

What Is Literacy?

Chapter One

From the perspective of student performance, literacy is a complex web of skills and knowledge related to engaging and expressing ideas—a web that, as mentioned in the introduction, serves as a foundation for all learning. We will introduce here the foundational concepts of literacy that are mandatory components of our students’ literacy progress. That is, as elementary school teachers, we must think of literacy as something more than the sum of the following parts:

- **Book and Print Awareness**
- **Phonemic and Phonological Awareness**
- **Phonics and the Alphabetic Principle**
- **Word and Structural Analysis**
- **Reading Fluency**
- **Reading Comprehension Strategies**
- **Writing Skills and Strategies**

Consider the graphic representation below, showing of these components as they relate to the two reading processes, decoding and comprehension. A close look at this graphic shows us that our ability to decode—to translate individual letters or various combinations thereof into speech sounds to identify and read words—is built upon our book and print awareness, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics and the alphabetic principle, and word and structural analysis skills. Our ability to comprehend—to actively read and understand language—is based on our background knowledge, vocabulary, and ability to use comprehension strategies. Finally, our ability to read fluently—with speed, accuracy, and expression—is dependent on our ability to read non-decodable words on “sight,” to decode with such automaticity that we spend no mental energy in the process, and to read with appropriate phrasing. Reading fluency is the bridge from decoding to comprehension, hence its placement in the graphic. Without quick, accurate reading, comprehension is near impossible. We simply cannot focus on understanding a story if we must spend all of our time decoding the words on the page. Fluency takes us from word-by-word reading to smooth, natural reading that mimics the ease with which we speak.

Decoding				Comprehension					
Book and Print Awareness	Phonological and Phonemic Awareness	Phonics and The Alphabetic Principle	Word and Structural Analysis	Fluency			Background Knowledge	Vocabulary	Comprehension Strategies
				Sight Words	Automaticity	Phrasing			

Chart modified from <http://www.ed.gov/teachers/landing>

This chapter provides a relatively broad survey of the components of literacy. Our aim here is to give you the **basic background knowledge** you will need to fully access the detailed information discussed in later chapters.

Keep in mind that in chapters three through seven, you will learn highly detailed information about and will consider specific strategies for teaching reading and writing, and that having a basic understanding of these underlying concepts will clarify the purposes and contexts for those specific strategies. (For example, while we will introduce phonemic and phonological awareness here, we will dive into considerable detail about when and how to teach various aspects of phonological and phonemic

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awareness in chapter three.) We have included cross-references with each component of literacy to highlight places that you will re-encounter these concepts in more depth.

Book and Print Awareness [Ch. 3]

What it is:	Understanding the function of print and the characteristics of books and other print materials
So, I teach . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print represents oral language • Reading from left to right and top to bottom • Spaces between words and sentences • Standard text structures and organization, such as covers, backs, titles, and illustrations • Specific genre structures and organization, such as table of contents and index • Sentence structure • How to hold a book, turn its pages, and shelve it
Sample Instructional Methods:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Shared writing” activities in which the teacher writes what students are suggesting • Reading Big Books to teach print conventions (like directionality) • Activities (for Kindergarten students) in which children practice how to handle a book—how to turn pages, how to find the tops and bottoms of pages, and how to tell the front and back covers • Lessons in word awareness that help children become conscious of individual words—their boundaries, their appearance, and their length

Most teachers develop students’ Book and Print Awareness through constant, explicit modeling. When they hold up a Big Book that the class is reading, they “think aloud” about how to hold the book, where to start reading, and in what direction. While a teacher is writing the morning news on the board for his first graders, he might ask the students, “Should I start at the top of the board or the bottom?”

One of the most profound and personal connections that young children make to print involves their names. The presence of students’ names in several locations around the elementary classroom (on classroom management charts, reading group lists, classroom job boards, etc.) is of great importance as an instructional tool for new readers.

