many kids' reading scores plummet in about the fourth grade. At this time there is a shift in emphasis as the instruction moves from decoding to comprehension. Problems in this area are among the major forces responsible for the poor reading scores that the states are reporting. Vast numbers of children are stymied when they have to cull and convey the meaning of what they have read.

These difficulties, though disturbing, are not surprising, because children receive almost no systematic teaching in this area. Identifying the main idea requires them to bypass details, when almost all their training has been focused on the recall of details. They are used to being asked questions about specific points, such as "the color of the man's car," "the name of the girl's pet," and "the toy that the boy received." They are not at all used to combining the details so as to succinctly summarize the total message. As a result, many simply do not know what to do when faced with calls for a main idea.

One bright fourth grader who was struggling with the main idea candidly explained the situation. His explanation reveals not only his coping strategy, but the way that strategy had been fostered by the dominant educational practices: "The main idea? I have no idea what a main idea is. But it's not so bad. Eight out of ten questions are on details and only one or two are on the main idea. That means I can still get 80 percent or 90 percent on my tests. So it doesn't matter if I figure out the main idea."

"The main idea? I have no idea what a main idea is. But it's not so bad. Eight out of ten questions are on details and only one or two are on the main idea. That means I can still get 80 percent or 90 percent on my tests. So it doesn't matter if I figure out the main idea" [comment of a fourth-grade student].

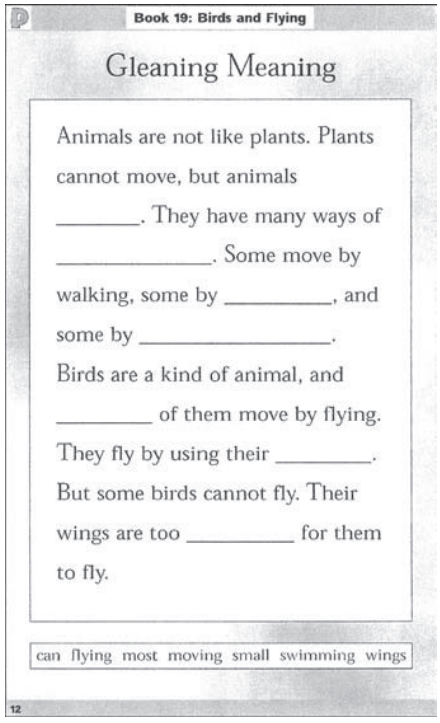
You can admire this child's ingenuity, but ultimately, his strategy won't work. As books get longer and more complex, the details pile up beyond manageable levels. If children do not learn how to summarize, their comprehension never reaches adequate levels. We must offer children the training they need to master this key skill in reading.

Gleaning Meaning

Fortunately, effective training can begin early on and provide children with a solid base for comprehension. Once past the first two reading levels in the S f be joh L johe pn system, your child is introduced to the *Gleaning Meaning* activity that sets him or her on the path to early and effective comprehension.

This activity provides your child with a prototype, or model, of a short text that summarizes the story he or she has just completed. The model, however, contains gaps that your child fills in to make the summary complete.

For example, in the book *Birds and Flying* (segments of which you saw earlier), your child sees the summary illustrated here. Selecting one word at a time from the words at the bottom of the page, he or she fills in the blanks and then reads the full summary.



Book 19: Birds and Flying

Gleaning Meaning

Animals are not like plants. Plants cannot move, but animals _____. They have many ways of _____. Some move by walking, some by _____, and some by _____. Birds are a kind of animal, and _____ of them move by flying. They fly by using their _____. But some birds cannot fly. Their wings are too _____ for them to fly.

can flying most moving small swimming wings

12

This task looks simple and it is. It has been designed to be that way. Children who are still novices at reading find it easy, and their confidence skyrockets. At the same time, the regular encounters with well-constructed summaries, without pressure or fear of failure, foster the hidden abilities that lead children to create summaries on their own. By the time they reach the highest-level programs, most children are accomplishing this with ease.

Key Features of the Programs

At all five levels—the Boarding, Runway, Liftoff, Airborne, and Soaring programs—the books of the S fbejoh L johepn system are designed to facilitate both decoding and comprehension.

Decoding is taught through the following techniques:

- Tightly limiting the total number of words in the initial books
- Restricting the books to words the children have learned
- Providing all the texts in the form of independent (stand-alone) books

- Incorporating features, such as pictureless text, that help children prepare for the conventions of the more advanced, published books they will soon encounter
- Including noncontent words in ways that mirror natural language

Comprehension is fostered by the following methods:

- Providing texts with meaningfully connected sentences
- Offering incomplete texts (books to enact), where children make entries that foster skills such as predictability
- Including comprehension activities that initiate children at the earliest levels into formulating main ideas

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