



Department
for Education

The reading framework

Teaching the foundations of literacy

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Foreword by Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards

Over the last two decades, there has been a deepening recognition of the fundamental importance of improving reading standards on a child's future academic achievement, wellbeing and success in life. The reading and writing of Standard English, alongside proficient language development, is the key to unlocking the rest of the academic curriculum. Pupils who struggle to read struggle in all subjects and the wonders of a knowledge-rich curriculum passes them by unread. Fluency of reading is also a key indicator for future success in further education, higher education and employment.



Even more significantly, being a highly engaged reader has the potential to allow a child to overcome their background. In 2000, results from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that:

"while the degree of engagement in reading varies considerably from country to country, 15-year-olds whose parents have the lowest occupational status but who are highly engaged in reading obtain higher average reading scores in PISA than students whose parents have high or medium occupational status but who report to be poorly engaged in reading. This suggests that finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change."¹

This finding remains pertinent, with a 2021 OECD report stating that "PISA data consistently shows that engagement in reading is strongly correlated with reading performance and is a mediator of gender or socio-economic status".² Research by the Institute of Education has also found that the benefits of reading continue as children get older, with the combined effect on children's progress at 16 of regularly reading books and newspapers and visiting the library "four times greater than the advantage children gained from having a parent with a degree".³ In short, reading

¹ OECD (2002). ['Reading for change. Performance and engagement across countries. Results from PISA 2000'](#) Paris: OECD

² OECD (2021). ['21st-century readers: Developing literacy skills in a digital world'](#) Paris: OECD Publishing

³ UCL IoE Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2015). [Reading for Pleasure Impact Case Study](#)

can achieve something teachers and policymakers have been attempting for decades: to lessen or even eliminate the impact of early life disadvantage.

Children do not just ‘become’ readers, however, and reading engagement is not possible if children struggle with the basic mechanics of reading. Fluency and enjoyment are the result of careful teaching and frequent practice. Ensuring children become fluent and engaged readers at the very earliest stages also helps avoid the vicious circle of reading difficulty and demotivation that makes later intervention more challenging.

That is why my focus since I became the Shadow Minister for Schools in 2005 has always been on reading. I welcomed the Rose Review in 2006 which recommended that all schools use systematic phonics to teach reading. The evidence for phonics is indisputable, with the EEF considering it the most secure area of pedagogy. In the 15 years since the Rose Review, we have moved on from the ‘reading wars’ that used to dominate discussion. All schools now use systematic phonics to teach reading and thousands of teachers are ensuring more children are learning to read because of their daily teaching of systematic phonics in schools across England.

We introduced two fundamental changes to make this happen: the National Curriculum published in 2013 required schools to teach reading using systematic phonics, and the Phonics Screening Check introduced in 2012 shows how many children are on track. These efforts have begun to pay off. In 2019, 82% of pupils in year 1 met the expected standard in the Phonics Screening Check, compared to just 58% in 2012. For disadvantaged pupils, this figure rose from 45% to 71%. England’s scores in international assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) have also improved notably, particularly for the boys and the lowest performing pupils. England’s progress through championing the teaching of phonics to improve early literacy has attracted attention from across the world, and we have shared our experiences with nations such as Australia, Fiji, Nigeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan.

There is more to do, however. The very best schools in our country are achieving near to 100% in the Phonics Screening Check, despite high levels of disadvantage. The effective teaching of reading, as evidenced in these schools, requires not just a systematic synthetic phonics programme but its consistent implementation in every class. These schools also recognise the importance of talk, of accurate assessment, and of building a love of stories and reading. Most importantly, head teachers need to prioritise reading and make it their mission to make sure every child in their school becomes a fluent reader.

This Reading Framework, formed through the contributions of literacy experts and school leaders, many of whom are part of our English Hubs programme, builds on

existing progress and shows how schools can introduce these changes with long-term effect. It sets out the core principles of teaching reading for children in Reception and year 1, and for older pupils who have not yet mastered the foundations. It provides support and guidance for school leaders, classroom teachers and Initial Teacher Training partnerships about how to create a school environment where every child is not only able to read proficiently, but also develops a genuine love of reading.

I would like to thank all involved in producing and commenting on this document, including reading and language experts, educational organisations, English Hubs Council members, and the 34 English Hubs and partner schools whose expertise has been vital in building an evidence base of what works in teaching early reading. I encourage all primary schools to use this guidance to ensure their children have the strongest possible foundations in reading.

Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP

Minister of State for School Standards

Introduction

Reading is fundamental to education. Proficiency in reading, writing and spoken language is vital for pupils' success. Through these, they develop communication skills for education and for working with others: in school, in training and at work. Pupils who find it difficult to learn to read are likely to struggle across the curriculum, since English is both a subject in its own right and the medium for teaching. This is why the government is committed to continuing to raise standards of literacy for all.

Aims

This guidance is for primary schools, initial teacher training (ITT) partnerships, specialist provision and others in England. It focuses on the early stages of teaching reading. Its key objective is to help schools meet their expectations around early reading as set out in the national curriculum and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. It also aligns with Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework.

The guidance aims to:

- set out some of the research underpinning the importance of talk, stories and systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in the teaching of reading
- provide practical support for high-quality teaching, including assessment and the importance of 'fidelity to the programme'⁴
- support schools to evaluate their teaching of early reading, especially in Reception and year 1, and identify how to improve provision if weaknesses are found
- explain the importance of systematic phonics teaching for older pupils who are at risk of failing to learn to read because they cannot decode well enough
- support schools working with parents to help their children learn to read.

Key points are listed at the end of each section to support leaders and teachers audit their current practice.

The document is based on teachers' experiences, classroom observations, assessments and research, as well as advice from and the contributions of experts from the early literacy sector. It also reflects the experiences of many primary schools that excel in the teaching of reading, including those in the English Hubs

⁴ Rose J (2006). ['Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report'](#) Department for Education and Skills, page 21

programme, which is administered by the Department for Education (DfE).⁵ The references to research provide schools, ITT trainees, and those who teach them, with sources for further reading. The appendices give additional support, including a glossary.

ITT partnerships may wish to consider using the guidance with trainees to develop their understanding of early reading, especially SSP, and to give them informed and practical support.

Overview

Why reading matters

The guidance begins by setting out the social, cultural and economic importance of reading before outlining a conceptual model of it. The national curriculum programmes of study for reading are based on this model, which consists of two dimensions: language comprehension and word reading.

Language comprehension

The guidance discusses the importance of talk and stories, and the critical links between these, especially the role stories play in developing young children's vocabulary and language. It explains how teachers might expand children's store of words through talk throughout the day, within the curriculum and, in particular, through stories. Listening to and talking about stories and non-fiction develops children's vocabulary, because they meet words they would rarely hear or use in everyday speech. Understanding vocabulary is vital for comprehension and so also for wider learning and progress.

The guidance also considers the role of poetry, rhymes and songs in attuning children to the sounds of language.

Teaching word reading and spelling

The national curriculum is designed to make sure that all children are able to read and write fluently by the time they leave year 6, so that they can make progress at secondary school. A vital element of this is the early and successful teaching of phonics.

⁵ The UK government's Department for Education is responsible for education in England.

Understanding that the letters on the page represent the sounds in spoken words underpins successful word reading. Children's knowledge of the English alphabetic code – how letters or groups of letters represent the sounds of the language – supports their reading and spelling.

This guidance explains why teachers themselves also need to understand the alphabetic code: evidence supports the key role of phonic knowledge and skills in early reading and spelling.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is the government-designated What Works Centre for Education, providing authoritative advice on evidence to improve teaching and learning. The EEF considers phonics to be one of the most secure and best-evidenced areas of pedagogy and recommends all schools use a systematic approach to teaching it. The DfE's [Early Career Framework](#), which was quality assured by the EEF, sets out the expectation that all early career teachers learn about phonics and says that SSP is the most effective approach for teaching pupils to decode. Schools should therefore be confident in the rationale for teaching SSP as part of their teaching of reading.

Data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLs) in 2016 also shows a significant improvement in the reading performance of boys in England (reducing the gap between boys and girls by 11 points since 2011)⁶, a finding that could be attributed to the roll out of systematic phonics programmes in England since 2010.

Children at risk of reading failure

Pupils who fail to learn to read early on start to dislike reading. The guidance emphasises that pupils need to keep up with their peers rather than be helped to catch up later, at a point when learning in the wider curriculum depends so much on literacy. Where pupils make insufficient progress, extra efforts should be made to provide them with extra practice and support from the beginning.

In evaluating schools' teaching of reading, Ofsted's inspectors pay particular attention to pupils who are reading below what is expected for their age.⁷

⁶ McGrane J and others (2017). ['Progress in International Reading Literacy Study \(PIRLS\): National Report for England'](#) London: Department for Education

⁷ Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages in England.

Leadership and management

Since the national curriculum is statutory in state-maintained primary schools, teachers are required to teach a programme of systematic phonics from year 1. The EYFS statutory framework also refers to the first stages of systematic phonics. The guidance on leadership and management highlights the roles of school leaders in successfully implementing a programme, and training and supporting their staff to teach reading as effectively as possible.

Ofsted inspects how well primary schools teach their pupils to read using SSP. Inspectors listen to children reading, observe lessons, consider schools' policies for teaching reading, and take account of the outcomes of phonics assessments and data from the phonics screening checks.

Schools that need to improve their teaching of phonics may find the section on word reading and spelling particularly useful.

COVID-19 recovery

The DfE recognises that extended school restrictions have had a substantial impact on children and young people's learning and is committed to helping pupils make up learning they have lost because of the pandemic.

As reading is so important for accessing the rest of the curriculum, ensuring pupils catch up on their reading is essential. Accurate assessment to identify next steps is vital. Making progress depends on quality-first teaching: this guidance articulates what the excellent teaching of reading looks like.

Reading also offers important emotional benefits, enabling pupils, through listening to and talking about stories, to talk about their ideas and feelings and to lose themselves in books.

Other sources of support

The [Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework](#) sets the standards that school and childcare providers must meet for the learning, development and care of children from birth to five in England.

[Development Matters](#), the non-statutory curriculum guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage, can help schools and providers meet the learning and development requirements set out in the EYFS.

The [SEND Code of Practice 2015](#) includes guidance on the role of Early Years providers and schools in identifying and supporting children with special educational needs (SEN), including those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

The DfE's 34 English Hubs offer support to schools to improve their teaching of early language, phonics and reading in Reception and year 1. The [English Hubs website](#) can help you find your local English Hub, which can provide support and information.

Support from the EEF can be found here: [EEF - Education Endowment Foundation | EEF](#).

Section 1: The importance of reading and a conceptual model

Why reading matters

I realized in a whiplash burst that those children, all mine for one year, might never reach their full potential as human beings if they never learned to read.⁸

Maryanne Wolf's sudden awareness, as a new teacher, of her responsibilities towards her young class highlights why reading matters. To the individual, it matters emotionally, culturally and educationally; because of the economic impacts within society, it matters to everyone.

Developing children's spoken language

Becoming a fluent, skilled and attentive reader starts at the earliest stages, before children encounter a book for the first time, partly driven by the quality of their parents'⁹ talk with them that expands their vocabulary.

This does not appear to happen only in economically advantaged families. This is based on evidence including the example of a study of a group of Spanish-speaking families in the United States, which suggests that:

Infants who experienced more child-directed speech became more efficient in processing familiar words in real time and had larger expressive vocabularies...¹⁰

To the researchers' surprise, the differences between the families, who were all disadvantaged, in the amount of talk directed to the child were almost as large as those reported in Hart and Risley's much-quoted 1995 study, in which the families differed markedly in terms of their socio-economic circumstances: children with wider vocabularies typically came from wealthier families.¹¹

All talk is useful, especially when directed to the child specifically. For instance, children expand their language and vocabulary when they listen to or join in with a

⁸ Wolf M (2018) 'Reader, come home. The reading brain in a digital world' New York: HarperCollins

⁹ The term 'parents' refer to parents and other carers.

¹⁰ Weisleder A and Fernald A. '[Talking to children matters: Early language experience strengthens processing and builds vocabulary](#)' Psychological Science 2013: volume 24, issue 11, pages 2143-2152

¹¹ Hart B and Risley TR (1995). 'Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children' Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing

story or rhymes in a well-scripted children's television programme, but an adult talking about it with them adds benefits. However, talk about books brings particular advantages.¹²

First, parents who engage their children in books prepare them to become committed and enthusiastic readers: they can transform their attitudes to reading.¹³ Their children learn to focus and share the enjoyment of the story; they learn how stories start and finish, and how a plot unravels and is resolved; they learn that books can transport them elsewhere. Without this, as Wolf said, they cannot experience 'the exquisite joys of immersion in the reading life.'¹⁴

Second, book-related talk introduces children to language that they might not hear in ordinary conversation, especially the vocabulary of the book itself.¹⁵ This primes them to understand what they read later, in their leisure reading and across the curriculum.

Researchers in the United States who had looked at the impact of parents reading with their children quoted the following figures in a news release about their findings:

Here's how many words kids would have heard by the time they were 5 years old: Never read to, 4,662 words; 1–2 times per week, 63,570 words; 3–5 times per week, 169,520 words; daily, 296,660 words; and five books a day, 1,483,300 words.¹⁶

The only effective route to closing this gap is for children to be taught systematically to read as soon as they start school. In this way, they do not have to rely on adults. Children who become engaged in reading can make huge progress in their literacy development simply through their independent reading, whatever the nature of their early experiences.

This is not to say, however, that all reading difficulties are caused by lack of conversation or engagement with books. Some parents provide the best possible

¹² Science Daily (2019). <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/04/190404074947.htm>. Also see Jessica AR Logan, Laura M Justice, Melike Yumuş, Leydi Johana Chaparro-Moreno. 'When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap' Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics June 2019, Volume 40, Issue 5, pages 373-386

¹³ See [Appendix 1: For parents: reading stories to children](#)

¹⁴ Wolf M (2018). 'Reader, come home. The reading brain in a digital world' New York: HarperCollins

¹⁵ For example, one study estimated, based on an assessment of the numbers of words in popular board and picture books, that children who are never read to at home are exposed to approximately 300,000 fewer words than children who are read to once day per day from birth to 5 years of age. Jessica AR Logan, Laura M Justice, Melike Yumuş, Leydi Johana Chaparro-Moreno. 'When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap' Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics June 2019, Volume 40, Issue 5, pages 373-386

¹⁶ Science Daily (2019). <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/04/190404074947.htm>.

opportunities for conversation and read to their children extensively, but their children still have more difficulty than most in learning to read. Schools should teach these children early and effectively, so that their difficulties do not restrict their full access to the curriculum and so that they also become engaged in reading.

Reading for pleasure

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) said as recently as 2021 that 'PISA data consistently shows that engagement in reading is strongly correlated with reading performance and is a mediator of gender or socio-economic status'.¹⁷ For example, when in 2000 the OECD analysed its data on the 15-year-olds who had taken part in that year's assessment, the literacy scores for students who were 'highly engaged in reading' were significantly above the international average; those who were 'poorly engaged' scored below it. This was the case whatever their family's occupational status. The OECD emphasised: 'Reading practices can play an important role in reducing the gap between the reading proficiency scores of students from different socio-economic backgrounds'.¹⁸ But children cannot be 'highly engaged' if reading words is a struggle. It is vital, therefore, that phonics is a priority in teaching reading.

In the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment, the data for the UK showed that the year 5 pupils in the survey who liked reading the most scored, on average, 45 points more than those who said they did not like reading.¹⁹

Making sure that children become engaged with reading from the beginning is therefore one of the most important ways to make a difference to their life chances, whatever their socio-economic background. For this to happen, however, children need to learn to read as fluently as possible and be motivated to continue reading.

Motivation and cognitive differences

The OECD's report described the 'entangled relationship' between 'cognition and motivation, proficiency and engagement in reading'. Teachers cannot improve reading skills without also taking account of, for example, 'access to interesting and

¹⁷ OECD (2021). ['21st-century readers: Developing literacy skills in a digital world'](#) Paris: OECD Publishing

¹⁸ OECD (2002). ['Reading for change. Performance and engagement across countries. Results from PISA 2000'](#) Paris: OECD

¹⁹ McGrane J and others (2017). ['Progress in International Reading Literacy Study \(PIRLS\): National Report for England'](#) London: Department for Education

meaningful reading materials'.²⁰ The DfE's internal analysis of the data from PIRLS in 2006 suggested it was particularly narrative rather than information texts that made the most difference.²¹ Although we tend to associate narratives with literature, they are simply stories and can bring subjects to life across the curriculum.

Children who are good at reading do more of it: they learn more, about all sorts of things, and their expanded vocabulary, gained from their reading, increases their ease of access to more reading. Conversely, those for whom reading is difficult fall behind, not just in their reading but in all subjects and a vicious circle develops. This is why the national curriculum says:

It is essential that, by the end of their primary education, all pupils are able to read fluently, and with confidence, in any subject in their forthcoming secondary education.²²

Moreover, as far back as the 1970s, evidence was emerging suggesting that 'reading for pleasure had a powerful influence on children's cognitive development, especially in terms of their vocabulary'.²³ It therefore seems that it is not just that the academically able children read more but that they have become academically more able through the reading they have done.

Economic and social argument

Teaching children to read as well as possible produces advantages for the individual. Without reading, it is impossible to access written information, on paper or online. Those who cannot read are also excluded from most social media. Crucially, being unable to read significantly narrows the range of work and life opportunities a person can access.

Reading benefits society, too, both economically and socially. Although estimates of the cost of low levels of literacy vary and the methods are often opaque, the costs to the UK are estimated to be very high. In a report published by the EEF in 2019, a foreword by Sir Kevan Collins cites the cost to the UK to be around £20 billion per

²⁰ OECD (2002). ['Reading for change. Performance and engagement across countries. Results from PISA 2000'](#) Paris: OECD

²¹ Department for Education (2012). ['Research evidence on reading for pleasure'](#) London: Department for Education

²² Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

²³ From the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), which has followed the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970. Sullivan A and Brown M. (2013) ['Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading. CLS Working Paper 2013/10'](#) London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education

annum²⁴ whilst other estimates are much higher.²⁵ In social terms, better reading might enhance opportunities for individuals to become more engaged politically, increase their tolerance and involve them in their communities more effectively.²⁶

Conclusion

All educators have a fundamental role in ensuring all children learn to read, including headteachers and initial teacher training (ITT) partnerships.

