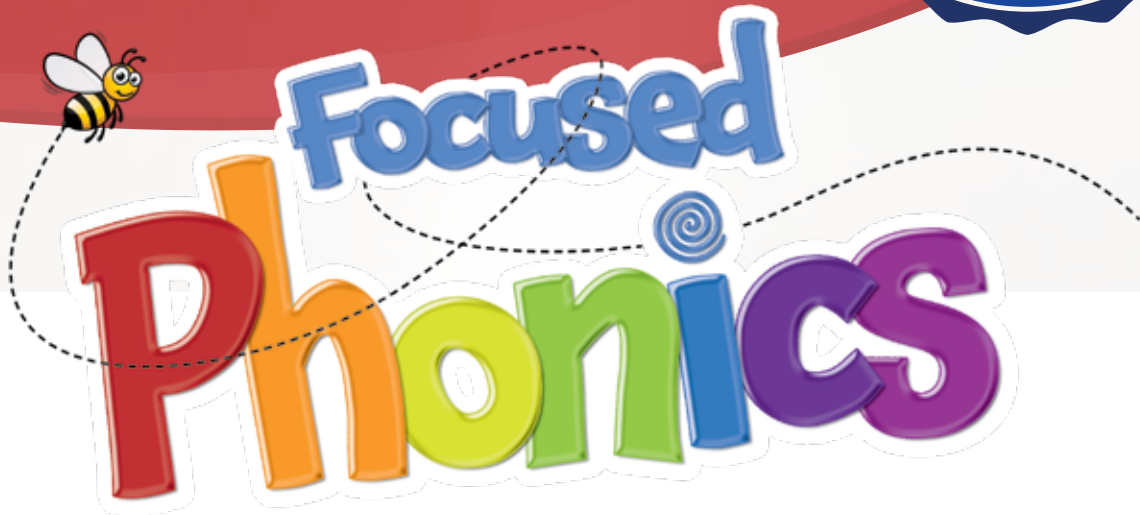


bed

Incorporates  
six instructional  
practices with Tier 1 and  
Tier 2 evidence ratings, as  
identified by the Institute  
of Education Sciences  
and What Works  
Clearinghouse.



**Focused  
Phonics**

Explicit and Systematic Phonics Instruction Program  
Based on Respected Research and Literature

# Introduction

*Focused Phonics* is a research-based curriculum that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness and phonics to provide emergent readers with a strong foundation in decoding. The materials explicitly teach and provide opportunities to practice the essential phonics skills necessary for helping students unlock words and become successful, proficient readers. The kits introduce phonics skills in a systematic, research-based progression that is reflected in the phonemes, graphemes, and high-frequency words found in the decodable texts.

As the units within each *Focused Phonics* kit progress, the phonics skills taught become more complex. Beginning with the kindergarten kit, students are introduced to short vowel and consonant sounds, as well as grade-appropriate high-frequency words. In the first and second grade kits, students continue learning grade-appropriate high-frequency words in addition to digraphs, blends, long-vowel patterns, vowel teams, open and closed syllables, and the use of prefixes and suffixes, among other phonics skills.



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# The Focused Phonics Logic Model

The Logic Model below demonstrates how *Focused Phonics* is designed to develop students' essential phonics skills as a foundation for decoding and building meaning from words. These foundational skills help students become successful, fluent readers. Evidence of this is suggested through the resources/inputs and activities in the Logic Model, which are linked to positive outcomes for students. The goal of this table is to show how implementing *Focused Phonics* can support and contribute to achieving school and district goals.

**Problem Statement: There is a need for systematic and explicit phonics instruction at the K–2 level.**

**Outcome/Goal: To help students develop essential phonics skills to support reading fluency, decoding, and comprehension.**

Theory of Action					
Assumptions	Resources/Inputs	Activities	Outputs/Metrics	Outcomes	Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School districts are interested in and prepared to incorporate systematic and explicit phonics instruction.</li> <li>Students can develop phonics skills through systematic and explicit phonics instruction.</li> <li>Phonemic awareness leads to the ability to decode and make meaning of text.</li> <li>Decodable text is an appropriate tool for students to practice and build phonics learning.</li> <li>Technology is accessible in the classroom.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Materials developed through collaboration with experts in the field</li> <li><i>Management Guide</i> with key research and best practices</li> <li><i>Teacher's Guide</i> with standards-based lesson plans that include extension and application activities</li> <li><i>Student Guided Practice Book</i> with engaging opportunities for practice and application of skills</li> <li>Focused, skill-based phonics lessons offering pacing plans for daily instruction</li> <li>25+ instructional routines to support systematic and explicit phonics instruction (includes 10 text-first readers)</li> <li>30 engaging decodable texts, 6 copies each</li> <li>Games and concept cards to practice and reinforce phonics skills</li> <li>Ebooks and audio recordings of all decodable texts, and online digital games</li> <li>Assessments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flexible, 45-minute daily lessons for whole-group instruction or small-group intervention</li> <li>Explicit instruction in phonics skills</li> <li>Teacher modeling of decoding skills</li> <li>Collaborative language and discussion opportunities</li> <li>Multiple opportunities to practice learned skills</li> <li>Family letters to support learning at home</li> <li>Engaging practice activities and games using pencil and paper, hands-on materials, as well as technology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student engagement in texts and resources</li> <li>Meets or exceeds expectations of ELA standards</li> <li>Completion of lessons</li> <li>Progress through benchmark, formative, and summative assessments</li> <li>Improvement in language and reading skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge of the alphabetic principle and graphophonic cues</li> <li>Application of decoding skills in reading grade-level text</li> <li>Increased fluency and confidence in reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of strong foundational reading skills</li> <li>Increased engagement in reading</li> <li>Preparedness for more challenging text and comprehension activities in upper elementary and secondary grades</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students engage in and utilize <i>Focused Phonics</i> content and strategies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students have increased phonological awareness and phonics skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students have increased achievement of reading grade-appropriate decodable texts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students are prepared to read more challenging grade-level texts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students become confident, fluent readers of grade-level texts.</li> </ul>	

# Guiding Principles

1. Phonics instruction must support learners in acquiring knowledge of the alphabetic principle to be prepared to read.
2. Phonics instruction should follow an explicit and systematic scope and sequence to support student learning.
3. Phonics skills must be applied in context, through the use of engaging texts, to help students develop fluency and comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading instruction. These guiding principles are the foundation of *Focused Phonics* and are embedded in every component of the product.



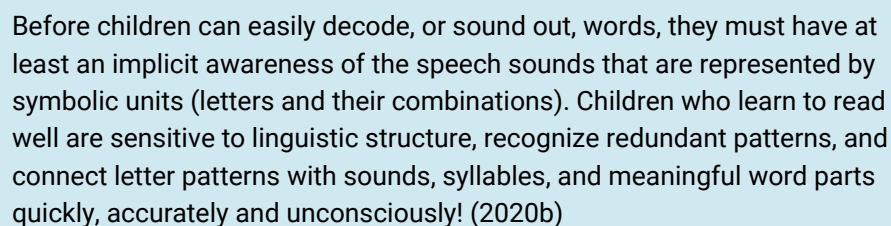
## Alignment with UFLI!

Teacher Created Materials' quality decodable readers align with the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Foundations Scope & Sequence! Access the UFLI Foundations Decodable Text Guide [here](#) to match TCM's decodable readers with UFLI's lesson sequence. Locate the UFLI lesson in column A, and then scroll to the right to find the Teacher Created Materials' book(s) that will support and engage students while they develop phonics skills.

# The Research on Reading

In its most basic form, reading is the process by which we look at a series of written symbols and decode those symbols to make meaning from them. However, there is a lot that goes into that process, such as the name of each symbol, understanding the sound that each represents, understanding the patterns that sounds and symbols represent together, having syntactic and semantic knowledge about how the symbols come together, and so much more.

