



A Balanced View of Reading

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn:

- to consider what reading is from a teaching point of view
- to discover how research has contributed to the teaching of reading
- to become aware of the emerging situation in relation to teaching reading and show how it relates to the Australian Curriculum: English
- to support a balanced approach to reading.

KEY TERMS

alphabetic writing system	phonemic awareness
'bottom-up' view	phonics
code-breaker	sight words
graphophonic	text-types
orthography	'top-down' approach
phoneme	whole-language

Introduction

Reading is the process of constructing meaning from text, whether written or graphic, paper-based or digital. It is a purposeful, thinking act and meaning is always at its core. There has been disagreement in the past over the correct way to teach reading, but a balanced approach is now generally accepted. Phonics and other decoding skills need to be taught explicitly and systematically, but phonics is not enough. Reading in the modern world also requires the ability to understand and use texts for a wide range of purposes. Literature plays a significant role in the development of reading skills and writing has a reciprocal link with reading. The oral language of children is also very important, and in the modern, digital age, multiple literacies are playing a significant role in literacy development.



WHAT IS READING?

Reading is the process of constructing meaning from text, whether written or graphic, paper-based or digital. The text may be wholly print as in most novels, or contain visual elements such as illustrations, diagrams, maps and graphs as in most children's books and many information books, magazines and newspapers. Increasingly, the texts we read are presented electronically, and often interactively, and contain a mixture of screen print, graphic or visual elements, and even sound.

At the core of reading is meaning. Meaning is what we search for as we read (our goal) and it is also part of what we use to reach that goal (our guide). In constructing meaning from text, readers combine what they know about the world, the topic of the text, the grammatical structure of the language in which the text is written, and the way spoken language relates to the letters, words, visual elements and symbols on the page.

*Reading is the process
of constructing
meaning from text*

Because reading is essentially a purposeful act, a reader seeks to fulfil some individual purpose by reading a text. Perhaps it is to enjoy a novel, or to find some information about plants for the garden. It may be to purchase a new car or to plan a holiday. Whatever the purpose, readers will bring to the reading task the skills and knowledge they have to fulfil that purpose. In the process they will learn more about what it means to be a reader.

Because reading is primarily a thinking task, readers relate what they draw from the text to what they already know about the topic, about texts of this type, and about the context. For example, when reading an information book about the wildlife of Kakadu, a reader might hope to add to their knowledge about how climatic conditions and ecosystems relate to animal species, and they would expect to see illustrations and perhaps photographs of animals and birds. The reader might look at the credentials of the author and/or photographer and consider what their purpose was in producing the book; perhaps the book has been produced by a mining company. And the reader would take the book's publication date into account when considering if the information was up to date. Reading, then, can be described as a process of literate thinking and can be further defined as bringing meaning to and taking meaning from text in a social and cultural context. This definition provides a

Reading is a purposeful thinking act that can be described as bringing meaning to and taking meaning from text

balance between the reader and the text. It also defines reading in terms of the context in which reading occurs and places meaning at the core of the process.

But what really happens? What does research tell us about reading and the best methods of reading instruction? What are the essential features of a balanced view?

A balanced approach to reading and to literacy in general is the position taken in this book. This is in keeping with emerging views about literacy teaching throughout the world and offers the best access to successful practice. It provides the best opportunity for all students to acquire the skills of effective reading. The following are some essential features of such a position. A balanced approach to reading:

- places meaning at the core of all reading
- recognises the interaction between reading and writing
- recognises the importance of code and context in reading
- places equal emphasis on the development of semantic, grammatical, graphophonic and visual/pictorial knowledge
- recognises the importance of students developing effective strategies for processing both paper-based and digital text
- provides for instruction across a range of fictional and factual text-types including public and electronic texts
- promotes a balance of Shared, Guided and Independent Reading opportunities that include explicit and systematic teaching, guided experiences and independent student work
- bases instruction on effective assessment of students' needs and abilities.

Given the different perspectives on learning and teaching reading, it is important to achieve a balance that will allow teachers to plan and teach systematically to meet the needs of all their students. The elements of a balanced approach to teaching reading have been woven throughout this book and can be found in the following chapters.