Extensive experience in early literacy indicates that, if children are taught well, their backgrounds, ethnicity, level of disadvantage, their disabilities and other variables, such as being a boy or summer born, should rarely prevent their learning to read. Some research supports this: in 2010, for example, Shanahan and Lonigan summarised the findings of the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel, which was published in the United States in 2008. That report was an extensive meta-analysis of around 300 studies. It also included meta-analyses of studies on teaching early literacy that had been published in journals. In their summary, Shanahan and Lonigan concluded:

It is possible that what works in early literacy works for all children, no matter their status and background...²⁷

The following pages describe what needs to happen at the earliest stages of teaching reading so that every child learns to read as well as possible.

The Simple View of Reading

Reading has been described as the product of decoding and comprehension, a model first proposed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986, who called it the Simple View of Reading.²⁸ It has been fundamental in changing the debate about the teaching of reading over at least the last 20 years. It is frequently shown as a diagram (Figure 1,

²⁴ EEF (2019). [‘Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools Guidance Report’](#)

²⁵ World Literacy Foundation (2018). [‘The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy’](#)

²⁶ For example, one paper suggests better reading might enhance opportunities for individuals to become more engaged politically, increase their tolerance and involve them in their communities more effectively, but acknowledges that better evidence is required on these social benefits. Cherry G and Vignoles A (2020). [‘What is the economic value of literacy and numeracy?’](#)

²⁷ Shanahan T and Lonigan CJ (2010). ‘The national early literacy panel report: summary, commentary, and reflections on policies and practices to improve children’s early literacy’ Educational Researcher: volume 39, issue 4, pages 279–285. Also see the small scale longitudinal studies by Grant M (2014). [‘The effects of a systematic synthetic phonics programme on reading, writing and spelling’](#)

²⁸ Gough PB and Tunmer WE (1986). [‘Decoding, reading and reading disability’](#) Remedial and Special Education: volume 7, issue 1, pages 6-10

page 17), consisting of two axes and four quadrants: a horizontal axis for word reading (decoding) processes and a vertical axis for language comprehension processes.

The national curriculum programmes of study for reading reflect the model, presented as two dimensions: 'word reading' and 'comprehension'.²⁹

Language comprehension

Comprehension does not refer to reading itself but, rather, to the way in which we make sense of words, sentences and the wider language we hear or read.

Language develops through interaction with others. Inevitably, by the time they start school, some children understand more and know more words than others, because of the quantity and quality of the interactions they have already had with adults and others. Children who begin school with a poor understanding of language will need considerable support to develop their spoken language.

Decoding (word reading)

Decoding refers to:

- reading unfamiliar words (words that have not been decoded before) by saying the sounds corresponding to the letters in the words and then blending the sounds together, either aloud or silently
- reading familiar words accurately and silently 'at a glance'³⁰, that is, no longer saying the sounds consciously.

This document uses the terms 'decoding' and 'word reading' interchangeably, as in Gough and Tunmer's original description of the Simple View of Reading.

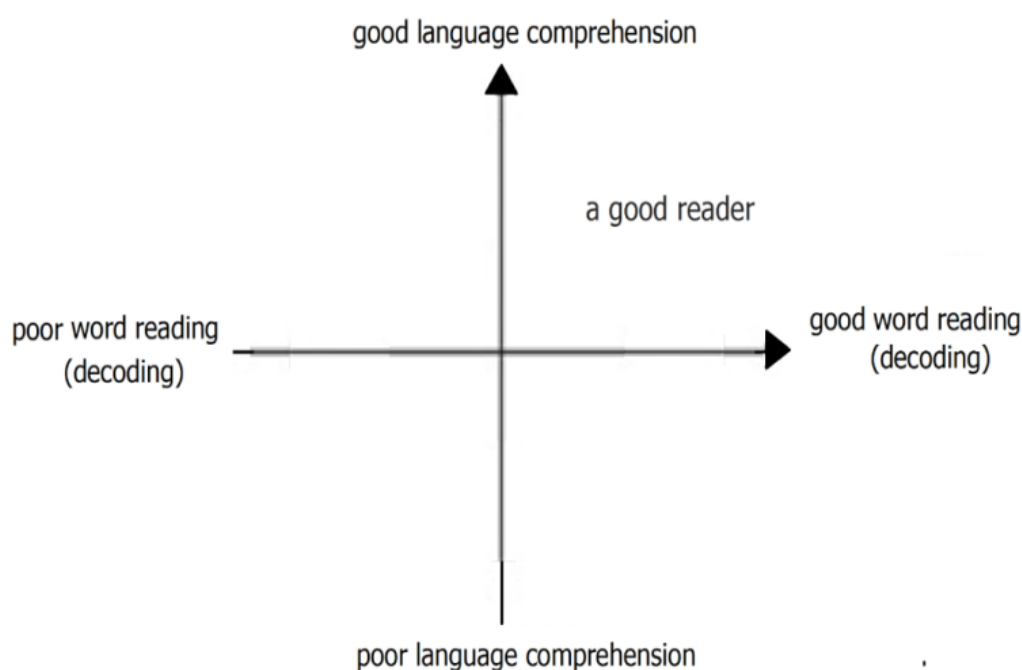
In contrast to spoken language, written language is a cultural invention. Most children do not develop the ability to read without direct teaching. For children who begin school with a poor understanding of language, being able to decode words is essential for equality, because their understanding of language, their vocabulary and their knowledge of the world will expand rapidly when they can read for themselves.

²⁹ Department for Education (2013). [‘The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013’](#) London: Department for Education

³⁰ 'at a glance' is the helpful term used by Daniel Willingham. It does not mean children should be taught to memorise whole words. Willingham D (2017). 'The reading mind' San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Children need both good language comprehension and good word reading to become good readers.

Figure 1: The knowledge of a good reader



Implications of the model for beginner readers

Word reading and language comprehension require different sorts of teaching.

When children start learning to read, the number of words they can decode accurately is too limited to broaden their vocabulary. Their understanding of language should therefore be developed through their listening and speaking, while they are taught to decode through phonics.

However, when they can read most words 'at a glance' and can decode unfamiliar words easily, they are free to think about the meaning of what they read. They can then begin to develop their understanding of language through their reading.

Implications of the model for beginners' writing

We might think of writing similarly. Composition might be considered as the reverse of language comprehension; encoding (spelling) is the reverse of decoding (word reading). Writing might therefore be described as the product of composition and transcription.

But before children can write independently, they need to be able to say (aloud or just to themselves) what they want to write. A wide spoken language gives them more that they can write about and more words for what they want to say. Their expressive and receptive language develops through talk and listening.

In learning phonics, children learn to spell familiar words accurately and how to form letters. When they can do this, and can spell any word in a way that is at least phonically plausible, they can begin to write down what they want to say.

These models and the following sections

What follows reflects these models of reading and writing, namely that:

- language comprehension and composition are developed by talking, listening to and talking about stories, and by learning poetry and songs ([Section 2](#))
- decoding and encoding can be taught through a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme ([Section 3](#)).

Section 2: Language comprehension

Developing talk

Young children typically gain several new words a day, acquiring vocabulary at an ‘astonishing rate’.³¹ Yet by the time they start school, some children will have heard millions more words than others.³² The number of words a child has heard and can speak by the age of three is a predictor of later language development, so these early vocabulary gains are critically important.³³

A language-rich environment is one in which adults talk with children throughout the day. The more children take part in conversations, the more they will understand once they can read and the more vocabulary and ideas they will have to draw on when they can write.

Spoken language runs through the national curriculum programmes of study for English and all seven areas of learning and development in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework.

Back and forth talk across the curriculum

Underpinning the reforms to the Early Years Foundation Stage is the aim of reducing the language gap between children from language-rich homes and others.³⁴ The progress of these children depends on adults engaging them in high-quality dialogue and direct teaching so that they can:

- articulate what they know and understand
- develop their knowledge across all areas of learning, using the vocabulary they need to support learning.

³¹ Oakhill J, Cain K & Elbro C (2015). ‘Understanding and teaching reading comprehension. A handbook’ Abingdon: Routledge.

³² One study found that children from higher-income homes will have heard 32 million more words than children from lower-income homes. A more recent conservative estimate gives a 4 million word gap at age four between the highest and lowest SES groups. See Hart B and Risley TR. [‘The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3’](#) American Educator: Spring 2003. Also see Jill Gikerson and others. [‘Mapping the Early Language Environment Using All-Day Recordings and Automated Analysis’](#) American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology: volume 26, issue 2, May 2017, pages 248-265

³³ Hart B and Risley TR. [‘The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3’](#) American Educator: Spring 2003

³⁴ Department for Education (2020). [‘Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. EYFS reforms early adopter version. July 2020’](#) London: Department for Education

Critical to this are children's back and forth interactions with adults:

[These] form the foundations for language and cognitive development. The number and quality of the conversations they have with adults and peers throughout the day in a language-rich environment is crucial.³⁵

These back and forth interactions involve the adult in:

- thinking out loud, modelling new language for children
- paying close attention to what the children say
- rephrasing and extending what the children say
- validating the children's attempts at using new vocabulary and grammar by rephrasing what children say if necessary
- asking closed and open questions
- answering the children's questions
- explaining why things happen
- deliberately connecting current and past events ('Do you remember when...?')
- providing models of accurate grammar
- extending children's vocabulary and explaining new words
- connecting one idea or action to another
- helping children to articulate ideas in well-formed sentences.

To develop and extend children's language takes careful, deliberate planning in each area of learning, with opportunities built in for plenty of repetition.

- What do we want children to know and think about?
- What vocabulary is associated with this knowledge and thinking?
- How can we engage the children in back and forth talk that supports their knowledge and thinking?
- What photos could we take that would reinforce the vocabulary and language after an activity or visit?
- Which books could be read aloud and shared before and afterwards?
- Which songs might introduce or reinforce the vocabulary?

For example, a class visit to a fire station might generate a range of vocabulary related to its different aspects – the [semantic](#) field or word field – such as the following.

³⁵ Department for Education (2020). [‘Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. EYFS reforms early adopter version. July 2020’](#) London: Department for Education

Semantic field	Examples
fire	blaze, flames, heat, smoke, plumes, extinguish
emergency	emergency, accident, harm, dangerous, trapped, (blue) light, siren
safety and rescue	protect, shield, escape, first aid, rescue, save, tackle
protective clothing	visor, helmet, gloves, soles, material
properties of materials	transparent, see-through, fire resistant, strong, tough, unbreakable, fireproof, protective, waterproof
equipment	fire engine, truck, reel, hose, ladder, turn-table, water, cutters, axe, air tanks, thermal imaging camera, torch
personal characteristics	brave, courageous, speedy, quick-thinking, daring, heroic

Following up the visit in the classroom, adults can reinforce the language and vocabulary: talking about the photographs taken on the visit, or recalling and naming specific features of the fire-fighters' clothes or the fire engine. For example:

'Do you remember why the firefighters have to wear special gloves? ... Yes, to keep their hands cool and protect them from the heat.

What did their gloves look like? ... That's right! That's a good word. They did look "stiff" but, actually, they said they were very comfortable.

Do you remember how they could bend their fingers easily in them? They could hold even the tiniest objects when they were wearing them.'

Once it has been introduced, opportunities arise to repeat and consolidate the vocabulary in different contexts, such as when describing the characteristics of a hero or heroine or exploring the properties of materials.³⁶

³⁶ The national curriculum year 1 programmes of study for science require pupils to be taught to 'describe the simple physical properties of a variety of everyday materials'.

The table above focuses on extending vocabulary related to a fire station visit. To give another example, on a woodland walk, adults might select from some of the following adjectives to focus on in back and forth talk with children: rough, bumpy, narrow, wide, curved, symmetrical, mottled, speckled, spiky, sharp, thorny, pointed, delicate, young. However, they might also make sure they use and reinforce specific [prepositions](#), such as between, underneath, up, down, inside, around and over. For example:

‘The oak tree bark has bumps like long fingers. Can you feel the deep lines between each bump?’

‘What does the acorn feel like? ... Yes, it is smooth, but it’s rough underneath.’

‘Lift the log up gently. What can you see underneath it? Can you see anything inside it? Put it down very gently.’

‘Look, Harry is wrapping his arms around the huge trunk.’

‘Let’s climb over this big log. Who is going to climb over it first?’

Later, by making a book from the photographs taken on the walk, teachers can revisit the language used and the children can learn to describe the events in greater detail on each ‘reading’.

‘What did we do?’

‘What can you see in this photo?’

‘Do you remember when we all climbed over the big log?’

‘And here’s Miraj, running his fingers across the rough bark. Look, you can see that the large bumps had even more tiny bumps on them.’

The Early Learning Goal, the Natural World, refers explicitly to children ‘drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class’.³⁷

More generally, sharing and discussing pictures in non-fiction books offers opportunities to broaden children’s experiences beyond the immediate and the local. For example, books about space, other countries, animals, exploration, and

³⁷ Department for Education (2020). [‘Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. EYFS reforms early adopter version. July 2020’](#) London: Department for Education

courageous people from a range of occupations and ethnic backgrounds are rich sources of vocabulary and knowledge.

As well as building important knowledge, this extends their familiarity with words that support understanding across domains. Enriching and widening children's vocabulary will support later reading comprehension.³⁸

Extending children's familiarity with words across domains is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who might not otherwise meet such vocabulary.

Listening

Children need to be taught when to listen, to know what good listening looks like, and they need praise. Ways of supporting good listening include:

- Deciding on a signal to alert children to listen.
- Showing children what good listening looks like through the teacher's own behaviour:
 - 'Wait a minute, I need to listen carefully.'
 - 'Let's be quiet so I can concentrate on what you're saying.'
- Reinforcing and praising good listening, with examples:
 - 'I could tell you were going to say something interesting: I could see you were listening carefully and concentrating.'
 - 'You must have listened carefully during assembly yesterday to have remembered that!'
 - 'Well done for telling everyone what your partner just shared with you – good listening.'
 - 'Well done for using that special word from the story yesterday. I am pleased you listened hard.'

Talking with a partner and giving feedback

Teachers need to help children articulate their ideas in well-formed sentences, by scaffolding, extending and developing their ideas.

³⁸ Department for Education (2020). [‘Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. EYFS reforms early adopter version. July 2020’](#) London: Department for Education

They all need to practise their skills of listening to, talking with a partner and giving feedback to the group. Learning the routines of back and forth talk is particularly important for children who have not experienced such talk before they come to school.

Pairing children with their partners, ready for responding together, encourages them to discuss a question, problem or idea and agree on their joint response. Because their answer belongs to both of them and they will have practised it first, they grow in confidence when asked to respond in front of others. The teacher can observe the pairs talking and select those with helpful answers to develop the discussion.

If the teacher chooses which pair feeds back to the group, rather than responding only to pairs who might raise their hands, this can help to make sure that all the pairs are ready to contribute. If children think they might not be selected, they might not engage fully. By establishing strong routines for responding to questions and suggestions, children will be more likely to pay attention because they know they will be expected to respond; the teacher will know what they have understood, because they will have listened carefully to what the children have been saying and will have heard any misconceptions.

The following are suggestions for managing effective pair work.

Guidance for managing talk in pairs	
Sequence	Guidance
Ask a question.	Ask questions about what happened before asking questions about why.
Ask children to talk with their partners.	Listen carefully to identify which pairs might give feedback later and to pinpoint misconceptions.
Take feedback from one or two pairs.	Ask one partner to feed back to the group. Choose a different partner each time.
Repeat what children say and/or rephrase their response.	Make sure that all children know what was said. Take the opportunity to model correct grammar (see below).
Extend children's ideas.	Think aloud as you extend the idea, so the discussion moves forward.

Ask the children to repeat some sentences chorally.	As you extend the sentence, gradually add more detail and ask them to repeat the sentence at each step in unison.
Ask children, sometimes, to build on the ideas of others.	Repeat the child's idea and ask partners to turn to each other again to discuss the idea.
Model accurate grammar, particularly irregular past tenses and plurals.	Avoid correcting children in a way that makes them feel they have said something wrong. Model a correct response rather than asking them to repeat the correction.

Speech, language and communication needs

For children who have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), the strategies already described should be even more focused (see [Appendix 2: Supporting children's thinking](#)). In particular, noise should be reduced where possible and the children seated where they have the best chance of hearing and paying attention. Reducing noise is important for all children (see page 50).

Help is available for schools to identify and support children who have speech, language and communication needs (see page 10).

Practices that can reduce interaction with children

Collecting evidence

Teachers do not have to collect and record evidence of children's achievements for the Early Years Foundation Stage profile.

Ofsted reported in 2017 that some leaders and staff during the course of its survey were spending teaching time 'on collecting and recording children's achievements, often through photographs, captions and written notes'. Inspectors found that:

... with the exception of literacy and numeracy, many teachers were devising tasks simply to tick off and record elements of the early learning goals rather than developing a proper plan that focused on progression in learning.³⁹

³⁹ Ofsted (2017). ['Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

Observation puts the adult in a state of judgement rather than interaction. Every moment spent in observing, recording, collecting and compiling evidence takes teachers' time away from teaching, including talking.

'Hands up'

Asking children to respond to 'hands up' is a common part of schools' teaching but it can cut down opportunities for learning and talk.

It might be beneficial to reflect on 'hands up' because children from families who are accustomed to talking already have the confidence and oral skills to grasp opportunities to speak, and will engage themselves readily in questions and answers. Other children, however, might hold back from responding, including shy ones, those who are new to learning English and those whose oral skills are less well developed. As a result, the language gap widens further.