Consider this explanation of the reading process from Louisa Moats:



Before children can easily decode, or sound out, words, they must have at least an implicit awareness of the speech sounds that are represented by symbolic units (letters and their combinations). Children who learn to read well are sensitive to linguistic structure, recognize redundant patterns, and connect letter patterns with sounds, syllables, and meaningful word parts quickly, accurately and unconsciously! (2020b)

With all this in mind, it's no wonder that significant attention to research has and continues to drive best practices in reading/literacy instruction.

The body of research that paves the way for reading instruction is immense. Several models are consistently used to define a framework for reading instruction. Philip Gough and William Tunmer (1986) originally proposed the Simple View of Reading (SVR), which says that reading comprehension has two basic components: language comprehension and word recognition (decoding). Dr. Hollis Scarborough (2001) further delineated the components of skilled reading—language comprehension and word recognition and their respective subsets of skills—as woven strands in a rope. In recent years, Kate Nation's work layers the idea that students' language skills affect their ability to decode and comprehend text (2019). And still more recently, Nell Duke and Kelly Cartwright (2021) expanded SVR to take into consideration what they call bridging processes (e.g., concept of print, reading fluency, graphophonological-semantic cognitive flexibility) that bring together students' word recognition and language comprehension skills. They also call attention to students' active regulation skills, such as motivation, engagement, and executive functioning, as being key to supporting reading development.

Each of these models has nuances, but all are grounded in the same pedagogical

stronghold: phonics instruction is important for all students. One reason for this is that research shows there is a clear connection between phonics development and reading comprehension. In his book, *A Fresh Look at Phonics*, Wiley Blevins (2017) clearly explains the connection:

“

Phonics instruction teaches students how to map sounds onto letters and spellings. The more phonics skills students learn, the better they are able to decode, or sound out, words. The more opportunities students get to decode words...the stronger their word recognition skills become. When students begin to recognize many words automatically . . . the better their reading fluency becomes . . . Reading fluency improves reading comprehension. (xxvi)

”

Recent discussion (and debate) has centered on the idea of the Science of Reading. The Science of Reading refers to the effective methods or practices used to teach reading, as proven by extensive research. Phonics instruction has historically been at the forefront of much debate and scientific research. This type of instruction dates back to the old *New England Primer*, published in 1690 (Cothran 2014). Students at that time were taught that letters and sounds form words. This approach to reading dominated until Horace Mann, in the 1800s, proposed the “whole-language” approach. The Dick and Jane books, first published in 1836, were examples of this “look-say” method, which depended on students memorizing whole words without any attention to decoding (sounding out) words. Then, in 1955, Rudolf Flesch published *Why Johnny Can't Read*, in which he criticized the memorization of words and advocated for phonics instruction. That was followed by Jeanne Chall's extensive research. She spent three years analyzing the literature and interviewing experts in the field of reading. Her 1967 publication *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* indicated the need for direct phonics instruction for beginning readers, as opposed to leaving the child to rely on trial and error and memorizing whole words.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the debate continued with a return to the “whole language” approach to reading, this time



focusing more on the holistic act of reading that students learn organically rather than the explicit teaching of phonics skills. During this time, the term *scientific research-based reading* was also coined. In 1997, Congress put together a National Reading Panel consisting of leading scientists in reading research, representatives from colleges of education, teachers, parents, and educational administrators (National Reading Panel 2000). The fourteen-member panel set to work identifying and critically examining the scientific literature. The panel released its report in February 1999. The results were clear: for students to become better readers, they need systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The greatest impact is seen, as Chall had previously suggested, in beginning readers in the primary grades or in older students who are struggling.

So, it follows that an effective reading program must include instruction in foundational skills such as phonemic awareness—the ability to hear sounds in words—as well as direct instruction in relating those sounds to the graphemes—written letters or sequences of letters—that represent them.

Thus, the goal of *Focused Phonics* is to teach beginning readers those sound-symbol relationships so that they can fluently decode text and comprehend the meaning it conveys.



# The Relationship Between Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

According to research, two of the best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness (Adams 1990, Beck and Juel 1995, Chall 1996). Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken language. Phonemic awareness can be taught and demonstrated without referring to letters or print (Piasta and Hudson 2022).

There are forty-four phonemes in the English language (Moats 2020a). Language researchers from the 1970s linked phonemic awareness to reading. They found that helping a child understand a word's sound structure would enable them to decode a word in print (Gillon 2018). Furthermore, the National Reading Panel's (2000) analysis of hundreds of studies shows that phonemic awareness is a critical foundational piece. It teaches children to grasp how the alphabetic system works in the English language and increases their ability to read and spell. It is unlikely that children lacking phonemic awareness can benefit from phonics instruction since they do not understand what letters and spelling are supposed to represent (Juel, Griffith, and Gough 1986).

Imagine a child seeing an individual letter or a sequence of letters for the first time. What they see are abstract lines, curves, and dots that carry no meaning. But these symbols (letters) represent discrete sounds in our written language. For this alphabetic principle to be applied or for children to recognize that letter patterns represent sounds of the spoken language, children first need practice segmenting spoken words into individual phonemes or sounds.

/j/ /ă/ /m/

They also need practice hearing individual sounds and blending those sounds to form a word.

/j/ /ă/ /m/ jam

Furthermore, Anne Cunningham's (1990) research demonstrated that kindergarten and first-grade children who were explicitly shown when, why, and where to apply segmenting and blending skills increased their reading proficiency levels over those who simply practiced the skills in isolation. Therefore, it is important for teachers to strategically link phonemic awareness activities to both spoken and written language.

Phonemic awareness taught hand-in-hand with letter names and letter sounds is vital to the development of early reading skills (Blevins 2017, Mesmer and Kambach 2022). It helps students see the valuable link between the abstract symbols on the page



and the sounds they hear in words. There are stages to the process. When a child knows only a few letter sounds and is just beginning to grasp the grapheme-phoneme relationship, they might identify and use only the initial or final sound to identify a word. David Share (1999) explains that a child oblivious to the phonemic structure of speech will have no way of generating a candidate pronunciation for a novel word. Piasta and Hudson (2022) make the following connection between phonemic awareness and phonics:



As children learn to read, they begin to associate these phonemes with letters, as supported by phonics instruction. These grapheme-phoneme correspondences, along with an increasingly sophisticated understanding of orthographic patterns, are used to decode and spell new words. (202)



Eventually, at the “full alphabetic stage,” students are able to decode whole words (Ehri 2002). As a result, they begin to pronounce more words, build their vocabulary, and bond these words and their meanings in long-term memory. Once in memory, the words can be retrieved quickly and effortlessly as sight words.

Making speech sounds is natural for most children. Because of this, phonemic awareness provides an anchor onto which they can attach subsequent skills. When a child learns that words are made up of individual sounds and that putting those sounds together results in the pronunciation of a word, the learning makes sense and is relevant. Further, attaching a letter or sequence of letters to pronunciation, according to David Kilpatrick (2020), allows the brain to see the sequence of letters as familiar and as a unit, and in turn activates the word’s pronunciation at lightning speed. This instant retrieval of what has now become a sight word reduces the need for decoding and increases reading fluency and comprehension alike.

# The Importance of Phonics Instruction

The debates about the importance of phonics instruction have been resolved—phonics knowledge is essential to reading success. In fact, the Institute of Education Sciences recommends teaching students to recognize and manipulate the segments of sound in words and to link those sounds to letters. This preparation is necessary so students can begin reading words and connected text and comprehend it. Blevins elucidates: “The purpose of phonics instruction is not that children learn to sound out words. The purpose is that they learn to recognize words, quickly and automatically, so that they can turn their attention to comprehension of text” (2023, 150).

