

Two for the price of one: Developing children's word reading and word writing



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

In the complex instructional landscape of literacy, the profound connection between reading and writing is a central tenet. This article explores the specific, interdependent relationship between early reading and early writing, framing them not as separate subjects but as 'two sides of the same coin'. The goal of literacy instruction is, of course, comprehension and composition; however, there can be no reading comprehension without word reading, nor conventional written composition without word writing. Understanding their shared foundations and development is therefore essential for effective teaching practice.

Students' abilities in word reading and word writing develop along a continuum, moving through distinct phases that are greatly facilitated by systematic instruction. For word reading, this progression is often conceptualised in five phases:

1. **Picture reading:** The child approaches words as visual wholes, using clues like logos, without understanding the alphabetic principle. For example, "*McDonalds!*"
2. **Letter reading:** The child begins to use some letter-sound knowledge, often focusing on initial and final sounds.
3. **Sounding it out:** The child can form connections between all graphemes in a word and their corresponding phonemes.
4. **Chunk reading:** The child starts to recognise and use consolidated letter sequence units (e.g. *-ight*, *re-*) rather than decoding letter by letter.
5. **Fluent decoding:** Word reading becomes accurate, fast, and effortless, as words are recognised by sight without conscious analysis.

A similar progression occurs in word writing development, which can be understood through five stages:

1. Emergent writing: The child hasn't yet got an understanding of the systematic relationship between letters and sounds. To see the stages of emergent writing, click [here](#).

2. First and final sound spelling: The child begins using letter-sound knowledge, but accuracy is usually limited to consonants and short vowels.

- *cat* → ct (child writes the consonants, may omit vowels)
- *dog* → dg
- *sun* → sn
- *bat* → bt

3. Sounding it out spelling: The child can spell most single-syllable words but struggles with more complex patterns like silent long-vowels.

- *make* → mak or make (may omit the silent e)
- *home* → hom
- *bike* → bik
- *read* → red or reed (confusion with long-vowel spelling patterns)

4. Chunk spelling: Errors typically occur at syllable junctures or in unaccented syllables.

- *hoping* → hopeing (error at the syllable juncture where the silent "e" should be dropped)
- *running* → runing (omitting the doubled consonant at the syllable break)
- *family* → famly (dropping an unaccented syllable)
- *different* → diffrent (leaving out the unstressed middle syllable)

5. Expert spelling: Errors are most common with low-frequency, multisyllabic words involving derivational morphemes.

- electricity → eletricity (dropping a syllable within a derived form)
- responsibility → responsiblity (omitting the derivational suffix syllable)
- biological → bioligical (confusing the placement of the derivational suffix -ical)
- nation → natian (misapplying the derivational -ion pattern)

It is important to note that these developmental phases are not rigid, and children will move between these stages depending on the specific word they wish to write.

The shared foundations: Emergent literacy skills

The development of both word reading and word writing is contingent upon a set of foundational emergent literacy skills. These skills are drawn upon for both decoding (reading) and encoding (writing), which explains why the two abilities are so strongly correlated. The three critical skills are:

1. Phonological awareness: This is the knowledge and awareness of the sound structure of language, from larger units like syllables down to the smallest units, phonemes. This skill is essential because English is an alphabetic writing system, where symbols primarily represent speech sounds.

- **Big sounds:** Children can detect or segment the larger parts of words, like the 'claps' (syllables) in a word. For example, 'but-ter-fly' has three claps.
- **Rhyming parts:** They can hear smaller parts, like the rhyme in a word. In 'cat', they can hear the 'at' part.
- **Tiny sounds:** They can hear the tiniest sounds (phonemes) in a word. They can hear that 'cat' is made of three sounds: /k/ /æ/ /t/

2. Orthographic awareness: This refers to the knowledge of print concepts, graphemes (the letters or groups of letters like *sh* or *ough* that represent sounds), and the permissible spelling patterns of the language. This is the skill of knowing all about letters and printed words.

- **Letter shapes and names:** Children learn what each letter looks like and what it is called.
- **Letter teams:** Children learn that sometimes letters work together to make one sound. For example, the letters 's' and 'h' team up to make the /ʃ/ sound in *ship*. This combination of letters that represents one sound is called a grapheme.

3. Morphological awareness: This is the understanding of morphemes, the smallest units of meaning in words (e.g., *re-*, *-act*, *-s* in *reacts*). This awareness is particularly crucial in English, a morphophonological system where meaning-based units can override apparent phonological patterns (e.g. recognising *re-* and *act* in *react* prevents it from being misread as /rikt/).

- For example, the word 'cats' has two meaning parts: 'cat' (the animal) and '-s' (which means more than one).
- The word 'redo' has two meaning parts: 're-' (which means do again) and 'do'.
- Knowing these parts helps children read and spell big words, like 'photosynthesis' or 'incredible'

Principles and practices for reading and writing instruction

The shared foundation of early reading and writing has critical implications for instruction. First, because they draw on the same skills, integrated teaching has a synergistic effect: teaching writing promotes reading development, and teaching decoding promotes encoding development. Second, a student who is weak in one is very likely to be weak in the other. However, it is important to recognise they are not identical; word writing requires production and greater precision of a word's mental representation, making it typically more difficult than the recognition task of reading.

