

What is the difference between balanced and structured literacy?

Balanced and structured literacy are two different approaches to teaching reading. They have things in common, but when they're referenced in the same breath they're usually pitted against each other.

I considered myself a “balanced literacy” teacher for many years. It's the approach I learned in graduate school, the approach I used as a classroom teacher, and the approach I (used to) teach on my website and in my online course. However, after a great deal of research into the science of reading, I now see things differently.

I now advocate a *structured literacy* approach to reading instruction.

This *isn't* to say that I did every single thing wrong as a balanced literacy teacher, or that balanced literacy teachers today aren't getting anything right. Nor do I think that we have to throw away everything with the balanced literacy label. But **it's time to take a good look at what we're doing when we teach children to read.**

What's the difference between balanced and structured literacy?

Let's start with a definition of balanced literacy.

Balanced literacy is a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control.

Fountas & Pinnell – Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Ages

The fact is, if you ask twenty different balanced literacy teachers to define balanced literacy, you will likely get twenty different definitions. It's just not well-defined. But most balanced literacy teachers will say (as I did) that they teach reading in a way that meets everyone's individual needs while also promoting a love of reading.

Balanced literacy came about in the late 90's as an answer to the whole language and phonics debate. The hope was that it would provide a much-needed compromise by using the best of both approaches. To many people, though, balanced literacy is a dirty word.

What went wrong? Why is structured literacy now coming into favor? Many will tell you that it's just another pendulum swing. I think it's much deeper than that.

Let's start with a definition.

"The term 'Structured Literacy' is not designed to replace Orton Gillingham, Multi-Sensory or other terms in common use. It is an umbrella term designed to describe all of the programs that teach reading in essentially the same way."

Hal Malchow – International Dyslexia Association

I used to be a STRONG balanced literacy advocate

Believe me, I never thought I'd be writing an article comparing balanced and structured literacy. I *believed* in balanced literacy with all of my heart.

I became ~~irritated~~ very angry when I read articles that slammed balanced literacy. The articles said I wasn't teaching phonics (I was). The articles said I was teaching guessing (I felt that I was teaching my students to be strategic).

The articles said I should be doing more explicit instruction (I felt that my mini-lessons served that purpose just as well as a 30-minute whole class lesson that would likely bore half my class).

The articles criticized my lack of a structured curriculum (I felt that I knew my students much better than a scripted curriculum any day). The articles said balanced literacy didn't work. I had plenty of anecdotal evidence that it *did*.

Here's the thing. And this is something we *all* need to take note of.

Balanced literacy works for some children. Many children DO learn to read without a lot of explicit instruction.

But it *doesn't* work for others.

Explicit instruction is good for all children. It's absolutely essential for many of them.

In other words? If we use a balanced literacy approach, we will not reach all of our students.

Here's the key difference between balanced and structured literacy

Balanced literacy is centered around activities that surround children with quality literature and promote a love of reading, whereas structured literacy teaches the structure of language through explicit, systematic, sequential instruction.

Balanced literacy teachers typically teach the essential components of reading (phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary) through the following structures:

- Read aloud
- Shared reading
- Guided reading
- Independent reading

Teachers tend to be more focused on the activities themselves than on the skills.

On the other hand, structured literacy teachers may include read aloud, shared reading, small group instruction, and independent reading in their days, but they are focused less on activities and more on the structure of language:

- Phonology
- Sound-symbol correspondences
- Syllables
- Morphology
- Syntax
- Semantics

A summary of the differences between balanced and structured literacy

I know that not everyone will agree with my characterizations in the following chart, but this is how I see it:

BALANCED LITERACY

- Haphazard approach to phonemic awareness instruction
- Phonics may be taught, but lessons are short and do not necessarily follow a scope and sequence
- Rote memorization of high frequency words
- Read leveled texts using the three-cueing system
- Greater focus on the meaning of the text rather than accuracy of what is read
- "Students get better at reading by reading."
- "The point of reading instruction is to get children to love reading."

