

Mistakes to Avoid When Giving Phonics Instruction

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Read this blog post on [themeasuredmom.com](https://www.themeasuredmom.com):

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> INTRODUCTION

For decades I considered myself a balanced literacy teacher. Of *course* I believed in phonics instruction.

Of course I *taught* phonics.

Or did I?

Looking back, I made some pretty big mistakes when it came to phonics instruction.

I'm sharing them here in the hopes that I can help you avoid my own mistakes!

> Phonics Instruction Mistake #1: Not following a strong scope and sequence

As a balanced literacy teacher, I had a general idea of which phonics skills were important to learn.

But I believed in an *embedded* approach to phonics instruction.

In other words, I taught phonics as it came up in our shared reading lessons, the students' reading of leveled books, and our spelling lessons.

When students were stuck on a word, I (sometimes) encouraged them to find chunks they knew. If the word contained a sound-spelling they hadn't yet encountered, I simply told it to them. ("ee" makes the long e sound)

Don't get me wrong; it's definitely helpful to point out sound-spellings during authentic reading and writing experiences.

BUT ... this should be *in addition to* explicit phonics lessons that follow a strong scope and sequence.

By using a scope and sequence, we can ensure that we are not leaving gaps in our students' phonics knowledge.

[Get my free phonics scope and sequence.](#)

› Phonics Instruction Mistake #2: Not teaching phonics explicitly and systematically

I'll be up front and tell you that my first year of teaching first grade, I was required to use a scripted phonics program that I *hated*.

It was a whole class program that, quite honestly, wasn't meeting the needs of most of my students.

Because of that bad experience, I strongly believed in an embedded (rather than sequential, systematic) phonics approach. With the school board's blessing, I tossed that program and, with it, explicit phonics teaching.

If I could go back (ahem) years, I would give engaging phonics lessons with the following elements: (see the graphic on the right).

› Phonics Instruction Mistake #3: Forgetting to incorporate phonemic awareness

I'll be honest. Phonemic awareness was hardly on my radar when I was a classroom teacher.

But these days, phonemic awareness is a hot topic in reading education ... and with good reason! Of all the phonological awareness skills, phonemic awareness is by far the most important.

A child's level of phonemic awareness has direct impact on his/her reading success.

THE STRUCTURE OF AN EFFECTIVE PHONICS LESSON



PHONEMIC AWARENESS WARM-UP

Ideally, this warm-up will connect to the sound-spelling you are going to be teaching.

INTRODUCE THE NEW SKILL

Explicitly teach the sound-spelling relationship. Remember to directly state what you want your learners to know.



BLENDING

Write words on the board that contain the new sound-spelling pattern as well as those you've previously taught. Include sentences with high frequency words you've taught. Guide students as they read the words and sentences.



WORD BUILDING

Distribute letter cards or magnetic letters. Guide students as they build as many words as possible.

READ DECODABLE TEXT

Make sure that the text includes the sound-spelling you've taught. This could be a decodable book, passage, or sentences. Plan to reread the text on subsequent days.



GUIDED WRITING

Use dictation to give students practice spelling words with the new sound-spelling. Students may also retell the story in writing or write what they learned from a nonfiction text.

A reminder: phonemic awareness is the ability to play with individual sounds in words; specifically, isolating, blending, segmenting, and manipulating those sounds.

We used to think that we should only do phonemic awareness “in the dark,” but now we know that incorporating letters is important.

It’s easy to do this when you remember that the best way to build phonemic awareness is to have students segment words into their sounds, spell each sound, and read back the word they’ve spelled.

› **Phonics Instruction Mistake #4: Not giving students enough practice with new sound-spellings**

As a balanced literacy teacher, I taught phonics within our spelling lessons. But looking back, I know that my approach was not nearly as robust as my students needed.

Most importantly, they lacked sufficient practice with new sound-spellings.

In spelling class, I taught my students to read and sort words with specific phonics patterns. But then I had them read leveled books during reading class. Since they yet didn’t know many of the sound-spellings in their leveled books, I told them to use context and the picture to help them “solve” words.

