



Washington Office of Superintendent of  
**PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

*ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS:  
MENU OF BEST PRACTICES  
AND STRATEGIES  
RESOURCES & REFERENCES*

**2024**

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

## MENU OF BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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# FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY SKILLS

Combining the findings from the National Reading Panel (2000), National Early Literacy Panel (2008) and National Council on Teacher Quality (2014), guidance on early literacy skills instruction and interventions is essential to our success to increase 4th-grade reading achievement scores. Educator understanding of these skills is essential for the successful implementation of best practices and strategies in K–4 literacy classrooms and K–12 literacy interventions.

The National Reading Panel identifies five pillars of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The Washington state literacy vision supports the five pillars and includes oral language and alphabet knowledge as being essential components of the foundational literacy skills. High-quality instruction in the foundational literacy skills is vital to students' literacy success. Each component is directly correlated with an early predictor of literacy success (NELP, 2008; NICHD, 2000). Deep understanding of essential foundational literacy skills must guide professionals as they plan and develop appropriate and engaging instruction and supplemental services for students who have not yet met literacy standards and for their teachers through professional learning opportunities (Pittman & Dorel, 2014; Strickland & Shanahan, 2004).

[Appendix A of the ELA Standards](#) provides additional information on the following areas: oral language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, and fluency.

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## Oral Language

Research demonstrates that oral language ability impacts children's success in learning to read, as well as overall academic success (Coll, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). "Oral language is the foundation of learning to read and write" (Roskos et al., 2009, p. 1). The English oral language ability of children as they enter school varies widely and may be impacted by various cultural factors (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Crawford-Brooke, 2013). Some factors affecting English oral language development can include:

- Exposure to language and print
- Opportunities to expand their background experiences
- Opportunities for oral conversations

Early gaps in reading ability and language development that result from a weak foundation in English oral language can continue throughout a student's academic experience (Crawford-Brooke, 2013; Fielding et al., 2007; Juel et al., 2003). However, lack of oral language exposure should not be interpreted as a learning disability. Proficiency in a language other than English is also powerful. Families should engage their children in the strongest language of the home, and

schools should engage their students in the strongest language of the classroom. Speaking a second language in the home is very beneficial to oral language and literacy development. Families should be encouraged to speak languages in which they are fully fluent to aid oral language development, especially vocabulary and concept understanding. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all important skills for learning. Therefore, children who have had a wide variety of language experiences will bring a stronger, intuitive, knowledge of how language works.

Oral language is an integral part of learning to read and write (Coll, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Crawford-Brooke, 2013); literacy instruction must therefore incorporate a focus on oral language for all students. Beginning readers use their oral vocabulary to make sense of the words they see in print. Readers must know what most of the words mean before they can understand what they are reading. Because students' vocabularies are an essential factor in student success in school and beyond (Beck & McKeown, 2007), students also need to be exposed to a wide variety of words and texts and to solid blocks of time for independent reading. One's use of oral language enables students to learn not just in literacy but also in all areas (Munro, 2009).

According to Kirkland and Patterson (2005), the development of oral language may be facilitated through an authentic environment for students to engage in conversations and thoughtfully planned oral language activities. For example, classrooms should be print-rich and include student work. Print on the walls should be functional, instructional supports (e.g., anchor charts, visual word walls—with picture support), signs for routine activities, (e.g., marking lunch choices), and all should be accompanied by picture support. Time should be scheduled for routine opportunities for students to converse with each other, such as a ritual class meeting at the end of the day for students to discuss challenges and successes of the day, and book clubs throughout the day and across content areas. Thoughtfully planned oral language activities may include think-alouds where oral language is modeled, shared reading, reader's theater, daily news, book clubs, turn and talk, and interactive read-alouds. "Teachers can no longer afford to squeeze a read-aloud book between lunchtime and bathroom break. Because reading aloud is so important to language development, we must systematically and explicitly plan for its use in the daily routine" (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005, p. 393).

For successful oral language implementation, the classroom environment must be supportive and nurturing. Specific time designated for listening and speaking activities must start in kindergarten or, even better, in preschool. Using the precise language of the content is important because development of language needs to be simultaneous with content learning. Not only does attention to oral language help develop language and reading, it benefits writing. Students benefit from talking about what they are thinking and what they plan to write before attempting to write.

