TEACHING STRATEGIES Grades K-3

Phonics from A to Z

A Practical Guide

BY WILEY BLEVINS

SCHOLASTIC

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SCHOLASTIC
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Terry Cooper, Wendy Murray, and Jeanette Moss for their efforts, support, and extreme patience. I would also like to thank the following teachers, colleagues, and students for their feedback and assistance: Erinn Hudson and her second graders at Ward-Highlands Elementary School in Ocala, Florida, Marissa Noguez, Joan Conway, Beth Ann Sullivan, Kelly Combes, Lou Ann Kleck, Joyce Nafziger, Renee Flory, Carla Hartz, Shelley Stalnaker, Julie Small-Gamby, Emily Teresa, and the staff at Gutman Library at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to Jeanne Chall, Marilyn Adams, M. E. Curtis, and the many other professors, colleagues, and classroom teachers who have taught me so much about how children learn to read.

Cover design by Kathy Massaro

Interior design by Ellen Matlach Hassell
for Boultinghouse & Boultinghouse, Inc.

Interior illustrations by Maxie Chambliss

Photographs: cover, 53, 140, 154: © Catrina Genovese;
57: © Margaret Lampert; 101: © Liza Loeffler;
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ISBN 0-590-31510-2

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What Is Phonics?

"At one magical instant in your early childhood, the page of a book—that string of confused, alien ciphers—shivered into meaning. Words spoke to you, gave up their secrets; at that moment, whole universes opened. You became, irrevocably, a reader."

—Alberto Manguel

The sun beat down on me hotter than I had ever felt it. I could feel the steam sizzling up from the tarmac as I stepped off the plane. Here I was in Guayaquil, Ecuador. My charge was to teach a class of second graders—many of whom had limited English abilities—to read. It was my first year teaching and I had journeyed far from Coal City, West Virginia, where I had first learned about the mysteries of books. As I walked toward the airline terminal, the enormity of the challenge and responsibility I had accepted struck me. I suddenly felt even hotter!

Each year millions of teachers enter classrooms across our nation (and the world) with this same challenge. They have to make key decisions as they wrestle with the question of how best to teach children to read. Considerable discussion and debate center around answering this critical question. The debate rages on not only in classrooms, but in universities and at school board meetings everywhere. However, this book is not about that "great debate." It is designed to help you better understand our unique and sometimes complex language and how you can use that knowledge to better teach children to read. Its focus is on phonics—the relationship between sounds and their spellings—and how helping children understand this important piece of the reading "puzzle" can help develop fluent readers who have a passion for books and who understand how books can provide pleasure and information.

This is where it all began—my first class on my first day!

Phonics: What and Why

According to a 1992 poll conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 62% of parents identified reading as one of the most important skills their children needed to learn. In 1994 the same polling firm conducted a survey for the American Federation of Teachers and the Chrysler Corporation and found that almost 70% of teachers identified reading as *the* most important skill for children to learn.

With such agreement on the importance of reading, how do we best teach children to read? What should be the goals of early reading instruction? The following goals are often cited

1. automatic word recognition (fluency)
2. comprehension of text
3. development of a love of literature and a desire to read

The first goal—automatic word recognition—is the focus of this book. To become skilled readers, children must be able to identify words quickly and accurately. To do so, they must be proficient at decoding words. Decoding words involves converting the printed word into spoken language. A reader decodes a word by sounding it out, using context clues, using structural analysis, or recognizing the word by sight. In order to sound out words, a reader must be able to associate a specific spelling with a specific sound. Phonics involves this relationship between sounds and their spellings.

Phonics is not a specific teaching method. In fact, there are many ways to teach it. However, what most types of phonics instruction do have in common is that they focus on the teaching of sound-spelling relationships so that a young reader can come up with an approximate pronunciation of a word and then check it against his or her oral vocabulary.

Approximately 84% of English words are phonetically regular. Therefore, teaching the most common sound-spelling relationships in English is extremely useful for readers. As Anderson et al. (1985) write, "English is an alphabetic language in which there are consistent, though not entirely predictable, relationships between letters and sounds. When children learn these relationships well, most of the words in their spoken language become accessible to them when they see them in print. When this happens, children are said to have 'broken the code.'"

One of the arguments against teaching phonics is that the approximately 16% of so-called irregular English words appear with the greatest frequency in text (about 80% of the time). As you will discover throughout this book, these words are not as "irregular" as they may seem. Although they must be taught as sight words, the reader has to pay attention to their spelling patterns in order to store them in his or her memory. Some detractors of teaching phonics also contend that reading develops in the same way as speaking—naturally. Foorman (1995) responds by saying "humans are biologically specialized to produce language and have done so for nearly 1 million years. Such is not the case with reading and writing. If it were, there would not be illiterate children in the world."

Clearly, then, most children need instruction in learning to read. One of the critical early hurdles in reading instruction is helping children grasp the alphabetic principle. That is, to read, children must understand that this series of symbols we call the alphabet map onto the sounds of our language in roughly predictable ways. This alphabetic principle is a key insight into early reading. Phonics instruction helps children to understand this alphabetic principle. And it enables children to get off to a quick start in relating sounds to spellings and thereby decoding words.

But isn't comprehension the most important part of reading? How does this ability to decode words help a reader understand a text? The flowchart below illustrates that strong decoding ability is necessary for reading comprehension. However, it is not the only skill a reader needs to make meaning from text. And sounding out words is not the only way to figure out an unfamiliar word while reading.

When they read, children need to be able to use three cueing systems. These systems represent signals in text that interact and overlap to help the reader understand what he or she is reading. The cueing systems include:

1. **Graphophonic cues** involve a reader's knowledge of sound-spelling relationships. Phonics instruction helps children to use these cues.
2. **Syntactic cues** involve a reader's knowledge of the grammar or structure of language. This knowledge helps the reader to predict what type of word might appear in a certain place in a sentence. For example, it might be a nam-

The Connection Between Decoding and Comprehension

Phonics instruction helps the reader to map sounds onto spellings. This ability enables readers to decode words. **Decoding** words aids in the development of and improvement in word recognition. The more words a reader recognizes, the easier the reading task. Therefore, phonics instruction aids in the development of **word recognition** by providing children with an important and useful way to figure out unfamiliar words while reading.

