

---

# Foundational Skills, Grades K–5

By Dr. Jan Hasbrouck

*Educational Consultant and Researcher*

*J.H. Consulting, Seattle, Washington*

*Gibson, Hasbrouck & Associates, Austin, Texas*

## Introduction

Researchers have made extraordinary progress in understanding what “reading” really is. Numerous complex brain processes involved in the act of reading have been identified, along with many individual component skills that must be learned and used automatically and efficiently by a reader. At this point, compelling evidence from a convergence of reading research indicates that 90% to 95% of all students can achieve literacy levels at or approaching grade level. These statistics include students with dyslexia and other students with learning and cognitive disabilities. Students succeed when intensive, comprehensive, and high-quality prevention and early intervention instruction is provided by well-trained and well-supported teachers. (c.f. Al Otaiba, Connor, Foorman, Schatschneider, Greulich, Sidler, 2009; Al Otaiba & Torgesen, 2007; Rashotte, MacPhee, Torgeson, 2001; Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2006; Torgesen, 2007; Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014; Vellutino & Fletcher, 2007.)

## Our Challenge

Given this fact about our students’ potential success in reading, many educators, parents, and members of the general community are increasingly frustrated: If scientists have proven that almost all children can be taught to read at or very close to grade-level, why is it that nearly 40% of the fourth-grade students in the United States continue to struggle with reading and understanding grade level.

## Foundation Skills

Current standards identify four essential prerequisite foundational skills for reading: Print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency. These skills have been recognized as essential for the truly extraordinary transformation of converting print and written symbols that have no meaning on their own—into a meaningful linguistic code (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2006). These four skills can help a child become a reader if the child has a solid foundation in a spoken language, ideally the same language in which they will be learning to read.

---

**Print awareness** is the initial stage of literacy in which emergent readers begin to connect the language they understand and are learning to speak to the symbolic representations of letters and words, such as those written on a page in a book, on the screen of a computer or smartphone, or on a sign posted in a restaurant or shop. Print awareness involves an understanding that print has different functions depending on the context in which it appears: a menu lists food choices; a book can tell story; a sign can announce a favorite restaurant or warn of danger; a card or letter can convey thanks or good wishes. Print awareness includes understanding that print is organized in a particular way—for example, knowing that print in English, Spanish, and other languages is read from left to right and top to bottom.

#### Print Concept Skills

- Knowing that print represents spoken language.
- Understanding print organization (text reads left to right, top to bottom, and page by page; printed words are strings of letters separated by blank space).
- Recognizing and naming lower- and upper-case letters in the alphabet.
- Recognizing features of a sentence (first word, capitalization, ending punctuation).

**Phonological awareness** is the general appreciation of the sounds of speech being distinct from their meaning. The finer-grained ability to notice, identify, and ultimately manipulate the separate sequence of sounds in spoken words is called phonemic awareness. These skills involve only auditory processes. Scientific evidence now confirms that having difficulty discriminating the sounds of spoken language is the causal factor of most reading difficulties, including dyslexia. The good news is that this difficulty can often be corrected or significantly improved with intensive and targeted intervention (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Phonological awareness skills include:

- Recognizing rhyming words.
- Counting, pronouncing, and segmenting syllables into phonemes (e.g., hunt > /h/ /u/ /n/ /t/); blending individual phonemes, consonant blends, onsets, and rimes into words (e.g., /d/ /o/ /g/ > dog; /t/ /r/ /u/ /ck/ > truck; /s/ + /um/ > sum, /g/ + /um/ > gum, /dr/ + /um/ > drum).
- Isolating and pronouncing initial, medial, and final phonemes in spoken, single-syllable words; replacing individual phonemes to make new words (e.g., hat > sat; cop > cap; grip > grit).
- Distinguishing long from short vowel sounds in short spoken words.

**Phonics** involves knowing which letters symbolize the sounds in a printed word and using that knowledge to sound out or decode words. Phonics is also referred to as the alphabetic principle. Phonics involves a reader using both auditory and visual (or tactile) processes.

---

Phonics and word recognition skills include:

- Knowing the primary or most common sounds of each consonant, five major long and short vowels, final e, and common consonant digraphs and vowel teams.
- Reading high-frequency, irregularly spelled words by sight (e.g., was, one, have, of, love).
- Being able to distinguish between similarly spelled words and identify inconsistent but common spelling-sound correspondences.
- Decoding regularly spelled words.
- Using knowledge of syllable structure and morphology (roots and affixes) to read words in and out of context.

**Reading fluency** has been defined as reasonably accurate reading at an appropriate rate with suitable prosody\* that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read (Hasbrouck & Glaser, 2012). There is a common misconception among educators that fluency is the same as rate or speed, and that having students learn to read as fast as possible will increase their reading proficiency (Rasinski & Hamman, 2010). This is a mistaken notion. Fluency needs to be understood as a complex skill in which accuracy plays a foundational role, along with rate. Students need to learn to use a reading rate that is appropriate to the task at hand, but not to “speed read.” Reading too fast can be as detrimental to skillful reading as reading too slowly. Fluency is an important skill because it is necessary (but not sufficient) for students to read and understand what they have read independently, proficiently, and with motivation. Fluent reading is a sign that a reader is reading with automaticity, which is the ability to do a task without having to think about it at a conscious level. When words are read “automatically”, the brain isn’t occupied with the details of the task itself and can instead attend to the meaning of the text being read (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012).

Fluency skills include:

- Reading with sufficient accuracy and rate to support comprehension.
- Reading on-level text with purpose and understanding.
- Reading on-level text orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression.
- Using context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding.

