HEIDI ANNE MESMER

Letter Lessons — AND — First Words

Phonics Foundations That Work

PreK–2

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Foreword

Nell K. Duke

WE HAVE GOT TO GET PHONICS INSTRUCTION RIGHT. THE stakes are so high—not only because the ability to read words is important to success in school and life, but also because there is so much else to teach. We just cannot afford to spend the better part of the school day on phonics instruction. We need to be highly efficient and effective in teaching phonics so that we have as much time as possible to develop comprehension, composition, science knowledge, social studies knowledge, and so much else that is important to young children's development. Put another way, whatever your passion, you have a vested interest in providing the most efficient as well as effective phonics instruction possible.

With stakes as high as they are for phonics instruction, I thought very deeply about who to ask to write this book. It had to be someone who knows the research well—not just reviews of research but many, many hundreds of individual studies on letter–sound knowledge development and instruction. It had to be someone who knows practice well—who has a long history of teaching children to read and teaching teachers to teach children to read. It had to be someone who can communicate all this knowledge in an accurate and engaging way. And it had to be someone with innovative ways of connecting research, theory, and practice. Who could meet a bar this high? Dr. Heidi Anne Mesmer.

Heidi Anne did not disappoint. In the introduction, Heidi Anne provides the "big picture" of effective phonics instruction, including some fundamental understandings young children need in order for phonics instruction to be most productive. In Chapter

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1, she builds key knowledge about English orthography and children's development of letter–sound knowledge. As she explains, it is crucial for us to have this knowledge in mind when examining children's early efforts at word reading and spelling and providing instruction accordingly. In Chapter 2, she moves on to assessment, providing an actual assessment that yields detailed information about letter–sound relationships each child currently knows and needs to learn next. You can use this tool along with observations to differentiate phonics instruction and accelerate teaching and learning as needed to get every child to grade-level expectations in this area. Chapter 3 tackles how to plan lessons that reflect research on phonics instruction. The lessons include a powerful mix of explicit instruction; hands-on, minds-on activities; and opportunities to read texts that reinforce letter–sound relationships taught. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide a much-appreciated level of detail, with three specific units that bring young children from alphabet learning through reading single-syllable words with complex letter–sound relationships. As the book concludes, you'll have a wealth of knowledge and tools available to support your quest to get phonics instruction right.

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Introduction

Reimagining Phonics Instruction

IF I SAID, "CLOSE YOUR EYES AND IMAGINE A PHONICS LESSON IN first grade," what would your picture be? Children sitting in rows with worksheets? A teacher holding a card with a word written on it? Would everyone have a number 2 pencil?

Would there be smiling? Jokes? Laughter? Puzzles? Riddles? Anticipation? I sure hope so, but this second list might not be what you associate with phonics instruction.

For a proficient adult reader, phonics can feel like a cumbersome distraction to the "real" work of reading and writing. But what this actually shows is that we've lost our awareness of what it is to be new to the printed word. As proficient readers, we read most words by sight and decoding is rarely a part of our reading and writing experience. Because phonics feels unnecessary to us, some teachers decide not to teach it or to give it only cursory attention. Others view it as necessary but don't make the connection between phonics principles and real reading and writing. The latter kind of phonics instruction involves lifeless routines; odd, dreary activities; excessive repetition; or whole-group, scripted lessons that soar over the heads of some children and bore others. Instead of rejecting phonics outright, we might want to consider that it's not phonics but how we teach it that is the problem. The teaching of phonics is a means to an end. Children need to decode in order to independently read and write. Phonics shouldn't feel like an interruption or detour away from these authentic experiences. Phonics should be the building of a curiosity—developed by a passionate, informed teacher—about how words work, an inquiry about how the sounds of our language are mapped onto visual symbols. It is discovering the purpose of letters, how letters can work alone

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or be combined to symbolize sounds, and later in the journey, how the spelling of words quite often intersects with their meaning. Phonics instruction simply gives children the information about how letter–sounds work so that they can build automatic word recognition that *frees their conscious attention* to concentrate on meaning.

I know many of us did not experience this kind of phonics instruction, so my intention in writing this book is to give you a vision of what that looks like and the tools to make it happen in your own classroom. Instead of quiet, passive students, imagine children spread out in groups on a brightly colored carpet spelling words with dry erase markers and boards. Imagine a first grader telling his teacher, "Look! *Some*, *done*, *none*, and *above* are the pattern!" Picture a small group of students with a teacher building words with magnetic letters. See a first grader sounding out a word for the first time: "/d/ /i/ /g/, *dig*? Oh! *Dig*! That's it!" Envision a prekindergarten student using letter–sounds to recognize her friend's name: "*T*, *Taylor*. *T* for *Taylor*." This is phonics! Engaged word solving! Using letter–sounds to read and spell! The "I can do it!" smile on a child's face when the grown-up world of words is unlocked. (And you won't have to imagine these scenes, as this book includes many video clips of real children doing this work.) When children are taught to decode words, they become fluent readers; they understand that they can use strategies when they encounter new words, which means they get stuck less often and we decrease the risk of them becoming disengaged readers.