If six children raise their hands and only one is chosen to answer, the other five are excluded, even if they had something worthwhile to say, while 24 further children may stay silent altogether (see page 23, [Talking with a partner and giving feedback](#)).

Noisy environments

When children are learning to read and write, a noisy environment makes it difficult for them to hear what the teacher and other children are saying, particularly for those who have hearing difficulties or impairments, those with speech, language and communication needs and those who find it difficult to pay attention. If these children cannot hear clearly, their chances of responding are immediately limited. Calm classrooms give them the best chance to interact and make progress in reading and writing.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ As well as teacher experience reflecting this, there is some research about the impact of noise on learning in these two studies: Erickson LC and Newman RS (2017). ['Influences of background noise on infants and children'](#) and Marsh JE and others (2017). ['Failing to get the gist of what's being said: background noise impairs higher-order cognitive processing'](#) Frontiers in Psychology: volume 6.

Audit: Language comprehension

	Current practice
A clearly defined curriculum extends children's language and vocabulary in each of the Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning, and in year 1 for each subject.	
Children are taught routines for back and forth talk.	
Activities are used effectively to develop children's language.	
Non-fiction books related to experiences and activities are read with children and made available for them to share at school and at home.	
Effective procedures identify and support children with speech, language and communications needs (see Appendix 2: Supporting children's thinking).	
Teachers are aware of practices that could reduce interactions with children.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Storytimes

Choosing books to read aloud to children

The decisions we make about how we educate our children are rooted in our beliefs and attitudes. The challenge is to reflect them in the stories and non-fiction children listen to and, later, in what they read for themselves.

Literature is probably the most powerful medium through which children have a chance to inhabit the lives of those who are like them. All children need to imagine themselves as the main protagonist in a story: celebrating a birthday, going shopping, being ill, having a tantrum, having their hair cut, worrying about a new sibling, being the superhero, going camping, visiting the seaside and having adventures.

Children also need to learn about the lives of those whose experiences and perspectives differ from their own. Choosing stories and non-fiction that explore such differences begins to break down a sense of otherness that often leads to division and prejudice.

The challenge is to make sure that the right books support all children to thrive, whatever their background. Teachers need to choose those that will engage all of them emotionally. As Maryanne Wolf wrote:

We know that emotional engagement is the tipping point between leaping into the reading life or remaining in a childhood bog where reading is endured only as a means to other ends.⁴¹

Teachers are the best people to promote a love of reading because children, particularly young children, care what their teachers think about the stories they read aloud. If teachers show they love the story, the children are likely to respond in the same way. However, this does not mean that teachers should choose only the books they loved as children.

These are suggested questions to help choose suitable books for reading aloud. A single book is unlikely to meet all the criteria below, although a full selection should do so.

⁴¹ Wolf M (2008). 'Proust and the squid. The story and science of the reading brain' Cambridge: Icon Books

Choosing books

Does the book:

- elicit a strong response – curiosity, anger, excitement, laughter, empathy?
- have a strong narrative that will sustain multiple readings?
- extend children's vocabulary?
- have illustrations which are engaging and reflect children from all backgrounds and cultures?
- help children connect with who they are?
- help children to understand the lives of people whose experiences and perspectives may be different from their own?

Core 'read aloud' stories and non-fiction

Use 'Choosing books' (above) as a guide.

- Identify a core set of stories for each year group.
- Consider a range of stories set in the UK and around the world, both traditional and modern, as well as non-fiction.
- Refresh the list regularly, at least once a year, as new books are published, and new teachers arrive, to avoid its being set in stone.
- Encourage teachers to familiarise themselves with the stories their class will know from previous years.
- Supplement the core 'read aloud' stories with others of the teacher's choice.
- Consider sharing the list with parents, and explaining its purpose, so they could buy or borrow the books.

Living the story

Everybody loves a good story. Even small children who have difficulty focusing in class will sit with rapt attention in the presence of a good storyteller. But stories are not just fun. There are important cognitive consequences of the story format. Our minds treat stories differently than other types of material. People find stories interesting, easy to understand, and easy to remember.⁴²

⁴² Willingham D (2017). 'The reading mind' San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

When teachers read aloud to a class, they try to replicate for children what it feels like to have someone's undivided attention while sharing a story. This is why reading aloud should be a priority.

Thriving on repetition

It is not just the number of different stories children listen to that matters. On each re-reading, their familiarity with a story deepens and, with that, comes a greater emotional engagement. Wolf quotes the writer Ann Fadiman when she reflects on what re-readings bring:

‘the former [reading] had more velocity; the latter had more depth.’⁴³

When children ask for a story to be re-read, in effect they are asking for another chance to explore the language, the characters and their feelings, and to relive the emotions they felt on the first reading. They hear the same words read in the same way and gain a sense of comfort in knowing what follows. They wait for their favourite bits, ready to join in or ready to be scared, even when they already know what happens. Their attachment to the story equips them to retell it and, when they have learnt to read, encourages them to read it for themselves.

Preparation and practice

The main aim of storytelling is to breathe life into the words, capturing children's attention rather than simply entertaining them.

Reading aloud therefore requires preparation. How to emphasise particular words, phrases and sentences needs planning so that the children understand the story as a whole. Rehearsal and frequent practice also improve the story-teller's confidence.

Consider the following in preparing a reading:

- voice(s)
- pauses
- word meanings
- asides
- memorable words and phrases.

[Appendix 3: For teachers: preparing to read a story](#) contains further guidance on preparation. Filming some reading aloud can be helpful, because teachers are often their own best critics.

⁴³ Quoted in Wolf M (2018). 'Reader, come home. The reading brain in a digital world' New York: HarperCollins

First and subsequent readings

Before a first reading starts, the teacher can build up children's anticipation during the day: 'I've got a new story by Elizabeth Laird. It's called "Gobblechops"⁴⁴. I'm really looking forward to reading it with you'; 'Let's clear up a bit earlier today, so I've got time to read the new story.'

Once the children have been told the name of the author and the title, and the story has been introduced, the reading should start: 'This is a story about Amir, whose dad gives him advice on how to deal with a monster under his bed.' The first reading should be left to weave its own magic, with no questions, no explanations and no requests for the children to predict what might happen.

On the second reading, asides, voices and actions can explain the meanings of new words in context.

If the story is read aloud in a similar way each time, the children can gradually join in with particular words and phrases, and even respect the pauses.

When children know the story well

Dramatising the story can be motivating, once the children know it well, and it can hold their interest and focus.

Dramatization of stories is unique in that it requires the basic teaching skills of listening, observing closely, and harnessing the imagination of everyone in exploring new ideas.⁴⁵

Role play can also help children to reflect on how a character might think, feel and behave at key moments, and explore motives and intentions. Asking all the children to adopt the same role at the same time is an opportunity for everyone to participate. For example, saying 'Hello, wolves! Show me your paws, show me your twitching nose, show me your sharp pointy teeth...' puts all of them quickly into role as the wolf, not just wondering about pretending to be one, which might be the case with simply saying, 'Imagine you are the wolf'.

The following questions for role play are designed to explore a character's motives. With minor adaptations, they can be used for any story and directed to any character in it.

⁴⁴ Laird E and Lucander J (2019). 'Gobblechops' London: Tiny Owl Publishing

⁴⁵ Cremin T, Flewitt R, Mardell B and Swann J editors (2017). 'Storytelling in early childhood: Enriching language, literacy and classroom culture' Abingdon: Routledge

Role play – example questions

(Little Red Riding Hood)

OK, wolves. Little Red Riding Hood is coming towards you...

What do you want?

How will you get it?

What are you thinking?

How do you feel?

What are your options?

What will you do?

What will you say?

Using stories and rhymes to develop vocabulary and language

Stories are a rich source of language – vocabulary and syntax. Good writers know how to entice young children into their texts. Through listening to repeated readings, and talking about what they have heard, the children have multiple exposures to vocabulary and the language of stories. Continued talk about words, as well as opportunities to use them, helps children to absorb the language. Teachers can also emphasise memorable words and phrases (see [Appendix 3: For teachers: preparing to read a story](#)).

Through stories, children encounter vocabulary that they are unlikely to hear in everyday conversation but will come across in writing, once they can read for themselves. Isobel Beck has called such vocabulary ‘second tier’ words.⁴⁶ All the following vocabulary, for example, occurs in a single picture book:

bellowed, startled, barged, sneaked, grinned, dreadful, stomped, refused.⁴⁷

Similarly, another story uses all the following:

⁴⁶ Beck IL, McKeown MG and Kucan L (2013). ‘Bringing words to life: robust vocabulary instruction’ New York: The Guilford Press

⁴⁷ Willis J and others (2017). ‘I’m in charge’ London: Nosy Crow

explore, discovered, wondered, enormous, barely, unexpected, shrink, tumbled.⁴⁸

A robust approach to vocabulary involves directly explaining the meanings of words along with thought-provoking, playful, and interactive follow-up.⁴⁹

Teachers can explore these words and explain them – not just in the context of the story but also as children might use or hear them in their own lives, as in these examples of ‘startled’, ‘barge’ and ‘bellowed’:

Everyone was startled when the balloon popped at her party.

Tanim was startled by the lion’s roar at the zoo.

It is always startling when the fire alarm rings in school.

Don’t barge past your sister, please – there are plenty of biscuits.

Don’t barge past those younger children, please.

My mum bellowed when she saw the paint on the carpet.

The team bellowed when Jodie deliberately pushed Anya over.

Mr Banks bellowed at the children when they ran next to the swimming pool.

Book corners

The books themselves are the most important aspect of any book corner. It should be the words of the stories and not the props that transport children to different worlds: the mysterious forest, the dark and dripping cave, the moated castle. Well-chosen books should capture children’s imagination to such an extent that they become unaware of whether they are sitting on a beanbag, an ordinary classroom chair or a bench in the book corner. Time might therefore be better spent on selecting, displaying and promoting the books in the book corner than on decorating it.

Ideally, every book corner should be a mini-library, a place for children to browse the best books, revisit the ones that the teacher has read to them, and borrow books to read or retell at home. Every child should be able to spend time in their book corner. Children will want to share books with others, especially if they are ‘books in common’ that they know their friends have heard before. They will also be interested to look at books which feature well-known fictional characters or are new and tempting.

⁴⁸ Percival T (2018). ‘Ruby’s worry’ London: Bloomsbury

⁴⁹ See, for example, the activities described in Chapter 4 of Beck’s ‘Bringing words to life’.

Every book in a book corner should be worth reading aloud. The focus should always be on what would make the biggest difference to children's reading habits, including:

- not displaying too many books at once
- refreshing the display
- making the books attractive and easy for children to find.

The more choice that is presented, the less children are likely to engage. Bookshops, for instance, reduce the number of books on display by using outward-facing shelving and tables, so customers can find new books easily. They also refresh their displays to highlight topics, titles or authors they hope will attract customers.

Teachers might consider displaying only the books that have been read aloud to children, such as 30 or 40 storybooks. Some children in the class will only be able to retell the story; others will be able to re-read it for themselves. Different books can be introduced gradually, including those the children will have heard during story-time. Ideally, books the children have listened to recently should be displayed at their eye level on outward-facing shelves. At the start of the school year, it is also worth including around 20 of the children's favourites from the previous year. These can occupy lower shelves or boxes. Books that have been previously read could be stored in extra boxes for children to read and retell again, at school and at home.

Children could be involved in returning books to the central library or other area, so that they can see that their book corner is being refreshed and replenished. A book that is dull and dog-eared should be removed, unless it is particularly well loved.

The ['decodable' books](#) (page 46) matched to the school's phonic programme are best stored separately so that teachers can select from them, both for children's reading in class and to take home.

Reading with children at home

Children benefit hugely from listening to family members reading aloud to them. Teachers might consider making a film for parents to illustrate the benefits of sharing and talking about stories aloud and how teachers read stories aloud to their own class.

Audit: Storytimes

	Current practice
The daily time for stories is a priority. Teachers prepare the story reading so they can capture children's attention.	
Extra small-group storytimes are timetabled for children with speech, language and communication needs.	
Staff have a wide knowledge of traditional and contemporary children's literature.	
High-quality stories to read aloud to children, including traditional and modern stories, are organised, listed and shared.	
In stories and other books, children encounter others whose experiences and perspectives are both similar to and different from their own.	
Teachers re-read stories and talk with children about them to build familiarity and understanding.	
Some stories are dramatised with children when they know the story well.	
'Second tier' vocabulary is explored in wider contexts, once children know a story well.	
Books are made available for parents to share with their children at home.	
Teachers explain to parents the benefits of reading aloud at home .	
Book corners are appealing to children and uncluttered.	

Children have time to browse, and re-read or retell stories that have been read to them.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Poetry and rhymes

Through enjoying rhymes, poems and songs, and reciting poems or parts of longer poems together as a class, teachers can build children's strong emotional connection to language.

Poetry in language-rich classrooms builds shared memories for all children.

The predictability of rhymes in poems and songs also helps children to memorise and re-use newly acquired words and phrases.

Learning poetry and songs using 'call and response' allows children to join in gradually. Each repetition strengthens their vocabulary, embedding new words.

Word knowledge exists on a continuum. As each word is acquired in the young child's lexicon, it moves from the barest familiarity to an in-depth knowledge of that word, with all manner of associations and contexts.

As the children say each word of a poem, the [cadence](#) of the lines helps to convey the meaning and the mood. Children pick up the rhythm and, by speaking more slowly, gain awareness and control of their voices.

Learning rhymes, poems and songs is an end in itself. However, learning poems including traditional nursery rhymes such as 'Hickory Dickory Dock', 'Little Jack Horner' and 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' can also heighten children's awareness of the individual sounds within words through [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) and [rhyme](#). For instance, because rhymes share the same end sound, they alert children to the

contrast of the [phonemes](#) at the start of each word, as well as the repeated phonemes at the end, as in 'dock'/'clock', 'Horner'/'corner' and 'Incy'/'Wincy'.⁵⁰

Choosing poems

Teachers should identify a core set of poems for each year group, including rhyming poems, poems where alliteration is a strong feature, word games, traditional songs and rhymes, nonsense rhymes, and poems that are particularly rhythmical. Those chosen should be able to withstand a lot of repetition, elicit a strong response and extend children's vocabulary in different areas of learning.

Audit: Poetry, rhymes and songs

	Current practice
The daily poetry, rhyme and singing session is a priority.	
Poems, rhymes and songs for each year group are listed.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

⁵⁰ In 'Incy'/'Wincy', the rhyme is made by adding a phoneme (/w/) to the start of the second word rather than by contrasting the two initial sounds. Other examples of rhymes made by adding one initial phoneme are 'argy-bargy' and 'okey-dokey'.

Section 3: Word reading and spelling

Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics

To teach word reading and spelling successfully, teachers need to understand the principles underpinning the teaching of word reading (decoding) and spelling (encoding). This should include understanding how the [alphabetic code](#) (page 39) of English represents the sounds ([phonemes](#)) of the language with single letters and groups of letters ([graphemes](#)).

Phonemes

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that signals a contrast in meaning. For example:

- the difference between the words ‘gap’ and ‘cap’ is the difference between the phonemes /g/ and /k/ at the start of each word⁵¹
- the difference between ‘fine’ and ‘fight’ is the difference between the phonemes /n/ and /t/ at the end
- the difference between ‘stale’ and ‘stile’ is the difference between the phonemes /ae/ and /igh/ in the middle of each word.

English has about 20 vowel phonemes and 24 consonant phonemes.⁵²

Graphemes

A grapheme is a letter or group of letters that usually represents a single phoneme. A grapheme can consist of:

- one letter, for example, ‘b’ – in big
- two letters (a [digraph](#) or a [split digraph](#)), for example, ‘sh’ in ship, ‘a-e’ in make
- three letters (a [trigraph](#)), for example, ‘igh’ in light
- four letters, for example, ‘ough’ in bough, ‘eigh’ in weight.

In a few cases, one grapheme represents two phonemes, for example in the word ‘uniform’, the first grapheme ‘u’ represents /y/ and /oo/.

⁵¹ This document shows individual letters between single quote marks and sounds between slashes. For example, the letter ‘m’ usually represents the sound /m/.

⁵² Regional pronunciations mean that the number of phonemes cannot be fixed precisely. For example, in the south of England, ‘u’ in ‘put’ and ‘u’ in ‘but’ correspond to two different phonemes, but in the north ‘put’ and ‘but’ rhyme, so ‘u’ in ‘put’ and ‘u’ in ‘but’ correspond to the same phoneme.

The number of graphemes in a word usually corresponds to the number of phonemes – hence the term '[grapheme-phoneme correspondence](#)' (GPC). To simplify the language for parents and children, some programmes use the terms 'letter-sound correspondences' or 'letter-sounds' to refer to GPCs.

The alphabetic code

Letters are a code, a way of writing down the sounds of speech.

Phonemes are the *basis* of the code, and the letters *are* the code.⁵³

English has a complex alphabetic code: 26 alphabet letters have to do duty, singly or in combination, to represent the 44 or so sounds ([phonemes](#)) of English and they do so inconsistently. In Spanish, German and Welsh, for instance, one grapheme almost always represents the same phoneme. English, however, has more than 70 common correspondences between phonemes and graphemes and hundreds of rare ones.

History of the English alphabetic code

Our complex alphabetic code has come about because English has absorbed many different languages (and, to a small extent, alphabets) through religion, invasion, trade and other reasons. The language continues to change, absorbing more words and generating entirely new vocabulary.

Since, at first, people spelt words as they said them or heard them and the pronunciation of words has changed over time, it is not surprising that many different spellings have existed for a single word. The word 'night', for instance, has been spelt as *naecht*, *naeht*, *nahht*, *nyht*, *nycht*, *nieht*, *nighte* – and in other ways.

Current spellings may also reflect a word's origins. The word 'yacht' was possibly originally a Dutch word. The sounds we hear now are: /y/ /o/ /t/. The first and last sounds are straightforward to spell; it is only the spelling of the middle sound that is unusual, because 'ach' is now pronounced /o/.⁵⁴

Dr Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 was probably the most influential factor in the reforming and standardising of English spelling, although it did bring some issues.