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## Phonological Awareness

Reading success in English, especially decoding, is connected to phonological awareness. Listening, rhyming, and identifying sounds in oral words or pictures are early literacy skills that help develop successful readers of English (Sullivan-Dudzic, Gearns, & Leavell, 2007). Phonemic awareness can be stimulated through parent-child activities [such as] playing rhyming games and reading rhymes (Pressley & Allington, 2015).

The most advanced area of phonological awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds—phonemes—in spoken words, called phonemic awareness. With phonemic awareness comes the understanding of the idea that spoken words can be broken down into sounds. Before children learn to read print, they need to become aware of how the sounds in words work. They must understand that words are made up of speech sounds (phonemes), the smallest parts of sound in a spoken word. Based on a simple view of reading, research suggests that two types of striving readers emerge—poor decoders and poor comprehenders. The group of poor decoders may not have strong skills in phonological awareness (Elwér, et al., 2013).

Equally important to understand is that phonemic awareness is not critical in all languages. For example, Spanish is taught by syllables, not by single sounds. Therefore, a student who reads and writes in Spanish may not demonstrate phonemic awareness in English, even though the student is a reader and writer (Hernandez, 2015).

[Appendix A of the ELA Standards](#) (p. 19–20) describes various aspects of phonological awareness and ends with a general progression of phonemic awareness development in grades K–2. Note that this progression refers to spoken language, not print.

All aspects of phonological awareness, including the sophisticated aspects of phonemic awareness refer to spoken language:

- Phoneme Identity (Spoken Language)
- Phoneme Isolation (Spoken Language)
- Phoneme Blending (Spoken Language)
- Phoneme Segmentation (Spoken Language)
- Phoneme Addition (Spoken Language)
- Phoneme Substitution (Spoken Language)
- Phoneme Deletion (Spoken Language)

Phonemic Awareness can be developed through spoken language activities:

- Identify and categorize sounds
- Blend sounds to form words
- Delete or add sounds to form new words

- Substitute sounds to make new words

Phonemic awareness instruction is usually taught in kindergarten and sometimes continued in 1st grade. Early readers can show they have phonemic awareness in several ways. The basics include:

- Recognizing which words in a set of oral words start with the same sound
- Isolating and saying the first or last sound in a spoken word
- Combining or blending the separate sounds in a spoken word in order to say the word
- Breaking up or segmenting a spoken word into its separate sounds
- Representing each phoneme when spelling (e.g., doktr for doctor)

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### Alphabet Knowledge (AK)

The NELP (2008) recognizes alphabet knowledge (AK) as an essential component in literacy and an early predictor of literacy success. Jones & Reutzel (2012) identify AK as “an essential prerequisite for developing early reading proficiency” (p. 448). Studies have shown that AK is a predictor in reading proficiency of multilingual students. AK is also thought to be a predictor of reading proficiency in students who are genetically at-risk for dyslexia. (Jones & Reutzel, 2012, p. 449).

AK instruction has been predominately based on what has *traditionally* been done and not research-based best practice. For example, teaching a letter a week in sequential order of the alphabet is not a research-based best practice, and it has many disadvantages. Teaching a letter a week has been criticized because it takes 26 weeks to teach (Mort, 2014). Research has identified numerous factors that influence and can enhance AK instruction that are highly effective for all students. For example, research regarding the advantages of the letters in the student’s name, alphabetic order (at the beginning and the end of the alphabet), letter frequency, letter pronunciation, and consonant phoneme acquisition order, can inform AK instruction (Jones & Reutzel, 2012).

When students have AK, they develop the foundation for early decoding, spelling, and working toward comprehension (Jones & Reutzel, 2012; Strickland, D.S. & Shanahan, T., 2004). It is, however, essential to remember that saying a word correctly does not mean that one understands the word or concepts. Some students will be able to say words or decode words without understanding what they are reading (Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002; Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004). Riddle Buly and Valencia have identified various profiles of readers, which are important to consider when working with students, especially students who are adding English as an additional language. AK can be supported in a variety of ways at home such as letter puzzles, reading to children, and talking about the book and the words and letters, alphabet games, alphabet songs, and carefully selected electronic programs. In addition, it is a common focus of children’s television shows, storybooks, and computerized applications (Pressley &

Allington, 2015).

Suggested tips for instruction: (1) frequent, brief, explicit, and repetitive instruction, (2) letter-a-day instructional cycles, (3) 10/20 review cycles, (4) name, sound, upper/lower case, and text identification, (5) each pacing cycle has a different sequence, and (6) focus on difficult-to-learn letters in additional pacing cycles and reviews (Jones & Reutzel, 2012).

