The Natural Phonics Primer: How to Teach It

A Comprehensive, Systematic, Single-letter, Phonics-First Program

A Simple System that will do the Job
A Complete Recipe for Teaching Reading

A Practical Introduction to the 72 Phonics Exercises in
Rudolf Flesch's 1955 Bestseller
Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it.

With extracts from *Why Johnny can't Read* (1955)
and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* (1980),
Representing the Essential Wisdom of Dr. Rudolf Flesch
in the areas of Beginning and Remedial Reading Instruction
with
Information from Other Experts
Concerning the Unique Advantages of Single-Letter Phonics.

Prepared by Donald Potter
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Five Step Sequence for Teaching *The Natural Phonics Primer*

I. The five short vowels and all consonants spelled by one letter.
Exercises 1 – 12

II. Consonants and consonant combination spelled with two or three letters.
Exercises 13 – 23

III. Vowels and vowel combinations spelled with two or three letters.
Exercises 24 – 39

IV. The five long vowels. Exercises 40 – 59

V. Irregular Spellings. Exercises 60 – 72

I. Step One: The Five Short Vowels and all consonants spelled by one letter. Exercises 1 – 12

Teach the vowel letters *a, e, i, o, u* and their short sounds. The classic way of doing this is to show the student each letter with a picture of a familiar object. (As you realize, the names of the letters A, E, I, O, U are not the short vowel sounds but the long vowel sounds. Since this is apt to confuse the student perhaps it is better not to teach him the alphabet until a little later.)

With the five short vowels, teach the student the following seventeen consonants: *b, d, f, g, h, j, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y, z.* Again, you might use pictures like bell for *b*, a doll for *d*, a fish for *f* and so on. Teach the "hard" sound of *g* as in *girl* and don't confuse him with words like *gem* or *gingerbread*. (He'll learn those much later.) Similarly, teach him only the *s* that sounds like *ss* and not the *s* that sounds like *z*. Teach him only the consonant *y* as in *yes, yet*, and *yesterday*, and not the *y* vowel that sounds like *i.*

To fix these twenty-two sounds and letters in Johnny's memory, let him read *and write from dictation* as many one-syllable words as possible that contain these sounds. (Use words that begin with the vowels or with any of the consonants and end with *b, d, g, ll, m, n, p, ss*, or *t*.) This first step is tremendously important because Johnny must learn, once and for all, that words are written by putting down letters from right to left, and that they are read in the same direction. Exercises 1 – 9.

After Johnny has gone through *pup, Sam, him, Bill, pad, run, bib, tub, web, Ted,* and so forth, and has reached the point of reading these words without trouble, given him one more simple consonant sound – the sound of *k*. Explain to him that before *a, o,* and u this sound is spelled *c*, but before *e* and *i* it is spelled *k*. *After* a short vowel it is usually spelled *ck*. Exercises 10-12.

II. Step Two: Consonants and consonant combinations spelled with two or three letters. Exercises 13 – 23

Now Johnny has reached the second step: combinations of consonant sounds. Those at the end of words are easier for him than those at the beginning of a word. So start him with two-letter consonant combinations at the end of words: *ft* as in *lift, lk* as in *milk*, *lm* as in elm, *lp* as in help, *lt* as in *belt, mp* as in *lamp, nd* as in *hand, nt* as in *tent*, *pt* as in *kept, sk* as in *desk*, *sp* as in *lisp, st* as in *nest*. Exercise13.

At this point explain Johnny the rule about the letter *s* as the end of a word: After the consonants *f, k, p,* and *t*, it stands for the hissing *ss* sound, but after all other sounds it stands for the *z* sound. Exercise 14.

Next, teach him the following consonant combinations at the end of words: *ng* as in *ring*, *nk* as in *pink*, *x* as in *fox, sh* as in *fish.* Exercise15. Exercise 16 is a Review of ending consonant combinations.