⁵³ McGuinness D (2004). 'Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tell Us about How to Teach Reading' Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, page 13

⁵⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary refers to this word's spellings as having been 'various and erratic' since its first recorded appearance in print in the 16th century.

The words the language has absorbed is one reason why, in reading and in spelling English, the relationship of graphemes to phonemes is like this:

1. one grapheme usually represents a single phoneme⁵⁵
2. different graphemes can be used to represent the same phoneme
3. a grapheme can represent different phonemes in different words (although this is less common).

This table gives examples.

Summary table English alphabetic code		
1. One grapheme usually represents a single phoneme		
Description of example	Grapheme	Example word
Graphemes (of one, two, three and four letters) represent a single phoneme ⁵⁶	b	<u>b</u> ig
	sh	fi <u>sh</u>
	air	h <u>air</u>
	augh	ca <u>ugh</u> t
2. Different graphemes can be used to represent the same phoneme		
Description of example	Grapheme	Example word
Graphemes (of one or more vowel and consonant letters) represent the single phoneme /oe/	o	<u>o</u> ld
	oa	bo <u>o</u> t
	ow	cro <u>o</u>
	oe	to <u>o</u>
	o-e	sto <u>o</u>
	ough	dough <u>o</u>

⁵⁵ An exception is 'x', representing the two phonemes /k/ and /s/, as in 'fox': /f/ /o/ /k/ /s/.

⁵⁶ Note that a [consonant cluster](#) such as 's' 't' and 'r' at the start of 'street' consists of three separate phonemes: /s/, /t/ and /r/.

	oh	<u>oh</u>
	eau	plate <u>au</u>
3. A grapheme can represent different phonemes in different words (less common)		
Description of example	Grapheme	Phoneme
The grapheme 'ea' represents three different phonemes in three unrelated words	<u>ne</u> at	/ee/
	h <u>ea</u> d	/e/
	gr <u>ea</u> t	/a-e/

Phonics gives children the key to unlocking this alphabetic code for their reading and spelling. This is why teaching phonics for reading and spelling is a cornerstone of the programmes of study for English in the national curriculum.

Many publishers produce one or more alphabetic code charts for classroom display, illustrating the correspondences between phonemes and graphemes.

The appendices include an [alphabetic code chart \(Appendix 4\)](#) for adults, listing the main phonemes in English, with example words.

Synthetic phonics

Phonics is a body of knowledge that is necessary for children to learn to read and spell. Because of the complex alphabetic code of English, children are taught explicitly the correspondences between letters and sounds (graphemes and phonemes), as well as the skill of blending the individual sounds together to read. The term 'synthetic' phonics refers to the verb 'synthesise', meaning 'to combine'. The skill of segmenting words into their individual sounds is needed for spelling.

Word reading and spelling are 'reversible processes'.⁵⁷ Reading involves blending sounds to say a whole word; spelling involves segmenting a whole word to identify the sounds in it.

Evidence shows that teaching phonics is the best way to teach children to read, e.g. the EEF considers phonics to be one of the most secure and best-evidenced areas

⁵⁷ Rose J (2006). ['Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report'](#) Department for Education and Skills

of pedagogy, recommending all schools use a systematic approach to teaching it. There is convincing evidence of the value of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), including the seven-year study by Johnston and Watson undertaken in Clackmannanshire, published in 2005, which has been especially influential in England.⁵⁸

In the United States, a seminal national study in 2000 described how:

... synthetic phonics programs produced stronger growth in reading than control programs in most of the different reader groups...

The impact was 'significantly greater for at-risk kindergartners and first graders'. The authors concluded that 'synthetic phonics programs were especially effective for younger, at-risk readers'.⁵⁹ The same alphabetic code underlies reading and writing in English regardless of differences between children.

In England, the national curriculum requires maintained schools to teach reading using systematic phonics.⁶⁰ When inspecting the curriculum, Ofsted's inspectors evaluate the extent to which the 'teaching [of] early reading and synthetic phonics is systematic and ensures that all children learn to read words and simple sentences accurately by the end of Reception'.⁶¹

Decoding (word reading)

To [decode words](#) (page 16), children are taught to look at [graphemes](#) in written words from left to right and to say each corresponding [phoneme](#) in turn. Then they blend the phonemes to say the whole word.

Children:

1. see the written word 'cat'
2. say the corresponding three phonemes /k/ /a/ /t/
3. blend the three phonemes to say the word 'cat'.

⁵⁸ Johnston R. and Watson J (2005). 'The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment: a seven year longitudinal study' Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Central Research Unit. Also see <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/phonics/technical-appendix/>

⁵⁹ Shriver EK (2000). National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. 'Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: reports of the subgroups (00-4754)' Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office

⁶⁰ Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

⁶¹ Ofsted (2021). ['School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

Children:

1. see the written word 'sheep'
2. say the corresponding three phonemes /sh/ /ee/ /p/
3. blend the three phonemes to say the word 'sheep'.

The pronunciation of some words might need tweaking once the sound has been pronounced. For example, a child reading 'mountain' for the first time might pronounce the 'ai' as a long sound, but then recognise they have heard the word and pronounce it more naturally.

Many children need extra support to blend words with [consonant clusters](#), particularly when they occur at the start of words. Consonant clusters (also known as 'adjacent consonants' or 'consonant blends') consist of separate phonemes and children should be taught to pronounce each one before blending them.

Example word	Phonemes in word (total)	Phonemes in consonant cluster
s-p-i-n	4	/s/ /p/
c-l-u-m-p	5	/c/ /l/ and /m/ /p/
ch-o-m-p	4	/m/ /p/
s-p-l-a-sh	5	/s/ /p/ /l/
s-t-r-ee-t	5	/s/ /t/ /r/
th-r-ee	3	/th/ /r/
f-l-air	3	/f/ /l/

To support children to blend phonemes into words, it helps if teachers pronounce the sounds as purely and clearly as possible (see [Appendix 5: Pronouncing phonemes](#)). SSP programmes provide guidance.

Encoding (spelling)

To encode words, children are taught to identify the phonemes in spoken words first. This is also referred to as 'segmenting' spoken words. Then they write the graphemes that represent the phonemes.

Children:

1. hear the spoken word 'dog'
2. say 'dog' – /d/ /o/ /g/
3. write the three corresponding graphemes 'd', 'o', 'g' to spell the word 'dog'.

Children:

1. hear the spoken word 'goat'
2. say 'goat' – /g/ /oe/ /t/
3. write the three corresponding graphemes, 'g', 'oa', 't' to spell the word 'goat'.

It is more difficult for children to spell 'goat' than 'dog', because the sound /oe/ has different common spellings from which they must choose.

Children learn to read more quickly than they learn to spell correctly. This is why their progress in reading must not be held back by whether or not they can spell accurately. The national curriculum also says that reading and spelling should be taught alongside one another, 'so that pupils understand that they can read back words they have spelt'.⁶²

The more graphemes children learn to read and write, the more words they will be able to read and spell, and, as they decode unfamiliar words, they encounter new vocabulary.

Young readers encounter words that they have not seen before much more frequently than experienced readers do, and they may not know the meaning of some of these. Practice at reading such words by sounding and blending can provide opportunities not only for pupils to develop confidence in their decoding skills, but also for teachers to explain the meaning and thus develop pupils' vocabulary.⁶³

Phonics continues to play an important role in spelling, even after key stage 1, because 'teachers should still draw pupils' attention to GPCs that do and do not fit in with what has been taught so far' in terms of spelling.⁶⁴

⁶² Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

⁶³ Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

⁶⁴ Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

As they are taught to spell, children have opportunities to practise writing the letters they have been shown how to form.

Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programmes

Synthetic phonic programmes have one thing in common: they teach children GPCs, to blend phonemes into spoken words and segment spoken words into phonemes. However, programmes use programme-specific systems and terminology such as actions, mnemonics, prompts, key words and routines to teach knowledge and skills. It is important not to confuse children by mixing material from different programmes or across different classrooms – hence the phrase ‘fidelity to the programme’. For example, one programme might use the term ‘[split digraph](#)’, while another might refer to ‘magic e’ for the same vowel GPC in a word such as ‘late’.

Teaching grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs)

Programme writers select which GPCs they are going to prioritise for teaching, as well as their order, so that the GPCs generate the most words at each stage of the programme.

Most programmes start with a simple code: approximately one grapheme for each of the 44 or so phonemes (maybe including a few common alternative spellings such as ‘c’, ‘k’ and ‘ck’ for the sound /k/).

A complex code follows, starting with the most common alternative graphemes. As the programme introduces more graphemes, the number of words a child can read increases rapidly.

Some programmes continue to teach phonics for spelling, once children can read, including teaching further [morphemes](#), as well as GPCs.

Common exception words

Programmes include a few [common exception words](#) to enable children to read texts. These words are kept to a minimum in the early stages, for example:

said to was I the me no of all he you
they she we are my be some so were go no

The national curriculum refers to these as ‘common exception words’ (sometimes referred to as ‘tricky words’), because they contain GPCs that are unusual or have not yet been taught. Children are taught to read and spell these by noting the part that is an exception to what they have been taught so far. For example, in the word ‘said’, ‘s’ and ‘d’ correspond to the phonemes /s/ and /d/ as usual, but ‘ai’ corresponds to the phoneme /e/, which is unusual.

High frequency words

Children should not be asked to learn lists of high frequency words. They can read most of these in the usual way, by saying the sounds and blending them, when they have learnt the GPCs in the words, e.g. 'mum' and 'came'. Synthetic phonics programmes teach others systematically as exception words, e.g. 'said' and 'to'.

Capital and lower-case letters

Programmes teach that each lower-case letter has a corresponding capital letter; they share the letter name and represent the same sound. Children are taught, for example, that both 'a' and 'A' are called /æ/ and are pronounced /a/. Some programmes teach the names of letters only once children have learnt to say the sounds.

'Decodable' books and texts

Experienced readers can decode the specialist words in a book about advanced physics, even if they cannot understand them. However, most texts are not decodable for children who are beginning to learn to read.

The national curriculum says that pupils should be taught to:

... read aloud accurately books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words.⁶⁵

This is why schools should invest in books that have been carefully structured in cumulative steps for children learning to read, so that they can decode every word as their knowledge of the alphabetic code increases. These books are often referred to simply as 'decodable' books.

⁶⁵ Department for Education (2013). ['The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013'](#) London: Department for Education

Audit: Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics

	Current practice
Teachers understand the nature of the English alphabetic code.	
Teachers understand the principles underpinning a programme of synthetic phonics.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Teaching a systematic programme

Daily phonics sessions should begin as soon as children start their Reception year. Learning to read and write letters develops [phonemic awareness](#) rapidly. It seems easier for children to identify phonemes in words when they know how they correspond to letters, because letters provide visible and concrete symbols for sounds.⁶⁶

Phonics sessions might be only ten minutes long in the first few days. However, by the end of Reception children will need about an hour a day to consolidate previous learning, learn new content and practise and apply what they have learnt, maybe split into different sessions for different activities.

High-quality class or group teaching is an efficient and effective way of ensuring good progress for the majority of children, 'given the expense and impracticality of

⁶⁶ Some evidence supports using letters from an early stage, including 'PA [phonemic awareness] instruction with letters produced larger effects on PA and reading than instruction without letters', Ehri LC and others (2001). '[Phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis](#)' Reading Research Quarterly: volume 36, number 3, page 255. Also see Johnston R and Watson J (2004). 'Accelerating the development of reading, spelling and phonemic awareness skills in initial readers' Reading and writing: an interdisciplinary journal: volume 17, number 4, pages 327–357

delivering instruction individually'.⁶⁷ This should not undermine, however, the value of one-to-one or small-group support for the few children who need extra help to [keep up](#) (page 66).

When teachers are engaging and motivating, children mirror their teacher's mood and attitude, pay attention and enjoy learning. Teachers should:

- be clear about objectives for any session and make sure that the children understand them (e.g. 'By the end of this week you will all be able to read these sounds; today we are learning the first one.')
- expect all children to participate throughout phonics sessions, for example by using 'call and response'
- make the most of the time for teaching and use activities that maximise the number of words children read and spell
- make sure that children practise using the knowledge they have been taught in previous lessons until they can use it automatically, thus freeing up their capacity to learn new knowledge
- support the children to connect the new knowledge with their previous learning
- demonstrate new learning in bite-sized chunks
- ensure children are given opportunities to apply what they have learnt
- praise the children for working hard and paying attention, being specific about what they have done well
- use assessment to determine next steps clearly, including identifying children who might need immediate extra support.⁶⁸

Direct teaching

All children should take part in high-quality phonics sessions. For some of the time, the teacher should teach directly. All the children should participate by listening and responding, and by practising and applying what they are learning.

For reading, children should:

- revise GPCs taught in earlier sessions
- be taught new GPCs
- practise reading words containing those GPCs

⁶⁷ Ehri LC and others (2001). 'Systematic phonics instruction helps students learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis' Review of Educational Research: volume 71, number 3, pages 393–447

⁶⁸ Ofsted (2021). '[School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005](#)' Manchester: Ofsted

- be taught how to read common exception words
- practise reading 'decodable' phrases, sentences and books that match the GPCs and exception words they already know.

For writing (spelling and handwriting), children should:

- practise segmenting spoken words into their individual sounds
- choose which letter or letters to represent each sound
- practise a correct pencil grip
- be taught the correct start and exit points for each letter, which should not include 'lead-in' strokes from the line (see below)
- respond to dictation from the teacher, practising writing words in sentences that include only the GPCs and exception words they have learnt.

Dictation is a vital part of a phonics session. Writing simple dictated sentences that include words taught so far gives children opportunities to practise and apply their spelling, without their having to think about what it is they want to say.

At other times, the children should be given tasks that allow them to practise and apply what they have been taught to read and write independently, while the teacher identifies and helps those who need more support.

A systematic programme is essential for teaching phonics. Opportunities sometimes arise, however, to teach more. When that happens, teachers can respond naturally and briefly. For example, after teaching that /j/ is represented with 'j', George might say that his name has the same sound but no 'j'. The teacher could praise his careful listening and show him how 'ge' in his name represents /j/.

Handwriting

Learning to form letters and spell words requires considerable effort and attention. Schools, therefore, should consider the advantages to children of delaying the teaching of joined handwriting. Nearly all the headteachers in the schools Ofsted visited for its 'Bold beginnings' survey did not teach a cursive or pre-cursive script in Reception. They told inspectors that they believed:

... it slowed down children's writing, at a point when they already found manual dexterity tricky and the muscles in their shoulders, arms and hands were still developing.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Ofsted (2017). ['Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

Written composition

Children's writing generally develops at a slower pace than their reading. Before they can write independently in a way that can be read by others, they need to know:

- what they want to say
- how to identify sounds in words
- at least one way to spell each of the sounds of English
- how to form letters.

With plenty of practice in writing from dictation, children will find it easier to write independently. Then they can begin to write down their ideas. However, expecting children to write at length early on results in cognitive overload and might damage their motivation to write, both at this stage and later. Extra time for writing is unnecessary at this early stage.

At first, teachers should support children to compose sentences out loud, without requiring them to write. As their spelling develops, they can begin to write sentences using the GPCs they have been taught so far, spelling some words in a phonically plausible way, even if sometimes incorrectly, for example: 'me and my frens went in a cafai and had caix'.

As children's knowledge of the alphabetic code increases, teachers should encourage correct spelling.

Resources

Well-organised teaching spaces allow children to focus on what they are learning.⁷⁰ Resources for children to refer to should be in a place where they can find or see them easily.

Phonics should be taught in a quiet space. Children need to have the best chance to hear clearly and pay attention, because extraneous noise hinders their progress. Researchers have also found that highly decorated walls in primary schools undermine children's ability to concentrate and absorb teachers' instructions.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Fisher AV and others (2014). 'Visual environment, attention allocation, and learning in young children: when too much of a good thing may be bad' Association for Psychological Science: volume 25, issue 7

⁷¹ Burnet K (2014). ['Study Shows Classroom Decor Can Distract From Learning'](#)

A large carpet close to the teacher enables young children to sit easily during direct teaching, while tables and chairs allow them to sit and write properly, without balancing materials on their laps.

Letter cards, friezes and posters showing GPCs should match the phonic programme the school has chosen.

‘Decodable’ books and texts for children to read

A systematic phonics programme includes sufficient ‘decodable’ books or texts, so that children can practise, at school and at home, their increasing knowledge of GPCs and their blending skill in meaningful contexts.

‘Decodable’ books and other texts make children feel successful from the very beginning. They do not encounter words that include GPCs they cannot decode. If an adult is not present, they are not forced to guess from pictures, the context, the first letters of a word or its shape (see [Appendix 6: Decodable texts](#) for examples). ‘Decodable’ books and texts that children read should run alongside or a little behind the teaching of the GPCs, so that they always feel a sense of achievement when they are asked to read such books.⁷²

It is important that children practise their reading with ‘decodable’ books or texts. They speed up the time they need to gain sufficient accuracy to read a wide range of children’s literature. It is helpful, therefore, if teachers explain to families how they can help their children to read such books when they bring them home.

Organising ‘decodable’ books

Ofsted has reported that in some schools visited for its ‘Bold beginnings’ survey:

... developing children’s reading accuracy was hindered by the way [the schools] organised their reading books into bands. These schools mixed a range of reading schemes, bought at various times, many of which used different approaches to the teaching of reading. Inspectors found that this did not ensure that children read books at the right level of difficulty.⁷³

So that beginner readers read books at the right level of difficulty, teachers should make sure their organisation of the books matches exactly the order in which GPCs are introduced in the programme. For example, a book that includes the word ‘play’

⁷² Programmes might also provide other written material (such as simple sentences) that reflects this.

⁷³ Ofsted (2017). [‘Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

should be placed so that children are not asked to read it until the digraph 'ay' has been taught.

Activities that can hinder learning

If children do not practise reading and writing enough, they fail to make sufficient progress. Activities must be high quality, practical, efficient and focused on the main goal – reading and spelling using phonics.