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### Phonics (Phoneme-Grapheme Correspondences)

Phonics comes from the term graphophonics, meaning the relationships between symbol and sound. When simply referred to as *phonics*, the definition can be muddled.

[Appendix A of the ELA Standards](#) refers to this area as phoneme-grapheme (or sound-symbol) correspondence, and is a more accurate label for this foundational area. Phoneme-Grapheme Correspondence defines the relationship between written letters and the spoken sounds that those letters represent. Conclusions from decades of research in reading related to grapheme-phoneme correspondence are summarized in the following set of recommendations:

- Teach every letter-sound correspondence explicitly. Research supporting this idea is simply overwhelming. Children who have been taught explicitly to decode words are far more likely to decode words successfully in the early grades than children who have had limited experiences.
- Teach high-frequency letter-sound relationships early. Successful materials tend to involve students in activities in which they can experience immediate and ongoing success. A successful grapheme-phoneme correspondence program gets children reading as soon as possible by teaching the highest frequency relationships early.
- Teach sound-blending explicitly. Students do not necessarily understand how to connect the phoneme-grapheme connections in unfamiliar words. Students with explicit teaching outperform those who have had little or no training.
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- Teach students how to chunk words.

[Appendix A of the ELA Standards](#) (p. 22) provides three useful principles for chunking longer words into syllables:



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## Fluency

Reading fluency is the ability to read with appropriate rate, expression, and accuracy. Allington (2006) describes fluency as “reading in phrases, with appropriate intonation and prosody—fluency is reading with expression” (p. 94). Rasinski defines fluency as the bridge between grapheme-phoneme relationships and comprehension. Reading with a lack of fluency is directly associated (correlated, but not causal) with lower reading comprehension. Rasinski (2002) suggests that fluent readers simply read more than those who struggle with reading because they are self-motivated and they read for pleasure (Rasinski, 2002), thus they get more practice with reading. Signs of reading disabilities begin with decoding and develop into slow, dysfluent, inaccurate reading (Kiuru et al., 2013). High-quality reading fluency instruction “lays the foundation for success in reading” (Rasinski & Zimmerman, 2013).

Although Classroom-based Measurements (CBMs) that measure words correct per minute (wcpm) are commonly used, they have been identified as being problematic. Allington (2006) notes that practicing speed-reading of words and non-words to increase students’ wcpm “does not improve text-reading performances (p. 95)”. To be efficient readers, students must have many opportunities to practice appropriate intonation, prosody, and phrasing (Allington, 2001; Rasinski, 2006) and lots of opportunity to read text independently. Recent research shows that wcpm in upper elementary grades and beyond has only a moderate correlation to comprehension, with a higher correlation as an accurate performance indicator for primary-aged students (Hunley, et al., 2013; Valencia, et al. 2010). However, it is important to understand that a correlation is simply a relationship; it does not show that fast reading creates stronger readers: what it does suggest is that strong readers are likely to read faster.

The misunderstanding of fluency has led to many educators focusing on speed and accuracy, since these are easily measured, without consideration of the other critical components of fluency described by Allington (2006), and cited above, as “reading in phrases, with appropriate intonation and prosody—fluency is reading with expression.” If speed and accuracy are used in isolation as a screening tool, it is imperative to understand that false negatives are likely to occur when calculating wcpm. What that means is that students who are actually at-risk are not identified. Valencia, et al. (2010) report, “findings of under-identification parallel several other studies of screening accuracy using wcpm oral reading measures...rates ranged from 15 percent to as high as 47 percent, depending on the benchmark used” (p. 287). When students are screened for rate and accuracy, nearly half of the students identified receive the wrong intervention (Valencia, et al., 2010). This results as a misunderstanding of the purpose of a screening measure.

According to Allington (2001), “[w]e cannot get too carried away with a focus on reading rate” (p. 71). We must be careful not to lose sight of all the indicators of oral reading fluency: rate, accuracy, and prosody; or, as Dawn Christiana, from Bellingham Public Schools, likes to say, “rate is not a teaching point.”

Fountas and Pinnell (2008) describe [fluency in six dimensions](#), with descriptions and rubrics for each dimension:

1. Pausing—how the reader is guided by punctuation to reflect meaning.
2. Phrasing—how the reader groups words to reflect meaning.
3. Stress—how the reader emphasizes words to reflect meaning.
4. Intonation—how the reader uses expression to reflect meaning.
5. Rate—how the reader uses appropriate rate—not too fast and not too slow—to reflect meaning.
6. Integration—how the reader uses 1–5 together to reflect meaning.