When children begin to be able to recognize a large number of words quickly and accurately, **reading fluency** improves. Reading fluency refers to the ease with which children can read a text. As more and more words become firmly stored in a child's memory (that is, the child recognizes more and more words on sight), he or she gains fluency and **automaticity** in word recognition. Having many opportunities to decode words in text is critical to learning words by sight. The more times a child encounters a word in text, the more likely he or she is to recognize it by sight and to avoid making a reading error (Gough, Juel, and Roper-Schneider, 1983).

Reading fluency improves **reading comprehension**. Since children are no longer struggling with decoding words, they can devote their full attention (their mental energies) to making meaning from the text. As the vocabulary and concept demands increase in text, children need to be able to devote more of their attention to making meaning from text, and increasingly less attention to decoding. If children have to devote too much time to decoding words, their reading will be slow and labored. This will result in comprehension difficulties.

5 Good Decoders Rely Less on Context Clues than Poor Decoders

Good readers rely less on context clues than poor readers do because their decoding skills are so strong (Gough and Juel, 1991). It's only when good readers can't use their knowledge of sound-spelling relationships to figure out an unfamiliar word that they rely on context clues. In contrast, poor readers, who often have weak decoding skills, overrely on context clues to try to make meaning from text (Nicholson, 1992; Stanovich, 1986). Any reader, strong or weak, can use context clues only up to a certain point. It has been estimated that only one out of every four words (25%) can be predicted using context (Gough, Alford, and Holley-Wilcox, 1981). The words that are the easiest to predict are function words such as *the* and *an*. Content words—the words that carry the bulk of the meaning in a text—are the most difficult to predict. Researchers estimate that content words can be predicted only about 10% of the time (Gough, 1983). A reader needs to use his or her knowledge of phonics (sound-spelling relationships) to decode these words.

"The whole word method . . . may serve a student adequately up to about second grade. But failure to acquire and use efficient decoding skills will begin to take a toll on reading comprehension by grade 3." —*Jeanne Chall*

6 The Reading Process Relies on a Reader's Attention to Each Letter in a Word

Eye-movement studies have revealed that skilled readers attend to almost every word in a sentence and process the letters that compose each word (McConkie and Zola, 1987). Therefore, reading is a "letter-mediated" rather than a "whole-word-mediated" process (Just and Carpenter, 1987). Prior to these findings, it was assumed that readers did not process each letter in a word; rather they recognized the word based on shape, a few letters, and context.

Research has also revealed that poor readers do not fully analyze words; for example, some poor readers tend to rely on initial consonants cues only (Stanovich, 1992; Vellutino and Scanlon, 1987). Therefore, phonics instruction should help to focus children's attention on all the letters or spellings that make up words and the sounds each represents by emphasizing the full analysis of words. In addition, phonics instruction must teach children strategies to use this information to decode words. This attention to the spelling patterns in words is necessary for the reader to store the words in his or her memory. It also helps the reader to become a better speller because the common spelling patterns of English are attended to to a greater degree and thereby more fully learned (Ehri, 1987).

7 Phonemic Awareness Is Necessary for Phonics Instruction to Be Effective

Before children can use a knowledge of sound-spelling relationships to decode words, they must understand that words are made up of sounds (Adams, 1990). Many children come to school thinking of words as whole units—*cat, dog, run*. Before they can learn to read, children must realize that these words can be broken into smaller

When a child asks me how to spell a word, I first ask, "What have you tried?" This provides me with information on the child's ability to segment the word, the sound-spellings he or she has learned, and the ways the child approaches spelling. I base my feedback on the child's strategy use. For example, occasionally when a child attempts to spell a word, he or she overarticulates it. This drawing out of each sound can result in misspellings. I bring this to the child's attention and suggest that he or she say the word at a more natural speed to check the spelling. I ask, "Have you added any unnecessary letters?"

units—and sounded out. Phonemic awareness is the understanding, or insight, that a word is made up of a series of discrete sounds. Without this insight, phonics instruction will not make sense to children.

8 Phonics Instruction Improves Spelling Ability

Reading and writing are interrelated and complementary processes (Pinnell, 1994). Whereas phonics is characterized by putting together sounds to read words that are printed, spelling involves breaking down spoken words into sounds in order to write them. To spell, or encode, a word, a child must match a spelling to each sound heard in the word.

Spelling development lags behind reading development. A word can generally be read before it can be spelled. The visual attention a child needs to recognize words is stored in his or her memory. This information—the knowledge of the spelling patterns of English, also known as orthographic knowledge—is used to spell. Spelling, however, requires greater visual recall than reading and places higher demands on memory.

Good spellers are generally good readers because spelling and reading share an underlying knowledge base. Poor readers, however, are rarely good spellers. Phonics is a particularly powerful tool in improving spelling because it emphasizes spelling patterns, which become familiar from reading. Studies show that half of all English words can be spelled with phonics rules that relate one letter to one sound. Thirty-seven percent of words can be spelled with phonics rules that relate groups of letters to one sound. The other 13 percent must be learned by memorization. Good spellers have not memorized the dictionary; they apply the phonics rules they know and have a large store of sight words.

Writing, in turn, supports a child's reading development because it slows the process by focusing the child's attention on how print works. Poor spellers experience difficulties in both writing and reading. Poorly developed spelling ability also hinders vocabulary development (Adams, Treiman, and Pressley, 1996; Read, 1986).

9 A Teacher's Knowledge of Phonics Affects His or Her Ability to Teach Phonics

A teacher's knowledge of phonics has a strong effect on his or her ability to teach phonics (Carroll, 1990; Moats, 1995). This knowledge of the English language enables the teacher to choose the best examples for instruction, to provide focused instruction, and to better understand students' reading and writing errors in relationship to their developing language skills.

10 It Is Possible to Overdo Phonics Instruction

Some teachers may unknowingly overdo phonics instruction (Stanovich, 1993–94; Chall, 1996). Likewise, some teachers may underemphasize phonics instruction to the point that they're doing a disservice to children by not providing them with a valuable decoding strategy.

For many children, a little phonics instruction can go a long way. The awareness these children have that sounds map onto spellings enables them to deduce other sound-spelling relationships from wide reading, especially if the material they read contains a large number of decodable words (Juel, 1991). However, some children (especially children at risk) need teaching that makes these relationships explicit through direct and systematic instruction.

In addition, phonics instruction should focus on applying learned sound-spelling relationships to actual reading, with smaller amounts of time spent on learning phonics rules or generalizations and out-of-context work.

History of Phonics Instruction in the U.S.

Phonics instruction has developed and changed throughout the history of reading instruction in the United States. At times, there has been an emphasis on teaching children sound-spelling relationships; at other times, phonics instruction has taken a backseat. The following time line highlights some important changes in the way phonics instruction has been treated throughout the history of U.S. reading education.

