



R E A D Y
T O R E A D

Using the Science of Reading in Pre-K and Kindergarten

EDITED BY LATISHA HAYES, PHD

READY TO READ

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SECTION I

Laying the Foundation

BY LATISHA HAYES

The goal of this book is to empower teachers to leverage the science of reading. To achieve this goal, the chapter authors review the research relevant to their topic and explain both how children develop these skills and the evidence-based practices you can rely on to support skill development. Not only do the chapters outline research, but they also offer a number of bread-and-butter, use-tomorrow activities that have been shown to support all learners—most especially our youngest learners in prekindergarten and kindergarten.

Why do we need a book focused on the science of reading in early childhood? The road to successful reading and writing begins long before children begin to practice writing and reading words themselves. Before they can tie their shoes, they are thinking about words, books, and stories. These early experiences are not incidental; they are the building blocks for future reading and writing. I'm reminded of stories over the years working with young learners that illustrate this point.

Children listen to and play with sounds in words. Rhyming books are in constant rotation for young children. I'm reminded of one of my own son's favorites: *Quick as a Cricket* by Audrey Wood. While rereading (maybe the hundredth time!) I read, "I'm as gentle as a lamb." He stopped me and turned back a page to point out, "*Clam. Lamb.* That's funny!" To which I replied, "That is funny! They sound the same at the end. *Clam. Lamb.* Here's another: *Clam. Lamb. Ham.* They rhyme!"

Children pay attention to print. Once, when working with a group of kindergartners, we were getting ready to read *Oh No, George!* by Chris Haughton. I pointed out the title and pointed to each word as I read, "Oh no, George!" I invited the group to help me count the letters in *George*. After we counted out the six letters, one child said, "Look. George has two Gs." Then another chimed in, "And two Es!"

Children learn the names of letters. A child's name holds intense meaning to them. And across my years teaching, children have also been fascinated by the fact that their teachers have first names! One kindergartner, Tanisha, announced to her friends when she saw the letter *T* in my name, *Tisha*, "Look! That's my name letter, too! *T, T, T.*"

They write (and draw!) to express themselves. A prekindergartner once brought me a drawing. Her drawing included scribbles, shapes, and some letters and numbers. She said, "Look at the story I just wrote. Read it to me." She understood that people write stories that are important to them, and we read those stories. She wanted to be a part of that! Moreover, her name was prominently written at the top. She claimed her story with her name—often the first word children attempt to write (Temple et al., 1988).

They enjoy and engage with a fun story. Recently, I was reading *Can You Make a Scary Face?* by Jan Thomas with a prekindergartner. This book is interactive and fun. As we got to the end and needed to help the main character (a bug), the child jumped in his seat and asked, “Did we scare frog? Is bug safe?” He implicitly knew bug had a problem and that problem needed to be resolved, demonstrating his beginning understanding of narrative story structure—an understanding that that children are actively developing between ages three and six (Khan et al., 2016).

They notice how books work. Young children love hearing a favorite story again and again—then again. Don’t we all? As I was getting ready to reread a favorite book, *I Stink!* by Kate and Jim McMullan, I turned to the back of the book and posed this question to a group of prekindergartners: “Is this where I start reading?” The group said no in unison with one child following up, “That’s silly! You can’t start at the end!”

They learn and try out new words. One of my favorite “things kids say” stories comes from a friend. After a pizza was delivered to their house for dinner, Jeffrey, their five-year-old, announced to the family, “Let us gather around the pizza box.” He had obviously heard the word *gather* in many books read aloud to him by his parents, and he was ready to try it out!

Research identifies three key considerations for early literacy development. First, early reading and writing skills are strongly linked to later reading success (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). Second, literacy development begins at birth and accelerates in prekindergarten and kindergarten through intentional exposure to language and print (Herrera et al., 2021). Third, these early, foundational skills can be strengthened through instruction aligned with the science of reading, and these early experiences are highly predictive of later reading achievement (NELP, 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000).

What Does the Science of Reading Tell Us?

