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Phonics is Knowledge:

A practical guide for Australian schools
to consider the evidence and prepare for
the Phonics Screening Check



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the Phonics Screening Check**

Phonics is knowledge

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Hayley is passionate about sharing *Read Write Inc.* throughout Australia. High-quality resources, comprehensive training and ongoing support ensure that schools implementing *Read Write Inc.* are able to achieve great results.

The purpose of this report

This report is a guide for schools to consider the evidence, reflect on current practices and perform a simple self-audit in preparation for the Phonics Screening Check.

When children start school, they typically have little knowledge about how to read and write. Literacy teaching and learning are core responsibilities of teachers and schools. However, teaching reading and writing is complex and educators must be equipped with specialised knowledge and skills. Effective literacy teaching, and specifically the teaching of reading, should be grounded in evidence from rigorous research.





What is phonics and why is it so important?

The English written language is an alphabetic code. Letters (graphemes) are symbols that represent the individual sounds (phonemes) of spoken language. Phonics is understanding the relationship between the sounds and the letter/s that represent them.

Unlike speech, reading is not an innate, developmental function and there is no single area of the brain devoted to reading. Making sense of written texts requires establishing connections between areas of the brain that are developed for different cognitive purposes (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005).

It is unlikely that a child will learn the relationships between sounds and letter-symbols on their own. It is also generally accepted that it is harder to learn to read and write in English because the relationship between sounds and letters is more complex than in other languages (United Kingdom Department for Education and Skills, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial that phonics is taught early, explicitly, systematically and regularly.

There are a number of different approaches to teaching phonics, all with varying levels of effectiveness. The evidence is clear, however, that systematic, synthetic phonics is the most effective approach.

A synthetic phonics approach teaches beginner readers:

- > grapheme–phoneme (letter–sound) correspondences (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence
- > to apply the important skill of blending (synthesising) phonemes in order, all through a word to read it
- > to apply the skills of segmenting words into their constituent phonemes to spell
- > that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.

Independent review of the teaching of early reading
Jim Rose, 2006, p. 20 (51)

Explicit instruction is particularly important for children who come from disadvantaged homes and communities, where oral language exposure in the pre-school years is significantly diminished when compared to children from more advantaged backgrounds (Buckingham 2016).

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*Phonics is the way
our written language
system works. Phonics is
knowledge.*

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Scientific evidence for effective teaching of reading

There is extensive and rigorous research from all over the world about how children learn to read and the most effective ways to teach them. Since 2000, there have been major national inquiries into the teaching of reading in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

These reviews, along with other research, identify five essential skills for reading competency:

- 1 Phonemic awareness:** The ability to identify and manipulate phonemes, the smallest units of sound, in spoken words.
- 2 Phonics:** The ability to decode words using knowledge of the relationship between the sounds (phonemes) of spoken language and the letters (graphemes) that represent those sounds in written language.
- 3 Fluency:** The ability to read effortlessly with speed, accuracy, and expression.
- 4 Vocabulary:** Knowing the meaning of a wide variety of words and the structure of written language.
- 5 Comprehension:** Understanding the meaning and purpose of the text.

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In 2005, the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy concluded:

... the incontrovertible finding from the extensive body of local and international evidence-based literacy research is that for children during the early years of schooling (and subsequently if needed), to be able to link their knowledge of spoken language to their knowledge of written language, they must first master the alphabetic code – the system of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that link written words to their pronunciations. Because these are both foundational and essential skills for the development of competence in reading, writing and spelling, they must be taught explicitly, systematically, early and well. (National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, 2005, p.37)

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What is the Phonics Screening Check?

The Phonics Screening Check is a simple, brief (5–7 minute) reading check for Year 1 students. The purpose is to check which and how many children have mastered phonic decoding – an essential early reading skill.

In order to decode, one must:

- > recognise individual letters and groups of letters
- > know which letters represent which sounds
- > blend individual sounds together to read words.

As part of the Phonics Screening Check, students will be required to read a selection of real words and pseudo-words. A pseudo-word is a ‘made-up’ word that has no meaning in the English language, but that can be pronounced using regular grapheme–phoneme correspondence. For example: *cag, jash, blard*. It will be made very clear to the student which of the words in the check are ‘made-up words’ before they are asked to read them.

Including pseudo-words in the check is an effective way to assess a student’s ability to decode an unfamiliar word. When learning to read, many real words in the English language will be unfamiliar to a student. Students need to be able to decode any word they come across in text. The use of pseudo-words eliminates the possibility that the word is a known word that has been memorised.