## **Introduction and Intervention for Foundation Skills**

**F**or many children, especially those who are at risk of academic failure due to the effects of poverty, cognitive challenges, and/or language deficits, learning to read will require a significant amount of carefully designed and systematically delivered instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Kilpatrick, 2015). Unlike learning to speak, which occurs naturally and organically because human brains are genetically hard-wired for spoken language, learning to read is not “natural.” Written language is a relatively new phenomenon in human

*\*the pitch, tone, volume, emphasis, rhythm of oral reading*

---

development and our brains must be taught how to turn the intrinsically meaningless symbols of print into something meaningful—and potentially memorable, useful, and enjoyable. In order for students to master the essential foundational skills for reading, effective instruction must be provided, skillfully differentiated to meet the varied needs of students. Struggling readers will typically need much more explicitly targeted guided practice to master the foundation skills than some of their peers, so care should also be taken by teachers to discern which students need additional, appropriate, and effective intervention, as well as when and how to provide it effectively and efficiently.

## References

- Al Otaiba, S., Connor, C. M., Foorman, B., Schatschneider, C., Greulich, L., & Sidler, J. F. (2009). "Identifying and intervening with beginning readers who are at-risk for dyslexia." *Perspectives on language and literacy*, 35(4), 13-19.
- Al Otaiba, S., & Fuchs, D. (2006). "Who are the young children for whom best practices in reading are ineffective? An experimental and longitudinal study." *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39(5), 414-431.
- Al Otaiba, S., & Torgesen, J. (2007). Effects from intensive standardized kindergarten and first grade interventions for the prevention of reading difficulties. In S.R. Jimerson, M.K. Burns, & A.M. VanDerHeyden (Eds.), *Handbook of response to intervention: The science and practice of assessment and intervention* (pp. 212–222). New York: Springer.
- Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit instruction: effective and efficient teaching*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Bowers, P. N., Kirby, J. R., & Deacon, S. H. (2010). The effects of morphological instruction on literacy skills: A systematic review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 80, 144–179.
- Fielding, L., Kerr, N., & Rosier, P. (2007). *Annual Growth for All Students, Catch-Up Growth for Those Who Are Behind*. Kennewick: The New Foundation Press.
- Foorman, B.R., Brier, J.I., & Fletcher, J. M. (2003). Interventions aimed at improving reading success: An evidence-based approach. *developmental neuropsychology*, 24(3), 613-639.
- Hasbrouck, J., & Glaser, D. R. (2012). *Reading fluency: teaching and understanding this complex skill*. Wellesley, MA: Gibson Hasbrouck & Associates. [www.gha-pd.com](http://www.gha-pd.com).
- Joshi, R., Treiman, R., Carreker, S., & Moats, L.. (2008-2009, Winter). The real magic of spelling: Improving reading and writing. *American Educator*, 9. <http://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/joshi.pdf> p. 10. Learning First Alliance (June, 1998). *Every child reading: An action plan and every child reading: a professional development guide*. Available online from 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. ,Suite 335, Washington, DC 20036. [www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org).
- Mathes, P., Denton, C. A., Fletcher, J. M., Anthony, J. L., Francis, D. J., & Schatschneider, C. (2005). The effects of theoretically different instruction and student characteristics on the skills of struggling readers. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 40(2), 148-182.

- 
- Moats, L. (Spring, 2011). Knowledge and practice standards for teachers of reading—a new initiative by the international reading association. *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, 51-52.
- NRP (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel NICHD. <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/Pages/smallbook.aspx>.
- Rashotte, C.A., MacPhee, K., Torgeson, J. K. (2001). The effectiveness of a group reading instruction program with poor readers in multiple grades. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 24, 119-134.
- Rasinski, T., Blachowicz, C. L. Z., & Lems, K (2012) (Eds.), *Fluency instruction, second edition: Research-based best practices*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Rasinski, T. & Hamman, P. (2010). Fluency: Why It Is “Not Hot.” *Reading Today*, 28(1), p. 26. (2012). Curious George and Rosetta Stone: The Role of Texts in Supporting Automaticity in Beginning Reading. In T. Rasinski, C.L.Z. Blachowicz, & K. Lems (Eds.), *Fluency Instruction, Second Edition: Research-Based Best Practices*. (pp.289–309) New York: Guilford Press.
- Shaywitz, S. E., & Shaywitz, B. A. (2006). Armed with the facts: the science of reading and its implications for teaching. In P. Blaunstein & R. Lyon (Eds.), *Why kids can't read: Challenging the status quo in education*, pp. 9-29. Toronto: Rowan and Littlefield.
- Simos, P. G., Fletcher, J. M., Bergman, E., Breier, J. I., Foorman, B. R., Castillo, E. M., et al. (2002). Dyslexia-specific brain activation profile becomes normal following successful remedial training. *Neurology*, 58, 1203–1213.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, S. M., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. National Research Council. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Torgeson, J. K. (2000). Individual differences in response to early interventions in reading: the lingering problem of treatment resisters. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 15, 55–64.
- Vaughn, S., & Wanzek, J. (2014). *Intensive interventions in reading for students with reading disabilities: meaningful impacts*. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 29(2), 46-53.
- Vellutino, F. R., & Fletcher, J. M. (2007). Developmental dyslexia. In M. J. Snowling & C. Hulme, (Eds.) *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*, pp. 362-278. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Wanzek, J., & Vaughn, S. (2009). Students demonstrating persistent low response to reading intervention: three case studies. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 24(3), 151-163.