STRUCTURED LITERACY

- Explicit, systematic, sequential instruction in phonemic awareness
- Phonics is taught through explicit, systematic, sequential instruction
- High frequency words are taught according to their phonics patterns; irregular words are taught explicitly
- Read decodable texts that include already-learned phonics patterns
- Misread words are corrected; focus is on sounding them out
- "Students get better at reading by learning and practicing the code."
- "The point of reading instruction is to teach children to read."



Let's tackle the differences one by one

DIFFERENCE #1

- In balanced literacy, we typically see a haphazard approach to phonemic awareness instruction.
- Structured literacy includes systematic, sequential instruction in phonemic awareness.

Through the work of David Kilpatrick, we've learned that phonemic awareness may very well be the missing key for struggling readers. It's essential that we give daily lessons in phonemic awareness.

Our students need lessons in phoneme isolation, blending, segmenting, and manipulation.

(If you're a member of The Measured Mom Plus, check out **my video series about phonological and phonemic awareness**).

If you're a balanced literacy teacher, an important change you can make is to do ten minutes of phonemic awareness instruction every day.

Try **Heggerty's** easy-to-use curriculum (my top pick!) or the free lessons you can print at **Reading Done Right**.

I also recommend the hands-on games that you'll find in my phonemic awareness bundle.

DIFFERENCE #2

- In balanced literacy, phonics lessons are typically quite short and may not follow a scope and sequence.
- In structured literacy, phonics is taught through an explicit, systematic and sequential approach (usually through a purchased curriculum).

As a new first grade teacher, I had to use a scripted phonics program that I HATED.

It moved too quickly for my low readers, and it was immensely boring for my strong ones.

And it took *way too much time* out of our school day.

I received permission to ditch that program in my second year of teaching first grade, and from then on I had a very "I'll teach it when you need it" approach to phonics.

I'm fully aware that many balanced teachers DO have a structured approach to teaching phonics, and I say hurray for them!

But it's not the norm.

A strong phonics lesson is 20-30 minutes long and has most, if not all, of the following components:

- A phonemic awareness warm-up that connects to the phonics skill
- Explicit introduction of the new sound-spelling relationship
- Blending practice
- Word building
- Practice reading decodable text
- Guided writing practice

(And while there are still pretty boring phonics programs out there, there are many hands-on programs that allow you to meet multiple levels in one classroom.)

DIFFERENCE #3

- Balanced literacy teaches rote memorization of high frequency words.

- In structured literacy, high frequency words are taught according to their phonics patterns, and even irregular words are taught explicitly.

For years I thought it made perfect sense to teach kids to memorize long lists of high frequency words. That's why I created a whole series of sight word books that taught high frequency words through repeated exposure.

I've since removed those books from the website because I've learned that this isn't the best approach for teaching high frequency words.

Read: **How to teach sight words**

After all, kids don't store thousands of whole words in their brains. That's not **how the brain learns to read**.

A better approach is to teach a small number of "sight words" to get kids started (such as *the* and *is*), and to teach the rest when you teach their related phonics patterns.

As for irregular words, you can still be explicit about teaching them.

Check out the video below to learn about my *new* sight word lessons and accompanying decodable books.

DIFFERENCE #4

- In a balanced literacy classroom, beginning readers read leveled texts using the three-cueing system.
- In a structured literacy classroom, early readers read decodable texts that include already-learned phonics patterns.

This difference right here is the one that made me realize I could no longer support a balanced literacy approach.

If you consider yourself a balanced literacy teacher and do *not* teach your students to solve words using the picture, context clues, first letter (and anything else other than sounding out the word), please comment below ... because as far as I know this type of teacher does not exist.

I never EVER thought I'd denounce three-cueing, but after studying the science of reading I can no longer support it.