Children enjoy well-designed activities that focus on phonics. They feel successful and recognise that they are learning to read and write.

Examples of activities that can hinder learning

Activities such as painting, colouring, modelling, playing in the sand and water tray are valuable for developing language, knowledge, cooperative play, fine motor skills, imagination and creativity. Using them as vehicles for practising phonics not only takes away the integrity of the activities but also does not provide sufficient practice in word reading, for example, when 'fishing' for words in a water tray, or painting or making models of letters.

A failure to make sure that all children are participating fully can hinder learning by limiting the amount of time for practice. For instance, sometimes only one child practises reading while the others are expected only to watch and listen without otherwise joining in. Other similar examples include:

- asking one child to write on the board while others watch
- asking children to take turns to read letters and words
- taking feedback from individual children
- playing games that involve turn-taking, e.g. 'Phonic Bingo' or 'What's in the box?'

Some practices may confuse children, make it more difficult than necessary for them to learn or discourage them, such as when the teacher:

- asks children to write independently, before they have the necessary skills: they do not know how to do it
- corrects spelling without appreciating that a child has identified a sound correctly, but not the correct grapheme

- demonstrates phonically plausible but incorrect spellings: the danger is the children may remember the wrong spelling⁷⁴
- asks children to identify and count sounds in a spoken word after reading it: identifying sounds in a spoken word is important for spelling but not for reading
- tells a story about a sound or letter with so much detail that children focus on the story more than on what they need to learn.

Poor classroom routines can also get in the way of learning, especially when:

- routines and activities change frequently and too much time is lost in explanations
- children are seated where they cannot see the teacher's face or resources and therefore cannot pay full attention
- children are not shown how to use the classroom's posters and charts for support when they are reading and spelling
- displays about reading and writing are overly elaborate so that children cannot use them effectively
- posters and charts other than from the school's selected phonics programme are used to decorate the classroom.

Finally, sitting on the floor and writing on a mini-whiteboard does not help children learn to hold a pencil and form letters correctly. To write, they should sit comfortably on a chair at a table. Using a whiteboard also means there is no paper record of the work, for the child, the teacher, or the parent.

The report of the Rose Review drew attention to 'weak practice in schools that were otherwise generally effective in teaching phonic work' and stressed the need for 'vigilance in ensuring consistently high quality'.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ An adult who knows how to spell should not show children spellings that are phonically plausible but incorrect, even if simply demonstrating to them.

⁷⁵ Rose J (2006). ['Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report'](#) Department for Education and Skills

Audit: Teaching a systematic programme

	Current practice
The school has adopted a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme.	
Direct teaching of phonics takes place every day for all children from the start of the Reception year.	
Interactive lessons ensure all children participate fully.	
Children are taught correct letter formation and practise it daily.	
Children are given tasks that allow them to practise and apply what they have been taught.	
Children practise reading only with books that are decodable for them at that stage of their learning.	
Children read a decodable book or other decodable text most days.	
Resources are organised effectively.	
The organisation of books matches the order in which the phonics programme introduces grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) and exception words.	
Enough books are available at each stage of the phonics programme for children to practise reading.	
Teachers are aware of activities that might hinder children's progress in learning to read and write.	

Parents are informed about the phonics programme: what is taught; how they could provide extra practice to develop accuracy and fluency; how the school will support children to keep up from the start through extra practice.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

The wide range of learning difficulties experienced by children with identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can have a significant impact on children's and young people's access to the curriculum. This section concentrates on good practice for those with moderate to severe SEND and complex needs, most (but not all) of whom will be in specialist provision.

Literacy is as important for these children as for their peers and teachers should be ambitious about teaching them to read and write. These children have to navigate the same written language, unlock the same alphabetic code, learn the same skills, and learn and remember the same body of knowledge as their peers. It is a critical skill in helping them prepare for adulthood.

Schools are expected to enable access to appropriate phonics instruction for children with complex needs. Under the Equality Act 2010, they are required to make reasonable adjustments to enable pupils with disabilities to have full access to the curriculum and to be able to participate in it.

Consensus is growing among academics and teachers that the best reading instruction for children with SEND is SSP, taught by direct instruction. They can learn to read and write and can make progress towards or attain functional literacy.

In a 2021 French study of children with learning disabilities, Sermier said:

These findings suggest that students with [special educational needs] benefit from phonics-based programs integrating research-based approaches and techniques.⁷⁶

Similarly, a recent systematic review for children with autism by Arcuili and Bailey concluded:

...comprehensive instruction that incorporates [phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency and reading comprehension]...is not only appropriate for children with autism but also effective.⁷⁷

The view that children learn in different ways is under scrutiny. Dehaene has said:

...it is simply not true that there are hundreds of ways to learn to read. Every child is unique... but when it comes to reading we all have roughly the same brain that imposes the same constraints and the same learning sequence.⁷⁸

Evidence suggests that most children with moderate to severe and complex needs are not 'visual learners', as previously thought. Trembath, for instance, in a small study, found 'no evidence of a prominent visual learning style in children with ASD,'⁷⁹ while Kathy Cologon has noted that, for children with Down's syndrome:

Sight-word learning on its own is insufficient for reading development and teaching with this approach alone is contrary to current evidence-based practices in literacy instruction.⁸⁰

SSP, rather than a whole-word approach, provides children with moderate to severe and complex needs the best opportunity to gain functional literacy. Children who have a hearing or visual impairment are generally able to access phonics teaching if they have some hearing or vision.

Instruction should be accessible to all these children. Teachers should:

⁷⁶ Sermier D and others (2021). 'Effects of a phonics-based intervention on the reading skills of students with intellectual disability' *Research in Developmental Disabilities*: volume 111

⁷⁷ Arcuili J and Bailey B (2021). 'The promise of comprehensive early reading instruction for children with autism and recommendations for future directions' *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*: volume 52, issue 1, pages 225-238

⁷⁸ Dehaene S (2009). 'Reading in the Brain' London: Penguin Random House

⁷⁹ Trembath D and others (2015). 'Accurate or Assumed: Visual Learning in Children with ASD' *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*: volume 45, pages 3276-3287

⁸⁰ Cologon K (2013). 'Debunking myths: Reading development in children with Down Syndrome' *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*: volume 38, number 3

- provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to read and spell, by direct instruction, progressing systematically with carefully structured, small and cumulative steps
- use instructional routines that become familiar
- provide materials that limit distraction; are clear, linear and easy to follow; are age-neutral or age-appropriate and can be adapted further, such as being reduced to individual items
- provide opportunities for work on vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension
- provide multiple opportunities for overlearning (recall, retrieval, practice and application at the level of the alphabetic code, word, sentence and text).

Teaching should:

- be at a suitable pace for the child because progression through a programme will be much slower than for their typically developing peers
- be daily, with well-paced, well-planned lessons that are engaging and motivating
- take full account of the child's individual strengths, weaknesses, knowledge and understanding, and profile of needs.

Some children may need additional strategies, such as for those who:

- have physical disabilities that affect their fine motor control for holding and manipulating objects, e.g. use of desktop manipulatives, alternative writing strategies
- are pre- or non-verbal, e.g. use of alternative communication strategies, such as selecting their response from auditory choices anchored to visual symbols or place-markers
- have both fine motor difficulties and are pre- or non-verbal, e.g. use of low- or high-tech eye gaze strategies.

A very few children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) might not be able to access direct literacy instruction, but might access alternative activities to teach children how letters correspond to sounds within the context of a pre-formal sensory curriculum.

Developing fluency

Fluent decoding allows us to understand what we read. Because the reader has gained accuracy and automaticity in word reading, the brain's resources are available to focus on lifting the meaning from the page: connecting the words,

sentences and text. As children gain fluency, their motivation increases: they start to enjoy reading more and are willing to do more of it.

Fluency: speed and accuracy

Researchers generally define and measure fluency in terms of the number of words read correctly per minute. Accuracy as well as speed influences fluency; it is not just about the speed at which a child reads.⁸¹ The national curriculum refers to pupils reading words comprising the year 1 GPCs 'accurately and speedily', reflecting this concept of fluency.⁸²

Fluency gives the reader the choice to read at a speed that allows for comprehension and can be adapted to the purpose of the reading. Beginner readers, however, do not have a choice about speed because they are still engaged in decoding the words on the page.

Children do not pass through a magic barrier and suddenly become fluent. There is no point in children reading speedily if the words they read are wrong – for example, if they read 'place' for 'palace'. Equally, accuracy on its own is not useful, unless they can read at a sufficient rate to support comprehension. Both accuracy and speed are essential.

However, practising to gain automaticity in decoding needs to focus on accuracy. This means children must first work out a word by sounding and blending. Most of them have to do this several times before they can read it accurately 'at a glance'. Re-reading a text, therefore, gradually increases the number of words in it that they can read 'at a glance'. Urging children to read at speed will not increase their fluency: they can read only at the speed they can decode.

Progressive fluency

Many factors contribute to fluency. Maryanne Wolf reached the 'unsettling conclusion' that:

⁸¹ Juul H, Poulsen M and Elbro C (2014). ['Separating speed from accuracy in beginning reading development'](#) Journal of Educational Psychology: volume 106, issue 4, pages 1096-1106

⁸² 'Fluency is typically measured as the number of words read correctly per minute. Thus defined, fluency is by definition influenced by accuracy as well as speed, and not a pure measure of speed.' Juul H, Poulsen M and Elbro C (2014). ['Separating speed from accuracy in beginning reading development'](#) Journal of Educational Psychology: volume 106, issue 4, pages 1096-1106

reading fluency involves every process and subskill involved in reading. ... [It] is influenced by the development of rapid rates of processing in all the components of reading.⁸³

It might be helpful to consider the idea of progressive rather than absolute fluency. The teacher helps children to gain reading fluency at each stage, in the same way that a piano teacher helps a pupil to gain musical fluency at each grade.

The piano teacher supports the child to practise playing a piece of music fluently at that grade. Once the child can play the piece automatically, the teacher draws attention to the expression marks and the phrasing. Together they decide how the piece will be performed. At each grade, the complexity of the music increases, but the actual process of becoming fluent remains the same.

Recognising familiar words 'at a glance'

Some children can decode a word by sounding and blending once; later, whenever they come across the same word, they read it 'at a glance'. Most children, however, have to decode a word several times in different contexts before it becomes familiar enough to read 'at a glance'. Children with poor short-term memories need to practise decoding a word many more times before they can read it 'at a glance'.

Children learn to read words 'at a glance' more easily if, when they first decode a word by saying the sounds and blending them, they know what it means: the written word is a label for what the spoken word represents. A child therefore might be more likely to read 'dog' 'at a glance' than 'cog', and 'splash' rather than 'stash'.

The more words children can read 'at a glance', the sooner they see beyond the word as consisting of a series of letters to decode and can focus on what it means.

One teacher with one child

Teachers rarely have the time to listen to children reading individually. However, if they did, the teacher could choose a book closely matched to the GPCs the child knew, and the number of words the child would be likely to be able to read 'at a glance'. The teacher would start by showing interest in the book, connecting it to something the child knew about or had read before.

The teacher would expect the child to sound out unfamiliar words and would praise them for doing so. The teacher might re-read a sentence or a page to the child to help them keep track of what was going on and explain the meaning of a word in the

⁸³ Wolf M and Katzir-Cohen T (2001). ['Reading fluency and its intervention'](#) Scientific Studies of Reading: volume 5, issue 3, pages 211-239

context of the story. Sometimes they might re-read sections together. At the end of the reading, the teacher might say, 'You could read this to your dad tonight. He'll be so impressed'. Above all, the teacher would make the process interactive and meaningful.

The next day, they might start a new book together or re-read the same book so the child could read more words 'at a glance' and notice more of what they were reading.

One teacher with many children

However, classroom teachers do not usually have the advantage of listening to one child read at a time. They need to replicate, for the whole class, what they would do with just one. This means:

- deciding how to organise children into groups so they can practise reading a 'decodable' book or text. This might be within the main class or group phonic lesson, or in groups throughout the day
- choosing the book or text that matches most closely the GPCs that the group knows and taking account of the children's ability to blend the sounds in words that are unfamiliar
- noting which words might need explaining
- clarifying the purpose of any re-readings: to increase the number of words children can read 'at a glance', or perhaps to discuss the plot of the story, the characters and their motives
- deciding which 'decodable' book the children will take home to read.

As their knowledge of GPCs and the words they can read 'at a glance' increases, the children can gradually read longer books.

They will also learn to draw on other knowledge of words, for example, common spelling patterns, such as the [morphemes](#) 'un-', '-ing', '-ly' and '-ed'. Eventually, they will no longer need the support of books deliberately structured to be decodable for beginners and will be able to read any age-appropriate literature.

Importantly, by practising reading every day, the children refine the vital processing they have to do. They are fluent readers only when they can read at a speed that allows them to understand the text they are reading.

Audit: Developing fluency

	Current practice
Teachers understand why fluency is essential for children's reading comprehension.	
Accurate decoding is assured before children move on to read a new book.	
The meaning of new words is explained to children to increase their vocabulary and accelerate their reading of words 'at a glance'.	
Children sometimes, from the earliest stage, re-read books to practise and improve their fluency.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Assessment

Close and regular assessment of children as they learn to read is vital if teaching is to match their capacity to learn and if difficulties are to be identified when they first arise, and overcome.⁸⁴

Formative and summative assessment

Once teachers are expert in teaching the school's chosen phonics programme, they can pay attention to children's misconceptions and adjust teaching minute by minute through the lesson: reviewing a GPC; repeating a step to support blending; directing attention to a child who has lost focus. This is formative assessment.

⁸⁴ Ofsted (2010). ['Reading by six. How the best schools do it'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

In contrast, the aims of summative assessment are about providing:

- teachers with information about what each child has learnt in a given period
- leaders with information about which children might benefit from additional support.

It is essential that leaders act on the information from assessment and understand ‘the connectedness of curriculum, teaching, assessment and standards’.⁸⁵

Summative assessments, therefore, should also indicate to leaders which teachers might benefit from additional practice and [coaching](#) (page 76) to improve outcomes for children.

Summative assessments might be termly or half-termly. It is up to schools to decide, on the basis of the guidance in the phonics programme they have chosen, at what points they collect such information. What is important is that they are clear about ‘what they are drawing from their data and how that informs their curriculum and teaching’.⁸⁶

Teachers should use their programme’s phonic assessments to check for gaps in children’s knowledge. They should then provide further practice for them in reading words with the specific GPCs that they have not yet learnt fully and then blending them.

Individual records of progress – not simply group records – are vital, particularly for children who are at risk of not meeting the expected standard of the phonics screening check and failing to learn to read.

The phonics screening check

The government introduced its statutory phonics screening check in September 2011 for all children in year 1. Its purpose is to assess whether children can read accurately a selection of words that include common GPCs: the first step in learning to read. It does not aim to assess reading comprehension or whether a child can read familiar words speedily or decode unfamiliar ones easily.

⁸⁵ Ofsted (2021). [‘School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

⁸⁶ Ofsted (2021). [‘School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

The check is a short, light-touch assessment, based on the Standards and Testing Agency's assessment framework.⁸⁷ It takes about five minutes for a teacher or other trained adult to conduct with each child.

The child is asked to read 20 real words and 20 [pseudo-words](#). Pseudo-words have been described as 'the purest measure' of decoding ability.⁸⁸ Because they have no meaning (in English), they allow for specific assessment of how well children can use their knowledge of GPCs and their blending skill, independently of any knowledge of the word, and how well they might work out unfamiliar words in their reading. (The check does not use pseudo-words that sound the same as a real word; for example, it would not include the pseudo-word 'bote'.)

Teachers should not ask children to read lots of pseudo-words to prepare for the phonics check. Instead, they should have as many opportunities as possible to practise their phonic knowledge and blending skill on reading familiar and unfamiliar real words.

The screening check has been developed systematically, for a specific purpose, and uses different graphemes in varying sequences from year to year, in line with the requirements of the assessment framework. Not all the GPCs that a teacher needs to assess will be included in any one year's check, so previous screening check papers are not an effective way to identify accurately the GPCs that need further practice or to track children's progress.

The children who do not meet the expected standard are screened again in year 2.

The results from the screening check are not published at school level. However, Ofsted's inspectors use them, alongside a school's policy for teaching reading, its assessments of phonics, and their observations of lessons as part of how they inspect reading.

The phonics screening check: only the first step

Meeting the expected standard of the check does not mean that children are now readers. Many children may have read the words in it very slowly, even if they met the expected standard, because speed is not part of it.⁸⁹ They still need considerable

⁸⁷ Standards and Testing Agency (2012). ['Assessment framework for the development of the Year 1 phonics screening check. For test developers'](#) London: STA

⁸⁸ Gough PB and Tunmer WE (1986). 'Decoding, reading and reading disability' Remedial and Special Education: volume 7, issue 6

⁸⁹ The two children who read 'plastic' slowly but successfully at the end of the training video for the check illustrate that speed of decoding is not a criterion.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-sample-materials-and-training-video>

practice in decoding unfamiliar words speedily and reading familiar words ‘at a glance’. They also need practice to build up stamina in their reading before they leave the security of books they know they will be able to decode. It is therefore important to find out if they can read books at the later stages of the school’s phonic programme at a pace that allows them to focus on what they are reading.

The Standards and Testing Agency says that around 90 words per minute is a good indicator of when children ‘start to read with sufficient fluency to focus on their understanding’. However, it also says that some children might read more slowly than this while still being able to understand what they are reading.⁹⁰

Assessing reading comprehension

While children are learning to read, most of their attention and working memory are directed to decoding words. [‘Decodable’ books](#) (page 46) and other material written for them to practise reading are likely to be below the level of what they can actually understand.⁹¹

They are also unlikely to be reading at a speed that is sufficient for them to focus on the meaning of what is written on the page. It is therefore neither necessary nor desirable to assess their reading comprehension using summative assessments before they are reading fluently.