Effective instruction is built upon several core pedagogical principles. Teachers should employ differentiated instruction based on ongoing assessment to meet children's varying needs and rates of learning (see [here](#) for more). It is also vital to consider students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, recognising that foundational principles of literacy instruction are effective for all children when teachers understand and value their language experiences (see [here](#) for more). Finally, instruction should be delivered using evidence-based approaches, namely explicit and systematic teaching that provides structured modelling and scaffolding, such as the *I Do, We Do, You Do* model (see [here](#) for more). For example:

- **I Do:** First, you model exactly what to do. For example, you show children how you are using your sound mat to help you encode the words you want to write in the picturebook you're making. "I want to write

'cat'. I hear three sounds: /k/ /æ/ /t/. The first sound is /k/. That can be a 'c' or a 'k'. I'll use the 'c' on my sound mat. The next sound is /æ/. That's an 'a'. There it is on the sound mat. The last sound is /t/. That's a 't'. Let me write it: c-a-t. Yes, that's what it looks like when I see it in books!"

- **We Do:** Next, you do it together. The children use their sound mats to help them encode the words they want to write in their picturebook that day.
- **You Do:** Finally, the children continue to use their sound mats when making picturebooks on their own during provision.

Here's another example:

- **I Do:** You show children how, when you *really* want to write a word, but you don't know all the grapheme-phoneme correspondences yet, you use 'kid writing' as a replacement. "When I was your age, and I wanted to write a really cool word, and I didn't know all my sounds yet, I used to do this. Watch. I want to write 'dinosaurs'. I can hear the first sound: /d/. That's the letter 'd'. I'll write that. Next, I hear /aɪ/ I don't know all the ways to spell that sound yet, so I'll just write the letter 'i'. Then I hear 'no' like the word 'no'. After that, I can hear lots of sounds, but I don't know how to write them yet, so I'll just use 'kid writing' for those. At the end, I can hear /s/. That's the letter 's'. So my 'kid writing' says: d-i-no-~~~~-s. It's not the same as the adult spelling, but it shows all the sounds I do know! This way, we can still write all our wonderful ideas and share our stories."
- **We Do:** Next, you do it together. The children use their sound mats and 'kid writing' to encode their more ambitious or complex vocabulary in their picturebook that day.
- **You Do:** Finally, the children continue to use 'kid writing' and their sound mats when making picturebooks on their own during provision.

Finally, one last example:

- **I Do:** You show children how, when you want to write a tricky word that doesn't follow the usual sound-letter patterns, you use the word wall to help you. "Ah, watch this! I really want to write the word 'said' in my picturebook. Hmm... if I try to sound it out, I might think it's s-e-d. But I know that 'said' is one of our tricky words, and it's on our word wall. Let's look. Here it is: s-a-i-d. I can copy it from the wall into my writing. Now my sentence looks just like it does in books."
- **We Do:** Next, you do it together. The children use the word wall to copy down any common tricky words in their picturebook that day.
- **You Do:** Finally, the children continue to use the word wall independently to spell tricky words while they are making picturebooks during provision.

Using this routine every day can help children feel safe and confident in learning new strategies and skills.

Research-supported recommendations

Based on these principles, four key recommendations emerge for effective, integrated word reading and word writing instruction:

1. **Teach phonological awareness and grapheme-phoneme correspondences.** This involves systematic instruction in manipulating sounds (e.g. blending, segmenting) and explicit teaching of letter formation. Letter instruction should focus on frequent exposure, making name-sound connections explicit, teaching visually similar letters non-sequentially, and building automaticity in both recognition and letter writing (see [here](#) for more).
2. **Model chunking.** As students progress, they must learn to process chunks larger than individual graphemes. This includes modelling **(1) common rime units or phonograms** (e.g. *-ock*, *-ight*, *-ean*), **(2) syllable types**:
 - Closed syllables (CVC): cat, hop, pen
 - Open syllables (CV): he, go, me
 - Vowel-consonant-e (VCe): make, bike, hope
 - Unaccented final syllables: table, pencil, cabinand **(3) morphemes** (e.g., prefixes, suffixes, roots)
 - Prefixes: un- (undo, unhappy), re- (redo, rewrite)
 - Suffixes: -ful (hopeful, careful), -less (hopeless, fearless)
 - Roots: struct (construct, destruct, structure), port (transport, portable, import)

Activities like word sorts and word building are highly effective for this work.

3. **Model decoding and encoding.** Foundational skills must be explicitly applied to the acts of reading and writing. An analytic approach should be used even for irregular words, focusing on the parts that do follow predictable patterns (e.g. the *sh* and *d* in *should*). Teachers should view [informed spelling](#) not merely as an error, but as a valuable window into a student's current knowledge and a crucial opportunity for them to practise applying grapheme-phoneme correspondences.
4. **Incorporate connected texts.** Children should be regularly invited to use and apply these skills in the context of meaningful reading and writing experiences. The use of decodable and high-quality commercial texts provides beginning readers with opportunities to practise taught patterns in a supportive context. Similarly, students should be encouraged to apply their ever developing encoding knowledge in daily book-making time (see [here](#) for more), reinforcing the connection between skill acquisition and authentic communication.

In conclusion, word reading and word writing are inextricably linked skills that are foundational to all later literacy development. By providing explicit, systematic, and integrated instruction that targets their shared underpinnings, teachers can capitalise on their relationship and build a robust foundation for students' success in both reading and writing.

Recommended further reading

- Feldgus, E. G., Cardonick, I., & Gentry, J. R. (2017). Kid writing in the 21st century: A systematic approach to phonics, spelling, and writing workshop. Hameray Publishing Group
- Kim, Y. S. G. (2022). A Tale of Two Closely Related Skills: Word Reading and Spelling Development and Instruction. In Z. A. Philippakos & S. Graham (Eds.), Writing and reading connections: Bridging research and practice. Guilford Press
- Kim, Y. S. G. (2022) Co-Occurrence of Reading and Writing Difficulties: The Application of the Interactive Dynamic Literacy Model, Journal of Learning Disabilities, 00222194211060868
- Ray, K. W., & Glover, M. (2008). Already ready. NH: Heinemann