Years of research show us that while some children intuit phonics on their own, the majority of children require phonics instruction in order to learn to read. In the past, phonics instruction was viewed as competing with or even threatening reading for meaning. Today, we better understand the role of phonics instruction as one of the building blocks for meaningful comprehension and composition and that research allows us to create curricula specific to individual children's needs.

To Make Use of Phonics, Children Must Understand How the System of Writing Works

Because of its discrete nature, people sometimes think that teaching phonics is uncomplicated and easily applicable. You teach letters and sounds and then children learn how to decode and spell. But this is not true. Yes, you can get kids to learn the visual shapes of letters, just as you might teach them the characteristics and names of circles, squares, and other shapes. And you can teach them to pronounce the sounds, but this doesn't mean they will know how to use that information. There are two fundamental understandings children must develop as they are learning letter–sounds: the alphabetic principle and concept of word in print.

Graphemes Represent Speech Sounds: The Alphabetic Principle

When phonics instruction is *used*, children understand the big picture—how the system of writing works. In English one part of the big picture is the **alphabetic principle**, the system of symbols that puts speech into print. In an alphabetic system,

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visual symbols (graphemes made up of letters) represent speech sounds (phonemes) (/e/ /k/). So if we want to write the oral word *cat*, we use these alphabetic symbols (*c* = /k/, *a* = /a/, *t* = /t/) instead of drawing a picture of a cat. The basis for written communication is breaking down speech into sounds and then matching those sounds in letters. We combine and recombine letter symbols to form words.

The alphabetic system is abstract, but teaching phonics without simultaneously developing awareness of the system will fail. Mrs. McCall's question to a group of kindergartners illustrates what children will say and do when they don't understand the alphabetic principle, when they don't know how the system works.

"What sound do you hear at the beginning of *cat*?" Mrs. Mc Call asked her twenty prekindergartners as she raised her pen during the morning meeting.

"Meow!" volunteered Hannah.

"Um, um, um *cat*?" answer Felix.

"/s/?" explained Aleksey.

Each of these answers tell us something about what the child understands or misunderstands about print and letter–sounds. Hannah is thinking not about the structure of the word but about the meaning, so she provides her teacher with a sound that a furry four-legged creature makes. She doesn't understand the *question*. Hannah's response reminds us that when we teach children how to read and spell words, we are asking them to have awareness about how printed language works and, in doing so, to suspend their knowledge about the meaning of words. It's like asking children to look at a candy store and tell us that it's built of bricks, with a flat roof and two windows, but not discuss that it's a candy store—a tall order for a little kid. And it's a tall order for the human brain, period.

Felix understands the abstraction built into the question, that the teacher is asking about the structure of the word and the way that it sounds, not about what it means. But Felix does not have insight about the separate sounds /c/, /a/, and /t/. He focuses on what he hears as one sound, the entire word—*cat*.

Aleksey connects with the idea of the question—to pay attention to the way the word sounds. He actually gets closer to the idea of focusing on separate sounds within the word, but he produces a sound that is not in the word. Perhaps he knows that *cat* starts with the letter *c* and is thinking about the soft /s/ sound of that letter. (Note: The letter *Cc* can represent two sounds: the hard sound, /k/, as in *cat* and the soft sound, /s/, as in *cent*.)

The brain wants and needs a "big picture," and it wants and needs a strong filing system to store information around that big picture.

None of the children completely understand the question or the layers of the system that organizes how we put speech into a printed, visual form. And this lack of understanding will hinder *any* attempts to teach them the smaller pieces of the system–phonics. What we know about learning and cognition is that the brain best stores and retrieves information when it is organized and categorized. The brain wants and needs a "big picture," and it wants and needs a strong filing system to store information around that big picture. When we present children with details and questions

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ahead of their understanding of the system or big picture, our teaching will not be successful. They will try to make us happy by taking a stab at our questions. They may even memorize what they are supposed to say when we ask these questions (e.g., "I'm supposed to say /c/ when my teacher asks what sound is at the beginning of *cat*"). But they will not truly understand and will not be able to transfer their knowledge to novel situations (e.g., "What sound is at the beginning of *cut*?"). They will not retain or use knowledge that we are trying to teach them.