I wish I knew then what I know now.

Here’s the thing.

For kids who struggle to sound out words, they’re going to take the path of least resistance. They’re not going to use phonics to solve words if they can help it.

I wish, wish, wish that I had used quality *decodable* books instead leveled books with my beginning readers.

Decodable books help students actually apply their phonics knowledge.

I know, I know. A lot of decodable books are really the pits. But there are some incredible decodable book series out there, and more are published all the time.

Check out my [**Ultimate Guide to Decodable Books**](#) to find new favorites!

› **Phonics Instruction Mistake #5: Not teaching strategies for sounding out multi-syllable words**

I’m embarrassed to say that the only thing I remember teaching my students about multi-syllable words was to find chunks they know.

There’s so much more we can and should do!

1-Consider teaching students to read and identify syllable types (open, closed, magic e, vowel team, r-controlled, and consonant-le). To learn more, check out Reading Rockets' article: [Six Syllable Types](#)

2- Teach flexible syllable division strategies. There are many different ways to teach children to decode longer words. While I learned a very elaborate syllable division process in my Orton-Gillingham training, I prefer to keep it simple.

- First, have students “peel off” any affixes that they know. This will depend on which prefixes and suffixes you’ve taught.
- Next, have students put a dot under each vowel in the remaining chunk. Note that some vowels work together (ee, ea, etc.) and will only receive one dot.
- Next, have students attempt to divide the word into syllables, remembering that each syllable has just one vowel (remember, vowel teams like ee count as a single vowel).
- Last, have students attempt to read the word by putting all the chunks together. They may need to flex a vowel sound to land on a word in their oral vocabulary.

A FLEXIBLE STRATEGY FOR READING BIG WORDS

STEP 1:
Peel off any affixes you know.

un|avoid|able

STEP 2:
Mark the vowels in what remains.

unavoidable

STEP 3:
Divide the word into syllables. Remember that each syllable has only one vowel.

un|avoid|able*

STEP 4:
Read the parts. If needed, flex the vowel sound(s) to make a word you know.

“Un-ay-void-able.”

“Un-ay-void-able?”

“Un-UH-void-able!”



*Students might also have divided the word this way: un | av | oid | able. Either way is fine as long as they flex the vowel to land on the correct pronunciation.

› Phonics Instruction Mistake #6: Failing to differentiate

I love the enthusiasm I'm seeing from teachers all over the world about making their phonics instruction more explicit and systematic.

But in doing this, we have to be careful not to fall back into the old trap of thinking that teaching the same thing to everyone – all the time – is the way to go.

If you've been a teacher for a single day, you know how vastly different our students' abilities are, especially when it comes to early reading skills.

There are different ways to approach these differences. One way is to teach the whole group phonics to everyone, with differentiation built into the lessons. If this is your preferred approach, check out Wiley Blevins' book **Differentiating Phonics Instruction for Maximum Impact**. (Very important note: If this is the approach you choose, you will still need to follow up with small group lessons to provide extra scaffolding and repetitions for those who need it.)

If you have staff that can work with you, I prefer using a **phonics assessment** to figure out what skill each student is ready to learn next. Then group students appropriately, with each participating staff member teaching 1-2 groups during this period of your day. This approach is called **Walk to Read**; it gives everyone what they need while not requiring students to do literacy centers for long periods of time. (Note: If you choose this approach, you *still need* to provide additional Tier 2 instruction for students who are behind – otherwise, you'll never close the gap. Think of it as a "double dose" of phonics instruction.)

› Phonics Instruction Mistake #7: Forgetting that phonics can be FUN

I believe that one reason phonics has gotten a bad rap over the years (see my post about the **reading wars**) is that some phonics instruction has been boring and stale.

Thankfully, it doesn't have to be! When you build engaging routines into your phonics lesson, it may become your favorite part of the day.

More resources for you

- Get the book, **[Reach All Readers](#)**
- Sign up for the **[Reach All Readers online course](#)**
- Join our **[membership for K-3rd grade teachers](#)**