To start, let’s define what we mean in this book by “the science of reading.” Petscher et al. (2020) define the term as “a phrase representing the accumulated knowledge about reading, reading development, and best practices for reading instruction obtained by the use of the scientific method.” In other words, the science of reading offers a research-based framework that supports effective reading instruction and empowers teachers. As research advances, our understanding of this science continues to evolve. That’s a good thing. We endeavor to understand more and do better. There is compelling evidence that informs how we teach reading and writing, even in the early grades and before formal schooling begins.

Perhaps most importantly, research has made one thing clear. Unlike spoken language, reading does not develop naturally (Gough and Hillinger, 1980). Children won't become proficient readers and writers just by growing older or being exposed to print and books. It takes skilled teachers and evidence-based instruction to support their literacy development.

Research has given us a useful framework for conceptualizing how children develop as readers over time. The Simple View of Reading (SVR) helps us understand reading development—even for our earliest readers—and highlights the foundational skills that contribute to skilled reading or reading with comprehension (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). The SVR breaks down reading comprehension into two distinct and equally important components: one focused on mapping print to language (such as phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge) and the other on constructing meaning from text (such as background knowledge and vocabulary). Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the SVR and how its core components work together to support later reading achievement. The chapter focuses specifically on what the SVR means for early childhood teachers. Parts 2 and 3 of this book build on this foundation, offering practical guidance for supporting children's early reading and writing development.

Importantly, your intentional decision-making paves the road forward, helping to smooth the way for the children in your classrooms. Think about it like this. Starting early allows children more time to learn to read and write words. We can spread instruction across the prekindergarten years to ease the pressure and potential anxiety of the expectations children face in kindergarten and first grade. Some teachers may wonder whether teaching letters, sounds, and words to young children aligns with developmentally appropriate practice, but the National Association of Educators of Young Children (NAEYC) points out that developmental appropriateness has more to do with how we teach (NAEYC, 2020). Chapters 1 and 2 walk you through evidence-based instructional practices that are assessment informed and grounded in explicit, systematic instruction. The chapters also take you to the early childhood classroom, a space rich with diverse children's literature, conversations and social collaboration, and plenty of play.

So, Let's Get Started!

Again, our goal with this book is to empower you as a literacy teacher of our youngest learners. You play a vital role in their journey as readers and writers, from the very beginning. Grounding instruction in the science of reading gives you the opportunity to build a strong foundation for all children. So, let's get started with the first two chapters setting the stage. Together, we'll explore early reading development and evidence-based practices that enrich early literacy experiences.

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CHAPTER 1

What Is the Science of Reading?

SARAH CAMPBELL LIGHTNER & LATISHA HAYES

MS. COBB pulls out a new book for her pre-K class to check out. As she reveals the front cover, she reads the title—*Roll, Roll Little Pea* by Cécile Bergame (2023). Before she begins reading, she points out the front cover of the book and asks her class where she should begin reading. Read-alouds are a daily activity in her classroom, so the children quickly answer and grow excited about the story. She points to the letter *R* and asks the children to name this letter. To encourage responses from all, she has them first share with their whisper partner and then give a thumbs up when they are ready. On the count of three, Ms. Cobb’s students collectively whisper the letter’s name: *R*. Excitement builds. Ms. Cobb says, “I wonder where this little pea is rolling off to. I notice on the back cover,” she turns the book over and points to each word as she reads aloud, “it says, ‘The tale of a runaway pea.’ Hmm... so let’s see where this little pea goes.”

As she reads, she periodically stops to ask the children to direct her reading from the left page to the right page, from the top left corner and across the page, from the end of a line with a return sweep to the next line. In the book, the pea rolls past different animals who want to eat it, and Ms. Cobb stops to tell the children what words such as *nibble* and *devour* mean. The class has learned the letter *R*, and Ms. Cobb emphasizes /*rrr*/ in *roll* from page to page. She asks the children, “What does little pea do? Little pea rrrrrrolls.”

After she finishes the read-aloud, Ms. Cobb and the children discuss why a rabbit might nibble but a wolf would devour that pea. She asks the children how they would eat the pea. They share with their whisper partners, and then Ms. Cobb invites the children to demonstrate how they would eat the pea. After she watches, she brings the group back together and spotlights how the children eat their pretend peas, using the words from the book and encouraging the children to verbalize these words. “Shawna devours her pea. How does Shawna eat her pea?” “Fredrick nibbles his. How does Fredrick eat his pea?”