Phonemic and Phonological Awareness [Ch. 3]

What it is:	<p>Phonological Awareness: Understanding that the spoken language is made up of units of sounds, such as sentences, words, and syllables</p> <p>Phonemic Awareness: Understanding that spoken words are made up of individual phonemes (the smallest part of spoken language); being able to hear, identify, and manipulate those phonemes</p>
So, I teach . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and counting words in sentences • Identifying and counting syllables • Identifying and making rhyming words • Identifying, blending, segmenting, deleting, and substituting phonemes
Instructional Methods:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Kindergarten, singing common songs, such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb” that encourage students to attend to sounds in words • Language games (many from simple songs or nursery rhymes) that teach children to identify rhyming words and create rhymes on their own • Activities that help children understand that spoken sentences are made up of groups of separate words, that words are made up of syllables, and that words can be broken down into separate sounds • Auditory activities in which children manipulate the sounds of words, separate or segment the sounds of words, blend sounds, delete sounds, or substitute new sounds for those deleted

Phonemic awareness is a component of broader phonological awareness. In English, we rarely pause between our spoken words, except for emphasis. Consequently, it is necessary for children to learn consciously that common phrases like “thank you very much” are composed of four individual words. This is phonological awareness—recognition of oral word and syllable boundaries. Phonemic awareness is the recognition of *distinct* phonemes, or speech sounds, in words. For example, the word *squished* is composed of the phonemes /s/, /k/, /w/, /i/, /sh/, and /t/.

Phonics and the Alphabetic Principle [Ch. 3]

What it is:	Understanding the relationship between spoken sounds and written letters
So, I teach . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing and writing the alphabet letters • The alphabetic principle—that letters represent speech sounds • Phonics— the ability to match written letters with corresponding sounds to read and write words
Instructional Methods:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alphabetic knowledge activities in which children learn the names and sounds of letters and learn to identify them rapidly and accurately, not only by name but by sound as well • Lessons in sound-letter relationships that are organized systematically and that provide as much explicit instruction, practice and review as is necessary • Activities in which children blend the sounds in words, sort words according to patterns, and build words by combining and manipulating letters

Key to Kindergarten and first grade teachers’ success in teaching the alphabetic principle (the idea that written spellings represent spoken words) is this notion of a long-term plan for an “explicit and systematic” approach. Most school districts have adopted reading curricula that include instruction in explicit and systematic phonics. Generally, these curricula have sequenced instruction in letters and sounds in ways that are developmentally appropriate for students in the particular grades for which they were written. Typically, Kindergarteners learn the alphabet letters and shapes (both capital and lowercase) in their alphabet order. Then, they learn the sounds of the alphabet letters, beginning with those that will give them the earliest access to print and are more easily pronounced.

In first grade, instruction typically begins with two or three weeks reviewing the alphabet letters and the simplest sound-symbol correspondences. As the year continues, students learn the remainder of the sounds and the different letters that represent them.

Students in the second and third grades continue to review phonics skills. While they should have learned all of the sound-symbol correspondences in the first grade, many children will need review of the most complex of these. The focus in second and the first half of third grade is on multi-syllable decoding. In the later elementary grades, decoding instruction should be limited to word and structural analysis, although some students will doubtlessly require further support in skills they did not master in Kindergarten through third grades. Upper elementary students who struggle to decode need *highly* explicit instruction and intensive practice in sound-symbol correspondences and in decoding.

Every day my 1st and 2nd graders would learn a new phonics skill during our 15- minute mini-lesson. Once they figured out what letter or letter combinations made that particular sound, we decoded practice words with our cool new symbols. Later on, when going over our Open Court stories, they would point out examples of that day’s lesson. The impact of improved decoding skills on fluency and comprehension is staggering.

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Word and Structural Analysis [Ch. 3 and Ch. 5]

What it is:	Decoding a word by examining its meaningful parts Learning a word's definition by examining its meaningful parts
So, I teach . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefixes • Suffixes • Inflectional endings (the -ed in walked, the -s in dogs) • Greek and Latin roots • Compound words • Contractions
Instructional Methods:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit instruction in breaking words into parts to improve decoding speed and accuracy • Explicit instruction in the meaning of word parts to improve vocabulary and comprehension • Word families that help students apply their understanding of meaningful parts to many words (cycle, motorcycle, unicycle, bicycle, tricycle, cyclist)

As students are mastering sound-symbol correspondences and becoming able to decode simple words with ease, they will begin to read texts that contain increasingly complex, multisyllabic words. In order to decode and comprehend these words efficiently, students must be able to recognize and use meaningful word parts (such as prefixes or suffixes). For example, students who encounter the word "ungrateful" will be able to decode it quickly if they can recognize the words' three meaningful parts (its prefix, root, and suffix) and comprehend it easily if they understand the meaning of each part.