As an adult, you probably think, "Well, yeah. Okay. I can teach that. I'll just tell them, 'See this letter *g*, it stands for the sound /g/ as in *girl*. The word *girl* starts with the sound /g/ that we make with this letter *g*.'" But you can do that until you are blue in the face (and the children can "give" you the right answer), but then when you ask them the sound at the beginning of *go*, they may not know. Helping children construct the alphabetic principle is not that simple. In order to make these kinds of major changes in children's thinking, especially with something as abstract and arbitrary as written language, we have to show them and show them over and over and over again in many different ways.

Vygotsky explained it like this:

> *Direct teaching of concepts is impossible and fruitless. A teacher who tries to do this usually accomplishes nothing but empty verbalism, a parrot like repetition of words by the child, simulating a knowledge of the corresponding concepts but actually covering up a vacuum. (Vygotsky 1986, 149–50)*

With young children we develop the alphabetic principle by modeling the writing of words, by playing with language, by reading "big books" and pointing to words, and by using letter–sounds to figure out words. (See Chapter 3 for many specific strategies.) This conceptual development of the alphabetic principle must be pervasive and consistent along with the explicit teaching of specific letter–sounds. Without the alphabetic principle, phonics instruction is futile.

WATCH

VIDEO 0.1

Alphabetic Principle

In this short clip, I explain the alphabetic principle. It's a central concept, so watching the video might be helpful.

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Concept of Word in Print

Imagine teaching children to read without ever explaining what a "word" is. Seems impossible, right? At a basic level, children must understand what a word is—a collection of letters that represent a meaningful unit. They must understand that words can be represented orally and visually, in speech and in writing. Children can only own this understanding by interacting with and observing others interacting with printed materials.

When children begin to try to "read" books or watch a teacher point to the words in a big book, they notice that the words stay the same each time, that there is a connection between print and voice, that words are made of groups of letters, and that white space separates words. As they interact with print, children acquire increasingly more detailed understandings of what a word is. Imagine looking at a plant cell under a microscope. At first, it is fuzzy and you can see that it is green and yellow. Then, as you turn the knob on the microscope, you can see that the shape is rectangular and very regular. You keep turning the knob and you can see that the borders are green and the interior has more structures inside. You see small floating green shapes (chlorophyll) and a large kind of brownish blob in the middle (nucleus). A child's concept of word comes into focus gradually, like the increasing magnification of the microscope. Below is an example of increasing understandings that children might have about how written words work.

Words are what a person "reads" when they interact with a book.
Words are not pictures, but a special code.
Words are made up of letters.
Words are collections of letters separated by white spaces.
The letters in words represents speech sounds.

You can see how the development of **concept of word in print** bleeds into the alphabetic principle. Children acquire concept of word in print by attempting to point to words as they say them in a line of print or by reading simple little books and finger pointing (Ehri and Sweet 1991; Henderson and Beers, 1980; Morris 1983; Morris et al. 2003). They eventually use alphabetic information to inform their concept of word. Although it sounds easy, it is not! Below is an example of a child reading and pointing to a memorized line of a nursery rhyme. Notice that at the end, the child points to the word *another* when he comes to the second syllable of *a-gain*. He doesn't yet understand that some words have two syllables.

Text:	*Come*	*again*	*another*	*day.*		
Child Reciting:	"Come	a-	gain	a-	nother	day."
Child Pointing:	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	(no print left)

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If you are teaching in kindergarten or prekindergarten, try asking a child to point to the words in a chart or big book, a line of print that they have memorized. It can be very interesting and informative to see what they do.

VIDEO 0.2

Concept of Word in Print

In this video clip, I explain the principle concept of word in print.

Phonics Is Teaching Children How to Organize Information for Use

Teaching phonics is about organizing information so that kids can store it in a systematized way. Once children begin to have some notion of the alphabetic principle and concept of word, they start to develop emerging cognitive structures. You might think of these cognitive structures as "file cabinets" and "file folders" into which they will store stuff about our written language. Concept of word provides a learner with a cognitive space, or "file cabinet," for storing "literacy symbols" or letters. The alphabetic principle and some visual discrimination drive a highly sophisticated and specific file folder system for each letter. What happens cognitively is that at first the filing system in the cabinet is not that sophisticated. Yes, letters are put into the cabinet, but they may not be well differentiated. So a child might, for example, have one file that stores both *Cc* and *Gg* together (erroneously) because the features have not been well differentiated. (This happens a lot with *Bb* and *Dd*.) Increasingly, the files become specific and correct so that each letter has its own file with the letter–sound, visual shape, written form, and other information (e.g., "That letter starts my name").