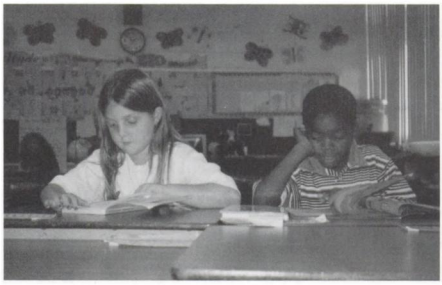
- **late 1600s:** The *New England Primer* was published in the colonies in the late 1600s. The instruction in this early reading book reflected a strong emphasis on phonics. Students first learned the alphabet, next practiced reading simple syllables, and finally read actual text. The Bible was the primary book students read, and reading was considered a serious matter. The "bottom-up" approach to reading, for which students began with sound-letter relationships, was consistent with the way the early colonists learned to read in other languages. From the time of the ancient Greeks, phonics had been taught to make written language accessible. It's no surprise then that the educated colonists,

many of whom were schooled in classics such as Greek and Latin, would advocate phonics instruction. This method of instruction continued unchallenged for over a century and a half.

- **mid-1800s:** During the mid-1800s, things slowly began to change. Instead of only an elite few learning to read, attention began to focus on educating a larger portion of the population. Education of the masses was viewed as a necessity for this young democracy called the United States to grow and thrive. In addition, a larger number of published works were becoming available. Comprehension became the focus of educators' attention, and instruction in comprehension was seen as being at odds with phonics instruction. Part of the charge against phonics instruction was led by Horace Mann, the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. He saw phonics as detrimental to creating a nation of eager and skilled readers and advocated a whole-word method to reading instruction. Although his influence grew slowly, graded reading books emerged, and the instructional emphasis on comprehension over phonics continued. Although many teachers initially fought this notion, the reading books published began to contain more controlled vocabulary, and the ensuing instruction reflected this. In the late 1920s, this whole-word method, with its accompanying controlled-vocabulary readers, would firmly take root.
- **late 1920s-1940s:** In the late 1920s, the well-respected educator William S. Gray led the criticisms against what he described as the "heartless drudgery" of the existing phonics instruction. He recommended that it be replaced once and for all with the look-say method (also known as the sight word or whole-word method). The Dick and Jane readers, which Gray helped to develop with Scott Foresman and Company, popularized the look-say method. These readers reflected significant changes in reading materials for children. For example, they contained full-color pictures and stories that appealed to children. The text was carefully controlled so that sight words were used repeatedly to provide children with multiple exposures. This approach followed a "top-down" model in which students began with their prior experiences and knowledge of whole words. Any sound-spelling relationships children learned were learned incidentally. Phonics was seen as a last resort.
- **1955:** In 1955 Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* took the nation by storm. Flesch attributed decreases in reading abilities among U.S. students to the look-say method and harshly attacked it. He advocated a return to the "sensibility" of phonics. Although Flesch's ideas were certainly not new, his book received considerable attention because of its political tone and severe criticisms. The general public and media embraced the book, and it became an instant best-seller. However, the academic community dismissed *Why Johnny Can't Read* because of Flesch's propaganda-style writing, because his claims couldn't be substantiated by existing research, and because he oversimplified how children learn to read. Undaunted, Flesch continued his attacks, and the public listened with open ears. Here is a passage from *Why Johnny Can't Read:*

  > I say, therefore, that the word method is gradually destroying democracy in this country; it returns to the upper middle class the privileges that public education was supposed to distribute evenly among the people. The American Dream is, essentially, equal opportunity through free education for all. This dream is beginning to vanish in a country where the public schools are falling down on the job.

  Flesch went on to complain that the use of the whole-word method was like animal training; it treated children like dogs. He called it "the most inhuman, mean, stupid way of foisting something on a child's mind." Today, Flesch's book remains popular and is widely quoted. One negative aftermath of this book is the polarization of reading educators. If a teacher advocates phonics, it is assumed that he or she wants to return to the drudgery of the past and is antiliterature, anticomprehension, and antimotivation. If a teacher advocates a whole-language approach, it is assumed that he or she wants to return to the look-say methods of the past and is uninformed about how children learn to read. Neither extreme interpretation is, of course, accurate.
- **1967:** The U.S. government was not deaf to the cries being heard throughout the country as a result of Flesch's book and turned to the academic community for answers. The answer came in 1967 with the publication of Jeanne Chall's classic *Learning to Read: The Great Debate.* This book reflected a more scientific and balanced analysis of the reading issue facing our nation. It advocated including early and sys-



Wide reading is a critical and effective way to build children's reading skills. Provide children with lots of books at their independent reading levels and set aside at least 15 minutes each day for independent reading.

tematic phonics instruction in the elementary reading curriculum and supported this with a substantial amount of research data. Many follow-up studies by other researchers supported Chall's notion that direct phonics instruction was more beneficial to students than incidental learning. Although Chall's findings were greatly substantiated, phonics instruction received varying degrees of emphasis in the 1970s, '80s, and early '90s, and often took a backseat to an emphasis on quality literature and comprehension.

- **1985–present:** With the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Anderson et al., 1985) and Marilyn Jager Adams's now classic *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, the spotlight once again highlighted the importance of explicit phonics instruction. These authors described phonics as "*one* of the essential ingredients" in early reading instruction. However, they acknowledged the many other important aspects of early reading and advocated a more balanced, comprehensive approach to reading instruction. They also acknowledged that reading is neither a "bottom-up" nor "top-down" process. Rather, they and other researchers proposed an "interactive model" of reading in which a reader uses in combination prior knowledge (background experiences) and knowledge of sound-spelling features of words, sentence structure, and word meanings to comprehend text. The instructional focus therefore should not be on one aspect of reading to the exclusion of others.

Stages of Reading Development: Where Phonics Fits In

Before I begin discussing current phonics instruction, I believe it is important for any teacher of reading to get a sense of the big picture. This understanding can help put phonics in its proper perspective and enable you to make instructional decisions based on each student's stage of reading development. I have chosen the stages of reading development proposed by Chall (1983) because it provides a clear and useful framework for how children learn to read. This framework includes six reading levels.

STAGE 0: Prereading

This stage lasts from birth to about age six. The most notable change is the child's growing control over language. By the time a child enters grade one (at around age six), he or she has approximately 6,000 words in his or her listening and speaking vocabularies. During this stage, children also develop some knowledge of print, such as recognizing a few letters, words, and environmental print signs. Many children are able to write their names. It is common to see children "pretend" read a book that has been repeatedly read to them. At this stage, children "bring more to the printed page than they take out."