Next, take up consonant combinations at the beginning of words. Here is your list: *bl* as in *blink, br* as in *brag, cl* as in *clash, cr* as in *crack*, *dr* as in *drink, fl* as in *flag*, *fr* as in *frog, gl* as in *glad, gr* as in *grab, pl* as in *plug, pr* as in *press, sc* as in *scamp, sk* as in *skip, sl* as in *sled, sm* as in *smack, sn* as in *snap, sp* as in *spill, st* as in *stamp, sw* as in *swim, tr* as in *trip, tw* as in *twin.* Then there is *scr* as in *scrap, shr* as in *shrimp, spl* as in *splash, spr,* as in *spring,* and *str* as in *stretch.* To teach the student these sound combinations, give him words that become other words when a second consonant is put in front: *lap* and *slap, ring* and *bring*, *rug* and *drug, nip* and *snip.* Johnny will like reading aloud words like *snack, crack,* and *plop.* Exercises 17 and 18. Exercise 19 is a Review of these beginning consonant combinations.

Next, take some other consonant sounds and combinations at the beginning of words: *qu* as in *quack*, *wh* as in *whiff,* "voiced" *th* as in *that* and "unvoiced" *th* as in *thick.* Exercise 20. Then take the *ch* at the beginning of a word and the *tch* at the end. Exercise 21. Exercise 22 is a Review of all consonant combinations.

Now Johnny is through with the second step. He can read or write from dictation all regularly spelled words that contain any consonant and any of the five short vowels. There are also a number of two-syllable words you can give him at this point: *basket, redskin, frosting, lemon, napkin, rabbit, chicken, locket, wicked, robin,* and so on. Exercise 23.

III. Step Three: Vowels and vowel combinations spelled with two or three letters. Exercises 24 – 39

Next, Step Three: Teach Johnny vowels and vowel combinations spelled with two letters. First, the *ee* sound, spelled *ee* as in *sheep* or *ea* as in *meal*. This is you chance to tell Johnny about words that sound alike but are spelled differently to distinguish between different meanings, like *meet* and *meat*, *feet* and *feat*, *see* and *sea*, *flee* and *flea.* (He'll like learning these pairs and make a game out of it. Tell him also about the words rhyming with *ee* but spelled with only one *e – be, he, me, she, we.*). Exercises 24 and 25.

Next teach Johnny the *oo* sound – short as in *book* and *look*, or long as in *moon,* or *spoon.* Exercise 26.

The *ah* as in *car, park, lark,* and pa, ma. Exercise 27.

The *or* as in *lord, fork, born*. Exercise 28.

The *er* sound as in *bird, hurt, her*. Exercise 29.

The *oi* sound as in *oil* and *boil, toy* and *boy.* Explain to Johnny that it's usually *oi* inside a word and *oy* at the end. Exercise 30.

The *ou* sound as in *house* and *cow*. Again, explain to him that it's usually *ou* inside a word and *ow* at the end. Exercise 31.

The *au* sound, usually spelled *au* in the middle as in *Paul* and *aw* at the end as in *raw.* This is the point to teach Johnny the spellings *all, alt, alk*, as in *hall, salt, talk.* Exercise 32. Exercise 33 is a Review of Exercises 24 – 32.

The *ai* sound, usually spelled *ai* inside a word and *ay* at the end. Teach Johnny also the slightly different sound in *air, pair, fair.* Exercise 34.

The long *i* sound spelled *ie* and *y* as in *pie, dry, my, shy.* Take this opportunity to teach Johnny words like *mind, kind, bind,* and *mild, wild.* Exercise 35.

The long *o* sound spelled *oa* as in *boat, oe* as in *toe*, *ow* as in *blow,* or simply *o* as in *go, so,* and *no.* Tell Johnny about such words as *old, hold, sold,* and *bolt, colt* Exercise 36.

Finally, the long *u* sound spelled, *ew* as in *new* or *ue* as in *true blue.* Don't forget pairs like *flew* and *flue*, *dew* and *due.* Exercise 37. Exercise 38 is a Review of Exercises 24 – 37.

By now, Johnny has a tremendous reading and writing vocabulary. He can also figure out a long list of two-syllable and three-syllable words like *oatmeal, mailbox, swallow, sheepish*, *murmuring, sunbeam, untrue, leapfrog, murderer, bamboo, cartoon, grandfather, hamburger*, *restlessness, flamingo, kangaroo*, *curlicue,* and *Easter bonnet.* Exercise 39.