If this makes you bristle (believe me, I know how you feel), I encourage you to listen to my podcast episode, **What's wrong with 3-cueing?**

For years I resisted decodable books because I was sure they would kill a love of reading before it could start.

After all, wasn't every decodable book boring, stilted, and nonsensical?

Turns out ... I was wrong! There are actually many quality decodable books just waiting for you to discover them.

DIFFERENCE #5

- In a balanced literacy classroom, there is typically a greater focus on the meaning of the text rather than on the accuracy of what is read.
- Structured literacy teachers correct misread words; they encourage their students to sound them out.

This sounds crazy, but for years I believed that "sound it out" should only be said as a last resort.

I thought that it was much better to ask my students to consider what made sense ... because isn't reading all about comprehension?

(Well, yes it is, but reading comprehension is a product of decoding and language comprehension. See this podcast: **What the science of reading is based on**)

I think that the traditional use of running records leads many balanced literacy teachers to believe that getting the general meaning right is more important than sounding out every single word.

For that reason, I recommend **rethinking running records**.

DIFFERENCE #6

- Balanced literacy teachers believe that students get better at reading by reading.
- Structured literacy teachers will tell you that students get better at reading by learning and practicing the code.

This one is a little tricky. Kids *need* to practice reading, whether or not they're in a balanced literacy classroom.

But *first* they need to learn to decode the words, which they learn through explicit instruction.

As a balanced literacy teacher, I had my students fill their bags with "just right books" (i.e. leveled books that required them to use three-cueing to solve the words) because I thought that they more they "read," the more they'd pick it up.

Now I know that *after* kids have developed the habit of connecting the phonemes to the graphemes (sounding out words), reading practice will help them orthographically map the words (i.e. store them in their brains for future, instant retrieval).

DIFFERENCE #7

- Balanced literacy teachers believe that the point of reading instruction is to get children to love reading.
- Structured literacy teachers believe that the point of reading instruction is to teach children to read.

This is NOT to say that balanced literacy teachers aren't concerned with teaching children to read.

Of course they are.

This is NOT to say that structured literacy teachers don't want children to love reading.

Of course they do.

But structured literacy teachers understand something I didn't "get" for a long time.

Success breeds motivation.*

When you teach children to read, and they see that they can do it ... that they are actually pulling those words off the page by connecting the sounds to the letters, THAT is what gets them excited about reading.

*Heard in **this podcast episode** from The Reading League

Final thoughts

This may be my longest blog post ever, so it's time to wrap it up. Before I do, though, I want to address a few criticisms of each approach.

Critics of balanced literacy say that it's haphazard, teaches bad habits, and puts the cart before the horse.

These criticisms were immensely insulting to me not so many months ago. But now I get it. By not teaching skills in an explicit, systematic way, I was missing many of them.

By teaching my students to use the picture or context to solve words, I was teaching them habits that would not serve them when they got into third grade (and the harder texts that came with it).

By thinking that we needed to focus FIRST on comprehension, I was putting the cart before the horse. (I was expecting them to comprehend what they couldn't even read!) I had to teach them decoding first. Once their decoding became more automatic, they could develop fluency. *Then* comprehension came into play.

Critics of structured literacy say it's boring and drill-and-kill. They claim that it stifles fluency, ignores comprehension, and kills the love of reading.

I'm not making this up. These were *my* criticisms of structured literacy.

Now I know that explicit, systematic teaching does not have to be boring. When a knowledgeable, engaging teacher combines the art of teaching with the science of reading, joyful learning can result.

Now I know that while it's a little painful to hear kids sounding out every word (instead of flying through predictable texts), it's a necessary part of the process. I learned that we can focus on comprehension when a child can sound out words quickly enough to remember what was read. Until that time, we focus on comprehension through interactive read alouds.

And through conversations with a principal, school psychologist, and many former balanced literacy teachers, I finally get it.

We've got to teach kids to read before they can love it.