- A balance of semantic, grammatical and graphophonic elements. See Chapter 2 for explanation of what these elements are, and Chapters 8, 10 and 11 for information about how to achieve this balance in the classroom.
- A balance of reading skills, including code-breaking skills, text-participant skills, text-user skills and text-analyst skills. See Chapter 2 for information about these skills and Chapters 8, 10 and 11 for how to teach them in the classroom.
- A balance of literary and factual texts. See Chapter 6 for information about different types of texts.
- A balance of print and digital texts that include a range of images. See Chapter 2 for information about visual/pictorial information as part of reading.
- A balance of teaching processes, including teacher modelling and demonstration, teacher guidance of students' efforts and students' independent work. See Chapter 8 for information about these essential teaching strategies.

- A balance of classroom grouping strategies, including whole-class activities, small-group and pair tasks and individual work. See Chapter 12 for information about managing these grouping strategies in the classroom.

A BALANCED APPROACH IN THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM: ENGLISH

The Australian Curriculum: English adopts a balanced approach to reading in its content descriptions, content elaborations and achievement standards.

If we look at the Content Descriptions (the mandatory content to be taught at each year level), we see:

- At all year levels from Foundation to Year 6, the Language Strand highlights both knowledge of grammar and knowledge of phonics as essential content for learning to read.
- At all year levels from Foundation to Year 6, the Literacy Strand includes contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge as essential for effective reading.
- At all year levels from Foundation to Year 6, the Literacy strand includes content descriptions that focus on comprehension and how students build and use semantic knowledge to understand texts.
- All year levels from Foundation to Year 6 include information about the choice of a variety of literary and information texts from a range of cultures for the reading program.
- All levels from Foundation to Year 6 include content descriptions that focus on reading as a code-breaker (decoding the text), reading as a text-participant (finding the meaning), reading as a text-user (putting the text to use) and reading as a text-analyst (critiquing the text).

If we look at the Achievement Standards (the statements of student achievement for each year level that tell teachers what students should know and be able to do) we can focus on the following statement about reading for Year 2 as an example. The words in bold show that this statement clearly demonstrates the balance that is expected in a classroom reading program if students are to reach this Achievement Standard at the end of Year 2.

They read texts that contain **varied sentence structures**, some **unfamiliar vocabulary**, a significant number of **high frequency sight words** and **images** that provide additional information. They monitor meaning and self-correct using **context, prior knowledge, punctuation, language and phonic knowledge**. They identify **literal and implied meaning**, main ideas and supporting detail. [From the Australian Curriculum Year 2: Achievement Standard]

Each year level in the Australian Curriculum contains an Achievement Standard that describes in similar terms the balance needed for an effective reading program at that year level.

PHONICS: Refers to the relationship between written letters (graphemes) and spoken sounds (phonemes).

PHONEMIC AWARENESS: An understanding of the smallest sounds that make up oral language. It is characterised by a speaker's ability to hear, segment and manipulate sounds in speech.

ALPHABETIC WRITING SYSTEM: A writing system in which the symbols represent the sounds of speech.

'BOTTOM-UP' VIEW: An approach to reading and learning to read that places emphasis on word recognition and the decoding of print. It is also described as a code-based or subskill approach.

'TOP DOWN' APPROACH: An approach to reading and learning to read that emphasises the primary importance of meaning and what the reader brings to the text.

Use the link below to access the Australian Curriculum website to read the content descriptions and achievement standards. Identify how they demonstrate the balance that is needed in the teaching of reading: <www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/Curriculum/F-10>

RESEARCH AND THE TEACHING OF READING

Research has not provided a perfect alignment with practice in the teaching of reading (Beard 1998), and the ways children learn and should be taught to read remain contentious issues (Scholes 1998).

Historically, there has been a sharp division among researchers and theorists about the teaching of reading.

'BOTTOM-UP' APPROACH

On one side stand those who stress decoding, **phonics** and specific **phonemic awareness** training for beginning readers, with heavy emphasis on word recognition in its various forms, on the **alphabetic writing system**, and on the subskills that are claimed to make up the reading task. This approach has been described in various ways, such as a '**bottom-up**' **view** of reading, a code-based approach, a subskill approach and a phonic approach. It has been heavily criticised for its limited vision of what reading is, for its lack of emphasis on comprehension of the text, and its playing down of the input that the reader makes to reading.