This is why, when children are learning to read, they should listen to and talk about books that include words beyond those they can read for themselves. When they can read, they are then more likely to have sufficient vocabulary and other knowledge to understand the books they can read for themselves.

⁹⁰ Standards and Testing Agency (2018). [‘Teacher assessment frameworks at the end of key stage 1. For use from the 2018/19 academic year onwards.’](#) London: STA

⁹¹ This might not be the case, however, for children new to speaking English, who may not understand many of the words.

Audit: Assessment

	Current practice
Teachers understand the difference between formative and summative assessment in relation to reading.	
Teachers use formative assessment throughout a lesson.	
Leaders use summative assessments to plan professional development.	
Teachers understand the specific purpose of the phonics screening check.	
Reading comprehension is not assessed until a child is a fluent reader.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Section 4: Children at risk of reading failure

Keeping up from the start

Teachers should aim for all children to keep up with the school's chosen phonics programme, ensuring teaching time is sufficient for the content to be taught within the time-scales the programme sets out.

Some children need extra support from the beginning. [Assessment](#) (page 61) should identify such children as soon as they begin to fall behind their peers (if not already identified). Teachers, working with others if necessary, should investigate possible reasons, such as whether a child might have a hearing or visual impairment, or speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

To enable children to keep up, they should be given extra practice, either in a small group or one-to-one, whether or not a specific reason has been found. The extra practice should:

- take place in a quiet place, at a regular time every day so that the children become familiar with the routine
- be a school priority, with maximum efforts made to avoid disruption or cancellation
- be provided by a well-trained adult: teacher or teaching assistant
- be consistent with the school's mainstream phonics programme
- include activities that secure the important phonic knowledge the children have not grasped.

The emphasis should be on:

- consolidating the work the children have already met in their main class or group phonics session, with bite-sized steps so all of them can achieve success every day
- revising grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs)
- practising oral blending of spoken sounds to pronounce words
- reading words by saying the sounds and blending them.

The children should continue to read [‘decodable’ books](#) (page 46), that is, books that include only words with GPCs they have been explicitly taught, until they can blend sounds to read new words fluently and automatically.

For various reasons, some parents cannot support their children's reading at home. Schools should provide extra opportunities for these children to read to adults and to listen to adults reading to them.

Audit: Keeping up from the start

	Current practice
Phonics lessons are of the highest quality to reduce the likelihood that children might need extra support.	
Children at risk of falling behind are identified within the first three weeks of their starting in their Reception year.	
These children have extra daily phonics practice with a well-trained adult.	
Each child receiving extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; their attendance; time at the school, and previous teaching.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Older pupils who need to catch up

After year 1, learning in the wider curriculum depends increasingly on literacy. Pupils who cannot read well enough do not have full access to the curriculum. Those who fail to learn to read early on often start to dislike reading. They read less than others – and less often – and do not accumulate the background knowledge and vocabulary from reading that their peers do. The word-rich get richer, while the word-poor get poorer.⁹²

⁹² Robert Merton is credited with creating the term 'Matthew Effect': Merton RK (1968). 'The Matthew effect in science' Science: volume 159, pages 56-63. Keith Stanovich and others applied the term to the idea that, in reading, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.
<https://childrenofthecode.org/library/refs/mattheweffect.htm>

Most of them will catch up if they receive a few months of intensive individual or small-group teaching; they should not need this extra support indefinitely. Late arrivals into the school may also need to catch up with their peers, particularly those who are new to the English education system or whose first language is not English.

Those with [learning difficulties](#) (page 55) may need longer, but every pupil needs to master the [alphabetic code](#) (page 39), whether they have special educational needs or not.⁹³

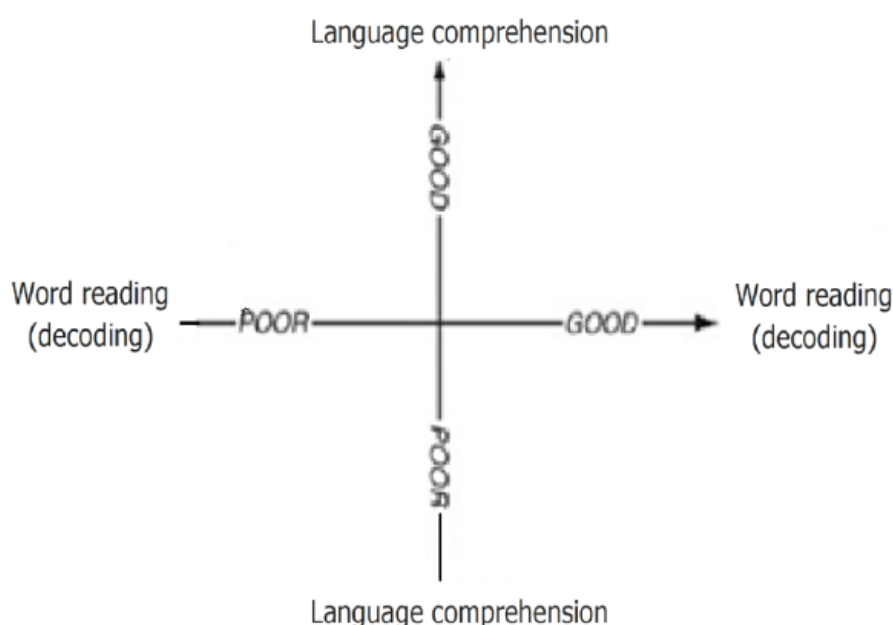
School leaders and special educational needs co-ordinators in primary and secondary schools must take responsibility for making sure all these pupils make rapid progress.

If pupils' reading is below what is expected for their age, it is important to determine whether they have difficulty with word reading (decoding), language comprehension or both of these, since different kinds of teaching are needed for each. [Figure 2](#) below, the model of the [Simple View of Reading](#) introduced earlier (page 15), suggests four patterns of performance that reflect 'relative differences in the balance of word recognition and language comprehension abilities'.⁹⁴ The model can be useful when thinking about children's reading difficulties and where they might lie in terms of three of the four quadrants.

⁹³ Johnston R and Watson J (2005). 'The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment: a seven year longitudinal study' Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Central Research Unit

⁹⁴ Rose J (2006). ['Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report'](#) Department for Education and Skills

Figure 2: The Simple View of Reading



Good word reading but poor comprehension

The bottom right-hand quadrant represents children who have good word reading skills, but have difficulty understanding what they have decoded. Even if an adult read the text aloud to them, they would still have difficulty. Children with speech, language and communication needs or who speak English as an additional language might well fall into this category.

Good comprehension but poor word reading

The top left-hand quadrant represents those whose understanding is good: they have a large vocabulary and extensive background knowledge. However, they cannot decode words easily. They therefore need to be taught to do this urgently through a synthetic phonics programme that is systematic and rigorous, with plenty of practice.

The books they are able to decode are likely to be far below their good level of comprehension. This means that they need to continue to develop their understanding through hearing and talking about books and poems and learning new vocabulary across the curriculum, along with the rest of their class, while their decoding catches up with the knowledge and skills they already have.

Poor comprehension and poor word reading

The bottom left-hand quadrant represents children who have poor language comprehension and who also cannot decode words easily. Although they have similar difficulties with decoding as the children just described (represented by the top left-hand quadrant), their limited language skills can obscure their poor decoding.

Teachers may have low expectations of them and not realise how much their reading comprehension might improve if they had extra practice in decoding through a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme, in addition to developing their comprehension, because the first step in reading comprehension is the ability to decode common and familiar words 'at a glance' and unfamiliar words speedily and silently.

Assessing older pupils whose reading is poor

The school should use the phonics assessments in its chosen programme to identify the extent of these pupils' phonic knowledge and skill and to identify any gaps exactly. Even pupils in the bottom right-hand quadrant, whose decoding skills appear to be good, may not be able to read fluently enough to concentrate on comprehension and may benefit from extra phonics teaching.

These pupils do not need something different from others who are learning to read: the same alphabetic code knowledge and phonics skills underpin all reading.

Organising and teaching catch-up

Providing catch-up teaching is vital, however difficult it may be to organise the time, space and staff (see [Section 5: Leadership and management](#) on ways to handle this difficulty).

The phonics programme a school chooses for catch-up provision, as for beginner readers, should be an SSP programme. However, for older pupils who are still at the earliest stages of learning to read, schools might want to avoid programmes specifically designed for younger children and consider those with age-appropriate lessons and materials.

Teaching should happen in the same place and at the same time, so that the pupils know what is planned and do not have to cope with changes. Leaders may have to be creative to achieve this. Good reading is the only route to success at school, so leaders also have to overcome the concerns of teachers and of parents that pupils are missing some mainstream lessons.

Leaders should invest in a strong team, committed to making sure these children catch up. Ideally, they should be school staff or long-stay tutors, rather than external teachers or tutors who might stay only a short time. They should be trained, supported and coached.

To continue to develop these pupils' language and vocabulary, and encourage a love of reading, their class teachers should make sure that they listen to and discuss the same texts that their peers read in their English lessons. However, then asking them to read the texts by themselves and complete written comprehension activities wastes their time and further demoralises them, because their decoding skills do not yet allow them to read well enough. Written composition might also be too challenging for most of them.

Audit: Older pupils who need to catch up

	Current practice
Phonic assessments identify pupils with poor decoding skills as soon as possible.	
Sufficient support accelerates progress, including for new arrivals and pupils who are learning English as an additional language.	
Each pupil receiving extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; their attendance; time at the school, and previous teaching.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Section 5: Leadership and management

Headteachers

Headteachers are ultimately responsible for building the reading culture in their school and ensuring that the teaching of reading is as effective as possible.⁹⁵ They have to make sure that all their staff, including the special educational needs co-ordinator, and their ITT trainees, have the knowledge, skills, understanding and professional support to teach reading effectively and thus transform children's life chances.

This requires them to:

- believe that all children can learn to read, regardless of their background, needs or abilities and be determined to make this happen
- adopt a rigorous, systematic programme that includes well-conceived and structured resources for teaching phonics (see [Section 3](#))
- make sure all children make sufficient progress to meet or exceed age-related expectations
- build a team of expert teachers who know and understand the processes that underpin learning to read, and draw on expert training, practice and coaching to achieve this
- ensure that ongoing [assessment](#) (page 61) of children's progress in phonics is sufficiently frequent and detailed to identify those who begin to fall behind, and provide targeted support immediately⁹⁶
- make efforts to involve families in supporting their children's reading⁹⁷
- make sure children are taught to read from the beginning of their Reception year
- develop a programme for reading aloud to children and encouraging a love of reading (see page 28, [Storytimes](#)).

In addition, teachers have a responsibility to demonstrate their understanding of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in their teaching so that ITT trainees can learn from them about how to teach early reading effectively.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ofsted (2010). [‘Reading by six. How the best schools do it’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

⁹⁶ Ofsted (2021). [‘School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

⁹⁷ Ofsted (2010). [‘Reading by six. How the best schools do it’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

⁹⁸ Department for Education (2019). [‘ITT Core Content Framework’](#) London: Department for Education

Time for teaching

The daily timetable for Reception and year 1 should include:

- a storytime
- a poetry/singing time
- one or more phonics sessions.

Finding sufficient time to teach every child to read can be challenging. Headteachers have a duty to support teachers in making literacy a priority and managing the rest of the curriculum realistically.

SSP programmes vary considerably and school leaders should carefully consider programmes that reflect this document before choosing one and training all staff to use it. See [Appendix 7: Guidance for choosing a phonics programme](#).

Leaders should set out strong, school-wide routines and make sure that all teachers reinforce these consistently to support children's learning, as well as reinforcing those of the programme the school has chosen.

Implementing a systematic programme

Implementation is a process rather than a single event; it needs to be planned and executed step by step. It is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure that the teaching of reading is as effective as possible and that a systematic programme is implemented successfully, because different schools or even teachers within the same school using the same systematic programme can achieve very different results. Ofsted has noted that 'compliance [with the programme] does not always guarantee effectiveness'.⁹⁹

Writers of phonic programmes provide detailed guidance about how to teach phonics, reading and writing.¹⁰⁰ With the right programme and teaching, all children can learn to read, including those with learning difficulties.

However, it should be noted that some children who are diagnosed with a learning difficulty no longer have such issues when they have learned to read. Care is therefore needed when identifying learning difficulties early on. Stahl and McKenna have said:

⁹⁹ Ofsted (2010). ['Reading by six. How the best schools do it'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

¹⁰⁰ Schools using a programme they have developed themselves should provide similar detailed guidance.

...generally, labels serve to excuse our failures to teach [reading] by blaming the students for their failure. Rather, we should accept that some children are harder to teach, and we need to work harder to reach those children.¹⁰¹

It might also be said that labelling teachers or their teaching as failing serves to excuse leaders' failures to put in place what teachers need. Headteachers are responsible for investing in the best teachers and teaching assistants they can find and scrupulously training or retraining them to teach phonics.

This section describes the implementation of a full SSP programme. Such programmes used by schools should provide:

all that is essential to teach SSP to children in reception and key stage 1 years of mainstream primary schools, up to or beyond the standards expected by the national curriculum, and provides sufficient support for them to become fluent readers.¹⁰²

Schools that have developed their own programme to teach SSP should ensure they provide what is described above.

The programme should achieve excellent outcomes for all pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Building a team of expert teachers

The literacy lead

Headteachers should appoint a literacy lead (or reading lead): someone to manage the teaching of phonics, reading and writing.¹⁰³ That person should become an expert in the school's chosen phonics programme.

Together, the headteacher and the literacy lead should agree on:

- the detail of their roles
- expectations and assessment of progress for each age group
- timetables for phonics, reading and writing sessions, and storytimes
- the best organisation of teaching spaces and resources

¹⁰¹ Stahl KAD and McKenna MC editors (2006). 'Reading research at work. Foundations of effective practice' London: The Guilford Press

¹⁰² [Validation of systematic synthetic phonics programmes: supporting documentation - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/364812/Validation_of_synthetic_phonics_programmes_supporting_documentation.pdf)

¹⁰³ Ofsted (2010). ['Reading by six. How the best schools do it'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

- extra practice for the children who are making the slowest progress
- systems to tackle any poor attendance and punctuality of the children who need the most support
- a timetable for practice and coaching for teaching staff
- systems for staff cover
- how they will help parents to support their children's reading.

Effective professional development

Effective professional development is likely to be sustained over time, involve expert support, coaching and opportunities for collaboration.¹⁰⁴

All staff responsible for leading and teaching reading should take part in the professional development for the school's chosen phonics programme: the headteacher, other leaders, newly qualified teachers, ITT trainees and others.

High quality in-service training, either face-to-face or online, is the first step. But training is just the beginning and, on its own, is insufficient to ensure consistency and effectiveness and to help teachers become experts. Acting, learning the violin and playing football all require the careful building up of skills and knowledge to be done as well as possible. Progress depends upon practice and coaching.

Practice builds mastery of a series of skills, and if you build up skills intentionally, you can master surprisingly complex tasks and in so doing free your active cognition to engage with other important tasks.¹⁰⁵

This also applies to teaching reading and writing.

In-school deliberate practice

Carefully constructed practice of teaching routines, sustained and developed, can help to make sure that all teachers become excellent teachers of reading, spelling and writing.

Practising together as a staff needs regular sessions. It builds consistency and accountability: everyone teaches reading in the same way. Sessions should be ring-fenced and not subsumed into staff meetings. This is also efficient for professional development, making the best use of the time of a literacy lead, because individuals then need less coaching.

¹⁰⁴ Department for Education (2019). '[ITT Core Content Framework](#)' London: Department for Education

¹⁰⁵ Lemov D, Woolway E and Yezzi K (2012). 'Practice perfect' San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

The most basic activities should be practised first, in particular those that support the teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) and how to blend sounds into words. Practice should focus on the activities that will make the biggest difference to the children who are making the slowest progress. [Assessment data](#) (page 61) will have identified them.

As teachers improve through practice, the literacy lead can identify an action for a teacher that would make a difference, there and then, to children's progress.

Great teaching is not learned through discussion. It's learned by doing – or, more specifically, by practising doing things well.¹⁰⁶

Coaching

Practice and coaching work hand in hand. The literacy lead should start by coaching teachers who are teaching the children who need the most support. Coaching, in this context, refers to a colleague identifying an action, so that the teacher can respond immediately and so improve children's progress. This might be in a practice session or during a lesson.

As teachers improve through practice, coaching can become more detailed and more focused.

Teachers are like tennis players: they develop most quickly when they receive frequent feedback and opportunities to practice [sic].¹⁰⁷

Once the literacy lead is confident that a few teachers are good enough, one might be selected to act as the coach for the week. The literacy lead should practise with this teacher before the practice session. Leadership becomes shared and the teachers grow in confidence. This also embeds sustainability and continuity, protecting the school should the literacy lead be absent or leave.

Reducing teachers' workload

One of the ways leaders can reduce teachers' workload is to make sure they use the resources produced as part of an SSP programme.

Ofsted reported that that 'the best of the products available to teachers for teaching systematic synthetic phonics were so well structured as to take much of the burden out of planning'. Ofsted also made the more important point that this gives teachers

¹⁰⁶ Bambrick-Santoyo P (2012). 'Leverage leadership. A practical guide to building exceptional schools' San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

¹⁰⁷ Bambrick-Santoyo P (2012). 'Leverage leadership. A practical guide to building exceptional schools' San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

‘time to think about how to teach rather than what to teach and enabling them to focus on the needs of individual children’.¹⁰⁸

Audit: Leadership and management

	Current practice
The headteacher takes responsibility for building a strong reading culture.	
The headteacher believes that virtually all children can learn to read, regardless of their background, needs or abilities, and acts to make this happen.	
Professional development, including training, practice and coaching, is planned and effective so all staff become experts in teaching reading and writing.	
The literacy lead has expertise in and experience of teaching phonics.	
The literacy lead has sufficient, dedicated time to fulfil the role.	
Sufficient time is planned for the teaching of phonics, reading and writing.	
Routines are strong, school-wide and reinforced consistently to support children’s learning.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

¹⁰⁸ Ofsted (2010). [‘Reading by six. How the best schools do it’](#) Manchester: Ofsted

Section 6: Building on the foundations with older pupils – a summary

This document has been about the foundations of reading and writing. When these are secure, pupils can [decode](#) (page 16) most written words and understand them in the context of age-appropriate literature and non-fiction. They can also write what they want to say in a way that others can read.