STAGE 1: Initial Reading or Decoding

This stage generally lasts from grades 1 through 2. During this time children develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle and begin to use their knowledge of sound-spelling relationships to decode words.

STAGE 2: Confirmation, Fluency, and Ungluing from Print

This stage generally lasts from grades 2 through 3. Children further develop and solidify their decoding skills. They also develop additional strategies to decode words and make meaning from text. As this stage ends, children have developed fluency; that is, they can recognize many words quickly and accurately by sight and are skilled at sounding out words they don't recognize by sight. They are also skilled at using context clues to predict words.

STAGE 3: Learning the New

This stage generally lasts from grades 4 through 8. During this stage, the reading demands change. Children begin to use reading more as a way to obtain information and learn about the values, attitudes, and insights of others. Texts contain many words not already in a child's speaking and listening vocabularies. These texts, frequently drawn from a wide variety of genres, also extend beyond the background experiences of the children.

STAGE 4: Multiple Viewpoints

This stage generally lasts throughout high school (grades 9 through 12). Readers encounter more complex language and vocabulary as they read texts in more advanced content areas. Thus the language and cognitive demands required of the reader increase. Readers are also required to read texts containing varying viewpoints and to analyze them critically.

STAGE 5: Construction and Reconstruction

This stage, which generally lasts through college and beyond, is characterized by a "worldview." Readers use the information in books and articles as needed; that is, a reader knows which books and articles will provide the information he or she needs and can locate that information within a book without having to read it in its entirety. At this stage, reading is considered constructive; that is, readers take in a wide range of information and construct their own understanding for their individual uses based on their analysis and synthesis of the information. Not all readers progress to this stage.

As Chall herself states, the value of this framework is that it "suggests that different aspects of reading be emphasized at different stages of reading development, and that success at the beginning is essential since it influences not only early reading achievement but also reading at subsequent stages of development." This framework highlights the need for beginning reading programs to provide children with strong instruction in decoding words. It is also a warning that a prolonged stay in any one stage can result in serious reading problems.

As you read the information provided in this book and assess the reading development of your students, keep in mind the stages of reading development framework. Consider how it can be used to modify instruction. For example, what you do instructionally with a third-grade child stuck in Stage 1 is different from what you do with a third-grade child already in Stage 3.

Aside from providing balanced, strong reading instruction that meets the needs of all your children, the greatest gift you can give them is a love of reading. I am constantly reminded of Mrs. Fry, my fourth-grade teacher. Throughout the year she read to us the entire *Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The words seemed to melt off the pages as she read. I can still remember the emotion and excitement in her voice. She made me want to read everything she picked up. Indeed, many of us purchased our own *Little House* sets of books or checked out of the library every book she recommended. She brought books to life! It is that love of literature we can and must share with our students in order to open the door for them to a world of amazing ideas.

Ways to Get Parents Involved

It's important to involve students' families in the reading development of their children. Here are some tips:

- Communicate what you're doing in your classroom through newsletters, conferences, phone calls, and individual notes. Be specific about the phonics skills you are teaching.
- Provide families with lists of books appropriate for their children to read independently.
- Keep an open door policy. Encourage family members to volunteer, visit your classroom, or simply offer feedback in writing.
- Send home learning kits filled with books and phonics activities for family members and children to enjoy together.
- Hold a reading workshop on a Saturday or weekday evening to answer questions about phonics and provide family members with strategies to help their children decode words. Videotape the session and send home the tape for parents who could not attend.

during the first two years of school should ensure that children know the alphabet and can use it with ease and efficiency.

Many children enter school already able to identify some of the printed letter names. In one study, children entering kindergarten could identify on average 14 letters (Hiebert and Sawyer, 1984). The letters the children were most likely to know were those used most frequently or those with the most personal relevance to them (for example, the letters in their name). These children had learned letters by singing the alphabet song, being exposed to alphabet books, and having family members point out and identify letters in environmental print.

However, being able to name and quickly recognize letters is a critical step to learning to read for *all* children. Adams (1990) points out that:

- Children who can recognize letters with accuracy and speed have an easier time learning about the sounds associated with letters than those children who are struggling with alphabet recognition. Automatic recognition frees up students' "mental energies" so they can focus on learning sound-spelling relationships.
- Accuracy is only one aspect of alphabet recognition. Speed (automaticity) is another critical factor. Both accuracy and speed indicate how well children have learned the letters' identities. Thus, children need to overlearn (memorize) the letters. A child who hasn't memorized the letters of the alphabet may become a "nonalphabetic" reader; that is, he or she will have to rely on sight words to read rather than using a knowledge of letters and the sounds they represent.
- As they learn the letters, children frequently become interested in learning more about them—their sounds and how to use them to write words.

How to Assess Alphabet Recognition

Assess children's knowledge of the alphabet at the beginning of kindergarten and grade one. Begin any assessment by asking children to say the names of the uppercase and lowercase alphabet letters. Then continue by asking them to identify the letters in and out of sequence. See the next page for some appropriate assessments.

Teaching Alphabet Recognition

Teachers all across the country use a wide range of methods and activities to teach the alphabet. Jill Simpson, teaching in Florida, reads a lot of alphabet books to her students and has them create their own alphabet books as she introduces each new letter. Sadie Connor in Ohio fills her classroom with manipulatives—fuzzy letters, paint, letter cards, and more. She also sings the alphabet song every morning and designates a letter of the day that corresponds to a child's name in her class. Her activities for the day center around that letter and its corresponding sound. Matt Bingham in Maryland has his students write letters in the air, form letters with their bodies, make letters out of clay, and practice writing letters while writing stories. He stresses the sound that each letter stands for by introducing his class to an object (toy, classroom object, etc.) whose name contains the letter/sound being studied. His children then write about that object.

What do all these teachers have in common? They all understand that children learn the alphabet best through the "active exploration of the relationships between letter names, the sounds of the letter names, their visual characteristics, and the motor movement involved in their formation" (Bear et al., 1996). Educators agree that children learn these relationships through a combination of direct instruction and multiple exposures to print. However, there is some disagreement about the sequence in which the alphabet should be taught. Some educators believe that the letters should be taught in order, since the alphabet represents a system with a set sequence that serves a valuable organizational function. And they emphasize the importance of starting with the known when teaching any new skill. Since most children come to school able to sing the alphabet song—with the letters in order—these educators reason that learning the printed forms of the letters in the same order will be easier.