Rasinski (2004) describes an analogy between reading aloud and giving a speech: the reader, like the speaker, uses the voice in a variety of tones, speeds, and expressions to capture the attention of the audience. "Speaking in appropriate phrases, emphasizing certain words, raising and lowering volume, and varying intonation help the listener understand what the speaker is trying to communicate" (Rasinski, 2004, p. 2). Just like giving a speech, reading aloud is a performance task that can be intimidating for some students, especially those with anxiety, striving to read, and those who speak English as an additional language. Thus, oral fluency is important when reading to others, and may be an indicator of internal fluency. However, it is critical to remember that the purpose of fluent reading, as a developing reader, is that fluency in our heads assists us as readers to understand the author's meaning. The goal is for students to read fluently and with meaning—it is an essential learning component for students to become proficient readers (Rasinski, 2002; Rasinski 2013).

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### Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge can be a predictor of reading fluency and comprehension success (Hickman, et al., 2004). Students' depths of knowledge in vocabulary varies significantly when they start school. The number of vocabulary words a student starts with on the first day of school can be as low as zero (for students who do not speak English as their primary language at home), and it generally ranges from 5,000 words to 20,000 words. Vocabulary knowledge is highly correlated to the family's socio-economic status (Marulis & Neuman, 2010), and it can be acquired in multiple ways: by listening, speaking, reading, writing, and sight (word practice) (International Reading Association, 2002). "The relationship between vocabulary is thought to be reciprocal—knowing more words facilitates successful comprehension, while successful comprehension and wider reading lead to opportunities to learn more words" (Lesaux, et al., 2010, p. 197).

[Appendix A of the ELA Standards](#) (p. 32) provides information on vocabulary acquisition and the three tiers of words.

Jensen (1998) supports that vocabulary skills start developing in infancy when adults talk to, sing

to, and read to children. Natural approaches to vocabulary acquisition are effective strategies for multilingual students; however, the classroom cannot easily replicate primary language learning experiences (Jesness, 2004). Tim Rasinski (2014) advocates using poetry and songs to build vocabulary. A careful balance of formal study and natural approaches enable multilingual students to acquire active knowledge. Younger students benefit more from natural techniques, and intermediate students require a more explicit approach. Educators need to decide which words are best taught naturally and which words are best taught analytically. Vocabulary acquisition requires a significant time allotment for students to be successful. Larger classes need to have English-speaking volunteers and assistants to support vocabulary acquisition (Jesness, 2004).

*Reading Standard 4* and *Language Standards 4, 5 & 6* explicitly focus on vocabulary in English language arts. Vocabulary can be an indirect focus, but it is a necessary comprehension tool across multiple content area standards (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Vocabulary knowledge is “emphasized...more than 150 times” in the Common Core Standards (Manyak et al., 2014, p. 13). Learning vocabulary is multifaceted. It is both implicit and explicit. Vocabulary instruction should be provided both directly and indirectly to support all areas of learning (International Reading Association, 2002). The National Reading Panel (2000) recognized there is not a single approach to teaching and learning vocabulary and suggests the following to support vocabulary instruction:

- Direct and indirect instruction,
- Repetition
- Rich contexts
- Active engagement

Manyak et al. (2014) recognize that vocabulary instruction outcomes are dependent on high quality implementation of research-informed instruction and activities—simply applying these techniques and strategies “does not in and of itself guarantee efficient and effective vocabulary instruction” (p. 22). For example, in more than 50 studies where educators implemented Marzano’s *the six-step process* for teaching vocabulary, student outcomes varied from negative effects to gains greater than 40 percentile points (Marzano, 2009). In reviewing these studies, the findings show that implementing the strategy as it was intended had a greater impact on student outcomes than when educators adapted, changed, or modified the delivery of the strategy. Vocabulary interventions that are taught explicitly versus passively also have better results (Marulis & Neuman, 2010). Explicit vocabulary interventions have the greatest effect on students with lower vocabulary knowledge, and interventions that combine explicit vocabulary instruction with implicit instruction (e.g. exposure in books and oral language) had that largest effect size (Bowne, Yoshika, & Snow, 2017).

