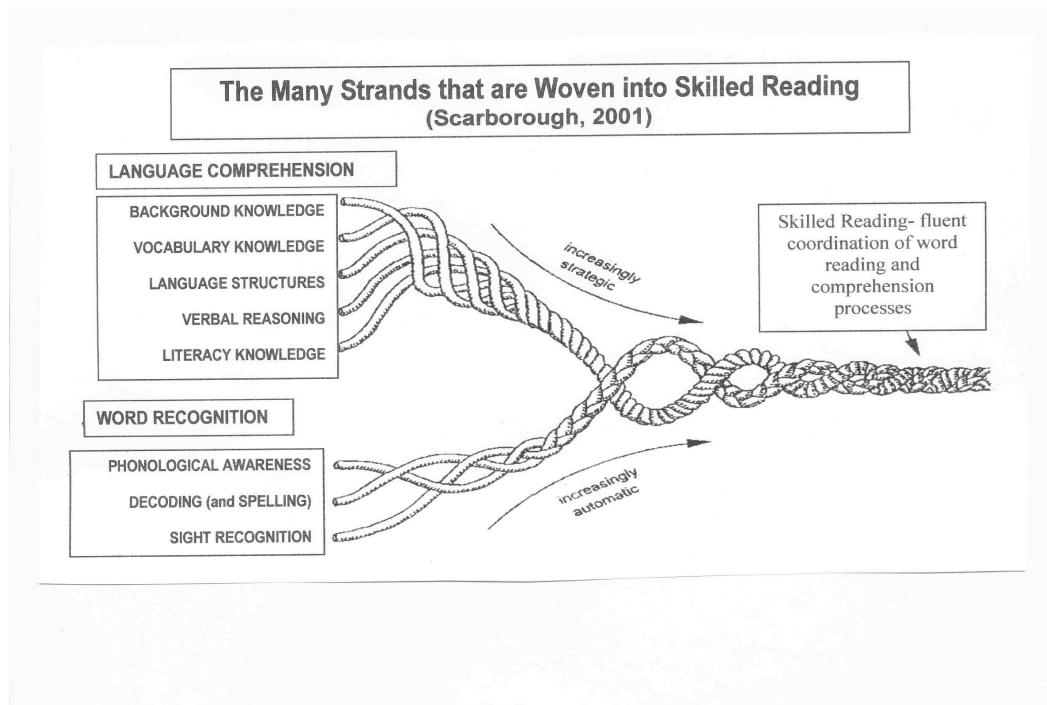


## The Reading Journey

A simple view of reading describes three components – word recognition, making meaning and fluency. Whilst this sounds a straightforward recipe, becoming a reader is actually a longer and more complex process than many of us realize. Most of the time, skilled readers don't need to think about the process of reading as they read. It requires little of their conscious effort because they have already mastered the smooth, seamless integration of a number of underlying core skills. As the well-known sports clothing advertisement says, skilled adult readers “Just do it”.

As skilled readers, it is easy to lose sight of the journey of learning to read. However adults helping young children learn to read will need to analyse and think about what is involved in this complex process.

Scarborough (2001) provides a model of skilled reading, likening it to a tightly woven rope, made up of a number of solid strands. She talks of two broad sets of sub-skills that contribute to reading success – language comprehension and word recognition. She stresses that aspects of language, such as vocabulary knowledge, the ability to reason and the awareness of grammar and sentence structure, need to be strategically applied as we read. She also describes the word recognition sub-skills of phonological awareness, decoding and sight word recognition, which must become increasingly automatic in order to support fluent and accurate reading.



Another useful analogy is that reading is akin to the construction of a house. All houses need a solid foundation. If the builder takes short cuts in the construction, the stability of the whole building is at risk. The same can be said for learning to read. You need a solid foundation of core skills to be the essential building blocks. These skills over time become increasingly accurate and automatic and this allows the attention of the reader to be devoted to understanding, thinking and enjoyment. If there are gaps or weaknesses in the underlying knowledge or processing skills of the student, then reading will be error prone, as well as slow and laboured.

### **Beginner reader and the Competent or Skilled reader – some essential differences**

**Beginner readers** are just learning the sub-skills of reading and may only be able to attend to one thing at a time. Unfamiliar with and uncertain about the relationship between sounds and letters, their reading is often slow and hesitant. The extra effort that beginner readers need to make to decipher the words on the page is sometimes at the expense of comprehension and fluency. In addition, they may look to the pictures for clues or make a guess from the context of the story. These strategies, if overused, are counterproductive in the journey of learning to read.