Given that 84 percent of English words follow regular phonetic patterns, it makes sense that teaching students the most common sound-spelling relationships would be beneficial for them as readers. By understanding the sound-spelling relationships, students are better able to decode words and read connected text. Students who are poor readers are often poor decoders. They use so much mental energy decoding the text they are trying to read that they do not have any left to make sense of and comprehend it meaningfully. Through phonics instruction, “as decoding skills improve and more and more words are recognized by sight, less mental energy is required to decode words and more mental energy can be devoted to making meaning from the text” (Blevins 2023, 15).

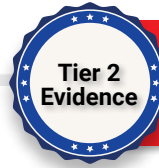
Thus, the discussion turns now to how research suggests teachers should integrate phonics instruction into their literacy plan in a way that is efficient, effective, and timely for students (International Literacy Association 2019).

Research supports an explicit and systematic approach to phonics instruction (e.g., Mesmer and Griffith 2005; Lonigan and Shanahan 2010; Blevins 2017; Castles, Rastle, and Nation 2018; Duke and Mesmer 2019; Ehri 2020; Piasta and Hudson 2022).

**Explicit instruction** means that sound-spelling correspondences are taught directly to students in a precise and unambiguous way. It includes teacher modeling and opportunity for students to practice skills through reading. **Systematic instruction** follows a specified, sequential set of phonics skills that builds from easy to more complex with built-in review and repetition to ensure mastery. According to the National Reading Panel report, “in implementing systematic phonics instruction, educators must keep the end in mind and ensure that children understand the purpose of learning letter sounds and are able to apply their skills in the daily reading and writing activities” (2000, 2-96). The ability to apply phonics skills in reading and writing extends beyond students’ time as beginning readers. As Linnea Ehri notes, “More advanced reading benefits from systematic phonics instruction focused on teaching multiletter units to decode words” (2020, S56).

**Systematic and early instruction in phonics leads to better reading: better accuracy or word recognition, decoding, spelling, and oral and silent reading comprehension.**

**(Chall 1996)**



Ensure that each student reads connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.



## Research to Practice

The *Focused Phonics* Teacher's Guide includes 30 lessons—each a weeklong collection of interconnected instructional blocks. The explicit instruction provided in the lessons is based on a systematic introduction of concepts that progress from simple to more complex. The lessons, decodable texts, and accompanying print and digital resources were designed to strategically work together to build students' foundational reading skills.



According to research (Blevins 2017), the following are key characteristics of effective phonics instruction:

- readiness skills
- scope and sequence
- blending and segmenting
- word awareness
- dictation
- high-frequency words
- reading connected text

*Focused Phonics* addresses these important characteristics.

# Data Study Illustrating the Efficacy of the Focused Phonics Series

The following evaluation was completed in 2024 in Spartanburg District 7, Spartanburg, South Carolina. Spartanburg used Teacher Created Materials' *Focused Phonics* program to provide daily designated phonics instruction in classrooms. Professional development training, model lessons, and coaching were put in place to systematically implement the program.

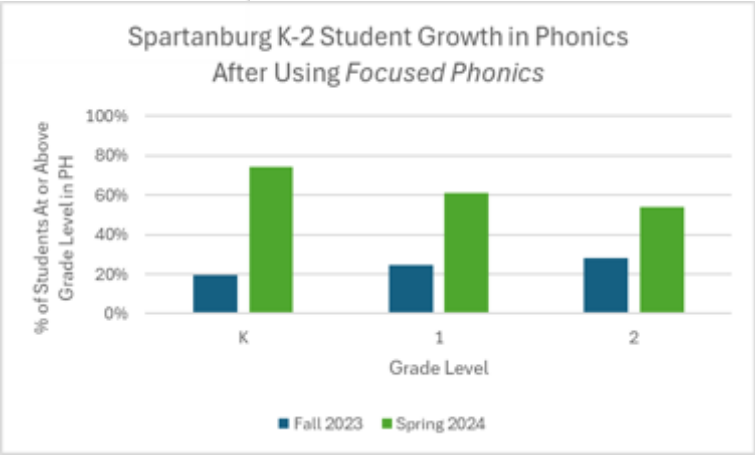
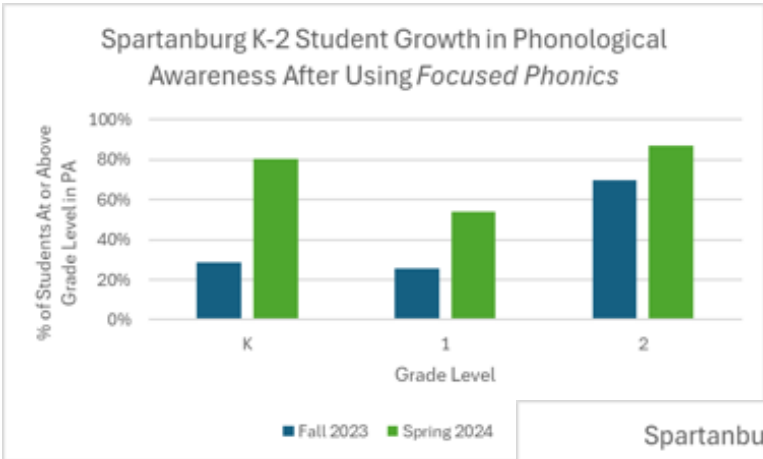
## Demographics

Spartanburg District 7 serves a predominantly minority student population, with 70% of students living below the poverty line. The district has a graduation rate of 85%, and, on average, 62% of graduates go on to pursue post-secondary education.

## Implementation

The goal of the implementation of *Focused Phonics* was to purposefully build students' foundational reading skills. The program was piloted across grades K–2 in four schools in Spartanburg: E.P. Todd School, Jesse Boyd Elementary, Mary H. Wright Elementary, and Drayton Mills Elementary School.

## Results



## Testimonials

“

I love that we have everything we need at our fingertips.

—Literacy Coach, E.P. Todd.

”

“

I love how it meets all needs. I also love the review powerpoints. The use of the decodables was a huge game changer! The one-page decodable was great to send home.

—Literacy Coach/Reading Coach,  
Jesse Boyd

”

“

I liked how the curriculum spirals and gives kids plenty of opportunity to practice.

—Classroom Teacher,  
Jessie Boyd

”

“

The program is very teacher friendly. The lessons are in an easy-to-follow format and are easily adaptable to whatever the day may throw at us!

—Classroom Teacher, Jessie Boyd

”

“

I appreciated the different approaches in just one curriculum. I was able to reach most, if not all, students with at least one component of the TCM Focused Phonics Curriculum.

—Classroom Teacher, Mary H. Wright

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# Key Characteristics of Effective Phonics Instruction

## Readiness Skills

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As noted earlier, the two best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness. Alphabet recognition involves understanding the concept of a letter, distinguishing letter forms and shapes, and fluently knowing the names and sounds of letters. (These skills are collectively known as the alphabetic principle.) This can be especially challenging for letters that are visually similar, such as b and d, E and F, and p and q. Students best learn the alphabetic principle through direct instruction of the relationship between letter names, their sounds, and their visual characteristics; active engagement; multiple exposures to print; and a wide use of text (Bear et al. 1996; Blevins 2017, 2023).

This understanding is extended by building students' phonemic awareness: "the conscious awareness that words are made up of segments of our own speech that are represented with letters in an alphabetic orthography (written system)" (Moats 2020a, 301). According to the studies examined by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), there is a strong level of evidence to suggest that engaging in instruction that helps students recognize and manipulate segments of sounds in speech, understand letter-sound relationships, and link knowledge of letter-sound relationships with phonemic awareness has positive effects on learning (Foorman et al. 2019).