IV. Step Four: The five long vowels. Exercises 40 – 59

Next comes Step Four: The long vowel sounds, spelled *a, e, i, o, u.* The easiest way to teach Johnny these is to show him the effect of a silent *e* added to a word. In other words, teach him to read and write *fad – fade, pet – Pete, pin – pine, rob – robe, cut – cute.* (If he has learned the alphabet by now, tell him that the silent *e* "makes the letter say its name."). Exercises 40 – 47. (Exercise 40 long a, Exercise 41 long a and long e; Exercise 42 long i; Exercise 43 Review; Exercise 44 long o; Exercise 45 Review; Exercise 46 long u; Exercise 47 Review.)

After Johnny has learned the silent *e*, show him that the syllable *ing* will also make the vowel sound long: *rate – rating, file – filing* and so on. Explain to him the important rule that if you want to keep the vowel short in such *ing* words, you have to double the final consonant before adding *ing*. For example: *bedding, shipping, trapping, humming, brimming, trimming.* Exercise 48.

Next teach Johnny final *y* as in *lady, rainy, handy.* Show him that the double-consonant rule applies here too, as in *nutty, sunny,* and *foggy.* Explain to him that the plural of *lady* is spelled *ladies,* of *body, bodies,* and so on. Tell him about *lazy, lazier, and laziest.* Exercise 49. (Exercise 50: Review of Exercises 48 and 49.)

Next, take up the ending *ed*, again with the double-consonant rule, as in *matted, rugged, robbed.* (Note: *ed* can have the sounds of *ed, d, or t.)*

Then, final *er* and *le*, again with the double-consonant rule as in *rubber, trigger, settle, middle.* Exercise 53. (Exercise 54: Review of Exercises 48 – 53.)

Finally, teach Johnny *ce* as in *rice, ge* as in *age, se* as in *cheese,* and *the* as in *loathe.* Give him pairs like *pack* and *pace*, *hug* and *huge, bath* and *bathe.* Exercise 55. Give him also some examples of *dge* as in *badge* and *hedge*. Exercise 56. (Exercise 57: Review of Exercises 55 – 56.)

V. Step Five: Irregular Spellings. Exercises 60 – 72

Now you are through with the fourth step. Johnny has learned to read and write practically all the words that follow *some* rule. The fifth step will be easy for him. He'll learn words in *sion* and *tion*, words in *igh*, *ought,* and *caught,* silent *k* as in *knife,* silent *w* as in *write,* silent *t* as in *whistle*, silent *l* in *calf,* silent *g* in *gnu*, words like *head* and *bread, word* and *worm, chief* and *thief, break* and *steak,* and so on.

And that's all. Everything else will come to Johnny automatically, because he can now read anything.

It took me five pages to set down the phonic method of teaching Johnny to read. Complicated you say? I don't think so. I (Rudolf Flesch) have seen six-year-olds getting the hang of it in a few months.

Anyway, it's not a question of speed. The point is that this method is *guaranteed*. A child who has been taught this way can read. Millions of children taught the other way can't.

Reading Wisdom of Rudolf Flesch

Extracts from
Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it (1955)
and
Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools (1980)

"To my mind, a remedial reading case is someone who has formed the habit of guessing instead of reading. … You see, remedial reading cases are harder to teach than first-graders for the simple reason that they already have four or five or six years of guessing behind them. It usually takes at least a year to cure them of the habit. There wouldn't be any remedial reading cases if we started teaching reading instead of guessing in the first grade" (18).

"The Hegge-Kirk *Remedial Drills* are what I finally used with Johnny" (19).

"CONCERING SPELLING: Reading and spelling are two sides of the same thing, and trouble starts as soon as you separate the two. The only way to teach reading is by teaching spelling *at the same time* (33). …They do so because their whole-word training makes a tremendous difference in their mental habits. Anyone who has started with phonics in first grade goes through life reading every single word he reads letter by letter. He does this fantastically fast, and quite unconsciously, but nevertheless he does it. Every time he reads *miracle*, he *sees* the *a;* every time he reads *definite,* he *sees* the second *i*. No wonder he knows how to spell these words; he simply can't read without taking in every single letter. He has done this since he was six years old and he never in his life read a single word, by just taking in its general shape and guessing what it might mean. … But our schools, as I said before, train our children in just that – word guessing. They can't read; they can't spell. Not only that, they can't even *learn* how to spell properly because they have been equipped with mental habits that are almost impossible to break – except by starting all over again from scratch and relearning to read and write English with phonics" (42).