Beginner readers are like young children learning to walk. Initially young children use all their attention and cognitive energy to stay balanced and focused enough to take their first tentative steps. Gradually through practice and increased confidence they can walk without holding on to the furniture. After a further period of consolidation they have the capacity to carry something whilst walking or to even to walk backwards. But early skills are vulnerable – children may fall over if they become tired or distracted or if the surface becomes uneven. Eventually, however children learn to walk and even run with ease and with little conscious thought, even whilst talking, eating or laughing.

Similarly, learning to read demands nearly all of a beginner reader's attention, thinking and energy. Once the early skills have been mastered however, the attention and memory "load" is considerably reduced. New energy becomes available for further learning. New skills are then built upon this solid foundation.

In contrast **skilled readers** can do it "all" effortlessly and strategically - recognize words, comprehend the text and read with fluency. They read fluently and with comprehension because they have also achieved fluency and automaticity in the underlying processes involved with reading. When reading, skilled readers can call on many areas of knowledge almost simultaneously. This multi-level processing enables them to rapidly predict and confirm the text. However when the going gets tough, perhaps when the meaning of a sentence is lost or they encounter a difficult word, they can rely on solid skills and strategies to assist them. The skilled reader is able to consciously apply a variety of strategies when and if needed. They can for example, sound out the pronunciation of a multi-syllable place name, access knowledge of spelling rules and rhyme patterns or figure out a word and its meaning by applying their knowledge of spelling derivations. For example, the aboriginal word 'Kurrookarook' (meaning koala with young) or 'insignificancy'.

### **If reading is a journey, who has the map?**

After analysing the research literature on reading instruction, the NICHD (2000) concluded that the following five elements were essential for effective literacy instruction: phonological awareness, phonics (decoding), vocabulary, comprehension strategies and fluency.

All students will benefit from the teacher sharing the "reading map" with them. Some children seem to make their way on the reading journey with relative ease, no matter what teaching they encounter. This should not however distract teachers from the need to have a thorough knowledge of what is involved in learning to read. Teachers must have the "map" to help guide each child along the road. Young children need explicit teaching and they need to be given the

opportunity to reach mastery and automaticity in the sub-skills that contribute to reading. We must also show them how to develop and bring language comprehension strategies into play before, during and after reading.

Another aspect of “having the map” is for teachers to provide texts for young learners that match their skill level and that are appropriate to their interests. It is also important that teachers share their reading map with the parents. This will help parents form realistic expectations and appreciate their child’s effort and progress along the reading journey.

### **Embarking on the reading journey**

We acknowledge that the reading journey begins a long time before children come to school. We cannot overestimate the importance of sharing stories with young children. Many of our previous newsletters describe this and make suggestions about using books to enhance young children’s language. For example Newsletter number 19 (June 2007) *Shared Stories – preparing for literacy*.

Decoding is one of the essential skills that children need if they are to become independent readers. Decoding is the ability to apply knowledge of letter- sound relationships to pronounce written words correctly (Love and Reilly, 2009). Whilst slow at first, children’s decoding becomes quicker with repeated practice until these early words become sight words. A decoding strategy provides students with the key to unlocking new words in reading. No longer reliant on the teacher or adult to tell them the word, students can become actively involved in discovering words and patterns for themselves. They can be described as ‘self learners’.

Hempenstall in 2005 says good readers know the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent and they know how to blend these to form words. Through repeated correct readings, they build up a ‘neural model of the word’ in the brain – specifically the parieto - temporal area. Over time, other areas of the brain consolidate this neural model so that the words can be recognized instantly and automatically. It is said that normally developing students need between 4–14 accurate ‘sounding outs’ to create the firm links that are needed. Many opportunities to see the word, blend the sounds and hear the associated spoken label are required before it will become a sight word.

Some children, who are at risk of literacy difficulty, display problems with the speed of processing information and in particular the speed of processing sounds. These children require considerably more exposures to sounding out words and blending sounds. Therefore it is really critical that their early learning experiences include structured systematic instruction in phonological awareness and phonics if they are to achieve the required fluency and automaticity.

Of course children also learn to visually memorize some early words. It is likely that they will soon recognize by sight, their name and other visually distinctive words that they see frequently, for example the sign for STOP or COLES. For those children with a good visual memory, this can initially be a very successful method. However research shows that as a strategy, reliance on visual memory alone is only a short-term solution. There are too many words to learn and children soon reach their capacity for using visual memory alone.

Ultimately, children will need the following core skills:

- phonological (sound) awareness
- making a consistent match between sounds and letters and
- applying this knowledge to the task of breaking words into component letters
- recalling their associated sounds and
- blending these to form words.