That system for learned letter–sounds means that children can quickly and easily access that information for *use*, such as in decoding words. When information is organized, it can be more easily retrieved or even expanded. For example, if we teach consonant digraphs together (e.g., *th*, *wh*, *sh*, *ch*), children might create a consonant digraphs folder. That "consonant digraph" category allows them to build from existing knowledge so that when they learn new information, say the digraph *ph*, they have a folder to put that information in (e.g., "Oh, that's like *th* and *ch*").

So teaching phonics requires a plan. Groups of letter–sounds are taught with a plan and an order, from easiest to hardest. This is called a scope and sequence, and by using it, teachers respond to the way that the brain organizes and stores information.

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VIDEO 0.3

Importance of Organizing Phonics Information

For a video explanation of why organizing information is very important for phonics instruction, watch this clip.

Phonics Learning Must Be Active

Good phonics instruction is about learning the architecture of words—what they are made of. It's about putting words together and taking them apart. Think about Legos and how children learn from assembling and disassembling. Words are the same way. To learn how they work, children must work with them, understand the parts, put them together, and take them apart. The best phonics instruction relies on active, manipulative, engaging activities in which students read and spell words.

Children learn it by *doing it*. They should have dry erase boards to practice spelling words and listening for sounds. They should have magnetic letters for building words. They should have (child-safe) scissors that allow them to cut the words apart and put them back together.

VIDEO 0.4

Active Phonics Instruction

Weak phonics instruction often happens when active application is missing. So here's a short clip to explain the importance of active phonics instruction.

VIDEO 0.5

Phonics Strategies

Good phonics instruction engages the *mind* and encourages the process as much as the right answer. When readers *use* information to decode or spell a word, they will store that word more securely. Sometimes, this means that phonics instruction honors successive approximations and imperfect answers, answers that show thinking and hard work. Take Zaida, a girl in a kindergarten classroom. For several weeks during phonics instruction, Zaida had been struggling with letter order. She would write words like *no* as *on*. You might first think that she didn't know left-to-right directionality, but she did. Her letter order confusion occurred because she was trying to "memorize"

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words and did not really connect letter–sounds with spellings. She knew that print ran from left to right, but she was not thinking about letter–sounds.

Mrs. Taylor explained, "I would read back words to her. 'Look you wrote *on*. See the first sound is /o/ and then you wrote /n/.' I kept doing this and sometimes I would stretch out a word while I was spelling it: 'I am going to write the word *look*. *llllook, llll*. How would I start it, Zaida?'" After two weeks, Zaida had a breakthrough. She was writing in her journal and wanted to spell *get*. "Say it, Zaida. What do you hear?" Mrs. Taylor asked. Gradually Zaida engaged in a process of saying the word slowly, listening for each sound, and then writing each letter as she heard the sound. This multistep process of saying, thinking, and writing went on for about two long minutes until she finally wrote *git*.

Sometimes, this means that phonics instruction honors successive approximations and imperfect answers, answers that show thinking and hard work.

"I was so happy!" Mrs. Taylor recalled. "I praised her to the hilt. 'Wow! Look at that. You listened for the sounds and then you wrote them down. You didn't just copy. You heard the sounds. The word had three sounds and you got them in order!'" Mrs. Taylor knew that Zaida's work to spell *git* was so transformative and important that the correct answer, at that time, was not important. "Yeah, that short *e* is tough," she explained. "It's so close to the short *i* sound, as in *sit*. I knew that there would be plenty of time to deal with that. But I had just watched Zaida cross a major milestone, showing she knew how to *use her letter–sounds*, and I wanted to praise that." (Note: Often spellings that are logical but not exactly correct, like *git*, are called, "invented spelling." I prefer the term "temporary spelling," to convey that these spellings will change into conventional ones as children develop. This term is very useful for communicating with parents.)

WATCH

VIDEO 0.6

Explanation of Temporary Spelling

For a video explanation of temporary spelling and the importance of honoring successive approximations, watch this short clip.

VIDEO 0.7

Temporary Spelling

For a video example of a child using temporary spelling, watch this short clip about Hot Rod the turtle.

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Isn't Just Following a Phonics Program Enough?

No doubt, if you are a teacher in the early grades, you have encountered programs. I define a phonics program as a "one-stop shop" for instruction with scripted lessons, worksheets, matching books, teacher's editions, posters, workbooks, and other shiny shrink-wrapped consumable items. Programs provide a day-by-day listing of what to do in each and every lesson for each and every minute. You may even use one of these programs now. You may be asking yourself, "Why not just keep relying on the ready-to-go program? It's right there. It's all set up. All I have to do is pick it up and go." There is nothing wrong with leaning on a program, especially as you learn content that may be new to you. You can't tell a whole classroom full of first graders, "Hey, I will figure it out in a year. So just hang on." Those kids have only one first-grade year and their literacy development is dependent upon getting phonics.