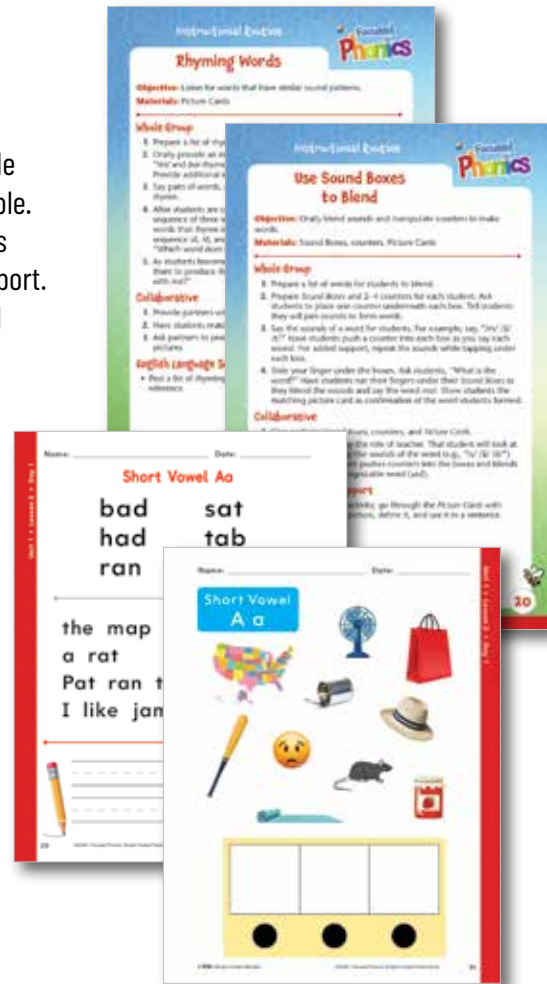
Develop awareness of the segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters.



## Research to Practice

The lessons within *Focused Phonics* contain a variety of instructional routines designed to promote and allow opportunities to practice phonemic awareness skills, while building students' understanding of the alphabetic principle. Each instructional routine can be used with the resources found in the program or independently for additional support. Some routines that support readiness skills include Blend Syllables, Sort Pictures, Stomp If You Hear It, Use Sound Boxes, and Use the Sound Wall.

Additionally, the Concept Cards are designed systematically and explicitly to develop students' phonemic awareness. The image-based fronts of the cards provide opportunities for students to practice many types of phonemic awareness skills, such as blending, segmenting, and listening for sounds. The Concept Cards include sound boxes, also known as Elkonin boxes, to help students distinguish how many sounds or syllables are in words. In combination with the Letter Tiles, students can also use the sound boxes to begin to make the connection between phonemes and graphemes.



## Scope and Sequence

“The hallmark of a systematic phonics approach or program is that a sequential set of phonics elements is delineated” (National Reading Panel 2000). “Although there is no ‘right’ scope and sequence, programs that strive to connect concepts and move through a series of skills in a stair-step way offer the best chance at student success” (International Literacy Association 2019).

**“Children with experience with Elkonin boxes make better choices when using invented spelling.” (Blevins, 2023, 18)**



## Research to Practice

The *Focused Phonics* program has a scope and sequence of phonics skills that are presented sequentially from least to most complex and are also accessible individually. This way, skills can be taught sequentially or specifically targeted for those students needing intervention.



## Blending and Segmenting

Decoding words involves recognizing what sound each letter or letter team makes and then blending the sounds. There are several kinds of blending techniques, including continuous blending (blending the sounds in a word in order), cumulative blending (returning to the first letters each time a new sound is added), and vowel-first blending (identifying the sound of the vowel or vowel team before blending the sounds of a word in order). Teachers can pick from among these techniques, using the best one for the particular word or student. Tapping under letters or using a finger sweep under a word when stretching out the sounds within it is a great way to help students track all the way through the word and pay attention to each sound represented.

**“Our brains are not as fully evolved for processing written language as they are for processing spoken language, and, therefore, learning to read and write is more challenging than learning to speak.” (Moats 2020a, 6)**



Segmenting words into sounds is a key foundational step to writing, or encoding words. Phonics is not centered on teaching spelling, but it does take into account that reading and writing go hand in hand. Blevins states, “It is through writing that all of a student’s phonics knowledge is tested, confirmed, and consolidated. This is application at the highest level” (Blevins, 2017, 98).

**“Both decoding and letter-sound mapping skills require knowledge of the alphabetic writing system. Gradual acquisition of this knowledge propels students through the alphabetic phases to become skilled readers.” (Ehri 2020, 13–14)**



Teach student to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words.



## Research to Practice

In *Focused Phonics*, students can practice blending skills in a variety of ways, such as through blending lines (Blevins 2017) and through reading the words, phrases, and sentences on the backs of the Concept Cards. The decodable texts also offer important blending-skills practice, since it is important for students to practice learned phonics skills in the context of a meaningful, connected text. Instructional routines dedicated to each type of blending support teachers and ensure systematic implementation of research-based best practices throughout the year.

Students can practice encoding words, phrases, and sentences by using letter tiles, doing guided dictation, or responding to prompts in writing. The instructional routines Segment Words into Sounds, Isolate Sounds to Spell, and Dictation describe the steps in building students’ awareness of phonemes, graphemes, and connected text.



# Word Awareness

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The notion of word awareness—or word consciousness—is one that we want all students to understand. It’s the understanding that words follow patterns and that playing with words is enjoyable and can help us make sense of what we read or what we want to write. Kevin Flanigan, Katie Solic, and Lisa Gordon perhaps said it best:

Word consciousness includes instilling a belief in your students that (1) phonics makes sense, (2) can be interesting, and (3) that when they know the system, your students have the ‘keys to the kingdom,’ enabling them to unlock the pronunciation (and meaning) of thousands of words as they become independent word learners. (2022, 74)

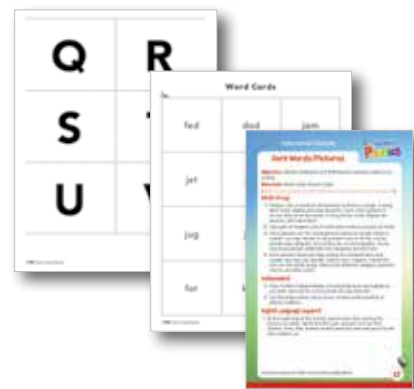
Word building and word sorts are two types of exploration activities that increase students’ word awareness. In word building students are asked to create a series of words by changing one letter each time to make a different word. For example, changing the word *sit* to *pit*, then changing the word *pit* to *pin*. This kind of activity involves phonemic awareness, attention to the position of specific sounds within a word, and the ability to blend and segment words.

Word sorts are another important strategy used to build students’ word awareness. Word sorts help draw students’ attention to patterns within words. Recognizing these patterns within words helps students free up mental energy to decode more quickly so they can think about the meaning of words. Discussion of the ways students sorted words draws further attention to phonemic patterns.



## Research to Practice

Word awareness activities and instructional routines are intentionally included throughout *Focused Phonics*. Activities that focus on phoneme manipulation, as well as word sorts, are prevalent in the lesson plans and in the *Student Guided Practice Book*.



## High-Frequency Words

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Skeptics of the value of phonics instruction often point to exceptions from regular spelling patterns (e.g., Cook 2004) as evidence for the limited value of phonics. These exceptions do attract attention, since many show up often in printed materials. However, the majority of English words follow common and consistent sound-spelling patterns (Anderson et al. 1985). High-frequency words that do not follow regular spelling patterns (e.g., *all, of, was, to*) are often critical connectors within phrases and sentences (Fry and Kress 2007, 49–58) and must be addressed during instruction since a lack of mastery will result in fluency issues (Blevins 2017).