Other educators believe that children should first learn meaningful letters, such as those in their names. Since these letters are of greatest importance, they reason, young learners will internalize them more quickly. In addition, these educators think that the visually confusing letters, such as *b* and *d*, should be taught far enough apart that one can be learned before the other is introduced.

Sensible Sequencing

Since there is no consensus on a best sequence for teaching the alphabet, you'll have to decide what is best for you and your students. I recommend the following:

- **Teach children letter names first.** Most letter names are closely related to their sounds. In fact, 21 letters contain the most common sound assigned to them in their names. For example, *b* (/bē/) and *m* (/em/). The exceptions are *h, q, w,*

Alphabet Recognition Assessment

Name _____ Date _____

Uppercase letters
Have the child point to each letter in order as he or she says the letter's name. Circle those that the child gets correct.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

Lowercase letters
Have the child point to each letter in order as he or she says the letter's name. Circle those that the child gets correct.

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i
j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r
s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	

Upper/lowercase letter match
Have the child draw lines to match the uppercase and lowercase letters in each box.

A	c	B	d	H	h	P	r	K	o	M	x
C	v	D	f	I	l	Q	z	O	k	N	y
G	a	E	e	J	i	R	q	S	t	W	w
V	u	F	b	L	j	Z	p	T	s	X	n
U	g									Y	m

Upper/lowercase random order mix
Have the child point to each uppercase or lowercase letter as he or she says the letter's name. Circle those that the child gets correct.

E	B	o	h	P	f	N	x	I
a	q	G	m	R	L	j	v	K
U	c	Z	W	d	T	y	s	

y, *g*, and the short vowels. Knowing the names of the letters helps children grasp the alphabetic principle—the notion that each letter stands for a sound. In addition, knowing the names provides you with instructional labels that are familiar to children.

- **Put a new spin on a classic song.** Children generally learn the letter names not by seeing the letters but by singing the "Alphabet Song" to the tune of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Although a classic, the traditional alphabet song isn't without its shortcomings—most notably the so-called elemeno problem. When the song arrives at the letters *L, M, N,* and *O,* they are sung so quickly that they sound like the word "elemeno" instead of the pronunciations of four distinct letters. You can overcome this problem by choosing a different version of the alphabet song, or pointing to the letters on an alphabet chart while singing the song. Alternate versions are available on audiocassette and range from slight modifications of the traditional song (for example, one uses the traditional tune but provides pauses on the letters *N, Q,* and *T*) to an alphabet rap. Also available are alphabet book/cassette combinations, such as *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (written by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault; performed by Ray Charles, Simon & Schuster, 1991).
- **Next, teach the shapes and sounds of letters.** When children know the names of the letters, teach their shapes and the most common sound assigned to each. Although many children can say the names of the letters by age four, most need up to two years to learn the corresponding shapes (Adams, 1990). Some children can learn several letters a week; some may need a week to learn one (Ekwall and Shanker, 1993). "Learning the alphabet proceeds in much the same way as learning anything else—by categorizing features that are the same and contrasting those with other features that are different" (Bear et al., 1996).
- **Tailor you letter lessons to students' needs.** If you're working with children who have limited alphabet knowledge, don't teach both the uppercase and lowercase forms of the letters simultaneously. If children are in preschool, teach the uppercase letters first since those are easier to distinguish visually. Besides, these are the letter forms preschool children are most likely to have become familiar with outside the classroom because of their exposure to environmental print. If you are working with children in kindergarten and grade one, focus on the lowercase letters since these are the letter forms most frequently encountered in text (Adams, 1990).
- **Help children to see differences and similarities among letters.** When teaching letter shapes, help children to discriminate small, but important, differences among letters. And remember that children need to be able to recognize letters in isolation and in the context of a word, the latter being more difficult (Clay, 1991). First help children see similarities in letters they know; then progress to pointing out letter differences and introducing other letters. For example, the letters *a* and *b* both contain small circles. Next point out and discuss the subtle differences among similar-looking letters. For example letters differ in the direction of their extension *(b-p, d-g, q-d),* their left-right orientation *(b-d, q-p, g-p),* their top-bottom orientation *(m-w, n-u, M-W),* and their line-curve features *(u-v, U-V).*

The following charts show letters that are visually similar and often confused by children. You need to pay special attention to teaching their differences. Don't teach these letter pairs in close proximity; be sure children have a firm grasp of the first one before you introduce the other. The letters that confuse children the most are those with reversible parts, such as *b-d, p-d, q-b, h-u,* and *i-l* (Popp, 1964).

Confusable Letter Pairs

Lowercase				Uppercase	
a-d	c-o	h-n	n-u	C-G	M-N
a-o	d-q	h-u	p-q	D-O	M-W
b-d	d-g	i-j	u-v	E-F	O-Q
b-h	d-p	i-l	v-w	I-J	P-R
b-p	f-t	k-y	v-y	I-L	U-V
b-q	g-p	m-n		K-X	V-Y
c-e	g-q	m-w		L-T	

The following four letter groups are particularly confusing for students and shouldn't be taught at the same time (Manzo and Manzo, 1993).

- e, a, s, c, o
- b, d, p, o, g, h
- f, l, t, k, i, h
- n, m, u, h, r

◆ **Provide support for children having difficulty discriminating letters.** The typical four- to four-and-a-half-year-old has the visual perceptual skill needed to distinguish lowercase letters (Rosner, 1993). However, some children will need extra help. One common letter reversal problem involves *b* and *d*. Most children who have trouble identifying *b* and *d* can see that the letters are different, but they can't remember which is which (Rosner, 1993). Using memory devices and having an alphabet chart on each child's desk for easy reference helps.

Classroom Spotlight

You can use memory devices to help children distiguish one letter from another. Try these strategies to help children with the visually confusing *b-d*.

- Write the word *bed* on the chalkboard and point out that the word visually resembles a bed. Show children that the word begins with the letter *b* and ends with the letter *d* and that the letter *b* comes before the letter *d* in the alphabet and in the word *bed*.
- Write an uppercase *B* on the chalkboard. In another color, trace the lowercase *b* that is "hidden" (embedded) in the uppercase *B*. For the letter *d*, teach the letter *c* first. Then point out to children that they need only add a line to the letter *c* to form the next letter in the alphabet—the letter *d*.