The 'bottom-up' or skill-based approach can be found in the writings of many theorists, from the past to the present, such as S. Jay Samuel, Philip B. Gough, Keith Stanovich and Charles Perfetti. It is misleading and inexact, nevertheless, to place these writers in a neatly defined category as their work crosses a wide range of theory and research.

'TOP-DOWN' APPROACH

On the other side stand those who are often termed '**top-down**' or *whole-language* theorists. They stress meaning as paramount in any approach to reading and devalue code as a substitute for context in word recognition. These theorists have been termed 'top-down' because of their emphasis on what the reader brings to print and on the primary importance of meaning generally. They are opposed to the subskill approach and regard reading from a holistic point of view. They have been criticised for their lack of attention to the alphabetic system of English writing, for their overreliance on context in word recognition, and for their refusal to look squarely at research that shows a high correlation between phonemic awareness and learning to read.

The top-down or *whole-language* approach is found in the writings of Frank Smith, Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, Brian Cambourne and others, but again caution must be exercised in describing these researchers because their works reflect a much richer vein of

educational thought than a simple category can indicate. Scholes (1998), who supports the top-down view, has stressed his strong opposition to the subsyllabic (phonemic) segments of speech as factors in the acquisition of literacy, arguing that developing an understanding of subsyllabic elements is a limited consequence of acquiring literacy in an alphabetic script and that positive correlations between phonemic awareness and reading skill are based on a misguided definition of reading. He also argues that phonemic awareness is a *consequence* of acquiring alphabetic literacy and not an engine for success.

R.S. Johnston (1998) attacks Scholes on the grounds that children have to recognise the 'building blocks of literacy' even though the ultimate purpose of reading is comprehension. She argues for a reciprocal relationship between reading skill and phonological awareness and states that using a learned knowledge of the alphabetic system of English spelling eases the burden on learning to read. She argues further that what skilled readers may need is **orthographic** knowledge (knowledge of the writing system), underpinned by an adequate but not particularly precise awareness of **phonemes** (sound units) in spoken words so that they can recognise printed words with ease.

Stuart (1998) also disagrees with Scholes, setting out a multidimensional view of reading that allows for two intersecting dimensions: word recognition and comprehension. She looks for agreement between the two antagonistic positions, arguing that perhaps all can agree that word recognition is a necessary part but not the whole of reading.

Fortunately there has been in recent years an emerging view of reading and acquiring reading, both from research and from ensuing practice, that can be called a 'balanced view'. Before considering the current position we shall look at some important steps along the way.

WHOLE-LANGUAGE:

A student-centred approach emphasising motivation and interest. Reading is focused on meanings from texts such as children's literature rather than basal readers.

ORTHOGRAPHY: The spelling system of a language.

PHONEME: The smallest unit of speech that distinguishes one word from another, e.g. the phonemes /s/ and /f/ in sat and fat.

Current theory and practice now support a balanced view

FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

In 1967 Jeanne Chall published a milestone text, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. The work was funded by the Carnegie Corporation in the USA and was written to draw some conclusions about current and past research on reading and learning to read. Chall put forward the view that learning the alphabetic code (variously termed by her as phonics, word analysis, decoding, and sound–symbol relations) was essential to beginning to read, although it was not all that was necessary. Other important factors were language, good teaching, and instructional materials at the appropriate level of difficulty.

Chall's seminal study pointed to the importance of teaching students to crack the alphabetic code

At about the same time as Chall was completing her studies, another project, commonly known as the First Grade Studies, was carried out and published by Bond and Dykstra (1967). This work was sponsored by the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare and experimentally compared various research methods. The First Grade Studies confirmed Chall's conclusions.

Chall (1999) drew attention to these facts and to following studies that had supported her views—in particular, Anderson and others (1985), Adams (1990) and Snow and others (1998), which essentially came to the same major conclusion as *Learning to Read*. Chall also referred in her paper to the Follow Through Studies, a large-scale investigation of compensatory

Phonics alone is not sufficient to teach a child to read effectively

education that extended into Year 3. Again, higher achievement occurred among those children learning from a direct instruction model with a code (phonics) emphasis.