Of most importance is how educators teach high-frequency words to beginning readers. Historically, teachers have used rote memorization of word lists. They show a flash card and expect students to memorize the whole word. This practice ignores the importance of attaching this new learning to previously learned skills and has no logical sequence or reason for choosing the words students must memorize at any given time. Since most high-frequency words have regular spelling patterns, meaning they are decodable, it makes sense to introduce high-frequency words that follow the same sound-symbol relationships being taught in the phonics lessons (Farrell et al. 2019). For example, when students are learning short-vowel sounds and they already know some consonant sounds, the teacher can introduce high-frequency words such as *on* and *it*. Later, consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) patterns can be taught alongside such words as *had* and *can*.

Some high-frequency words are irregular, meaning they may have one or more sound-spelling correspondences that cannot be sounded out. For example, the words *put* and *what* each have one nondecodable letter. The term *heart words* has been used to describe these words, because some of the letters do not make sense so the words must simply be memorized by heart (Farrell et al. 2019). Yet, the beginning and final sounds in each word do make sense; thus, those sound-letter patterns should be reviewed while teaching and mapping the sounds and irregular spellings.

Students who are guided in associating sounds with letters can eventually internalize this process. “Orthographic mapping involves connecting something we already know (the word’s pronunciation) to something we are trying to learn (the printed form of the word). This connection

**Thirteen words make up approximately 25 percent of all words in print. They are *a, and, for, he, in, is, it, of, that, the, to, was, and you*. (Johns and Lenski 2019)**

**“Research shows that readers store ‘irregular’ words in their memory in the same way they store ‘regular’ words...According to brain research, three parts of the brain must be activated in order for us to learn a word. These parts include where the sounds are stored, where the word’s meaning is stored, and where the word’s spelling (individual letter) is stored.” (Blevins 2017, 139)**

forming process occurs at the level of phonemes, given the alphabetic nature of our writing system” (Kilpatrick 2020). It is the phonemes, or individual sounds in a word, that act as an anchor to which the word’s spelling and pronunciation can be attached.

One essential goal of reading is to have students read text fluently—with proper speed, accuracy, and expression. Orthographic mapping is a process which leads to words being stored in long-term memory and being retrievable without conscious thought (Ehri 2014). They become sight words. According to Kilpatrick (2020), the greater a child’s sight-word vocabulary, the more fluent a reader they become. Ehri echoes this, pointing out that “building a store of sight words that can be read as single units from memory automatically is essential for students to read and comprehend text. This allows readers to focus their attention on the meaning of the text while words are recognized automatically out of awareness” (2020, S55–S56).

Another effective way to promote learning of high-frequency words is to provide learners with extensive opportunities to read engaging stories that use these words. With frequent exposure, students learn these words as wholes. In addition, students read with increased fluency and speed (Prescott-Griffin and Witherell 2004).



Intentionally plan activities to build children’s vocabulary and language.



## Research to Practice

During each unit of instruction, a set of high-frequency words are introduced, practiced, and used in reading and writing. This multiday routine follows the Read-Spell-Write-Extend structure described by Blevins (2017). It encourages a deeper understanding of these important words.

The high-frequency words in *Focused Phonics* were placed in lessons based on two factors: appropriateness for the grade level and connection to phonics patterns being taught. All high-frequency words are reviewed throughout the units to ensure students have multiple exposures to these essential words.

The high-frequency words are incorporated throughout the decodable texts, in the student book, and on the backs of the Concept Cards. In addition, the digital resources include individual High-Frequency Word Cards for each included word. These cards can be used for word sorts or practice. The digital resources also include High-Frequency Words with Sentences Cards. These cards each include both a high-frequency word and a sentence using the word in context. They encourage deeper learning, since students are asked to focus not only on the words themselves but also on the meaning of the words in the context of a sentence.



# Dictation

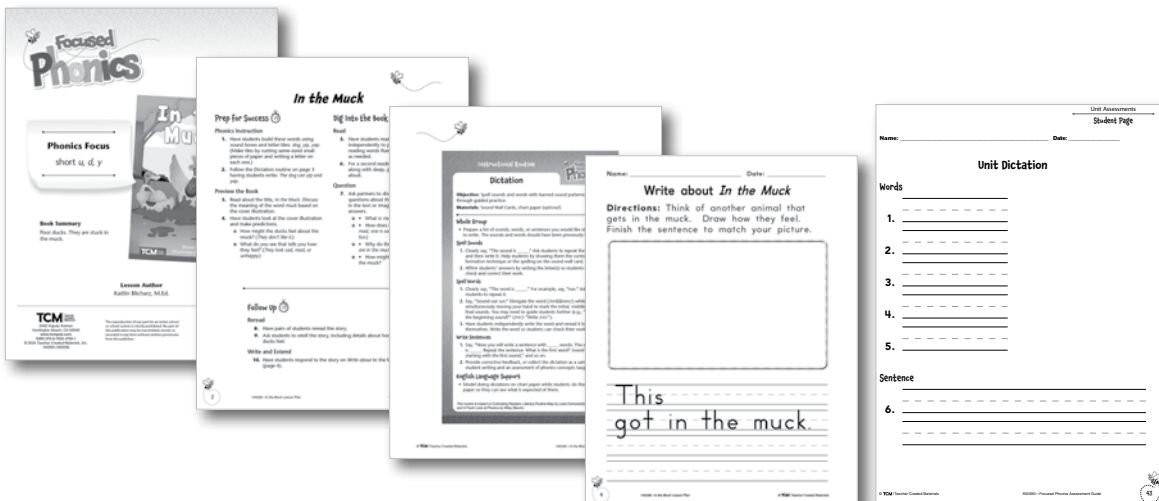
Teaching phonics and teaching spelling are deeply intertwined. If students are able to hear and understand the sounds taught through explicit phonics instruction but are unable to correctly write those sounds as letters, they cannot have a comprehensive understanding of language. Knowing how to spell provides valuable information students can build upon throughout their literacy development: “Spelling, or orthographic, knowledge provides the underlying foundation for the rapid and efficient encoding and decoding of words, allowing individuals more room for thinking and planning as they write and read” (Templeton 2020, 315). One valuable strategy to ensure a spelling connection is maintained when teaching phonics is dictation.

Dictation is guided writing—in essence, spelling practice. It can accelerate students’ use of phonics concepts in written form. Once students have knowledge and understanding of phonemes, they can participate in the process of dictation. This involves the teacher saying words, phrases, or sentences aloud and students writing what they hear. The teacher helps students as they are working and learns valuable information from students’ invented spellings. Dictation is how students “transfer phonics skills from reading to writing” (Blevins 2017, 91). Dictation can also include review to make sure teachers are extending the review/repetition cycle.



## Research to Practice

Dictation is another instructional routine found strategically throughout the lesson plans in *Focused Phonics*. Dictation is also used in the unit summative assessments to evaluate students’ abilities to apply learned phonics skills.



## Reading Connected Text

Beginning readers become better at both decoding and understanding what they have read when they have numerous opportunities to read and reread stories. This commonsense notion is supported by substantial research (Nagy and Scott 2000). As Timothy Shanahan notes, “Phonics instruction should teach kids to hear the sounds, to recognize the letters or spelling patterns, and then to connect the sounds and the letters/spellings. They need a lot of practice with those elements within words and some reading practice with them, too (that’s where decodable texts come in handy—as part of the phonics instruction)” (2022).

Many types of books exist for early reading instruction, and each has a purpose. Predictable, or patterned, texts are motivating to beginning readers, who can rely on picture and context clues to figure out the words. Picture books and other trade books help young readers develop a sense of story and rich vocabulary. Decodable texts help students apply their phonics skills and support reading over the long term, even as picture clues decrease. Blevins explains, “If you have just completed a phonics lesson and want students to practice using their newly taught phonics skills, decodable text is the appropriate choice” (2017, 155).

According to the studies analyzed by WWC, there is a moderate level of evidence to suggest that reading connected text has positive effects on student learning. “Reading connected text accurately, fluently, and with appropriate phrasing and comprehension requires students to identify words quickly, integrate ideas in the text with their background knowledge, self-monitor their understanding, and apply strategies to support comprehension and repair misunderstandings” (Foorman et al. 2019, 32).