"The *Blue-Backed Speller* as a fourteen-cent medicine that cured your of illiteracy. Nobody dreamed of criticizing it as wrong unscientific or inefficient" (46).

"The value of phonics can only be proven when it is taken seriously and taught systematically" (65).

"A normal child is ready and eager to learn to read because it is mankind's most fascinating game… The fun in reading lies in the great game of deciphering a hidden meaning – just as the fun of writing lies basically in the game of encoding a message" (74).

Quoting the British schoolmaster, Mr. Winch, Flesch reflects, "The argument for the look-and-say method is tainted by **the limited-adult view of the child-mind.** Our own psychological processes are put into the child, diminished in strength, but similar in form. We are getting old and worn, many of us. We do no like the mechanical acquisition of new things; it is hard for us; so we say children do not like it. As a matter of fact, they do. Repetition boors us; so we say it bores the young child. As a matter of fact, he loves it" (75).

CONCERNING THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONICS REVIEW: "Miss Hletko explained to me that it was the usual practice to work through the Hay-Wingo primer during the first year and to review it in the second and then again in the third year" (101).

"IF YOU TEACH READING WITH PHONICS: 1. If you teach reading with phonics (regardless of the particular method used), student achievement in all subjects will be, on the average, one grade higher than the national norm. 2. If you teach reading with phonics, you will have no cases of 'non-readers.' 3. If you teaching reading with phonics, you will produce students with a habit of wide reading" (208f).

HOME SCHOOLING: "Although you may not think so, my main purpose in writing this book is not to criticize and attack the doctrines of educators. What I am really interested in is a book that will be of practical help to parents. …Of course, an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. By far the best thing you can do is to teach your child to read before he ever *gets* into the habit of word guessing. My advice is, teach your child yourself how to read – at the age of five. (110) … Probably the process will *not* take a whole year. Remember that so far in this book I have talked about classroom teaching. Now I am talking about private, individual tutoring at home – **the most speedy and efficient method** of teaching there is. (112) … Then you'll be faced by a problem hardly any American parent has any more: the problem of how to quench your child's thirst for books. But it's not really a difficult problem: just give him the books parents usually read aloud to children of his age. And later, as he grows up, give him the books children of his age have always liked: fairy tales, mythology, adventure stories, Stevenson, Mark Twain, Poe … he'll be all right. Just turn him loose in the public library, and let him take over his own education" (113).

REMEDIAL READING CASES: "To begin with, let's try **to isolate Johnny from his word-guessing environment**. While he is in school, that is difficult or almost impossible. So the best thing will be to work with him during the summer vacations. Let him **stop all reading** – all *attempts* to read. Explain to him that now he is going to learn to how to read, and that for the time being, books are out. All he'll get for several months are lessons in phonics. … This, incidentally, is important. Take him fully into your confidence and explain to him exactly what you are trying to do. Tell him that you are going to do something **new** with him – something entirely different from what his teachers did in school. Tell him that this is *certain* to work. Convince him that as soon as he has taken this medicine he will be cured. … Start him on the phonics lessons. Give him either this book or the only other book of that type that I know: *Remedial Reading Drills* by Thorleif G. Hegge, Samuel A. Kirk, and Winfred D. Kirk. Go with him through the Exercises, one by one, always making sure that he has mastered the previous one before you go on to the next. …**Only when you are through – or almost through – with the drills and exercises, start him again on reading**. At first, let him read aloud to you. Watch like a hawk that he doesn't guess a single word. Interrupt him every time he does it and let him work out the word phonetically. He'll never learn to read if he doesn't get over the word-guessing habit" (115).