Pseudo-words should be used for assessment purposes only. Good phonics teaching is the only way to achieve accurate real word and pseudo-word reading.

The Phonics Screening Check will provide early identification of students who are struggling with the essential foundational reading skill and require appropriate intervention. The check will also provide feedback for teachers and schools about their instructional approaches and supply the impetus to make improvements (Buckingham 2016).

The Phonics Screening Check in the United Kingdom

In 2012, the UK government introduced a Phonics Screening Check in all primary schools in England. There have been considerable, measurable improvements in early reading achievement since its implementation.

- > The proportion of students achieving the expected standard on the Phonics Screening Check in Year 1 has increased each year.
- > The number of students failing to achieve the expected standard in Year 2 reading tests has fallen by one third.
- > The attainment gap associated with low socio-economic status has narrowed considerably.

(Buckingham, 2016)

A report published in 2015 tracked developments over three years of the Phonics Screening Check implementation. It found that since the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check, schools have made improvements to the teaching of phonics, including faster paced lessons, longer duration, more frequent, more systematic, and improved monitoring and assessment of student progress (Walker, et al. 2015).

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The check should help teachers to identify children who may be struggling with phonic decoding early on and who need speedy intervention to catch up.

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What does the Phonics Screening Check mean for your school?

Using the Phonics Screening Check to measure phonic knowledge alone won't improve reading in your school. It's what you do with the information that matters. The Phonics Screening Check should encourage you to consider your current instructional approaches to reading. The following questions provide a starting point for reviewing how you teach reading and monitor reading progress in your school.

Are you teaching phonics effectively?

- > What is your understanding of 'phonics instruction'?
- > If you asked your teaching staff: 'How do you teach phonics?' would there be consistency in responses?
- > Do you have a shared understanding of the different types of phonics instruction, such as synthetic, analytic, embedded and incidental?
- > Which approach do you employ? Is it consistent, or is it a mixture of more than one approach?
- > How do you know if your current reading instruction is effective?

ANALYTIC PHONICS

Starts at the word level. Children are taught whole words first and then to 'analyse' the word, taking clues from the recognition of the whole word, the initial sound and the context. Spelling is tackled separately.

INCIDENTAL/EMBEDDED PHONICS

Involves pointing out letter-sounds in the process of reading words, and generally not as the first strategy when a child cannot read a word. No direct teaching of letter-sound correspondences, but rather taught as the opportunity arises. It cannot, therefore, be regarded as systematic or sequential and there are no guarantees that children will learn all of the alphabetic code.

SYNTHETIC PHONICS

Children are explicitly taught sound-letter correspondences and, as soon as a few have been taught, children are then taught to 'synthesise' or 'blend' known sounds to read words. Each phoneme in every position is important. Children are never asked to 'guess' a word. At the same time, children are taught to segment words into their constituent phonemes to spell and understand that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.

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A high-quality phonics program will employ a systematic synthetic phonics approach to decoding print and demonstrate that blending and segmenting are reversible processes.
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Do you teach phonics systematically?

Do you teach grapheme–phoneme correspondences in a clearly defined, incremental sequence, introducing blending after a few letter–sounds have been learnt? There should be a clearly defined and structured progression for learning all the major grapheme–phoneme correspondences: singular (e.g. m, t, d, h), digraphs (e.g. sh, th, ay, oi), trigraphs (e.g. igh, air, ure), and alternative graphemes for the same sound (e.g. sat, dress, horse, circle, piece).

How do you ensure that this teaching is consistent across all classrooms?

The incontrovertible finding from extensive research is that teaching children the alphabetic code early, explicitly and systematically is the most effective approach (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005).

A high-quality phonics program will map grapheme–phoneme correspondences in a clearly defined, incremental sequence that progresses from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills.

How often do you teach phonics?

In the earliest schooling years, it's not uncommon practice for some schools to focus on a 'letter of the week'. This usually involves introducing a letter by its name and can also include craft activities, colouring/sorting pictures that start with the letter and even dressing up. But how effective are these approaches in teaching children to read?

Consider the length of time required to introduce even the most common, singular sounds of the 26 letters in the alphabet when teaching one letter a week. Documented schools that achieve the best reading results teach a sound a day. Every day a new sound is explicitly taught, and previously taught sounds are reviewed and consolidated.