**“Decodable books provide beginners with practice in applying the grapheme-phoneme relations that they have learned to decode words and to build their sight vocabularies. Reading words in meaningful context ensures that syntactic and semantic identities of words become bonded to spellings and pronunciations to form amalgamated units in memory. Building a store of sight words that can be read as single units from memory automatically is essential for students to read and comprehend text. This allows readers to focus the attention on the meaning of the text while words are recognized automatically out of awareness.”**  
(Ehri 2020, 11)

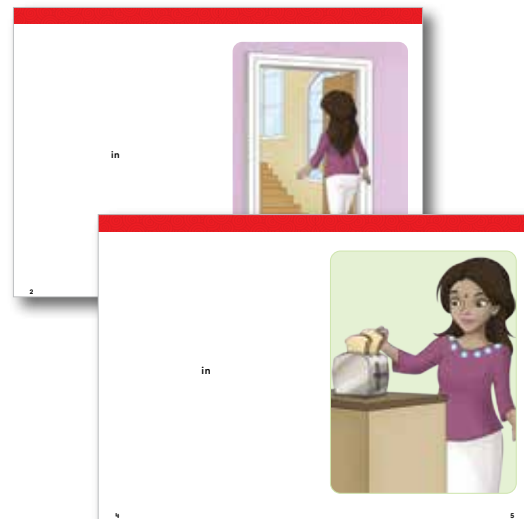
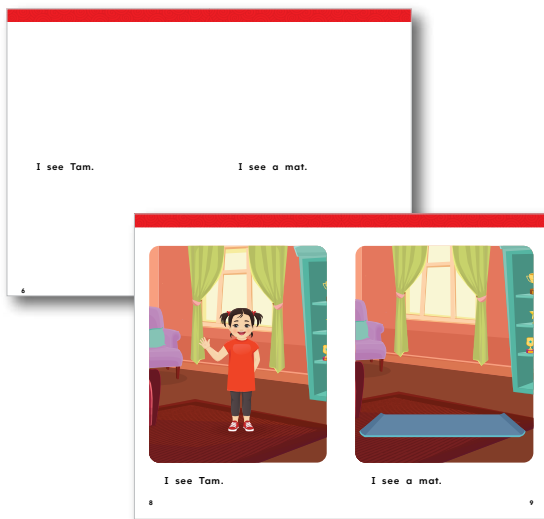


## Research to Practice



The decodable texts in *Focused Phonics* strike a balance between being comprehensible (sounding natural), engaging (worth revisiting and talking about), and instructive (decodable according to the instructional scope and sequence). They follow a systematic sequence of skills, providing teachers with authentic opportunities for formative assessment. As such, students gain confidence in decoding, since the books provide spiral reviews of high-frequency words and previous concepts that lead students toward mastery. Any words that fall outside the instructional scope and sequence are listed toward the back of the book as Challenge Words. Challenge Words include decodable words with skills that have not yet been taught, irregular high-frequency words that have not yet been introduced, or words with nondecodable parts.

A unique component of *Focused Phonics* is the inclusion of text-first decodable books among the decodable texts. In these books, the text of the story is first presented with no images, and then presented a second time with illustrations or photographs. This format allows students to first have an opportunity to decode text. When they turn the page, they are then delighted with strong images and a chance to check their decoding skills and confirm their comprehension of the text.



Use shared book reading to develop children's language, knowledge of print features, and knowledge of the world.

# Supporting Diverse Learning Needs

## Helping Readers Who Struggle

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Early readers can run into problems for a variety of reasons, including delayed language development, difficulties in auditory and phonological processing, and impoverished language and literacy environments (Nation 2019, Stone et al. 2004, Vellutino 1979). Research on these predictors is extensive, as are evaluations of instructional programs and practices. The short answer to the question about how to help these students is that (1) they require extra time and careful scaffolding, but (2) the same essential elements promote achievement growth for these students as they do for others.

**“Part of teaching children with reading problems is convincing them that they can learn to read, despite their experience to the contrary.” (Stahl 1997, 183)**

Dorothy Strickland, Kathy Ganske, and Joanne Monroe define scaffolding as “a process in which the learner participates in the full performance of a given activity to the degree to which he or she is capable” (2002, 48). The goal of scaffolding is to gradually release the cognitive burden to the student. The authors elaborate: “As the learner gains competence, the adult gradually increases expectations of how much of the full performance the child can be responsible for” (48). During phonics instruction, scaffolds may include modeling, movement or visuals, choral reading, or reading or spelling part of a word, sentence, or paragraph.

Prompting is another strategy to support readers who struggle easily and effectively. Blevins suggests that teachers can “provide prompts that help focus attention on reading strategies...You can also create Strategy Picture cards for students to refer to” (2001, 276). For some developing readers, a quick reminder of taught strategies can help them apply skills to decode unknown words. To foster independence, visual prompts can be the least intensive level of prompting to trigger application of known strategies. However, prompting of decoding strategies is not to be confused with utilizing contextual clues. Blevins expounds: “Good readers don’t need to rely as much on context clues because their decoding skills are so strong” (2001, 15). Rather than prompting students to make meaning of a text using syntactic or contextual clues, effective prompting should include cueing of word-attack strategies rooted in phonetic knowledge.

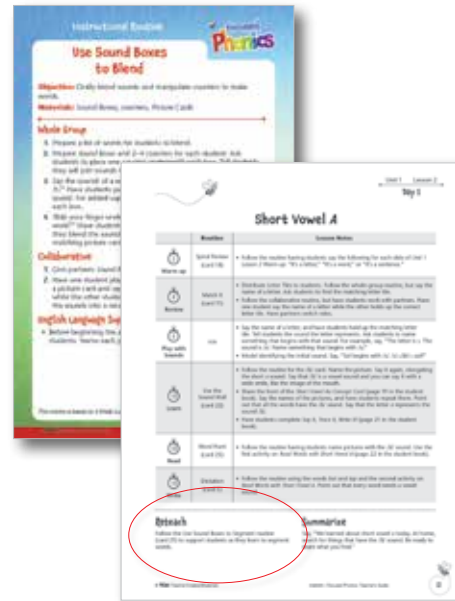
**“Many struggling students need explicit, systematic instruction before they habitually notice details of both speech and print.” (Moats 2020a, 6)**





## Research to Practice

*Focused Phonics* includes Instructional Routine Cards that guide teachers in providing the kind of explicit instruction that is helpful to readers who struggle. In addition, the *Teacher's Guide* provides daily Reteach tips to help teachers support students with diverse learning needs.



## English Learner Support

Evidence suggests that phonological awareness transfers from one language to another (Yopp and Stapleton 2008). “Children who have developed phonological awareness in their native language bring that insight to additional languages”; however, the sounds they are learning may not be familiar depending on their primary language (Yopp and Yopp 2022, 24). Therefore, it is important to clearly articulate sounds found in English that are not part of students’ native languages. For example, the /ă/ sound in *can* does not occur in Spanish, and the /v/ sound in *vet* does not occur in Arabic. Additionally, the blend /st/ is never found at the beginning of a word in either language. Knowing this, teachers can provide special attention and support to students learning unfamiliar letter-sound relationships.

In her *Education Week* article, Sarah Schwartz notes that “systematic, explicit instruction in letters and sounds is crucial for beginning readers” (2022). English learners benefit from being taught the explicit code of the English language (Adesope et al. 2011). However, researchers often emphasize that for English learners, explicit phonics instruction is only one component of a comprehensive reading instructional program. “Kids learning English needed more instruction in oral English proficiency than their peers: things like vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, and syntax” (Schwartz 2022). English learners must be given time to build language, content knowledge, effective oral and written expression, and meaning-making skills alongside foundational skills.