"We mean phonics as a way to learn to read. We mean phonics that is taught to the child letter-by-letter and sound-by-sound until he knows it – and when he knows it he knows how to read. We mean phonics as a complete, systematic subject – the sum total of information about the phonics rules by which English is spelled. …We say, and we cannot be budged, that when you learn phonics, in our sense of the word, you learn how to read. We want our children taught this particular set of facts and rules, because we know that this is and only this will do the job" (121). "Systematic phonics is one thing, unsystematic is another. Phonics is simply the knowledge of the way spoken English is put on paper. ... Among other things, this means that there is an end to phonics. Phonics is something a child can master completely, once for all, with the assurance that he has covered everything there is. …There are a known number of items to be mastered and when he is through he knows how to read. You are a teacher, Mrs. Smith. You *must* know that when there is an end to the book, when he knows that at the bottom of page 128 he will be through. So and so many pages covered, so many pages covered, so and so many still to go. There is a concrete goal. Talk about motivation – what better motivation could there conceivably be than that knowledge that at the end of page 128 *he will have learned how to read?"* (122).

LEVELED READERS: "There should be no such thing as reading levels. Once a child knows how to read, he reads. He doesn't have to spend hours circling consonants on a worksheets" (Preface x).

WHEN TO START: "Four- and five-year olds, far from being "unready" for reading, may be at the exactly right age for learning writing and reading quickly and painlessly" (*Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 122).

"If you use phonics as *the* method of teaching reading, your teach children the alphabet code. You do this step by step, in easy stages. At each step, you give the children plenty of material to practice on. When you teach them the short *o*, you give them a hundred words or more with short *o* to read aloud again and again until the pronunciation of the short *o* has become fully automatic. You do the same thing with short *u* and *ch* and *th* and *igh* and *ou* and *mps* – through the whole inventory of 181 items until it's all firmly fixed in the pupil's subconscious mind. Sounding out and blending practicing – there is no other way. It's like practicing scales on the piano or practicing driving until you're good enough for the road test" (*Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 75).

1980 REFLECTIONS: There are two schools of thought about how to teach children to read. One is called "intensive phonics" or "systematic phonics" or, more recently, "decoding" or "code emphasis." In this book to avoid confusion, I'll call it "phonics-first." The other is called the "look-and-say" or "whole-word" or "sight-reading" method or – so help me – "psycholinguistic." I'll use "look-and-say." … I said in my first book that phonics-first worked splendidly and should be used in all schools, while look-and-say was wretchedly poor and should be abandoned at once. … Unfortunately my advice fell on deaf ears. With heart-breaking slowness, phonics-first crept into some 15 % of our schools, but an estimated 85 percent of them still stick to old discredited look-and-say. … The results of this mass miseducation have been disastrous. America is rapidly sinking into a morass of ignorance. (*Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 1)

SIGHT WORDS: "The point is that the whole issue of sight words comes up only because the look-and-say people insist they must immediately have the children reading stores. Dumb stories, inane stories, but stories there must be, otherwise the child is "bored" and lacks "motivation." The phonics people go ahead and teach children to read, relying on the sheer thrill of learning the alphabet code – one of the great wonders of the world – to fascinate the children until they can hardly wait to be told that *u* makes *yoo"* (*Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 98).

Donald L. Potter typed these pages on 3/14/03 in an effort to become a better-informed reading teacher and to share with others the wisdom of Rudolf Flesch.

I was motivated to look closer at Flesch's *72 Exercises* because of a phone conversation with Mr. Edward Miller (3/11/03), who uses Flesch's phonics-first method to help students with whole-word dyslexia. Mr. Miller explained to me that he works with two students at a time, one on either side of him. He has one student read the first two columns, Ed reads the middle column, and the other student reads the two columns on the right. I immediately began to try Mr. Miller's procedures in my Instructional Resource Classroom and witnessed significant improvement in the students' word processing strategies. Ed is the author of the *Miller Word Identification Assessment* (MWIA), which is an instrument for detecting and measuring whole-word dyslexia. It available for free downloads on the Education Page of the www.donpotter.net web site.

Concerning Phonics Methods

by Donald L. Potter
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Generally speaking there are two broad categories of phonics programs: "spelling-family" and "single-letter" phonics. Flesch's *72 Phonics Exercises* is a single-letter phonics approach. In this short research piece, I am going to compare the two methods and point out some of the advantages of "single-letter" phonics.