With a strong start in Reception and year 1, pupils' word reading and spelling rapidly become more accurate and automatic. Teachers can then spend more time developing pupils' reading comprehension and written composition. They should continue to read aloud to pupils every day to enhance their enjoyment of literature, increase their vocabulary and develop their language comprehension.

Pupils should read often, in English lessons and across the curriculum: to learn from their reading, to read for pleasure and for specific purposes, and – with practice – to become more fluent, since fluency is important for comprehension.

As their reading becomes more fluent, the need for a systematic phonics programme¹⁰⁹ for reading reduces. Spelling, however, is more difficult than decoding, because the same sound can be spelt in different ways. An effective spelling programme will therefore continue to teach further correspondences between [phonemes](#) and [graphemes](#). For example, pupils might learn that /u/ is spelt with 'ou' in 'young', 'touch', 'double', 'trouble' and 'country'. As they make progress with spelling, the emphasis moves to learning about [morphemes](#), that is [prefixes](#), [suffixes](#) and [root words](#). For instance, when pupils have learnt the prefix 'inter-', the suffix '-ion' and the root word 'act', they can read and spell 'interaction'.

To help them to learn to spell the new words they meet across the curriculum, teachers should draw pupils' attention to any unusual correspondences between spelling and sound. For example, in science, the teacher should draw attention briefly to how the word 'circuit' is pronounced, how the letters correspond to the sounds and the unusual spelling of 'ui' for /i/.

When pupils can form letters correctly and easily, they should be taught how to join them and should practise their handwriting to increase its fluency, legibility and quality.

Grammar and punctuation become more important in teaching writing as pupils' spelling and handwriting improve. Sentence dictation that includes the words pupils

¹⁰⁹ See page 45, [Systematic synthetic phonics programmes](#), and [Appendix 7: Guidance for choosing a phonics programme](#).

have been taught to spell is effective in helping them to consolidate spelling, handwriting and punctuation.

Appendices

Appendix 1. For parents: reading stories to children

The following has been drawn together to provide the basis for a leaflet schools might create for parents and carers. Further guidance is available: [10 top tips for parents to support children to read.](#)

Introduction

Your child will bring home two books. One is for your child to read to you. It has been carefully chosen so that they can work out all the words. The other book has words your child may not be able to read yet. It is for you to read to your child and talk about together.

How to read a story to your child

If you can find the time beforehand, read the read-aloud book to yourself first, so you can think about how you're going to read it to your child.

On the first reading:

- Make reading aloud feel like a treat. Make it a special quiet time and cuddle up so you can both see the book.
- Show curiosity about what you're going to read: 'This book looks interesting. It's about an angry child. I wonder how angry he gets...'
- Read through the whole story the first time without stopping too much. Let the story weave its own magic.
- Read with enjoyment. If you're not enjoying it, your child won't.

Read favourite stories over and over again.

On later readings:

- Let your child pause, think about and comment on the pictures.
- If you think your child did not understand something, try to explain: 'Oh! I think what's happening here is that...'
- Chat about the story and pictures: 'I wonder why she did that?'; 'Oh no, I hope she's not going to...'; 'I wouldn't have done that, would you?'
- Link the stories to your own family experiences: 'This reminds me of when ...'
- Link stories to others that your child knows: 'Ah! Do you remember the dragon in? Do you remember what happened to him?'
- Encourage your child to join in with the bits they know.

- Avoid asking questions to test what your child remembers.
- Avoid telling children that reading stories is good for them.

Appendix 2. Supporting children's thinking

These are some ideas for supporting children's thinking, which might be useful for trainees and new teachers.

Effective strategies to support children's thinking

Give time – make sure you have given the child enough time to respond. Wait for at least six seconds.
Delay – make sure the child has waited until you have finished your request.
Focus attention – make sure the child is looking towards you and listening to your request.
Repeat – repeat the request again, after sufficient waiting time.
Simplify – break your request down into parts or make it simpler. e.g. instead of 'Before we go for lunch, we need to wash our hands' say 'First we'll wash our hands. Then we'll go to lunch.' The sequence of events is clearer.
Use questions to clarify – check the child understands by asking questions at a simple level first.
Focus on the feature – help the child focus on the feature they need to look at to be able to understand your question. e.g. if asking how two items are alike, draw attention to relevant similarities, such as colour or size.
Forced alternatives – give the child two choices. e.g. 'What is he doing? Is he running or jumping?'
Gesture – use gesture to help the child understand or to cue in to the correct answer.
Rephrase – repeat the request in a different way. Don't do this too quickly, since the child may still be processing the first request. e.g. (1) 'Please could you pick up the litter from under your table?' (2) 'There is litter under the table. Please pick it up.'

Sentence completion – When asking questions that need a defined answer, model the response by beginning it, prompting the child to repeat how you start.

Adult: What colour is it? ... It is

Child: It is ... blue.

Adult: How many sides does the shape have? The shape has ...

Child: The shape has one, two, three, four ... five sides.

Demonstration – show the answer without talking and then ask again, while demonstrating.

e.g. 'What will happen if we put water in this broken cup?'

Experience the concept – help the child to experience the answer.

e.g. 'How does it feel? Let's touch it to see how it feels.'

Relate known to unknown – help the child to relate the request to previous experiences.

e.g. 'Let's touch the spaghetti. The spaghetti feels hard. How will it feel after it is cooked? Remember when we cooked the potatoes? How did they feel?'

Model thinking and comprehension monitoring

'That's a hard question. I need to think about that.'

'I've forgotten what you said. Can you say it again for me, please?'

Appendix 3. For teachers: preparing to read a story

These are some ideas for preparing to read a story effectively, which might be useful for trainees and new teachers.

Preparing a reading

Seating	The teacher should sit on a low chair, so that all children can see the book easily, and make sure that everyone is comfortable.
Voices	Choose the best voice for: • the narrator: a neutral voice that won't detract from the characters' voices or a voice that gives away what the narrator is thinking • the main characters: high- or low-pitched? quick or slow? Not everyone can imitate accents successfully, but real life offers a multitude of voices to draw on: the needy 'Could you make me a cup of tea?'; the 'I'm so disappointed in your behaviour'; the voice for interviews; the 'furious' voice when something goes wrong. Remember, the voices have to be maintained for the whole story. If there are too many, it can be difficult for the children to identify them.
Pauses	Decide on the best places to pause to convey shock, concern or, sometimes, just to tease. Pausing builds anticipation.
Word meanings	Wait until the second reading to explain words. Tell the children the meaning: if they already know it, there is no point in asking; if they don't, the question is pointless and encourages only guessing. If only a few children guess, it will distract others from the story. Even if some children do know the meaning, it might not be, in any case, the correct meaning in the context of the story. Use short asides to explain a word or a specific use of a familiar word to avoid disrupting the flow, such as '<i>leapt</i> – that's a big

	jump' or – in the context of the story – 'a <i>spin</i> – that's a fast ride in a car'.
Asides	Use asides to show reactions to particular events: • 'I can't believe he did that!' • 'Oh, my goodness. He's not happy.' • 'Whatever will he do next?'
Memorable words and phrases	Colour your voice to give words meaning: whooped, wondered, wailed or to convey an action: sprouted, quivered, squirmed. Emphasise memorable words and phrases. These will feed into children's vocabulary and awareness of the syntax of literary texts and increase their comprehension. Use phrases from the story later in different contexts, when children know it well. For example, when they recognise: 'Is there room on the broom for a dog like me?', they can enjoy being asked, 'Is there room at the table for a teacher like me?'¹¹⁰
Illustrations	Decide which pictures to show – and when. If you have decided to show a picture, give the children enough time to look at it.

¹¹⁰ Donaldson J (2001). 'Room on the broom' London: Pan Macmillan

Appendix 4. An alphabetic code chart

The following chart lists the main [phonemes](#) in English with example words.¹¹¹ The order corresponds to the chart in [Appendix 5: Pronouncing phonemes](#).

The pronunciation of a few graphemes varies according to accent (noted with an asterisk). For example, the 'u' in 'but' is sometimes pronounced the same as the 'oo' in 'foot'. To reflect different regional accents, the chart does not use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

The chart excludes many rare grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs), as well as graphemes that are likely to be taught as suffixes, such as the '–ed' representing the /t/ sound at the end of 'jumped'. Words with less-common GPCs are in brackets.

Note: This chart is not suitable for teaching children to read.

Consonant phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to the consonant phonemes
/p/	<u>p</u> in, ha <u>pp</u> y
/t/	<u>t</u> op, le <u>tt</u> er
/k/	<u>k</u> ey, <u>c</u> at, du <u>ck</u> (sch <u>oo</u> l, mos <u>qu</u> ito)
/ch/	<u>ch</u> ip, wa <u>ch</u>
/f/	<u>f</u> ish, co <u>ff</u> ee, <u>ph</u> oto (rou <u>gh</u>)
/th/	<u>th</u> in
/s/	<u>s</u> un, dress <u>s</u> , <u>c</u> ity (hou <u>s</u> e, prin <u>ce</u> , list <u>en</u> , <u>sc</u> ience, <u>ps</u> ychology)
/sh/	<u>sh</u> ip (<u>ch</u> ef, <u>s</u> ugar)
/h/	<u>h</u> at (<u>w</u> ho)
/r/	<u>r</u> un, cher <u>ry</u> , <u>w</u> rite (<u>rh</u> ino)
/l/	<u>l</u> ip, be <u>ll</u>
/b/	<u>b</u> oy, rabb <u>it</u>

¹¹¹ The chart is not definitive because the alphabetic code can be analysed in various ways.

/d/	<u>d</u> og, lad <u>d</u> er
/g/	go, big <u>g</u> er (<u>g</u> uide, <u>g</u> host, dialo <u>g</u> ue)
/j/	<u>j</u> et, <u>g</u> iant, brid <u>g</u> e
/v/	<u>v</u> an (ha <u>v</u> e, of)
/th/	<u>th</u> at
/z/	<u>z</u> ip, f <u>izz</u> , <u>is</u> (chee <u>s</u> e, snee <u>z</u> e)
/zh/	treas <u>u</u> re (camou <u>fl</u> age)
/m/	<u>m</u> an, ha <u>mm</u> er (co <u>mb</u> , autu <u>mn</u>)
/n/	<u>n</u> ut, di <u>nn</u> er (go <u>n</u> e, <u>kne</u> e, <u>gn</u> at)
/ng/	ri <u>ng</u> , si <u>nk</u>
/w/	<u>w</u> et, <u>w</u> heel (pengu <u>i</u> n)
/y/	<u>y</u> es (on <u>i</u> on)

Vowel phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to the vowel phonemes
/ee/	<u>f</u> ee <u>t</u> , <u>b</u> ea <u>ch</u> , m <u>e</u> , ha <u>pp</u> y, <u>e</u> ve <u>n</u> ing (<u>k</u> ey, <u>f</u> ield, mach <u>i</u> ne)
/i/	dig (gym) happy*
/e/	<u>e</u> gg, he <u>a</u> d (<u>s</u> a <u>i</u> d, <u>a</u> ny)
/a/	<u>c</u> a <u>t</u>
/u/	up (<u>c</u> o <u>m</u> e, <u>y</u> o <u>u</u> ng)
/o/	on (<u>w</u> a <u>n</u> t)
/oo/ (short)	<u>b</u> o <u>o</u> k (<u>w</u> o <u>u</u> ld) <u>b</u> u <u>t</u> *

/oo/ (long)	moon, clue, flute, flew (you, fruit, do, through) book*
/a-e/	ape, rain, play, baby (they, eight, steak)
/i-e/	kite, light, mind, fly, pie (eiderdown)
/ou/	out, down (bough)
/oe/	bone, boat, snow, go (toe, though, plateau)
/oi/	coin, boy
/aw/	saw, sauce, ball (caught, thought) for (door, sore, four, warm board)*
/ur/	burn, person, bird (work, earth)
/ar/	far fast*
/air/	hair, square, bear (there)
/ear/	near, steer (here)
/ə/ (schwa)	yoga, the, animal, lemon, suspend (borough) bigger, doctor, polar (colour, centre)*

Common combined phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to combined phonemes
/ks/	box
/kw/	queen
/yoo/	uniform, due, cube, few (neutral, beauty)
/əl/	little, tunnel (pencil, animal)

Appendix 5. Pronouncing phonemes

The chart provides guidance for pronouncing isolated consonant phonemes when teaching them. Vowel phonemes are easier to pronounce than consonant phonemes, when they are isolated from words.

Teachers should enunciate phonemes clearly, and avoid adding [schwa](#), to help children blend them to read words. For example, it is easier to blend the sounds /s/ /p/ /or/ /t/ than /suh/ /puh/ /or/ /tuh/ to read the word 'sport'.

The following sounds are unvoiced:

/p/	as in 'p <u>i</u> n'
/t/	as in 't <u>o</u> p'
/k/	as in 'k <u>e</u> y'
/ch/	as in 'c <u>h</u> ip'
/f/	as in 'f <u>i</u> sh'
/th/	as in 't <u>h</u> in'
/s/	as in 's <u>u</u> n'
/sh/	as in 's <u>h</u> ip'
/h/	as in 'h <u>a</u> t'

The next two are voiced:

/r/	as in 'r <u>u</u> n'
/l/	as in 'l <u>i</u> p'

The next four cannot be heard clearly in isolation, unless small schwa is added:

/b/	as in 'b <u>o</u> y'
/d/	as in 'd <u>o</u> g'
/g/	as in 'g <u>o</u> '
/j/	as in 'j <u>e</u> t'

The next four have a buzzing sound:

/v/	as in 'v <u>a</u> n'
/th/	as in 't <u>h</u> at'
/z/	as in 'z <u>i</u> p'
/si/	as in 'v <u>i</u> sion'

The next three are nasal sounds:

/m/ as in 'man'

/n/ as in 'nut'

/ŋg/ as in 'ring'

The next two cannot be pronounced clearly in isolation, unless they are pronounced as vowel sounds (/oo/ and /ee/) or a small schwa is added to the sound.

/w/ as in 'wet'

/y/ as in 'yes'

Appendix 6. Decodable texts for children beginning to learn to read

The following four texts illustrate the importance of children reading books that are matched to the grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) they already know.

A Reception child learning through a typical systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme might know:

- the phonemes corresponding to each letter of the alphabet
- the phonemes corresponding to 'ck', 'sh', 'th', 'ng', 'ee', 'oo', 'or', 'ar'¹¹²
- exception words: 'to', 'the', 'we'.

The child would not be able to decode any of the deleted words in the first two books below (Books 1 and 2).

Book 1: What do they like to eat?

What does a ~~bird~~ like to eat?

A ~~bird~~ likes to eat worms.

What does a ~~giraffe~~ like to eat?

A ~~giraffe~~ likes to eat leaves.

What does a ~~seal~~ like to eat?

A ~~seal~~ likes to eat fish.

What do you like to eat?

Book 2: Splash!

Josh and Alex got ~~their~~ boots.

~~They~~ went to the park.

Josh saw a big puddle. He ~~jumped~~ in it.

Splash! Alex got wet.

~~He~~ ~~kicked~~ the ~~water~~.

Splash! Josh got wet.

Then ~~they~~ went ~~home~~.

~~Their~~ boots ~~were~~ full of ~~water~~!

¹¹² The GPCs are not quoted from a published programme; they are examples only.

The child could decode every word in the next two books below (Books 3 and 4).

Book 3: A Trip to a Planet

Look up! A ship!
Will it land?
Yes. Let's run and see it.
A thing with three legs and six arms got off.
Can we get in?
Yes, get in!
Up, up, up we went on a trip to a far planet.
We had fun.
Then we went back.

Book 4: Shark Facts

A shark is a fish.
It has fins and a soft skeleton
to help it swim fast.
As soon as a shark pup is born,
it can fend for itself.
Sharks keep dropping worn teeth
and getting extra teeth.
A carpet shark can get as long as a truck.

Appendix 7. Guidance for choosing a phonics programme

To help schools choose a suitable programme, the DfE provides a [list](#) of those that have been assessed and judged to comply with essential core criteria for an effective systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme. These criteria match the description of an [SSP programme](#) in this document (page 45).

It is not mandatory for schools to use a programme from the DfE's list. Schools that choose to develop their own SSP programme, or choose a programme that has not been validated, should ensure their programme meets the guidance on good SSP teaching in this document. They are advised to read these pages closely to consider how the ideas can be reflected in their own practice.

There is a range of programmes available that follow the principles outlined in this document, but they vary considerably in other ways. Schools should therefore consider the following points.

General

- Can the publisher point to studies, existing practice or evaluations as evidence of the success of the programme?
- Have school leaders spoken to staff in other schools where the programme is being used?
- Have school leaders and teachers visited other schools to see the programme being used and where excellent results have been achieved in the phonics screening check?
- Have any other new SSP programmes been considered?
- Is the programme deemed to be complete after two years or does the publisher provide further guidance and resources to build on the foundations?
- In multi-academy trusts, which SSP programme(s) are the other schools already using?

Costs

- How is the programme accessed, e.g. with a licence online, only through training, in hard copy directly from the publisher, and what are the costs of these different options?
- How is training paid for, e.g. one fee for all staff in the school or a fee for each member of staff?
- What is the estimated total cost of the programme each year, including training and resources?

Training

- What are the options for training, e.g. from a trainer visiting the school, by sending staff to a training venue, by webinar or by completing a course remotely? Are online training films available?
- To what extent are schools supported following training? How is the initial training reinforced and updated?
- What provision is made for teachers who are new to the school to access training individually?

Groupings

- Does the programme recommend whole-class grouping or grouping according to children's reading progress? To what extent might one arrangement suit your school more than another?