Additionally, immersion in rich oral language experiences in a social environment establishes both receptive and productive growth of English for students who are learning both the English language and English literacy. It helps if the classroom includes environmental print, such as numerous exposures to the alphabet, and instructional support through the use of visuals, examples, and picture cards as often as possible.

Although English learners in schools have a wide variety of language and cultural backgrounds and come to school needing varying levels of support, Blevins reminds us that all English learners, regardless of their age, have the following in common when it comes to learning English: “They all need explicit instruction in how English words, a focus on vocabulary development, lots of safe opportunities to use language, wide reading of simple English texts, and opportunities to transfer their existing skills into English” (2023, 338).



## Research to Practice

Multiple components in *Focused Phonics* address the needs of English learners. The Instructional Routine Cards have research-based English language support tips. Picture Cards foster comprehension of decodable words. High-Frequency Word Cards with Sentences provide high-frequency words in context. Concept Cards provide images of words with targeted phonics patterns to support comprehension. Game Cards and Online Games have supporting pictures to help students link meaning, sounds, and letters.

The decodable texts in *Focused Phonics* provide students opportunities to practice the learned phonics skills in context, develop vocabulary, build background knowledge, and practice oral and written expression. The comprehension lessons also provide opportunities for personalized and culturally responsive oral language development.



# Application of Phonics Knowledge

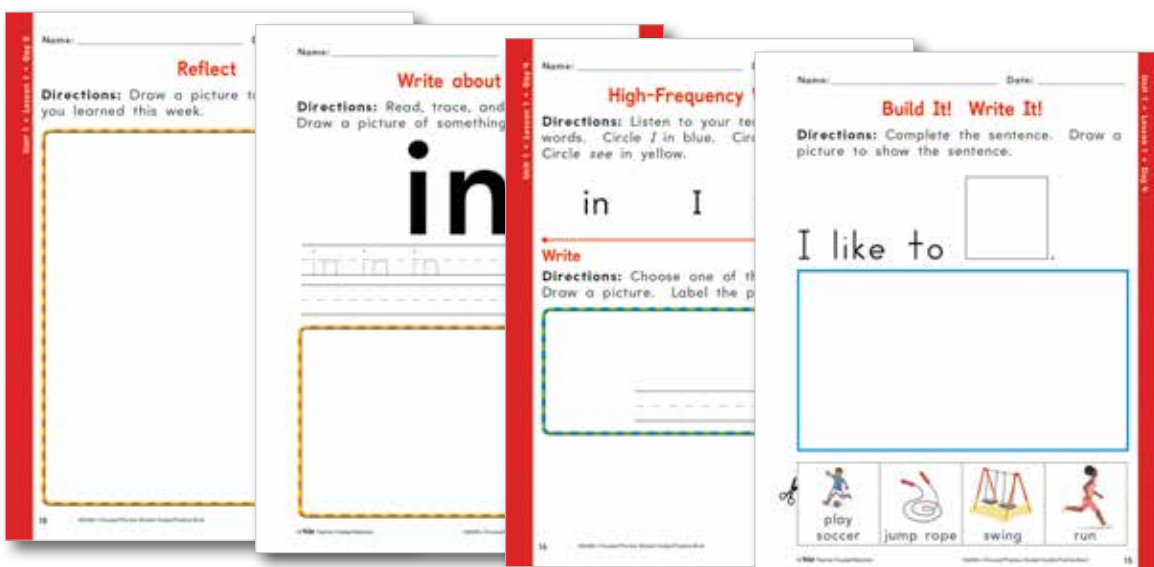
## Writing

The reciprocal relationship between reading and writing is well documented (e.g., Conrad, Harris, and Williams 2013; Deacon, Benere, and Pasquarella 2013). As students write, they use their knowledge of letter-sound relationships and concepts of print to record their ideas. The act of writing helps students understand the link between hearing and identifying phonemes and matching those to their corresponding graphemes. It's like a cycle. "Studies have revealed the impact of decoding, spelling, and word reading on phonemic awareness; the impact of morphology and oral reading fluency on decoding ability; and the impact of writing on reading comprehension. This reciprocity has been found in longitudinal correlational studies and in instructional studies" (Shanahan 2020).



## Research to Practice

Each lesson of *Focused Phonics* includes an opportunity for students to apply the phonics skill they are learning through writing. Activities include opportunities to label pictures, answer questions, write dictated words/sentences, write in response to reading, free write, and more.



# School-to-Home Connections

“Correlational studies have repeatedly documented the significance of...parents’ educational level, family socioeconomic status, the uses of print and the number of books in the home, and the frequency of parent-child storybook reading” to early and continued literacy success (Purcell-Gates 2000). Regardless of these factors, teachers can encourage and support literacy activities in the home. When young students bring home the books they are reading and the products of their schoolwork, especially when they are proud of what they have done—and even more so when they have ideas about how to capture parental attention—then the family has a way to link to classroom literacy. Victoria Purcell-Gates (2000) describes several large-scale studies demonstrating the impact on language and literacy achievement of programs that include simple steps like those described above.

**“Those who learn to spell easily usually have well-developed phoneme awareness, and the poorest spellers usually have phonological processing weaknesses. This is because mapping spoken to written words requires matching representational units (graphemes) to individual phonemes rapidly and accurately.” (Moats 2020a, 66)**



## Research to Practice

Each unit in *Focused Phonics* also includes a family letter. These letters give a general overview of the learning from the unit, including the high-frequency words students learned, and suggestions for how the family can support the student and extend their learning.

From the digital resources, teachers can print and send home one-page copies of the text from decodable texts so students can practice reading at home.

Teachers can also share ideas for family engagement based on the last page of each reader. There, teachers will find at-home family engagement activities that focus on phonemic awareness and phonics, as well as connections to other subjects. Some of the at-home activities focus on visual literacy and reading together. These are distinct from classroom activities, providing families with options for engagement in the home.

### Family Engagement

Extend the fun and learning with your young reader!

**Phonics Focus**  
Read *cab* and *cat* on page 6 with your child. Ask, “What letter is in the middle of these words? What sounds does it make?” Explain that the silent *c* in *cab* makes the *a* say its name. Have your child find another word that follows this pattern. (*map*) Contrast it with the *a* in the word *tab*.

**Reading Together**  
Work with your child to identify whether the grandpa or the children are speaking on each page. As you decide, label the speaker with a sticky note. Then, take turns being the children or the grandpa as you read the story.

**Connection to Storytelling**  
Have your child retell the story of the cab. Have them start with “Once upon a time,” and then use their own words to explain what happens. Continue in this way through page 11. Then, help your child decide how the story will end.

**Connection to Food**  
Share with your child that refrigerators keep foods cold and fresh. Discuss what foods spoil quickly if they are not in the refrigerator. Have your child name the food items they recognize in the illustrations.

16



# Using Games and Technology to Support Phonics Instruction

Games and technology are a surefire way to motivate and engage learners in phonemic awareness and phonics. Games have been shown to be an effective motivator and a fun method for students to develop, maintain, and reinforce mastery of essential concepts and processes. Joey Lee and Jessica Hammer (2011) point out the benefits and learning potential of using games in classrooms. They identify various advantages, including motivation and engagement, as well as collaboration, which often leads to more students having opportunities for success. Technology provides “additional opportunities, repetition, and extension activities to allow for review and practice of concepts that have been explicitly taught” (Ordetx 2020).

The use of technology, such as read-along ebooks and audio recordings, has been found to support literacy learning. According to The National Reading Panel Report (2000), the seven studies that reviewed the addition of speech to computer-presented text indicate that this may be a promising use of technology in reading instruction. Furthermore, the National Reading Panel Report authors found that the use of computers as word processors may be very useful, given that reading instruction is most effective when combined with writing instruction.