Diane McGuinness

Concerning the disadvantages of spelling-family phonics

I will begin with some pertinent observations from Diane McGuinness' 1997 bombshell *Why Our Children Can't Read.* She illustrates the kinds of mistakes that children make because of the faulty strategies they are taught in various reading programs. We will quote her in full concerning "word family" phonics: "The first type of phonics comes from major publishing houses and teaches what are called "word families" or "analogies." Word families are parts of words, usually a group of ending sounds combining a vowel and final consonant. These are often taught in rhyme: "The cat sat on the mat." and are known technically as "rimes," which are vowel + consonant(s) endings to words. Dr. Seuss is a favorite author. The letter strings: ing, ent, unch are examples of word families or rimes. In these examples, the letter strings stand for the following number of sounds in English: 2 (/i/ /ng/). 3 (/e/ /n/ /t/), 3 (/u/ /n/ /ch/). However, children are taught, or led to believe, that these letter sequences *are only one sound*. This means that if they are taught unch, as in "bunch," "hunch," "lunch," "punch," they will not be able to transfer this knowledge to other similar sounding endings: "bench," "ranch," "launch," because they learned "unch" as one unit or one 'sound.' They don't know that *n* stands for the sounds /n/ whenever it appears in a word, or that *ch* stands for the sound /ch/ most of the time (except when *ch* stands for /k/ in words like Christmas, character, chaos, choir, anchor, mechanic, etc.) This means each word family or "rime" has to be taught one at a time, but there are 1,260 possible rhyming endings in English. Even if teaching rimes was an effective way to teach spelling patters (with it isn't), phonics programs never teach more than a fraction of them" (21).

William Kottmeyer

Concerning spelling-family phonics and the advantages of single-letter phonics

William Kottmeyer was the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction for the St. Louis, Mo., Public Schools. I have his 1947 *Handbook for Remedial Reading* and his 1959 *Teacher's Guide for Remedial Reading*. Both books are filled with valuable insights on the teaching of reading. I shall quote him at length concerning the problems with spelling-family phonics and the advantages of what he calls "single-letter" phonics. All quotes are from his 1959 book.

Although many different phonetic systems have been used for years, they are usually variations of only two broad types – "family" phonics and "single-letter" phonics (8).

FAMILY PHONICS: Family phonics attempts to avoid the more laborious blending of individual sounds by blending a beginning consonant with a family unit. The pupil is first taught – in a variety of ways, depending upon the "system" employed – to associate the consonant symbols with the sounds represented. Sometimes these consonants are memorized as isolated sounds, and when they are, most of them are usually distorted by the inevitable "uh" vowel sound that is appended to them. Thus the *b* sound becomes "buh, the *k* becomes "kuh," etc. These consonant sounds are now more commonly taught by making the pupil aware that the *b* represents the sound that starts *ball*, *boy, baby,* etc., in order to avoid the distortion of consonant sounds which cannot be uttered without a vowel sound. In the older family phonics, Exercises designed to give the pupil power to read words independently, a family unit like *at, an, ell,* etc., would be preceded by all the consonants, with the unit, would form a word:

bat	pat	ban	Nan	bell	sell
cat	rat	can	pan	cell	tell
fat	sat	Dan	ran	dell	well
hat	vat	fan	tan	fell	yell
		man		Nell	

CRITICISMS OF FAMILY PHONICS: This kind of drill was criticized bitterly for various reasons: that it was isolated from meaningful reading; that it resulted in mechanical word-calling; that the family unit had to be recognized as a unit within a word; that, if the pupil could, after tedious drill, recognize the commonest family units with every possible beginning variation, he would be able to unlock a relatively small number of words. It was also pointed out that, although the system helped unlock monosyllabic words, it often confused the pupil when he had to deal with multi-syllabic words. Thus, for example, having learned to recognize the *ig* family in *big, dig, pig,* etc., he would see it as a sound unit in *tiger, higher, migrant,* etc. It is, of course, obvious that any system of phonics, which deals with monosyllable, must be supplemented by word structure generalizations if it is to be useful.