◆ **Provide letter-writing practice.** To learn and recall the letter shapes, children need plenty of practice writing them as early as possible. Teach letter shapes along with teaching handwriting. If a child hasn't chosen which hand to write with (usually a preference emerges by age four), determine it now. To remember the intricacies of letter orientation, children should keep writing the letters with the same hand.

"Having children write the letters accurately, especially with encouragement to attend to their distinctive features, significantly helps letter recognition" (Clay, 1993). When teaching handwriting, be consistent. Choose only one style of manuscript. The two most common styles currently in use are Zaner-Bloser, which is characterized by straight lines and sharp edges, and D'Nealian, which is characterized by slanted lines and tails resulting in a close resemblance between its manuscript and cursive forms. Let children write the letters on unlined paper before they encounter the greater demands of lined paper. Be sure to spend adequate time helping them develop proper habits in forming the necessary line and curve strokes.

◆ **Use memory devices to help children write letters.** Memory devices can help children learn and remember each letter's distinguishing features. One commercially-available program (*Scholastic Spelling*, 1998) employs clever rhymes. For example:

For teaching E:
Pull straight down, just like me. *(Pull down straight.)*
Then slide to the right: one, two, three. *(Pull across from left to right three times.)*

For teaching g:
There's a gopher in my garden,
See him going round. *(Half-circle up and left.)*
Oops! Now the gopher sees me,
And he pops down in the ground! *(Pull down straight. Curve up left.)*

◆ **Use copying and tracing appropriately.** Independent writing is the most effective way of teaching children to form the shapes of each letter. But copying and tracing have their place. Having children write the letter while saying its name, and/or the sound associated with it, ensures that they are focusing on the subtle differences in each letter and thinking about it in terms of its name and/or sound. Copying and tracing also help to develop children's fine-motor skills. So emphasize independent writing and use copying and tracing according to each child's' needs.

Classroom Spotlight

You may need to help children who are having difficulties forming letters by holding the pencil with them and guiding them to form the letter. Think aloud about how you are forming the letter, discussing the unique visual characteristics of the letter. You may want to have children whose manual dexterity is developing more slowly write on unlined paper. For one of my second graders who was having trouble fitting his letters on lined paper, I enlarged the paper on the photocopy machine. That way I could teach him how to use the base line and dashed lines as guides for correctly forming letters and still accommodate his inability to write letters in that small a space.

◆ **Use key words and pictures when you introduce sound-spelling relationships.** After you teach the names of the letters (and possibly the shapes) in sequence, teach the most common sound-spelling relationship for each. Use a sequence that will allow you to form simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words early on and model the principle of blending. Starting in kindergarten,

children need to be shown how their letter knowledge applies to the actual reading of words. To help students see this, associate a key word and picture with each letter. For example, when teaching the letter *s*, you might use the word *sun* and a corresponding picture of a sun. Research has shown this letter/key word/key picture combination to be highly effective (Ehri, 1992). You'll find a listing of key words and pictures for each letter in the "Learning About Sounds and Letters" section (page 43) of this book.

- **Adjust the pace of instruction according to students' needs.** Children who have a limited alphabet knowledge upon entering school may have trouble gaining the all-important alphabet recognition skills through the traditional "letter a week" method. Without the necessary memorization, early reading instruction becomes cumbersome and difficult. As Adams (1990) writes, "For children who haven't cut their teeth on alphabet letters and picture books, one letter per week is a mere drop in the bucket against the 1,000 to 1,700 hour advantage of their peers." For these children, you'll have to provide lots of extra practice saying the names and identifying the shapes of the uppercase and lowercase letters in and out of sequence as you introduce sound-spelling relationships.
- **Include multisensory activities.** You'll find tactile (touch), visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (movement) activities for teaching the alphabet on pages 24–27. Remember to include letter recognition activities throughout your daily instruction. For example, point out target letters while reading a Big Book and look for letters in environmental print.
- **Read a lot of alphabet books.** Provide opportunities for children to hear, see, say, and write the alphabet in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes.

An Alphabet-Recognition Timetable

The following benchmarks can be used to monitor students' progress in alphabet recognition (Honig, 1996).

Preschool

- Child has been exposed to the letter names.
- Child can recognize his or her name in print.

Kindergarten

- Child knows most letter names.
- Child recognizes most letter shapes (upper- and lowercase)

Grade 1 (Fall)

- Child knows all letter names and shapes.

Alphabet Books Play a Role

Alphabet books, those popular picture books that present the letters of the alphabet in order, fill elementary classrooms everywhere. Many alphabet books center around a common kid-pleasing theme or concept, such as animal alphabet or city alphabet. You can use alphabet books to develop alphabet recognition and to build vocabulary. Some of the books, such as *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* by M. Musgrove, promote multicultural awareness.

Alphabet books are valuable because:

- they support beginning readers' oral language development.
- they help children learn letter sequence.
- they help children associate a sound with a letter.
- they can help children build vocabulary and world knowledge. Children's knowledge of the world, referred to as "semantic domain" (Lindfors, 1987), grows substantially during the elementary school years. Alphabet books can be extremely beneficial for children with limited world knowledge.
- they can be vocabulary builders for students learning English as a second language.
- they are appealing to at-risk readers who might be intimidated by books containing denser text.

Tips for Teaching with Alphabet Books

Here are some suggestions for using alphabet books as part of your weekly instruction.

- Read the book the first time in its entirety, without pauses, so children can enjoy the language and illustrations.
- Reread the book and discuss items of interest, such as finding the objects in the illustration that begin with the sound the letter on that page represents. Keep the discussion playful and gamelike, limiting the letters you focus on to one or two each day.
- Create letter charts, using the words and pictures in the alphabet book. Have children identify words and pictures with a target letter/sound to add to each chart.
- Have children create their own alphabet books using the pattern of the book you just read.

For additional alphabet books, see J. H. Chaney, "Alphabet Books: Resources for Learning." *The Reading Teacher* 47 no. 2 (1993): 96–104.

7 Singled Out

Write on the chalkboard a CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) word that children have recently encountered in a story. Say the name of one letter in the word and invite a volunteer to circle that letter. Review the sound that the letter stands for. Ask children if it is the beginning, middle, or ending sound in the word

8 Let's Go on a Hunt

Write the upper- and lowercase forms of each letter on large note cards. Distribute one note card to each child. Have children find their letter in magazines and newspapers. Suggest that they cut them out and paste them to the back of the card. They might also want to add pictures whose names begin with the sound that the letter represents.

9 Alphabet Walk

Take children on a walk around the school or neighborhood. Have them look for, and identify, learned letters in environmental print.