## Preparing for the reading journey

### Phonological awareness

Children who are familiar with the phonological awareness skills of **blending** sounds to make words and breaking words up into their sounds (**segmenting**) will be more confident when they need to apply these skills to reading and spelling. Even very young children enjoy playing auditory blending and segmenting games, especially when teachers explain the tasks clearly and use physical props for support.

- A 'robot' or puppet can be involved in the activity – giving the children “broken up” or segmented words to be blended or “put back together”.  
For example: /f/ /ee/ /t/. What is the word?
- When demonstrating blending sounds, it is useful at first to use words that contain continuant sounds, as in the words m a n (man) or f i sh (fish).  
This allows you to keep the stream of sound going as you move to the next sound.
- Children, who are having difficulty tracking and blending the sounds to make a word, can be supported with extra meaning clues.  
For example: “It is a part of my body /f /ee/ /t/.” Alternatively or in addition, rhyme clues can be given. “It’s a part of my body and it rhymes with seat /f/ /ee/ /t/.”
- Segmenting the sounds in a spoken word is a difficult and abstract task. You can help children to understand the task by using a physical activity, such as moving a block, to represent each sound.  
For example: “What sounds can you find in the word ‘fish’?”

/f/    /i/    /sh/



- Be sure to build up slowly from 2 sounded words such as ‘knee’, to 3 sounded words such as ‘boat’ or ‘sock’. Four-sounded words often involve a blend of 2 consonants, either at the start of the word (e.g. **clap**) or at the end (e.g. **fist**). It will take practice for children to “tease apart” these closely occurring sounds. Wizard (Love and Reilly 2002) provides card packs and a game board for practice in these skills.

### Sound- letter links

- Successful decoding depends also on reliable and automatic sound-letter links. If children do not recognize a particular word by sight they will need to examine each letter/letter group and be able to quickly associate it with its sound, before blending these sounds to

approximate the word. A **multisensory** approach to teaching provides maximum learning opportunities and reinforcement for sound letter links. For example, when learning the connection between the sound /m/ and its letter m - saying, listening, touching, moving, copying, singing and a meaningful context - all contribute to the learning experience. You can refer to Singing Alphabet Pack (2010) or Newsletter 22 (November 2007) Linking Sounds and Letters for more information.

### Decoding/spelling

- When sounding out written words children need to first segment words into units (letters), translate each letter to sound knowledge and then blend these sounds to form a recognizable word.
- We know that there is not always a one to one correspondence between sounds and letters. However children will need to learn the common and consistent matchups and spelling patterns first. Over time they will become more confident and able to tackle the less consistent or less frequent matchups.
- Blocks or counters can be moved into squares or spaces on a grid, to represent the sounds within a word. Letters can be written on the grid or below the blocks to show children how sounds and letters match up. (plastic or magnetic letters are an alternative) Although the words 'hot' and 'shock' both have 3 sounds, children can learn that that more letters are needed in example 2.

E.g. 1



h o t

E.g. 2



sh o ck

- It is also essential that children be given simple suitable texts, so that they can read for a real purpose. Ask your school or local librarian for good children's books with few words that still tell a meaningful and engaging story, for example 'Dog in, Cat out' by Australian author Gillian Rubenstein. Decodable texts that use primarily phonically regular words include Fitzroy Readers and Dandelion books.
- As well, children will enjoy playing card games featuring their newly learned words. However remember that although practice in decoding is important, it is only a means to an end – the automatic 'sight' recognition of the words.

### Empowerment

Research from New Zealand tells us that in establishing an identity as a reader it is important for young learners to have early success. Chapman, Tunmer & Prochnow (2000) examined the

relationship between academic self concept and measures of reading in beginning school children and found that differences in their self concepts – as competent or less competent – appeared within the first two months of starting school. This is particularly early on the ‘reading journey’.

Learning to read involves the teaching, learning and practice of a number of skills. Literacy progress will vary widely between children but also at different times for any particular child. Children will need reassurance and demonstration that they are making progress. We need to ensure that literacy instruction is equipping students with both the word recognition and the language comprehension strands of knowledge, so that they can become confident and skilled readers.

### **Finally**

Over the past few decades there have been different ways to describe reading and how best to teach it. In the light of the research that is now available however, we hope that debate has given way to decisive action and that all teachers are applying what we know is best practice. Young children embarking on their reading journey must be taught explicitly!

We know that reading is a very complex cognitive process involving many areas of the brain. We also know that there is a set of reading sub-skills that are ‘non negotiable’ in our planning for instruction. These are essential ingredients for the ‘reading map’.

Parallel to the children’s journey towards becoming an independent reader is the model that we provide as we read to and with children. By continuing to expose children to the rich and informative language of books we are revealing to them what reading offers and nurturing communication at the same time.

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