VARIATIONS OF FAMILY PHONICS. Family phonics reappears in many guises and variations. The word analysis programs of many modern reading series, for example, stress the beginning consonant substitution method of dealing with unfamiliar words. The beginning consonant sounds are usually taught by associating them words which the pupil has already learned as sight words. For example, after having to recognize *man, monkey, and mother,* etc., by the configuration or pattern of the total word form, the pupil is lead to observe that the words begin with the same symbol and the same sound and thus to the generalization that all words which begin with the *m* symbol will begin like *man, monkey, mother,* in sound. After some sight vocabulary has been acquired by the pupil, the writers next contrive to introduce into the reading material words which are like a familiar word except for the beginning consonant sound. This, if the pupil recognizes *man* and *rabbit* (or any word beginning with *r)*, he now is confronted for the first time with *ran*, He is led to observe that *ran* looks like *man* except for the first letter; that *ran* starts like *rabbit*; that he must substitute the beginning sound of *rabbit* for the *m* in *man;* and the new word is *ran*. Usually *ran* is introduced in such a manner that the context will also give a clue. The pupil is taught to use both the context and the substitution technique to unlock the word. Some reading series also use the final consonant substitution device.

This general procedure is pedagogically more palatable than long periods of blackboard drill on isolated word families, and some of its virtues are readily apparent. However artfully it is contrived, the fact remains that the pupil's power to unlock unfamiliar words is still restricted to those words, which are members of word families, and the research shows that the number of words in this category is surprisingly small.

The remedial reading teacher will advisedly re-examine this method of word attack from the point of view of the severely handicapped reader. Beginning consonant substitution, as described, becomes useful only after a fairly substantial stock of sight words has been mastered, and it becomes increasingly useful as the sight vocabulary grows. The poor reader with little power of visual imagery has great difficulty in acquiring sight vocabulary—or he would not be a poor reader. For him, the consonant substitution method will have limited usefulness.

Consonant substitution appears to be a simple process, and it is—when it is demonstrated on the board by a teacher. But when a slow-learning pupil looks at an unfamiliar word form, he must conjure up the visual image of the sight word that belongs to the same family and must note the similarity and difference between the image and the word before his eyes. Simultaneously, the pupil must recall the new beginning consonant of another word and must mentally extract and substitute the sound for the one he sees. This process requires more power of visual imagery than the typical remedial reading pupil has.

SINGLE-LETTER PHONICS. Single- letter phonics, currently in disrepute, requires that the pupil become familiar with both consonant, and vowel sounds immediately. When the pupil encounters an unfamiliar monosyllabic word, he blends the individual vowel and consonant sounds to approximate the word. The process usually begins by practice with phonetically regular monosyllables, which have short vowel sounds. Consonant variations and long vowel sounds and vowel variations are introduced as rapidly as possible. Except for sounds, which are regularly represented by two symbols, no effort is made to teach phonograms.

The popular criticisms of single-letter phonies, however, indict common malpractices rather than the system itself. As in the case of family phonics, when certain consonant sounds are taught in isolation, they are necessarily distorted by appending the "uh" vowel sound. The *b* sound becomes "buh," the *d,* "duh," etc., because consonant, sounds like *h, d, g, j, k, p, t*, and *v* cannot, be uttered without, a following vowel sound. Sounds like *f, h, l, m, n, r*, and *s* can be uttered without vowel sounds, but the "uh" is commonly appended. The distortions are usually avoided by using key words, which the pupil learns to associate with the consonant sounds. Vowel sounds are uttered naturally without distortion.

Another common mistake that is made with the use of single-letter phonics is to permit the pupil to pause between sounds when he sounds the letters of a word. When he pauses momentarily, the consonant sound distortion is inevitable. For example, when the pupil attempts to sound the letters consecutively in *man* or *cat*, he commonly grunts something like "muh (pause) a (pause) nuh" and "kuh (pause) a (pause) tub." Thus he utters five sounds instead of three and quite understandably loses faith in the method. This kind of distortion need not occur if the teacher does not permit the pupil to utter one sound until he can blend it with the one which follows. Distortion can be completely inhibited by practice so that the pupil learns to "think" the sounds together instead of sounding audibly.

Other virtues of single-letter phonics are not commonly recognized. This system, in contrast to family phonics, causes no confusion when word structure generalizations are taught, because the pupil does not look for family units which are often crossed by syllabic divisions. Single-letter phonics is also much more directly applicable in strengthening spelling skills. The greatest advantage of single- letter phonics over family phonics is its relative simplicity. It can be taught faster and applied more quickly by the pupil. Because of its simplicity, it is especially useful for the slow-learning pupil. And so the suggestion is herewith submitted that the teacher will do well to use single-letter phonics in teaching remedially and that the use of the system will profitably constitute an essential difference between remedial and classroom teaching.