10 Round 'em Up

Write a letter on the chalkboard in red or some other distinguishing color. Then write a series of letters beside it in yellow or white chalk. Many of the letters should be the same as the one written in red. Ask volunteers to circle the letters that are the same as the one in red. As each letter is circled, have the class state the name of the letter. Finally, have the class count the number of letters circled.

EXAMPLE: *s s t s s s m s*

11 Word Roundup

Write a series of simple words on the chalkboard. Most of the words should begin with the same sound. Read the words aloud. Then have volunteers circle the words that begin with the same letter.

EXAMPLE: *sat sun sad top sick mop*

12 Word Pairs

Write a word pair on the chalkboard, such as *sat* and *mat*. Read the words aloud. Ask children to identify the letter that is different in each word.

13 Hide-and-Seek

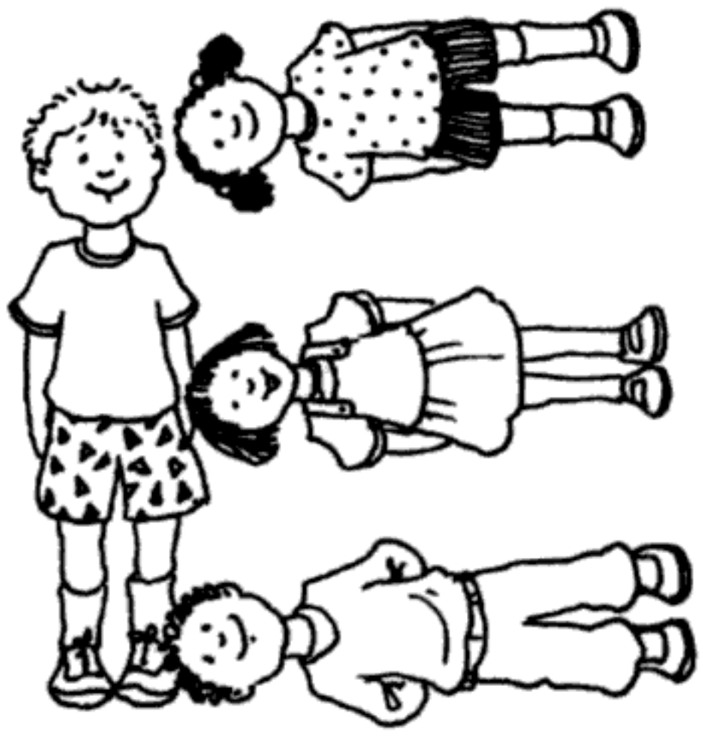
Hide letter cards throughout the classroom. Have children search the room for them. When each child has found a card, he or she can return to his or her seat. Then have children share the letter on the card they found as they write it on the chalkboard.

14 Through-the-Year Alphabet Book

Have the children use large sheets of colored construction paper to create a personal alphabet book throughout the year. They should write the upper- and lowercase form of each letter on one page, then paste or draw pictures of objects whose names begin with the sound the letter stands for and add words that begin with that letter.

15 Body Letters

Divide the class into groups of three to five students. Assign each group a letter to form with their bodies. They might form the letter individually (each child forming it), or use the entire group to form it (four children might lie on the floor to form the letter *E*).



16 Letter Path

Create a construction paper "stone" path around the classroom with one letter written on each stone. Laminate the stones for durability. Have children "walk" the alphabet each day, saying aloud each letter name.

Variation: As you call letters, have children stand on the appropriate stones.

17 Disappearing Letters

Using a small, wet sponge, write a letter on the chalkboard. Challenge children to identify the letter before it disappears. Have the children sponge on letters for classmates to identify.

18 Letter Snacks

As you introduce a letter, choose a snack whose name begins with or contains the sound the letter stands for. This yummy treat will serve as a memory device to help children to associate the letter with its sound. Following are snack possibilities for most of the letters. NOTE: Choose whether you will introduce the long- or short-vowel sounds first and be consistent with your snacks. You might have to choose snacks with the vowel sound in the middle of its word.

apples/cake
bananas
carrots/cookies
donuts
eggs/green beans
fish crackers
gum
hamburgers
ice cream, dip
Jell-O™/juice
Kool-aid™
lemonade
milk
noodles/nachos
oatmeal cookies
pizza/peaches
raisins
soup/salad
toast/tacos
upside-down cake
vegetables
watermelon
yogurt
zucchini bread

19 Alphabet Partner

Divide the number of children in your classroom in half. Use this number to determine the number of letters you will use to make a letter card set. The letter card set should contain two cards for each letter—one uppercase, one lowercase. Then give each child a card. Have children find their upper- or lowercase match.

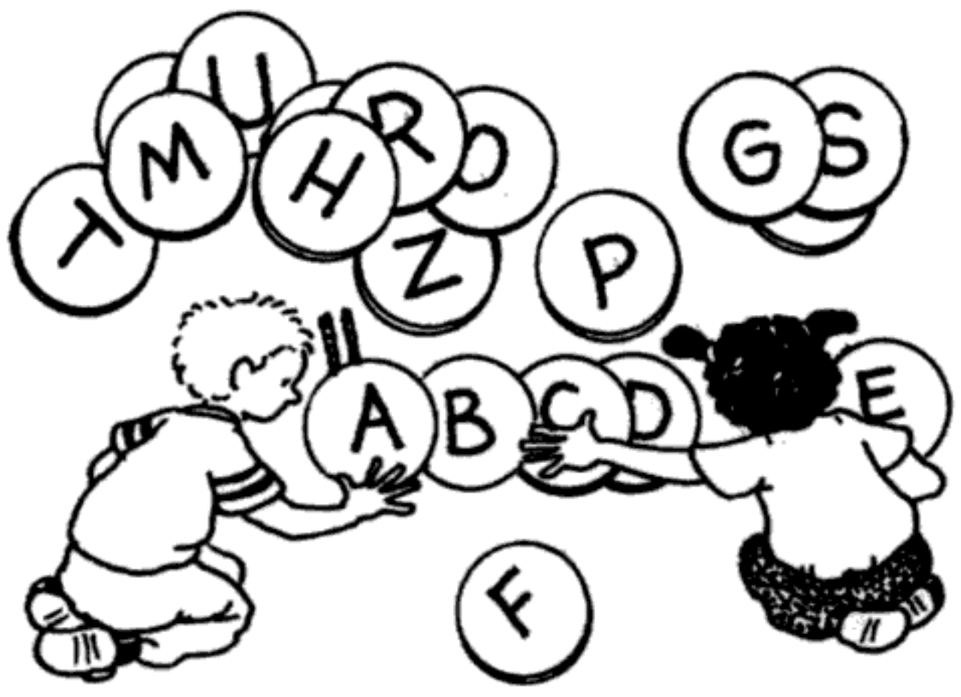
20 Tongue Depressor Alphabets

On each of a set of tongue depressors write one letter. Have children arrange the tongue depressors in alphabetical order.