It should be noted, however, that Chall was eager to point out that many of her recommendations in *Learning to Read* and other writings included many of the practices that are commonly associated with the idea of whole language. She stressed that teaching only phonics—and in isolation—was not what she would support, that library books have an important place, and that children's writings should be incorporated into the teaching of reading. Likewise she warned against the overteaching of phonics, 'leaving little time for the reading of stories and other connected texts' (1967, p. 531).

Stanovich (1994), while making the point that Chall saw the teaching of reading much more broadly than has been commonly accepted, argued that some children in whole-language classrooms do not pick up the alphabetic principle through simple immersion in print and writing activities but need explicit instruction in correspondences between spelling and sound. He argued that this fact was borne out by voluminous research evidence.

Explicit and systematic instruction is vitally important

Cognitive research as reported by Perfetti (1995) and Stanovich (1994; Stanovich & Paula 1995) has made a number of contributions to views on the nature of reading and its application to the way reading should be taught. The position taken is that skilled readers read more words than they skip, use *phonology* when reading, and rely very little on the use of context for word recognition. Children benefit from learning how their writing system works. It is also argued that comprehension and the use of context are not sacrificed by following the above tenets of reading teaching.

Stanovich (1994) makes the point that essentially the 'reading wars' that have wasted so much energy can be reduced to having both sides say simultaneously, 'Some teachers overdo phonics' and 'Some children need explicit instruction in alphabetic coding'. The matter may not be as simple as this, but a defusing of the issue and a rapprochement between the two sides is beginning to appear in the literature, as explained below. It is important to remember that many good teachers continued to use a balance of both approaches in their classrooms while the reading debate was raging in academic circles.

THE EMERGING SITUATION

At the risk of trivialising the issue or ignoring the enormous amount of research and carefully woven theory that is available, it is necessary in a book of this nature to move to the current situation in the light of national and international movements in the field, with special emphasis on their practical outcomes. It is valuable to look at some recent reports and publications that point to a middle way between the extreme positions taken in the past. While various researchers have argued strenuously for a reading program based exclusively on one or other specific approach, *the evidence is now overwhelming that no one element holds the key to the successful teaching of reading. Each element is necessary but none is sufficient on its own.*

Beard (1998) draws attention to the fact that recent research-based models of early reading and fluent reading suggest that reading is neither ‘top-down’ nor ‘bottom-up’ in nature. Instead, as Adams and Bruck (1993) in the USA point out, sources of *contextual*, *visual* and **graphophonic** information are used simultaneously and interactively by the reader to achieve comprehension. This is a similar bringing together, Beard argues, to that which operates in the composition of writing.

Substantial changes in how fluent reading is understood are incorporated in Beard’s document, which refers to the British National Literacy Project. In particular, it draws attention first to the relationships between word recognition and context, and second to the role of phonological processing in reading. It is argued that fluent readers rely less on context for word recognition than was thought. They are experts at word recognition and are able to use their skills in rapid, effective reading, also relying for comprehension on context and the knowledge they bring to print.

The hallmarks of skilled reading are fast word identification and rich context-dependent understanding of the text (Perfetti 1995). If we look at fluent, effective reading from a commonsense point of view, backed up as this is by a battery of research (Beard 1998), we realise that a balanced view is a logical and valuable one for the teacher of literacy. It opens the way to teaching children to read and write, bringing into play phonological-graphological (i.e. graphophonic), grammatical and semantic information from a range of sources, and it allows teaching to be both balanced and focused on the needs of the child.

When it comes to working with fluent readers in a context that requires improvement in reading flexibility across a range of **text-types**, improvement in speed, skim reading, or reading in depth for specific and detailed information, the model holds up well: fluent readers are experts in word recognition, so much so that the process becomes automatic and higher reading skills can be taught through context and the use of improved strategies.

The role of phonological processing has been reconsidered, producing much more interest in the nature of the alphabetic writing system in English. Learning to read is not only learning to construct meaning from print but also learning how the writing system works and how it encodes the reader’s language. Knowledge about the grammatical system of the language works in conjunction with graphophonic processing in fluent reading.