Remedial reading, then, differs from other reading instruction in that it isolates and telescopes the basic skills of the typical classroom program for younger pupils, eliminates many supplementary activities, and stresses quick mastery of the phonetic and structural analysis skills. Although any sympathetic individualized teaching usually results in gains in reading skill, the use of single- letter phonics appears to be best adapted to the needs of the slow learner and of the child who has little knack for retaining sight vocabulary or for making his own phonetic generalizations from his experiences with reading material. Single-letter phonics is the simplest of the several varieties of phonetic systems. It can be taught more quickly, can be effectively combined and used with the structural analysis skills, can be directly and usefully applied to increase spelling power, and is peculiarly well adapted for use by the remedial reading teacher. (All of the above is from Chapter 1)

The plain fact of the matter is that poor teaching or poor learning conditions are probably responsible for more reading disability than all the other investigated causes put together. (16)

Our experience has shown that the use of single- letter phonics, which habituates a left-to-right sequence, inhibits reversal tendencies. (47)

The objection that English is phonetically irregular, to the extent that a sound blending method of word attack is not useful, patently will not hold water. Although the commonly quoted estimate that our language is approximately six-sevenths "regular" phonetically must be supported by qualifications as to what precisely is meant by "regular," a careful scrutiny of common vocabulary shows that letter symbols and sounds have a consistently high relationship. Generally, it may be said, without detailing the necessary qualifications, that consonant symbols and sounds are about 98 per cent consistent and that vowel symbols and sounds are approximately 80 per cent consistent. Using the most extreme deviations from expected spellings to demonstrate the phonetic irregularity of English is misleading. Some teachers seem to think sound blending, to be useful, must invariably yield a precisely accurate pronunciation of a word. For the practical business of unlocking a word, distinctions like those between a long *o* (old), a half-long *o* (obey), and circumflex *o* (orb), short *o* (odd), short-circumflex *o* (soft), and Italic short *o* (connect); long *a* (ale), half-long *a* (chaotic), and circumflex *a* (care), short *a* (add) and one-dot *a* (ask); short *e* (end) and Italic short *e* (silent); etc., are unnecessary. Stress, or accent, which blurs vowel sounds in unaccented syllables makes it impossible for literate adults to be independent of a dictionary. The child who does not recognize words needs a crude sound-blending tool to approximate the unfamiliar word so that he can combine his sound clues with

the context clues to help himself. We must remember that the retarded reader, using easy reading material, almost always knows the word he cannot read. He is in trouble because he does not recognize which of the words he knows is represented by the visual symbol at which he is looking. Furthermore, the fact that a relatively small percentage of words are not susceptible to sound blending does not destroy the usefulness of the method. Sound blending makes it possible to reduce enormously the number of word configurations, which would otherwise have to be visually memorized (116f).

WORD REVERSALS: Whatever may be the cause of word reversals, the fact is that many retarded readers continue to reverse some words like *was, saw, on,* and *no.* Usually this tendency to reverse disappears as the pupil grows in skill in blending sounds from left to right. **Single-letter phonics is an especially effective cure for reversal tendencies.** (116)

Note: These quotes from Kottmeyer are given here because they explain the advantages of "single-letter" phonics. Rudolf Flesch's phonics method is pure "single-letter" phonics. I have found Flesch's method highly effective in helping students with whole-word dyslexia and recommend it to all educators. Remediation Teachers who have not used a good "single-letter" phonics program will be amazed at the progress their students will make in a very short time. Donald L. Potter. Revised 1/13/04 and 2/9/14.

Additional thought: Reading lists of unrelated words forces attention to each individual letter, whereas reading stories at too young an age encourages guessing at the next probably word. Remedial students, also, tend to guess the next probably word and should be removed from their context guessing environment and taught to read all over again using "single-letter" phonics. (Don Potter)

A common characteristic of whole-word dyslexia is a premature leap to meaning (DP).

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