It is important to identify when educators are not using best practices to support vocabulary

learning. For example, instructional time devoted solely to completing worksheets and looking up word lists are not best practice; unfortunately, Fisher and Frey (2014) report that during vocabulary instructional time this practice occurs 39 percent of the time. Moreover, in lower elementary classrooms, vocabulary instruction is often taught during read-aloud times, but this strategy only results in 20-40 percent improvement on target words. "Few read-aloud interventions have shown effects on general vocabulary knowledge" (Silverman & Crandell, 2010).

Providing students with "more opportunities to interact with and process word meanings have been found to be the most effective at supporting both learning of the words taught and growth in overall receptive vocabulary" (Bowne, Yoshika, & Snow, 2017). Some effective strategies to support vocabulary instruction include:

- Connecting words to personal experiences
- Comparing and contrasting words
- Providing simple definitions of words
- Creating and answering questions about words
- Connecting words to photos, videos, and books
- Making relationships between words (e.g. synonyms/antonyms)
- Teaching words in groups and word families (Bowne, Yoshika, & Snow, 2017)

Effective vocabulary instruction should be part of rich routines, provide explicit definitions and examples with anchor experiences to support active and deep processing. Vocabulary instruction needs to be multi-faceted and varied for all students. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work for two reasons: (1) students come to classrooms with various depths of vocabulary knowledge, and (2) words simply "differ in nature, ranging from concrete nouns like peninsula . . . to densely conceptual terms like democracy" (Manyak et al., 2014).

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### Comprehension

Mastery of foundational skills in literacy is directly correlated to successful reading comprehension. Fluency and vocabulary knowledge are both strong predictors of student success in reading comprehension. When approaching interventions for reading comprehension, it is necessary to also assess the student's proficiency in fluency and vocabulary to ensure the intervention services provided meet the individual needs of the student. It is important to scaffold the interventions accordingly to ensure the reading intervention is comprehension-focused and not decoding-centered (Watson et al., 2012).

[Appendix A of the ELA Standards](#) (p. 27) highlights the need for ELA classrooms to explicitly make the connection between oral and written language because listening comprehension surpasses reading comprehension in the early grades.

The What Works Clearing House Practice Guide (2010) on [Improving Reading Comprehension in](#)

[Kindergarten Through 3rd grade](#) outlines five recommendations that support reading comprehension. These recommendations are:

- “Teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies;
- Teach students to identify and use the text’s organizational structure to comprehend, learn, and remember content;
- Guide students through focused, high quality discussion on the meaning of text;
- Select texts purposefully to support comprehension development; and
- Establish an engaging and motivation context in which to teach reading comprehension.”

Having the ability to process information to analyze text, to synthesize text, and to draw conclusions from text are strategies that can be practiced and supported in the classroom both orally and in writing. Activating prior knowledge, or schema, is one of the most effective ways to help students connect to text and build understanding (Messenger, 2015). Background knowledge enhances reading and reading builds background knowledge for future reading experiences; prior knowledge helps the reader understand plot and conflict, make inferences, and draw conclusions (Lemov, 2017). Research supports explicit instruction benefits for students who have not yet met reading comprehension standards (Watson et al., 2012). Writing about texts also strengthens reading comprehension (Shanahan, 2014).

Current studies specify that direct teaching of text structure and exposure to informational text is beneficial to students as early as pre-school (Culatta et al., 2010). Close reading of complex text is essential for college and career readiness, and is correlated to reading proficiency success (Boyles, 2013). Close reading is a strategy that invites students to examine texts. Close reading provides students opportunities to expand their schema by connecting the reader’s background knowledge and prior experiences to the text. Close reading also builds stamina and essential reading habits needed for complex, independent practice. Strategies for close reading include: using short passages (from a few paragraphs to a couple of pages), providing opportunities for re-reading text, annotating text, identifying areas needed for clarification, modelling reading, leading text discussions, asking text-dependent/specific questions, and focusing on observing and analyzing text (Fisher & Frey 2012; Boyles, 2013).

The following reading strategies can help guide scaffolding for reading comprehension (Messenger, 2015; Watson et al., 2012):

- Activate prior knowledge
- Make predictions
- Draw conclusions
- Ask questions
- Make inferences

- Synthesize text
- Build fluency
- Develop vocabulary
- Self-regulation
- Text structure

Shanahan (2014) encourages the following five steps to support student reading success:

- Students should read extensively during instruction across content areas
- Teachers should scaffold guidance and support of grade-level text to increase stamina and rigor
- Texts should be rich in content and challenge students' reading ability
- Students need to explain their answers by using text evidence to support claims
- Students need to write about (summarize and synthesize) texts

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