The ability to use technology to conduct assessment is supported by the findings of the National Reading Panel (2000), as well as by the California Statewide Literacy Task Force, which was charged with making a set of recommendations to improve student achievement in reading. The task force determined “ongoing diagnosis that informs teaching and assessment that ensures accountability” are essential components of any reading program (California Department of Education 1995, 10).



## Research to Practice

*Focused Phonics* includes a variety of games and technology support. The card games and online phonics games provide students with fun and interactive review of key phonics concepts and opportunities to apply what they have learned.

The deck of phonics cards can be used for a variety of games to help students apply and practice learned phonics skills. Games can be played in small groups, pairs, or one-on-one with the teacher as a formative assessment tool.

There are four online phonics games, each with a different focus. Within each game, there are ten variations based on each of the ten units in *Focused Phonics*. As students play, they will be asked to practice phonemic awareness, blending, matching sounds and letters, and reading high-frequency words. The content included in the games closely aligns to what has been taught as part of the systematic scope and sequence. During instruction, the teacher has access to online sound boxes and tools to build students' phonological awareness.

All decodable texts have audio and read-along ebook versions that can be used at a listening center while the student follows along. Fillable PDFs allow students to respond to writing activities from the student book using a keyboard.

Methods of tracking individual assessment scores to note progress and pinpoint areas of growth are provided.



# Quality Assessment Drives Instruction

To decode and encode words at increasing levels of difficulty, students must demonstrate that they can generalize what they have been taught. This assessment is key for teachers to understand what students know, what they need to know, and how to tailor an instructional plan to achieve learning goals. Routine assessment improves instructional practice and, ultimately, student outcomes. Understanding what students know and still need to learn helps teachers structure their teaching and reteaching activities to be more meaningful. “When we clearly know our learners, we can make informed choices and adjust the learning processes so that all students have an optimal chance of succeeding” (Gregory and Kuzmich 2004, 36). Ultimately, just as there are many ways to teach phonics, there are also many ways to assess phonics skills.

Phonics screeners and benchmark assessments can be used alongside the assessments in this program to determine which *Focused Phonics* lessons would benefit students most directly. The screeners and benchmark assessments described here include research-based procedures to evaluate individual student progress and establish grade-level benchmarks. Screening assessments are performed at the beginning of the year, with regular benchmark testing in the middle and at the end of the school year.

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment is used by many districts across the United States to measure students’ acquisition of literacy skills. As with all phonics assessments, the DIBELS aims to provide teachers with meaningful feedback about reader development to inform their instruction. The DIBELS can also be used as a screener for reading disorders, such as dyslexia (University of Oregon n.d.).

In some districts, teachers use the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) to assess students’ literacy skills. This screening tool “provides a comprehensive assessment of young children’s knowledge of important literacy fundamentals that are predictive of future reading success” (PALS Resource Center n.d.).

Another widely used tool for assessing phonics skills is the CORE Phonics Survey. This screener assesses “phonics and phonics-related skills that have a high rate of application in beginning reading” (CORE 2008, 41). Benchmarks are established by grade level, sorting student performance into three categories. Ultimately, the results of the CORE Phonics Survey “point to areas in which the student is likely to benefit from systematic, explicit phonics instruction” (CORE 2008, 41).

The *Qualitative Reading Inventory-6* (QRI-6) is a comprehensive reading assessment that helps educators gain more information about students’ phonics skills. The QRI-6 is “an individually administered informal reading inventory designed to provide information about (1) conditions under which students can identify words and

comprehend text successfully and (2) conditions that appear to result in unsuccessful word recognition” (Leslie and Schudt Caldwell 2017, 1). Students are presented with decoding word lists and passages and comprehension question sets to determine their overall performance against grade-level benchmarks.

Some computer-based assessments can provide valuable information about students’ understanding of phonics. i-Ready® is a nationally normed diagnostic assessment for reading and math that is given on a computer. It is an adaptive assessment, which provides a raw score; a percentile ranking comparative to same-age peers; grade-level descriptors for phonemic awareness, phonics, and high-frequency words; and an overall score. For further phonics assessment, the i-Ready teacher portal provides word lists and passages that are administered one-on-one with a teacher.

Another online reading assessment is aimswebPlus. Like i-Ready, aimswebPlus “screens and monitors the reading and math skills of Pre-K–12 students...to uncover learning gaps quickly, identify at-risk students, and assess individual and classroom growth” (Pearson Assessments 2023). The aimswebPlus assessment also includes phonics portions that are administered to students individually to gain further information.



## Research to Practice

*Focused Phonics* has a number of assessments to help teachers plan their instruction and determine reteaching opportunities. It includes beginning, middle, and end-of-the-year assessments that can be used in districts that do not have a required screener or benchmark assessment.

The summative assessments and progress monitoring charts in *Focused Phonics* can be referenced to align teachers’ instruction and prepare students for whichever phonics benchmarks are used in the state or district. The summative assessments included in each unit aim for a goal of 80 percent accuracy or greater.

Formative assessment data, ranging from anecdotal observations to teacher notes based on student classwork, can be taken during *Focused Phonics* instruction, discussions, and interactive activities with students. The program includes formative assessment record sheets and a Progress Monitoring Chart that can be used to assist in gaining insight using formative data.

**Individual Record Sheet**

Directions: Use this page to organize formative assessment notes for individual students during daily instruction. You can record skills that require additional support as well as mastered skills.

Date	Skill	Teacher Response	Outcome
.....	.....	.....	.....

**Individual Benchmark Summary Form**

Directions: Record the student's scores from each section of the Benchmark Assessment. This document can be shared with other stakeholders on the student's instructional team.

Student Name:	Beginning of Year Date	Middle of Year Date	End of Year Date
.....	.....	.....	.....

**How to Administer the Unit Assessments**

Each section of the Unit Assessments includes an administration page and a student page. The Unit Assessments include both dictating and dictation sections. These documents complete the dictating section first and then move to the dictation section. The dictation can be completed in small groups.

Provide each word to the student orally. "Can you read this word?" As needed, say, "The words that are marked (dots) to the right of the word are made-up words."

Record correct answers with a check mark in the first column. Incorrect answers can be recorded by writing the student's response in the incorrect column.

Read each dictation word two times. Say words slowly and precisely, but avoid stretching out or placing emphasis on parts of a word.

Read each dictation sentence two times in a similar manner. Parts of the sentence can be repeated as additional work, as needed. Capitalization and punctuation are not needed for the dictation items.

After each student dictates, evaluate their reading fluency using the rubric scale.

Use the Unit Assessment Scoring Guide (page 12) to determine percentage scores and the level of fluency or accuracy that may be needed.

- Achieve or exceed 85%—Continue with lessons at the expected pace.
- Meet between 70%–85%—Use Mastery Monitoring (page 16) to teach skills and assess students.
- Needs below 70%—Intensive teaching may be necessary.

Prepare copies of page 41, the student dictation page, prior to giving each unit assessment. Students should write their responses on this page.

You may choose to share the words one at a time using the version of the assessment that is provided in the digital resources. See page 62-64 in the Management Guide for more information.



# Conclusion

Learning how to read is a complex task. It requires students to use many cognitive skills in tandem, such as identifying sounds, recognizing learned words, applying concepts of print and learned phonics patterns, and comprehending the meaning of words and sentences. Students must have a strong sense of oral language, letter-sound relationships, and spelling patterns, as well as the ability to transfer those skills to what they are reading.

Developing strong reading skills begins with high-quality phonics instruction as the foundation for success. *Focused Phonics* provides a systematic approach to teaching phonics using accessible student resources, explicit lesson plans, purposeful technology support, and engaging texts that feature learned phonics skills. Each of the resources within *Focused Phonics* serves to support students' foundational literacy skills to prepare them to read fluently, accurately, and with comprehension.

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