As soon as children know a few sounds, they begin to blend these sounds together to read words. Progress is rapid and children who are struggling are identified swiftly and provided with extra tuition in order to 'keep up, not catch up.' (Reading by six: How the best schools do it, 2010)

A high-quality phonics program should be taught daily, at a vigorous pace that is well matched to children's developing abilities.

Are you using decodable texts that match the students' phonic knowledge?

Do lessons provide frequent and regular opportunities for children to apply their phonic skills by reading carefully matched, phonically regular texts?

As children are taught grapheme–phoneme correspondences, it is logical that they should then be presented with books containing words with only the grapheme–phoneme correspondences that they have learnt, and can therefore successfully decode the words on the page. Predictable texts (texts that follow a repetitive/predictable structure, e.g. I can see a horse. I can see an elephant. I can see a giraffe.) send mixed messages to children and can become confusing as they contain grapheme–phoneme correspondences that they won't have been taught and will encourage unhelpful early habits such as 'reading' from picture cues.

Consider a child learning to play the recorder who has been taught the notes B, A, G. The child will practise playing these notes in and out of order until they can play them effortlessly. They will then practise these notes by playing simple tunes containing only these notes, such as 'Hot Cross Buns' or 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.' We wouldn't give the child a tune to play with different notes that they haven't yet learnt. Nor would we ask them to work out an unfamiliar note by playing the next note and guessing the one before.

It's exactly the same when teaching children to read. Children should only be asked to read texts that are entirely decodable for them, so they experience success and learn to rely on phonemic strategies. As their knowledge of grapheme–phoneme correspondences increases, so do the texts to practise reading until, eventually, the child has a secure understanding of the alphabetic code and can read any word.

Of course, adults should continue to explore and read a wide variety of books with children. This should be an enjoyable experience, and an opportunity to discuss vocabulary and develop comprehension. As soon as children become proficient independent decoders, the world of children's literature will open to them.

A high-quality phonics program should include lively and engaging decodable texts that are carefully and easily matched to the appropriate level for children to apply and practise phonic knowledge and skills.

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A high-quality phonics program should build teacher capacity through high-quality training for all staff and facilitate ongoing professional development.

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Do you teach children to decode high-frequency words?

Do you send home lists of sight words? How many of these words can be easily decoded once a child knows a few sounds and can blend (e.g. dad, mum, it, on)?

Almost every word in the English language can be decoded; some words are just trickier than others. Take the word 'said', for example. Children should be taught to identify the 'tricky' bit in the word – ai. The grapheme 'ai' in 'said' represents the /e/ sound. This way of representing the sound is irregular and is therefore the 'tricky' bit of the word. Understanding this will not only help a child to read the word 'said', but also to spell it accurately.

How do you assess phonics?

How informative are your current assessments and to what extent is this information used to inform teaching and learning? How often do you assess the children? Do you assess the children's knowledge of grapheme–phoneme correspondences, their pronunciation of sounds, their blending ability, and their reading of words and pseudo-words? How do you identify children with additional needs and address this in order to close the gap early?

A high-quality phonics program should regularly assess children's progress, using this information to plan, support and group effectively.

Do teachers have the required level of knowledge and understanding to teach phonics effectively?

How consistent is the quality of the teaching in individual classes/groups and across the school? The teaching of reading is complex and requires specialised knowledge and skills. One cannot teach what one does not know.

A number of studies have found that undergraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) teachers, graduate teachers and practising teachers have a weak knowledge of the structures of the English language.

“...a large proportion of Australian early primary school teachers were not familiar with very basic linguistic concepts — 38% of prep teachers correctly defined phonemic awareness, 41% correctly defined a consonant blend, and 53% correctly defined a morpheme. Compounding this problem, teachers overrated their own knowledge, which indicates they were unaware of their limitations.”
(Buckingham, 2016, p.9)

Adequate preparation needs to be given to teachers not only through their pre-service teacher education but also through ongoing professional development.

Do you adopt a whole-school approach?

Do you have a consistent and comprehensive whole-school approach to reading and writing that is clearly specified in a literacy plan?

Do all teaching staff in your school acknowledge that the teaching of reading is the shared responsibility of the whole school, under the leadership and direction of the principal and senior staff? Have you researched high-quality programs that are grounded in findings from current, scientific research? Is the program adhered to with fidelity, applied consistently and used regularly, avoiding drawing on too many elements from different programs?

A high-quality phonics program should be grounded in evidence from rigorous research and be implemented with fidelity and whole-school commitment.



Choosing the right program

High-quality phonics teaching can be achieved by using a commercially produced program. It is vital that the program meets the criteria for high-quality phonics work and that it is adhered to with fidelity.