Resources

- How are resources provided, e.g. ready-made, to photocopy, to print from online, only with training?
- Are resources non-digital, digital (e.g. electronic whiteboard, online software application) or both?
- What does the programme provide for the teacher to use with children, e.g. letter cards, word cards, alphabetic code charts, other resources to display to support learning?
- What does the programme provide for the children to practise and apply reading and writing words and sentences, e.g. plain texts, 'decodable' books, activity sheets, pupil books?
- What does the programme provide to support letter formation?
- Are the resources especially suitable for young children or suitable for both young children and older pupils who have not yet mastered the early stages?

Parents

- Consider how the programme supports parents in helping their children to read at home, for example, through meetings and online support.

A note about 'Letters and Sounds'

In 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published a new phonics framework and called it 'Letters and Sounds'. Its aim was to provide schools with a practical programme to teach children to read and write according to the principles of

synthetic phonics. Copies of 'Letters and Sounds', including guidance and a handbook, were provided free to state-funded schools and teachers received free training. As a result, many schools that had not previously taught synthetic phonics implemented 'Letters and Sounds' in their schools, thus improving standards of teaching and children's reading.

However, 'Letters and Sounds' relied on schools building a full programme of resources around the handbook and in many cases updating the progression to bring it in line with current best practice. Some schools did this very successfully, but in other schools 'Letters and Sounds' was poorly resourced and not used according to current best practice. That is why, in 2021, the government decided to remove it from its list of validated full phonics programmes.

Individual schools may decide which phonics programme they use. It is important that schools look carefully at a range of programmes and the DfE recommends they consider an SSP programme from the validated list.

For further information about 'Letters and Sounds' from 2021, see the DfE blog, ['teachers' questions answered'](#).

Appendix 8. Audit for leaders and teachers

This audit form draws together all the audits from the main text.

Language comprehension

	Current practice
A clearly defined curriculum extends children's language and vocabulary in each of the Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning, and in year 1 for each subject.	
Children are taught routines for back and forth talk.	
Activities are used effectively to develop children's language.	
Non-fiction books related to experiences and activities are read with children and made available for them to share at school and at home.	
Effective procedures identify and support children with speech, language and communications needs (see Appendix 2: Supporting children's thinking).	
Teachers are aware of practices that could reduce interactions with children.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Storytimes

	Current practice
The daily time for stories is a priority. Teachers prepare the story reading so they can capture children's attention.	
Extra small-group storytimes are timetabled for children with speech, language and communication needs.	
Staff have a wide knowledge of traditional and contemporary children's literature.	
High-quality stories to read aloud to children, including traditional and modern stories, are organised, listed and shared.	
In stories and other books, children encounter others whose experiences and perspectives are both similar to and different from their own.	
Teachers re-read stories and talk with children about them to build familiarity and understanding.	
Some stories are dramatised with children when they know the story well.	
'Second tier' vocabulary is explored in wider contexts, once children know a story well.	
Books are made available for parents to share with their children at home.	
Teachers explain to parents the benefits of <u>reading aloud at home</u> .	
Book corners are appealing to children and uncluttered.	

Children have time to browse, and re-read or retell stories that have been read to them.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Poetry, rhymes and songs

	Current practice
The daily poetry, rhyme and singing session is a priority.	
Poems, rhymes and songs for each year group are listed.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics

	Current practice
Teachers understand the nature of the English alphabetic code.	
Teachers understand the principles underpinning a programme of synthetic phonics.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

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Teaching a systematic programme

	Current practice
The school has adopted a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme.	
Direct teaching of phonics takes place every day for all children from the start of the Reception year.	
Interactive lessons ensure all children participate fully.	
Children are taught correct letter formation and practise it daily.	
Children are given tasks that allow them to practise and apply what they have been taught to read and write.	
Children practise reading only with books that are decodable for them at that stage of their learning.	
Children read a decodable book or other decodable text most days.	
Resources are organised effectively.	
The organisation of books matches the order in which the phonics programme introduces grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) and exception words.	
Enough books are available at each stage of the phonics programme for children to practise reading.	

Teachers are aware of activities that might hinder children's progress in learning to read and write.	
Parents are informed about the phonics programme: what is taught; how they could provide extra practice to develop accuracy and fluency; how the school will support children to keep up from the start through extra practice.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Developing fluency

	Current practice
Teachers understand why fluency is essential for children's reading comprehension.	
Accurate decoding is assured before children move on to read a new book.	
The meaning of new words is explained to children to increase their vocabulary and accelerate their reading of words 'at a glance'.	
Children sometimes, from the earliest stage, re-read books to practise and improve their fluency.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

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Assessment

	Current practice
Teachers understand the difference between formative and summative assessment in relation to reading.	
Teachers use formative assessment throughout a lesson.	
Leaders use summative assessments to plan professional development.	
Teachers understand the specific purpose of the phonics screening check.	
Reading comprehension is not assessed until a child is a fluent reader.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Keeping up from the start

	Current practice
Phonics lessons are of the highest quality to reduce the likelihood that children might need extra support.	

Children at risk of falling behind are identified within the first three weeks of their starting in their Reception year.	
These children have extra daily phonics practice with a well-trained adult.	
Each child receiving extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; their attendance; time at the school, and previous teaching.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Older pupils who need to catch up with reading and writing

	Current practice
Phonic assessments identify pupils with poor decoding skills as soon as possible.	
Sufficient support accelerates progress, including for new arrivals and pupils who are learning English as an additional language.	
Each pupil receiving extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; their attendance; time at the school, and previous teaching.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

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Leadership and management

	Current practice
The headteacher takes responsibility for building a strong reading culture.	
The headteacher believes that virtually all children can learn to read, regardless of their background, needs or abilities, and acts to make this happen.	
Professional development, including training, practice and coaching, is planned and effective so all staff become experts in teaching reading and writing.	
The literacy lead has expertise in and experience of teaching phonics.	
The literacy lead has sufficient, dedicated time to fulfil the role.	
Sufficient time is planned for the teaching of phonics, reading and writing.	
Routines are strong, school-wide and reinforced consistently to support children's learning.	
Actions to be taken (by term)	

Appendix 9. Glossary

Terms marked with an asterisk are the definitions given in the Glossary for the programmes of study for English in the national curriculum.

Term	Guidance	Example
adjacent consonant	See consonant cluster .	
alliteration	The same initial sound occurring in adjacent or nearby words.	In 'Hickory D ickory D ock', the sound /d/ is alliterative; in ' R ing a R ing o' R oses', the sound /r/ is alliterative.
antonym*	Two words are antonyms if their meanings are opposites.	hot – cold light – dark light – heavy
assonance	The same or similar vowel sound occurring in adjacent or nearby words without the end sound rhyming, often used to draw attention to the words.	In the phrase 'breath and bread', the repeated vowel sound /e/ is assonant; the words 'breath' and 'death' are rhymes.
cadence	The rise and fall in pitch of the voice, generated in literary works by the specific choice of rhythm and vocabulary.	
common exception words	Exception words are words with GPCs that are unusual or have not yet been taught in a programme.	In the word 'said', the 's' and 'd' correspond to the sounds /s/ and /d/ as usual, but the grapheme 'ai' corresponds to the sound /e/, which is unusual.
consonant*	A sound which is produced when the speaker closes off or obstructs the flow of air through the vocal tract, usually using lips, tongue or teeth.	/p/ [flow of air stopped by the lips, then released] /t/ [flow of air stopped by the tongue touching the roof of the mouth, then released]

Term	Guidance	Example
	Most of the letters of the alphabet represent consonants. Only the letters <i>a</i> , <i>e</i> , <i>i</i> , <i>o</i> , <i>u</i> and <i>y</i> can represent vowel sounds.	/f/ [flow of air obstructed by the bottom lip touching the top teeth] /s/ [flow of air obstructed by the tip of the tongue touching the gum line]
consonant cluster	Two or more consonant letters in sequence that represent separate phonemes .	The letters <u>s</u> <u>t</u> and <u>r</u> in <i>stream</i> and the letters <u>m</u> and <u>p</u> in <i>lamp</i> are consonant clusters.
cursive script	Also known as joined handwriting. From the Latin verb 'currere', meaning 'to run'.	
decode	To convert written words into spoken language.	
'decodable' books	The term 'decodable books' is often used to describe books that have been structured in cumulative steps for children learning to read so that, as their knowledge of the alphabetic code increases, they can decode every word.	
digraph*	A type of grapheme where two letters represent one phoneme . Sometimes, these two letters are not next to one another; this is called a split digraph.	The digraph <u>ea</u> in <i>each</i> is pronounced /i:/. The digraph <u>sh</u> in <i>shed</i> is pronounced /ʃ/. The split digraph <u>i</u> - <u>e</u> in <i>line</i> is pronounced /aɪ/.
exception words	See common exception words .	

Term	Guidance	Example
GPC*	See grapheme-phoneme correspondences .	
grapheme*	A letter, or combination of letters, that corresponds to a single phoneme within a word.	The grapheme <i>t</i> in the words <i>t<u>e</u>n</i>, <i>be<u>t</u></i> and <i>a<u>t</u>e</i> corresponds to the phoneme /t/. The grapheme <i>ph</i> in the word <i>dol<u>ph</u>in</i> corresponds to the phoneme /f/.
grapheme-phoneme correspondences* (GPCs)	The links between letters, or combinations of letters (graphemes) and the speech sounds (phonemes) that they represent. In the English writing system, graphemes may correspond to different phonemes in different words.	The grapheme <i>s</i> corresponds to the phoneme /s/ in the word <i><u>s</u>ee</i>, but... ...it corresponds to the phoneme /z/ in the word <i>ea<u>s</u>y</i>.
inflection*	When we add <i>-ed</i> to <i>walk</i>, or change <i>mouse</i> to <i>mice</i>, this change of morphology produces an inflection ('bending') of the basic word which has special grammar (e.g. past tense or plural). In contrast, adding <i>-er</i> to <i>walk</i> produces a completely different word, <i>walk<u>er</u></i>, which is part of the same word family. Inflection is sometimes thought of as merely a change of ending, but, in fact, some words change completely when inflected.	<i>dogs</i> is an inflection of <i>dog</i>. <i>went</i> is an inflection of <i>go</i>. <i>better</i> is an inflection of <i>good</i>.
mnemonic	A device for supporting memory and recall.	A snake shaped like the letter 'S'

Term	Guidance	Example
morpheme	See morphology . A free morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning that can stand alone. Some inflections are examples of bound morphemes.	See examples below. The word <i>dogs</i> consists of the free morpheme <i>dog</i> and the bound morpheme <i>s</i> , signalling the plural form.
morphology*	A word's morphology is its internal make-up in terms of root words and suffixes or prefixes, as well as other kinds of change such as the change of <i>mouse</i> to <i>mice</i>. Morphology may be used to produce different inflections of the same word (e.g. <i>boy</i> – <i>boys</i>), or entirely new words (e.g. <i>boy</i> – <i>boyish</i>) belonging to the same word family. A word that contains two or more root words is a compound (e.g. <i>news+paper</i>, <i>ice+cream</i>).	<i>dogs</i> has the morphological make-up: <i>dog</i> + <i>s</i>. <i>unhelpfulness</i> has the morphological make-up: <i>unhelpful</i> + <i>ness</i> where <i>unhelpful</i> = <i>un</i> + <i>helpful</i> and <i>helpful</i> = <i>help</i> + <i>ful</i>
phoneme*	A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that signals a distinct, contrasting meaning. For example: /t/ contrasts with /k/ to signal the difference between <i>tap</i> and <i>cap</i> /t/ contrasts with /l/ to signal the difference between <i>bought</i> and <i>ball</i>.	The word <i>cat</i> has three letters and three phonemes: /kæt/ The word <i>catch</i> has five letters and three phonemes: /kæʃ/ The word <i>caught</i> has six letters and three phonemes: /kɔ:t/

Term	Guidance	Example
	It is this contrast in meaning that tells us there are two distinct phonemes at work. There are around 44 phonemes in English; the exact number depends on regional accents. A single phoneme may be represented in writing by one, two, three or four letters constituting a single grapheme.	
phonemic awareness	This refers to the ability to distinguish phonemes in spoken words. It should be distinguished from phonological awareness .	
phonological awareness	The general ability to attend to the sounds of language as distinct from the meaning.	
prefix*	A prefix is added at the beginning of a word in order to turn it into another word. Contrast suffix.	<i><u>o</u>vertake, <u>dis</u>appear</i>
preposition*	A preposition links a following noun, pronoun or noun phrase to some other word in the sentence. Prepositions often describe locations or directions, but can describe other things, such as relations of time. Words like <i>before</i> or <i>since</i> can act either as prepositions or as conjunctions.	<i>Tom waved goodbye <u>to</u> Christy. She'll be back <u>from</u> Australia <u>in</u> two weeks.</i> <i>I haven't seen my dog <u>since</u> this morning.</i> Contrast: <i>I'm going, <u>since</u> no-one wants me here!</i> [conjunction: links two clauses]

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pseudo-word	A pseudo-word resembles a word in a language because it uses GPCs and spellings that are likely to occur in that language. However, the word does not actually exist as a real word in that language. Also called 'nonsense words'.	Examples of pseudo-words in English: <i>emp</i> , <i>blant</i> , <i>meck</i> , <i>tubbin</i> The following are not pseudo-words in English because the letters do not occur in these places in this order in English words: <i>ckelt</i> , <i>wellsch</i>
rhyme	A word rhymes with another word when the final stressed syllable shares the same sound.	The words 'red' and 'shed' rhyme. The words 'red', 'said' and 'gingerbread' also rhyme because they share the same end sound, although the spellings of those sounds differ.
root word*	Morphology breaks words down into root words, which can stand alone, and suffixes or prefixes which can't. For example, <i>help</i> is the root word for other words in its word family such as <i>helpful</i> and <i>helpless</i> , and also for its inflections such as <i>helping</i> . Compound words (e.g. <i>help-desk</i>) contain two or more root words. When looking in a dictionary, we sometimes have to look for the root word (or words) of the word we are interested in.	<i>played</i> [the root word is <i>play</i>] <i>unfair</i> [the root word is <i>fair</i>] <i>football</i> [the root words are <i>foot</i> and <i>ball</i>]
schwa*	The name of a vowel sound that is found only in unstressed positions in English. It is the most common vowel sound in English.	/əlɒŋ/ [<u>a</u> long] /bʌtə/ [<u>u</u> tter]

Term	Guidance	Example
	It is written as /ə/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet. In the English writing system, it can be written in many different ways.	(with accents where the /r/ is not pronounced)
second tier words	Words that children are unlikely to hear in everyday conversation but are likely to come across in stories	
semantic	Related to meaning	
split digraph*	See digraph .	
stress*	A syllable is stressed if it is pronounced more forcefully than the syllables next to it. The other syllables are unstressed.	<i><u>about</u></i> <i><u>visit</u></i>
suffix*	A suffix is an 'ending', used at the end of one word to turn it into another word. Unlike root words , suffixes cannot stand on their own as a complete word. Contrast prefix .	<i>call – <u>called</u></i> <i>teach – <u>teacher</u></i> [turns a verb into a noun] <i>terror – <u>terrorise</u></i> [turns a noun into a verb] <i>green – <u>greenish</u></i> [leaves word class unchanged]
syllable*	A syllable sounds like a beat in a word . Syllables consist of at least one vowel , and possibly one or more consonants .	<i>Cat</i> has one syllable. <i>Fairy</i> has two syllables. <i>Hippopotamus</i> has five syllables.
synonym*	Two words are synonyms if they have the same meaning,	<i>talk – speak</i> <i>old – elderly</i>

Term	Guidance	Example
	or similar meanings. Contrast antonym .	
trigraph*	A type of grapheme where three letters represent one phoneme .	<i><u>High</u>, <u>pure</u>, <u>patch</u>, <u>hedge</u></i>
unstressed*	See stress .	
vowel*	A vowel is a speech sound which is produced without any closure or obstruction of the vocal tract. Vowels can form syllables by themselves, or they may combine with consonants. In the English writing system, the letters <i>a</i>, <i>e</i>, <i>i</i>, <i>o</i>, <i>u</i> and <i>y</i> can represent vowels.	
word*	A word is a unit of grammar: it can be selected and moved around relatively independently, but cannot easily be split. In punctuation, words are normally separated by word spaces. Sometimes, a sequence that appears grammatically to be two words is collapsed into a single written word, indicated with a hyphen or apostrophe (e.g. <i>well-built</i>, <i>he's</i>).	<i><u>headteacher</u> or <u>head teacher</u></i> [can be written with or without a space] <i><u>I'm</u> going out.</i> <i><u>9.30 am</u></i>
word class*	Every word belongs to a word class which summarises the ways in which it can be used in grammar. The major word classes for English are: noun,	

Term	Guidance	Example
	verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, determiner, pronoun, conjunction. Word classes are sometimes called 'parts of speech'.	
word family*	The words in a word family are normally related to each other by a combination of morphology , grammar and meaning.	<i>teach – teacher</i> <i>extend – extent – extensive</i> <i>grammar – grammatical – grammarian</i>

Reviewers' comments

"A brilliant document and well-timed"

Dr Elaine Allen, Executive Headteacher of St John Vianney Catholic Primary School and English Hub, and Chair of the English Hubs Council

"This is an excellent piece of work that has the potential to have a significant impact"

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Shahed Ahmed OBE, CEO of New Vision Trust and Hub Representative on the English Hubs Council

"A useful, no-nonsense document which provides everything that a school would need to ensure that they are providing the best opportunity for all pupils to succeed."

Liz Kenny, English Hub lead for Learners First English Hub and Hub Representative on the English Hubs Council

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"...a 'how to teach early reading' guide...very thorough, well-researched"

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"The Framework focuses clearly on the earliest stages of teaching reading and does so explicitly, supportively and in an accessible manner for student teachers as well as practising professionals."

Professor Teresa Cremin, Professor of Education (Literacy) at The Open University



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