Later in the day, Ms. Cobb shows the children her stick puppets of the animals from the story. She models how to play with the puppets and become different animals, pretending to crunch like a cat, peck like a hen, nibble like a rabbit, and devour like a wolf. Together, they retell the story. Ms. Cobb reinforces the vocabulary from the book as children peck and crunch and prompts them, asking questions such as, “What does little pea do? Where did little pea roll? What happened next?”

Throughout the week, Ms. Cobb and the children revisit Roll, *Roll Little Pea* (Bergame, 2023) as she intentionally reinforces the children’s language and literacy development:

Ms. Cobb rereads the story, pointing to the words “roll, roll little pea” with each refrain, and invites the children to reenact what the animals do as they nibble and crunch.

She distributes pictures of a rabbit, a wolf, a cat, a robot, and so on. The children collectively name each picture and then sort their pictures into categories—words that begin with /rrr/ and words that don’t—as they say, “Roll, roll,” or “Don’t roll!”

Ms. Cobb uses vocabulary throughout the day, saying, for example, “I was so hungry today. I devoured my lunch.” She also reinforces the children’s vocabulary use by narrating when appropriate—“Are you nibbling your carrots?”—and encouraging them to use the words in their own conversations—“How are you eating your carrots? Are you nibbling or crunching?”

She demonstrates writing through shared writing. Together, the class decides where little pea rolls and who wants to eat it. Then, Ms. Cobb puts their discussion into three simple sentences: “Little pea rolls past a rock. Ms. Cobb sits on the rock. She munches and crunches little pea.” As Ms. Cobb writes their story on chart paper, she includes the children in the process. For example, she asks questions such as, “Where do I begin writing?” and has them skywrite letters they’ve been working on as she writes.

This glimpse into Ms. Cobb’s classroom demonstrates how language and literacy come alive as children playfully interact with books, their teacher, and each other. Here, literacy instruction takes place through direct and explicit instruction; guided practice; read-alouds; and numerous opportunities to play with sound, language, reading, and writing in meaningfully embedded contexts. Instruction in this classroom is intentionally executed by a knowledgeable teacher who knows how to leverage children’s interests to engage them in comprehensive early language and literacy instruction. Paulson and Moats (2018) note that “the job of all early childhood educators is to deepen their understanding of the processes involved in children’s learning so they can do the best job possible.” Ms. Cobbs’ understanding of these processes informs each part of her day. Within this book, our goal is to help you build your understanding and show how, like Ms. Cobb, you can translate your understanding to the early childhood classroom.

You may be asking yourself: What is the science of reading, and how do I know if I’m incorporating it in my instruction? This book addresses the essential components of language and literacy instruction across early childhood settings, using reading science as a backbone. The “science of reading” refers not to a specific instructional approach but rather to reading instruction that is based on decades of research and evidence. Since children’s early language and literacy experiences affect their later literacy achievement (Burchinal et al., 2022; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008), it is critical that educators examine the research and evidence to better understand prekindergarten and kindergarten instructional practices that lead to greater reading and writing outcomes for children. Plus, children come to our early childhood classrooms with vast differences in their experiences, needs, and interests. With these things in mind, our main goals in this chapter are to outline:

- why early literacy instruction is important,
- when it should begin,
- the essential components of early literacy instruction, and
- evidence-based instructional practices.

Ultimately, this book aims to provide you with an array of options to meet the early literacy needs of the diverse children in your classrooms, so you’ll know if you are incorporating the science of reading into your instruction.