THE TWO COMPATIBLE VIEWS

Freebody (2007) refers to the **code-breaker** role as part of his model of reading elements (see Chapters 2 and 11). He describes the role as ‘knowing about and using the nature and contents of the relationship of spoken sounds in the language to the graphic symbols used to represent those sounds’ (p. 34)—that is, the grapheme–phoneme correspondences or GPCs. Its practical application in the classroom is the teaching of phonics in word recognition. Freebody adds punctuation to his description of the code-breaker role and another facet, ‘the basic visual aspects of text’. He gives the example of ‘decoding the elements and

GRAPHOPHONIC:

Relating to the connections between sounds and letters in reading and spelling. The knowledge of how letters in printed English relate to the sounds of the language.

Skilled reading requires fast word identification and understanding of text

Reading and writing have reciprocal links

TEXT-TYPES: The types of texts are those that can be identified as written, spoken and visual communications. In the Australian Curriculum: English, texts are classified as belonging to one of three types: imaginative, informative or persuasive.

CODE-BREAKER:

A reader who knows or can work out what the words in a text say.

structural compositions of pictures and graphic displays, and hotlinks on web pages'. The next element in Freebody's four roles of the reader is the text-participant role: 'knowing about and using the meaning patterns operating in the written text...'

SIGHT WORDS: A word that is read 'on sight', as a whole, without being sounded out or analysed structurally, e.g. said, the, was, through.

Rose (2006), in what he terms 'a simple view of reading', states that word recognition is simply the ability to decode words on a printed page by learning to apply the alphabetic principle through phonics or **sight words**, and that understanding the meaning of the text (comprehension) is, as in Freebody, a different matter. Each aspect of reading should be given specific and individual attention, particularly when children are learning to read. In this way, focus can be placed on the teaching of each aspect of reading separately, without, as he says, confounding the two by attempting to teach them together or in conjunction with other factors such as knowledge of context or grammatical content. Recent research using factor analysis (a statistical method that identifies a small set of variables that account for differences) suggests that, with reading, different factors are employed in word recognition as distinct from comprehending text (Nation & Snowling 1997; Oakhill et al. 2003). Word recognition skills such as phonics and sight words can be taught separately, explicitly and systematically, while comprehension skills and strategies can be given equal but separate focus as well.

In essence, the two views are similar, except that Freebody has extended the role of decoding, largely to include visual aspects of literacy. It should be noted, nevertheless, that there are two different approaches to word recognition, particularly for the beginning reader. A more holistic view goes further than Freebody's (2007) description of the code-breaker role, stating that, when decoding, the reader employs a knowledge of the world, the topic and the vocabulary of the text, a knowledge of how the language works, and pictorial knowledge, as well as letter–sound relationships. 'It is important that students learn to draw on and combine information from all these sources as they read' (Holliday 2008, p. 6). This approach draws to a large extent on the work of Clay (1972, 1979, 1985), who posited that children have to use four cueing systems when reading and learning to read. These systems allow them to develop strategies they use together when processing and reading written texts.

THE BALANCED VIEW OF READING

A balanced view of decoding is the wise approach in theory and practice

In the balanced view of reading taken in this book, the authors can see the strengths and weaknesses in both approaches. For instance, they can see that in a holistic approach the four types of knowledge will be used by the advanced reader in their quest for meaning. It is less clear whether this would be so with a beginning reader, struggling to master the writing code, or an older reader experiencing reading difficulties. It is an accepted fact, for instance, that poor early readers often rely heavily on visual cues to the detriment of symbol–sound relationships. It does appear, also, that there is a spillover from the holistic approach, which includes semantic and grammatical knowledge, to the achievement of meaning in reading.

The simple view of reading (Rose 2006) provides a readily identifiable set of subskills to be employed in teaching word recognition and would have great appeal to a busy teacher in a modern classroom. It allows focus on the decoding of actual words in print with

uncluttered attention, and is therefore much more amenable to the development of lesson plans. On the other hand, the simple view of reading appears on the surface to leave out some important features when children are being taught word recognition skills, such as concepts about print (left-to-right movement, return sweep, and so on). The structure also appears inflexible and runs counter to much of the vision of past scholars such as Margaret Meek, Connie and Harold Rosen, Douglas Barnes and Jim Britton in the 1970s and 1980s, who emphasised a much more open-ended holistic (whole-language) approach to be used in teaching a child to read (Wyse & Styles 2007).