Variation: Write words for children to alphabetize on the tongue depressors.

21 Alphabet Caterpillar

Students will have fun creating this letter-perfect creature. Write each letter of the alphabet on a paper circle. Mix the circles and spread them out on the table or floor. Have children work in pairs or small groups to form the caterpillar by placing its body parts (circles) in alphabetical order. Attach antennae to the *A* circle for the caterpillar's head.



22 Connect the Dots

Gather pages of connect-the-dot pictures from children's activity books and laminate them. Children can use a wipe-off marker to connect the dots and form the picture.

Variations: (1) Make multiple copies of each page to keep in a learning center. (2) Create your own connect-the-dot pictures by lightly tracing over pictures in workbooks or coloring books with a pencil and placing dots at intervals along the outline with a pen or marker. Then assign a letter to each dot in the order it should be connected. Add any connecting lines, such as curves, necessary to complete the picture, erase your tracing, and photocopy the page.

23 Letter Pop-Up

Distribute letter cards, one or two per child. Call out a letter. The children holding that letter's cards should pop up from their seats and hold up their cards so you can quickly check for accuracy.

24 Moon and Stars

Using construction paper, cut out 26 stars and 26 crescent moons. On each moon, write an uppercase letter. On each star, write a lowercase letter. Have children match the moons and stars.

Variation: Use other objects that might go together—chicken and egg, dog and doghouse, leaf and tree.

25 Special Name Day

Write children's names on note cards and place them in a decorated box or can. Each day, choose one name, which will be the "special name of the day." Spend time having the class identify each letter in the chosen name, write the name on a sheet of paper, group the name with names selected from previous days (for example, by first letter, by boy and girl names, and so on), clap the number of syllables in the name, add the name to a name book organized in alphabetical order, and count the number of letters in the name.

26 Play with Names

Have children write their names in various ways. For example, ask them to write their names using only uppercase letters, using pipe cleaners and glue, or using clay.

27 ABC Time

Distribute a set of letter cards, one card per student. Say a series of three or four letters. Have the children holding a matching letter card come to the front of the classroom as their letters are called. Then have the group of three to four children holding the cards place themselves in alphabetical order. The rest of the class can offer feedback and determine the group's accuracy.

28 Word Wheel

Create a spinning wheel using two cardboard circles of different sizes and a brass fastener. On the outside of one wheel (circle) write the uppercase letters; on the other write the lowercase letters. Then punch a hole in the center of each wheel and attach them using the fastener. Children will spin the wheel to match upper- and lowercase letters.

29 Classroom Labels

As you teach each letter of the alphabet, add labels to objects in your classroom whose names begin with the sound the letter stands for. Invite volunteers to suggest objects to label.

30 Alphabet Spin

Write the uppercase letters on a spinner and the lowercase letters on note cards, one to a card. Have small groups of children take turns spinning the spinner, identifying the letter, and finding the letter match in the card pile. Use a timer to make the game more engaging. Decrease the amount of time allowed to find the matching card after each round.

31 Alphabet Tic-Tac-Toe

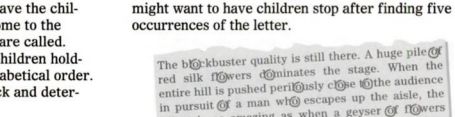
This form of Tic-Tac-Toe is played like the regular game—with one exception. Here, each child is assigned a different letter. Pairs of students play the game using their assigned letters. When most pairs have finished, assign new letters and continue play.

32 Alphabet Book Tape

Make a tape recording of an alphabet book to place in a learning center or take-home activity pack. After reading the text for each page (or series of pages), give activity directions ("Find the letter *s* on page 22. Point to it and say *s*. Write the letter with your finger. Next, find the picture of the sun. The word *sun* begins with the letter *s*. The letter *s* stands for the /s/ sound. Say /s/. That's right—sssssssss!")

33 Newspaper Search

Distribute a few pages of an old newspaper to each child and assign each a letter. Have the child circle the letter every time it appears on the page. You might want to have children stop after finding five occurrences of the letter.



34 Letter Actions

Teach children an action for each letter they learn. As you introduce the letter, model the action and have children perform it. In later weeks, tell children you will hold up a letter card, and they should perform the action associated with the letter shown. Here are some possible actions (Cunningham, 1995).

All the Right Moves

bounce	hop	nod	vacuum
catch	jump	paint	walk
dance	kick	run	yawn
fall	laugh	sit	zip
gallop	march	talk	

35 Alphabet Cereal Sort

Place a pile of alphabet cereal on a napkin on each child's desk. Give children time to sort the cereal letters. Have them count the number of times they found each letter. Use these tallies to create a class chart. Children will enjoy a tasty letter treat when the activity is completed.

In *Phonics from A to Z*, reading specialist Wiley Blevins tells you everything you would like to know about phonics but were afraid to ask! Written for K–3 classroom teachers, reading resource teachers, preservice teachers, teacher educators, and staff developers, this comprehensive resource provides the phonics background you need *and* the highly practical strategies and lessons you want. *Phonics from A to Z* includes more than 100 quick-and-easy activities for developing students' phonemic awareness, alphabet recognition, and understanding of phonics, as well as games, sample lessons for teaching all phonics skills, word lists, and teaching strategies for the 44 sounds of English—and much, much more. Other highlights of this book include:

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- ready-to-use assessments for students' alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness;
- phonogram word lists;
- tips for teaching word-attack skills such as compound words, prefixes, suffixes, homophones, and syllabification;
- a section devoted to identifying and solving children's common reading roadblocks.

About the Author

Wiley Blevins has taught elementary school both in the United States and South America. He completed his undergraduate work in Elementary Education at Bowling Green State University and his graduate work in Education at Harvard University. Currently Editorial Specialist for Early Reading at Scholastic, Inc., in New York City, Blevins is the author of *Phonemic Awareness Activities for Early Reading Success*, and *Quick and Easy Learning Games: Phonics* published by Scholastic.

ISBN 0-590-31510-2

UPC 0 78073 31510 9 01695

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