“Experience shows that even high-quality programs flounder if they are not applied consistently and regularly. It can be unwise to ‘pick and mix’ too many elements from several different programs because this often breaks up important sequences of work and disrupts planned progression.”
(Rose, 2006, p.21).

How the best schools do it

Schools in the United Kingdom are graded by an independent external evaluation body called Ofsted, which rates the school's overall effectiveness. In 2010, Ofsted released a report titled *Reading By Six: How the Best Schools Do It*. This report draws on the practice of 12 ‘outstanding’ (the highest rating a school can achieve) schools, with a diverse range of communities, to show what works when teaching students to read. The report found that the systematic teaching of structured phonics is essential to reading success. The following table summarises the key findings of the report.

Summary of the findings across all 12 schools

OVERALL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > All staff believe that every student can learn to read, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, language spoken at home, cultural background or needs. > A consistent approach to reading is used throughout the whole school. > The teaching of rigorous and systematic phonics underpins reading, spelling and writing.
LEADERSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The senior leadership team are knowledgeable about the strengths of their staff. > The senior leadership team closely follow students' progress in reading and writing. > The literacy coordinator is given ample release time to monitor the phonics program, support staff and closely monitor individual students.
ASSESSMENT AND GROUPING BY ATTAINMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Assessments are conducted frequently to monitor progress and inform planning and grouping. > Students are taught in small groups according to ability. > Students who are struggling are identified quickly and effective provision for them to catch up is put in place early.
QUALITY AND CONSISTENCY OF TEACHING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > High-quality and expert teaching follows a carefully planned and tightly structured approach to teaching phonic knowledge and skills. > Lessons are fast-paced, rigorous and are high in positive praise and reinforcement > Effective teachers are highly trained to instil the principles of phonics.



Conclusion

Regardless of a child's background or starting point, reading closes the attainment gap. Only readers can learn independently, only readers can write. **Reading is empowering.**

Effective literacy teaching, and specifically the teaching of reading, should be grounded in evidence from rigorous research. It is our responsibility as educators to ensure that all children achieve early literacy success and that no child slips through the reading net.

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Teach a child to read and keep that child reading and we will change everything.

And I mean everything.

Jeanette Winterson

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Oxford phonics resources

Helping you achieve the best results

Questions	Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters	Floppy's Phonics	Project X Phonics	Read Write Inc. Phonics
Do you have a systematic approach to teaching phonics?	A rigorously structured synthetic phonics program developed by phonics expert Debbie Hepplewhite	Decodable fiction and non-fiction stories that are ideal for providing extra practice and reinforcement alongside any phonics teaching program	A systematic synthetic phonics resource developed using a unique approach to ensure rigorous consolidation and practice of phonics skills	Proven approach that ensures children learn to read and write as quickly and effectively as possible
Are you catching every student the moment they fall behind?	Rigorous and systematic phonics teaching and practice materials, with flexible and differentiated assessment sheets, mean that no student is left behind	Can be used in group work and one-to-one reading practice	Regular assessment of all students' progress through assessment records, designed to help track each student to see how they are developing, and show at a glance any areas that need extra practice and reinforcement	Ongoing assessment means that groups are constantly adjusted to ensure the best progress for every child until they have successfully completed the program
Do you have fully matched resources to ensure all your students read books at the right level every step of the way?	Provides everything you need to teach and practise phonics with your whole class	Matched to <i>Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters</i> , with step-by-step progression	For group work and one-to-one reading practice. Easy to pick up and go, with clear teaching instructions on every page meaning that no preparation is needed	A key element of the approach is that practice across the school is completely consistent. This means that everyone has a shared understanding of the 'Simple View of Reading', how letters and sounds in English are related (the alphabetic code), and how to teach all children to read and write.
Is your staff as effective as they can be when teaching phonics?	Oxford University Press can provide phonics training for your school, drawing on a range of resources from all our phonics programs. For more information email professionalsupport.au@oup.com or for more phonics resources, visit www.oup.com.au/phonics			Accredited training is available and is an imperative part of the program to ensure successful implementation of <i>Read Write Inc. Phonics</i> in your school. The training delivers comprehensive professional development on how to use the program, which is based on a deep understanding of how children learn to read.

For more information about phonics resources for your school, contact primaryeducation@oup.com to book a consultation. For more information about professional development, email professionalsupport.au@oup.com

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For more information about professional development,
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Please note: The photographs of children in this report are for illustration purposes only.