The content of word analysis lessons varies significantly between grade levels. First grade students will learn compounds, simple contractions, and some word endings. Second grade students will expand on these skills and learn some simple prefixes and suffixes as well. Our second graders will learn syllable types in their phonics lessons and can combine the use of syllable types and word analysis to decode longer words. Third graders will learn to use meaningful word parts not only for the purpose of decoding, but increasingly, to learn word meanings. Fourth and fifth graders will use Greek and Latin roots to decode words and learn their meanings. Though these grades, students will learn more complex meanings for increasingly less common roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

Reading Fluency [Ch. 4]

What it is:	The ability to read words quickly, accurately, and with expression
So, I should . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students read the same passage repeatedly to improve rate and accuracy • Monitor and track speed and accuracy • Practice and use of decodable text • Practice reading sight words • Know the independent, instructional, and frustration levels of your students and only require them to read for fluency those texts at their instructional level or above
Instructional Methods:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model fluent reading during the Read Aloud and provide voice support for readers by using choral reading or echo reading • Strive for sight recognition of words through decoding, practice with irregular words, and an emphasis on certain "sight words," built from lists of the most common words students will encounter • Have students monitor and track their own accuracy and fluency progress by recording their weekly fluency results • Use poetry and reader's theaters to engage students in repeated readings of texts • Have students in Kindergarten through third grade read decodable text to practice sound-symbol correspondences

Reading accuracy refers to the ability to read words in a given passage correctly, without mispronunciations. Fluency combines accuracy with speed and expression. Research has shown that students who can read with accuracy and fluency are better able to comprehend the material because they are spending the majority of their time thinking about the text and not deciphering the words.

Research asserts that most children benefit from direct instruction in decoding, complemented by practice with simply written decodable stories. Stories should “match” the child’s reading level. Beginning readers should be able to read easily 90 percent or more of the words in a story, and after practice should be able to do so quickly, accurately, and effortlessly.

Reading Comprehension Strategies [Ch. 5 and 6]

What it is:	The ability to actively read and understand language
So, I should . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read aloud to children daily • Discuss what students understood from a text they read or heard • Teach vocabulary directly (through explicit instruction) and indirectly (through immersion in a rich language environment) • Plan thematic units of study to build students’ content knowledge and vocabulary in particular domains of study • Expressly model and teach comprehension strategies • Check for students’ understanding
Instructional Methods:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent reading of a variety of genres, both narrative and informational texts • Explicit instruction about both the meanings of words and their use in the stories the children are reading • Explicit instruction in strategies students can use to learn new vocabulary words • Discussions of new words that occur during the course of the day, for example in books that have been read aloud by the teacher, in content area studies and in textbooks • Activities that enable children to use context clues to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words in a reading passage • Activities that help children learn to use a variety of comprehension strategies to construct meaning as they read

Children learn new vocabulary, new ideas, new characters, and new concepts by listening to, reading, and thinking about stories and information texts. Yet, reading comprehension doesn’t simply happen as students pronounce the words on a page. Vocabulary, background knowledge, and the use of comprehension strategies all impact how well we understand what we read.

Vocabulary development plays a central role in reading comprehension. Students must be given the tools to understand new words so they can make the most out of reading. In addition to directly teaching key words found in a text, students must also learn strategies for independently conquering new vocabulary, including the use of context clues, word analysis, dictionaries, and other people.

Of course, vocabulary is just one part of developing reading comprehension skills. Students must also learn to analyze and assess what they read at increasingly complex levels. Because students are often at different levels when it comes to prior experience with specific topics, teachers must assist their students in broadening their basic knowledge before students engage with some texts. Before reading, you should develop your students’ prior knowledge by allowing them to share their knowledge of the subject and giving the class important information they will require to make sense of the text.

Finally, research has shown that students benefit tremendously from explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies (such as predicting, making connections, and asking questions). The most effective way to teach students to be strategic readers is to model the use of strategies while reading,

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through the teacher “thinking aloud.” Beginning in Kindergarten, any comprehension strategy can be modeled for students.

Writing Skills and Strategies [Ch. 7]

As with reading, the foundational concepts of writing must be taught in an explicit and systematic manner to students at all grade levels. This instruction begins in Kindergarten with the dictation of stories to correspond to children’s illustrations. The child first attempts to use the letters he or she is learning to label pictures independently. Then he or she moves on to early elementary grades, where he or she should learn sentence structure, parts of speech, and how to develop paragraphs with topic sentences and details on a variety of topics. Finally, in upper elementary grades, the child learns to complete full compositions of different styles targeted to different audiences. At each stage, students are exposed to specific stories and texts that serve as models as they learn the conventions of writing.