What does the research say about programs? The key to effectiveness is not a program but a systematic and explicit approach. In a 2005 analysis, my colleague and I (Mesmer and Griffith 2005) reviewed definitions of *systematic* and *explicit* going back to 1967, noting that "historically, *explicit, systematic* phonics instruction has converged upon three features . . . (a) a curriculum with a specified, sequential set of phonics elements (e.g., scope and sequence); (b) instruction that is direct, precise, and unambiguous; and (c) practice using phonics to read words" (69). Programs can deliver a systematic, explicit approach, *but* so can knowledgeable teachers not using a program. In fact, I went to the What Works Clearinghouse, and when I surveyed eight of the most well-known pre-K programs focusing on phonics, I found that only five had had "potentially positive" or "positive" impacts on print knowledge. I did the same with nine well-known programs for K–2 and found that only five had had "potentially positive" or "positive" impacts on alphabetics and only four had had "potentially positive" or "positive" impacts on reading achievement. In addition, both a recent meta-analysis of phonics instruction and a comparison study showed that both programs and nonprograms were effective (Suggate 2016; Tivnan and Hemphill 2005). Although a program can certainly make things easier for the teacher and, *if implemented with fidelity*, can result in learning, a program does not guarantee that. Why not invest in your own professional knowledge? We know that one of the most critical factors in any instructional situation is the *teacher* (Bond and Dykstra 1967).

The key to effectiveness is not a program but a systematic and explicit approach.

Another challenge with teaching according to the script of a program is that programs are typically designed for whole-class instruction. These kinds of one-size-fits-all programs are not flexible or adaptive. Everyone gets the same thing, both students who are completely bored by too-simple content and students who are overwhelmed by content that is over their heads.

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VIDEO 0.8

Why a One-Size-Fits-All Approach Is Less Effective in Kindergarten

In this short clip, learn about why a one-size-fits-all approach can be less effective in kindergarten.

What This Book Offers: An Adaptable Approach to Phonics Instruction

The approach in this book is to empower teachers with need-to-know content about phonics instruction and to walk them through a process for teaching phonics that adds to their instructional prowess. In order to teach phonics, you must

- know the content (e.g., English letter–sounds),
- know how to find out what your kids need to learn, and
- know how to teach that content.

The information in this book is pared down to be accessible, concise, and efficient, because in many resources phonics instruction is unnecessarily overcomplicated. The book has six chapters that reflect a process of creating phonics instruction:

Chapter 1, "Know the Code," provides basic information about the English alphabet and how the twenty-six letter symbols are used to read and spell. It can be used as a resource to revisit.

Chapter 2, "Assessment That Shows You What to Teach," gives the scope and sequence for phonics instruction and a simple test to use. The scope and sequence is organized around three main units—Letter Lessons, First Words, and Beyond First Words. These units take about twenty-three to twenty-seven weeks to do and match to important milestones, learning letter–sounds, decoding simple words, and decoding words with multi-letter units.

Chapter 3, "Phonics Lessons for Real Literacy," provides a small-group lesson framework that can be used across the different units and also tweaked for whole-group instruction. This framework includes the types of activities that support students in applying their knowledge of letter–sounds to reading.

Chapters 4–6 are unit specific, providing specific guidelines for teaching children at each of the stages, with activities as well.

(Note: In this book, I provide mnemonics and labels for different types of letter–sound patterns [e.g., "We Are Family" for c-v-c (consonant-vowel-consonant) word families, "Sneaky Silent *e*" for the c-v-c-*e* pattern (consonant-vowel-consonant silent *e*), and "*R* the Robber" for *r*-controlled vowels]. These may or may not be useful,

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appropriate, or desired in all classrooms. Share these with children only as you see fit. What is most important is not what we call these patterns but that they are categorized in some memorable way for children to learn and understand.)

The book is a streamlined approach to phonics, a quick reference to move forward and lay groundwork that will empower informed and inspired teaching. The basics can be enhanced and creatively expanded by resourceful and reflective educators teaching young children. As always, children achieve more when they are working with teachers who know them and are thoughtful of their needs. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share this work that's been inspired and influenced by so many wonderful teachers and children. My hope is to plant a seed and to watch the seed grow into the type of innovative practice that changes the lives of children.

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit
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