The proponents of the simple view of reading argue that the approach represents an advance on the multiple cue system, which relies on the child's ability to orchestrate the application of the different cues in a holistic manner when reading and learning to read (Rose 2006, pp. 74–5). As indicated above, they cite a significant body of psychological research supporting the separation of the two components of reading, word recognition and comprehension.

It should be noted that the whole issue discussed here remains contentious in academic and teaching circles around the world, and will probably remain so (see Brooks 2007; Wyse & Styles 2007). The important thing, we believe, is to keep the matter in balance, as we have said. There are advantages to be gained from a careful consideration of both approaches and it should be noted that there is no absolute dichotomy between the two. In many ways each overlaps the other, such as in the agreed need to impart the basic skills of reading, to teach these skills explicitly and systematically, and to expose children to a rich array of literature. The difference between the two approaches probably hinges on the nature of word recognition in relation to the beginning reader. In the simple view of reading, word recognition refers to the alphabetic code per se, supported by sight word recognition; the holistic approach is much wider and more encompassing.

Our view remains that 'balance' is the key word. We have taken the position that the four roles of the reader, as described by Freebody, provide a valuable description of reading practices and have built these practices into our model of reading, with supporting strategies, particularly for the developing reader. In particular, we believe that the inclusion of the visual aspects of text (Freebody 2007) is a valuable addition to code-breaking in the modern world.

A balanced view of reading appears to be the approach increasingly favoured around the world. Overall we believe that teaching a child to read is essentially a very practical matter and that there is no one way to proceed. Added to this, every child is different and 'one size does not fit all'. The important thing is that the teaching of reading should be explicit, systematic, and thoroughly carried out, taking into consideration the different abilities of each child. The new Australian Curriculum is compatible with these views.

The authors of this book endorse Freebody's view. The acceptance of what we term a balanced view of reading throughout the world will, we hope, make for an improvement in the literacy levels of all people. This book contains a detailed description of a balanced view of reading in Chapter 2 and identifies how this view can be applied in the classroom in many of the other chapters.

Summary

- Reading is bringing meaning to and taking meaning from text. It is a complex task.
- Research has been inconclusive about the ways children learn to read and should be taught. Sharp divisions have occurred but common ground is now being found throughout the world and is being documented in international studies and reports.
- Commitments to improving the literacy standards of students are being made around the world. There is now a national Australian Curriculum.
- This book takes a balanced view of reading in line with emerging theory and practice.
- A balanced approach to teaching reading is the norm throughout the world.

Extend your practice

1. Discuss the two sides in the ‘reading wars’. Attempt to isolate the main points of difference between a ‘top-down’ and a ‘bottom-up’ approach.
2. Consider how a balanced view of reading incorporates the best theory with the best practice in the light of the eight essential features listed above. Are there others? If so what are they?
3. Write a brief statement supporting what is termed ‘a balanced view of reading’ in this book. Use some of the evidence presented in this chapter.
4. What changes do you think might occur in literacy learning in classrooms within the next decade? (Try some lateral thinking.)
5. As you will be teaching in the context of the Australian Curriculum: English, what are some specific things you would need to do in order to support a balanced approach to teaching a child to read?

Further reading

Further reading for this chapter and others in Parts 1 and 2 should include key journals on literacy such as the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* (ALEA), *Reading Research Quarterly* (IRA), *The Reading Teacher* (IRA), and *Journal of Research in Reading* (UK Reading Association), the various publications of the National Council for the Teaching of English (NCTE) in the USA and the various publications of the Primary English Teaching Associations (Australia) (PETA). These associations also publish specialist monographs on important literacy topics.

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Useful websites

The Australian Curriculum: English: <www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/Curriculum/F-10>

International Reading Association: <www.reading.org>

Australian Literacy Educators' Association: <www.alea.edu.au>

Primary English Teaching Association: <www.peta.edu.au>

ACARA: <www.acara.edu.au>

An Australian Curriculum



The fifth edition of *Literacy: Reading, Writing and Children's Literature* comes at a significant milestone in education: the appearance of the Australian Curriculum. This edition has been written in the context of the new curriculum in English, with special attention being given to the interfusing of the strands of Language, Literature and Literacy. The book supports the principles enunciated in the new curriculum and provides students with the tools to put it into practice.