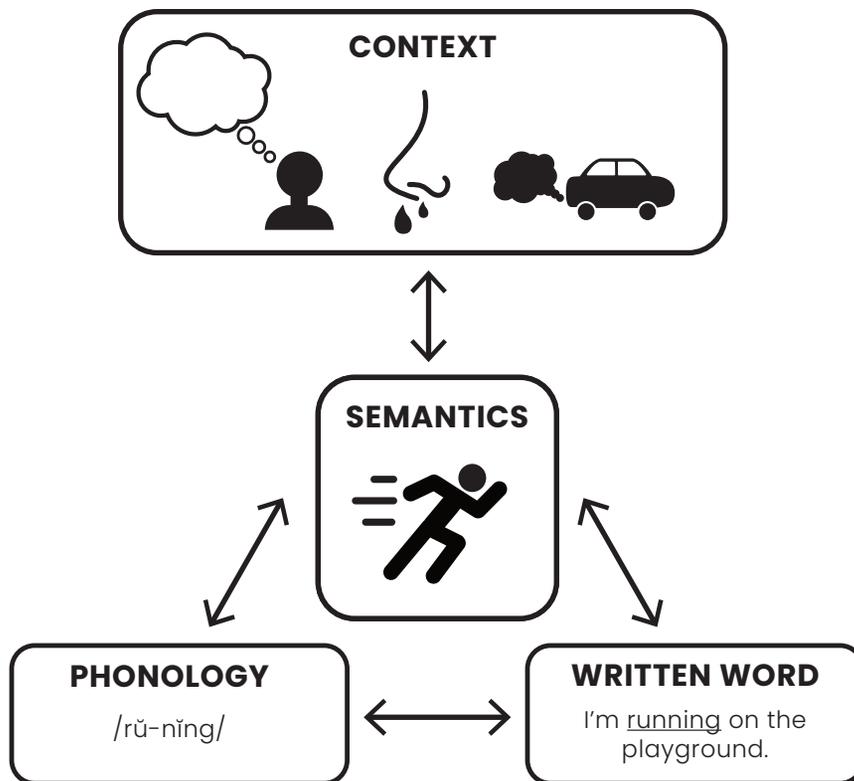
Why We Teach: The Importance of Early Literacy Instruction

A child’s early years provide the foundation for later success in both school *and* life. Learning to read and write is not like learning to listen and speak. Unlike oral language, learning to read is

not a natural task. Children must be taught to read. When children learn to read, their brains are changing. In fact, neuroscience research has shown that our brains create new circuits to enable reading (Dehaene, 2009). This new circuitry connects *phonology* (the sounds that make up spoken words), *semantics* (the meanings of words), *context* (the meanings of words in different contexts), and *visual input* (the written word).

This connection has been referred to as the four-part processor (Seidenberg and McClelland, 1989). At first, as we learn oral language, we are connecting phonology and semantics. As we learn more about the words in our speaking vocabulary, we develop an understanding of them in different contexts: maybe I'm *running* on the playground, my nose is *running*, my car engine is *running*, or thoughts are *running* around in my mind. Then, we learn about how our spoken words are represented in writing. At this point, we must rework our circuitry to pull the printed word into the already-developed connections between phonology, semantics, and context (see Figure 1.1). As our brains make these new connections, we are creating new circuitry.

FIGURE 1.1



Learning to read words requires not only learning about the structure of written language and how it translates to the spoken word, but also building vocabulary knowledge and world knowledge so that we can understand what we read. Children who develop solid early literacy skills are

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The shift in reading instruction has left many early childhood educators searching for clarity and support. *Ready to Read* bridges the gap between research and real-world practice, offering early childhood teachers the tools they need to deliver evidence-based, developmentally appropriate instruction grounded in the science of how young children build literacy skills.

Edited by literacy expert Latisha Hayes, PhD, this resource brings together leading voices in the field to demystify key concepts and provide practical, easy-to-implement strategies tailored to pre-K and kindergarten classrooms. Whether you're just beginning your structured literacy journey or looking to align your instruction with new mandates, this guide will help you feel equipped and empowered. Discover how to:

- ▣ Align instruction with research-supported literacy recommendations
- ▣ Support emergent literacy through play-based activities
- ▣ Build phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and early writing skills
- ▣ Promote literacy development for multilingual learners
- ▣ Implement strategies contributed by top early literacy experts

Ready to Read is your resource for laying solid early literacy foundations—empowering every child to become a confident, joyful reader through inclusive, research-informed practices.



Lead author and editor **Latisha Hayes, PhD**, is Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education at the University of Virginia, where she teaches courses on the language structures of English and interventions for students with reading difficulties. She is director of UVA's McGuffey Reading Clinical Services, where she works with preservice and in-service teachers to provide students across the grades with diagnostic and tutoring services. As a special educator, reading specialist, and literacy coach, Dr. Hayes has taught students with reading disabilities across the elementary and middle grades. She is an author and coauthor of several books, including *Playful Activities for Reading Readiness* from Gryphon House.

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