As they learn the writing skills necessary to convey their thoughts, students also develop strategies for utilizing the steps of the writing process so that their final product displays their ideas in the best manner possible. Through instruction on pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, teachers arm their students with the tools required to express their thoughts in print. Many teachers create recurring classroom structures that emphasize these writing practices. Writing Workshops (described in chapter seven) are, for example, a staple of the elementary classroom.

Conclusion and Review

When we think of literacy, most of us probably first think only of reading and writing. As indicated above, an elementary school teacher’s definition of literacy must be more complex than that. As elementary school teachers, we have to think about our students as relative strangers to reading and writing. We have to isolate and teach concepts that we may not remember learning ourselves, such as: reading from left to right, using context clues to learn new vocabulary, or writing a topic sentence.

For the purposes of introducing you to this complex notion of literacy, we have highlighted seven components of literacy instruction for elementary school students. In later chapters of this book, you will be learning more in-depth information about each and some research-based instructional methods designed to teach each of these components of literacy.

Do These Concepts Apply to English Language Learners?

This summer you will receive a supplemental packet of materials related to instruction of English language learners. We did, however, want to flag the fact as you read this text that instruction of English language learners, both in “bilingual” and in “English as a Second Language” settings, is built upon precisely the concepts and strategies that you are learning in this literacy course. While you will adjust some activities to match the needs of your English language learners, success with bilingual and ESL students requires a foundation in these basic components of literacy. Consider these findings from just one of many studies making this point:

[A]ll students, regardless of which language(s) is (are) spoken, must develop an awareness of phonology and syntax if they are to become literate. . . . The development of listening comprehension is also a necessary condition for reading readiness. The variety, amount, frequency, and quality of interactions greatly influence the development of phonological and syntactic awareness. . .¹²

As you have read in *Instructional Planning & Delivery*, most studies confirm that these skills are most effectively taught by providing students with a solid foundation in their first language before focusing on these issues in English, though this is not always practical or politically possible.

¹² Durgunoglu, Aydin and Banu Oney. “Literacy development in two languages: Cognitive and sociocultural dimensions of cross-language transfer.” US Department of Education, Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA), Reading Research Symposium. Washington, DC: 2000.

As a means of review, please consider the following examples of each component of literacy:

Fundamental Concept of Literacy	Definition Review	Teaching Examples
Book and Print Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing relationships between print and speech Knowing the conventions of print (left to right and top to bottom, spaces between words, variability in letters' shapes, placement of captions and titles, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking kindergarteners which way to write, from top down or bottom up Emphasizing the space between words and sentences to first grade writers Teaching third graders about genres of texts
Phonemic and Phonological Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to think about individual spoken words as a sequence of individual sounds and as segments of sounds (syllables and individual sounds) Ability to add, delete, substitute, manipulate, and blend individual sounds within a word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rhyming games for primary students Clapping the syllables in frequently used words Blending sounds together to make a word; segmenting sounds to take a word apart
Phonics and the Alphabetic Principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding that written words are composed of patterns of letters that represent the sounds of the spoken word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systematically and explicitly teaching sound-symbol correspondence Direct Instruction: "On your white boards, underline the letters that say the /sh/ sound." Teaching students to blend words
Word and Structural Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to solve the meaning of words by examining their meaningful parts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching second graders to decode and comprehend compound words Implementing a word analysis center that allows fourth graders to practice using prefixes and suffixes in sentences Asking fifth graders to create word family charts for common Greek and Latin roots
Reading Fluency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to quickly and automatically translate words and sentences in spoken phrases The combination of reading rate (the speed with which text is decoded) and reading accuracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading decodable books Repeatedly reading the same text Asking students to read quietly as they listen to a book on tape Pairing students to read a text aloud together
Reading Comprehension Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to understand word meanings, extract meaning from groups of words (e.g., sentences and paragraphs), and draw inferences from speech and writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using a teacher "think-aloud" to model using comprehension strategies Constant checking for understanding during reading assignments Teaching text structure Building students' vocabularies
Writing Skills and Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to communicate thoughts in written form and to recognize the processes that go into good writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instituting a morning meeting time for first graders when students tell news and the teacher—with help from students—writes out the news Implementing a Writer's Workshop and teaching third grade students to use the writing process effectively to produce a persuasive letter to the principal Expressly teaching grammar rules to fourth graders who are, in turn, creating a book of rules that they have learned