

# STRUCTURED LITERACY:

## Applying the Science of Reading in the Classroom

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## Introduction

### ***Structured Literacy* is the embodiment of the Science of Reading in the classroom.**

Importantly, the terms Science of Reading and *Structured Literacy* are not synonymous; the accumulated evidence from gold-standard research on reading acquisition and instruction is the Science of Reading (Reyna, 2004; Seidenberg, 2017) whereas *Structured Literacy* is representative of reading instruction that applies the Science of Reading to classroom practice.



Although it is based on decades of gold-standard research and instructional practice, the term *Structured Literacy* is fairly new in the reading world. Coined and trademarked by the International Dyslexia Association, the intent of establishing the term *Structured Literacy* was to differentiate reading instruction or programs that are truly informed by the Science of Reading from those that purport to be but are not (for example, because they lack critical components or include practices that are not supported by scientific evidence). As Seidenberg (2019) cautioned, it is important to safeguard the term, so its power to inform administrators and teachers about effective instruction will not be diminished.

**This white paper will highlight the critical importance of recognizing what constitutes *Structured Literacy* and what might be the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing.**



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## The Hallmarks of *Structured Literacy* Instruction

**After the Reading First program was mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, a swell of reading approaches and programs claimed to be research-based, evidence-based, or scientifically based to qualify for federal funding.**



Today, there are approaches and programs that profess to be informed by the Science of Reading but cherry-pick the evidence to accommodate certain beliefs—hence, the need for a term such as *Structured Literacy* that provides clear differentiation among reading programs and instructional approaches.

Two critical hallmarks of *Structured Literacy* instruction are that it 1) teaches all the components that evidence has found to be foremost in ensuring reading success, and 2) employs principles that align to the necessity of each component.

## The Components—How to Teach

*Structured Literacy* is **not** just about phonics; it includes phonics and much, much more. The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990), which proposes that reading comprehension is **the product of decoding** (or word recognition) and **linguistic comprehension** (or language comprehension), serves as a framework for understanding and identifying *Structured Literacy* instruction. Because inefficiency in one component may lead to overall reading failure, *Structured Literacy* instruction includes both of the critical components and their underpinning components, as outlined below. These components distinguish *Structured Literacy* as being informed by the Science of Reading.

### Reading Comprehension = Decoding + Linguistic Comprehension

- Phonology
- Orthography
- Morphology
- Syntax
- Semantics
- Pragmatics
- Discourse



*Because inefficiency in one component may lead to overall reading failure, Structured Literacy instruction includes both of the critical components and their underpinning components...*

## Decoding

The translation of printed symbols on a page into their spoken equivalents is known as decoding. The ultimate goal of decoding is to free cognitive resources to focus on the meaning of what is being read. One important idea about decoding: Reading begins with the translation of printed symbols that connect to words in students' oral language; hence, meaning relates directly and significantly to the decoding of words. A second important idea: As students achieve fluent reading, decoding instruction diminishes and only remains essential for those students who are not fluent readers. **The underpinning components of decoding are phonology, orthography, and morphology.**



### Phonology:

The sound system of language is known as phonology. The phonology of English is comprised of approximately 44 speech sounds, or phonemes.

#### **The Science of Reading** *Evidence*

Phonological and phonemic awareness are necessary components in learning to read (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) to the extent that early instruction can prevent reading failure (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Indeed, the ability to detect, think about, and manipulate phonemes is particularly predictive of reading success (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Liberman & Liberman, 1990; NICHD, 2000). Ninety percent of students who struggle with decoding have a core deficit in the phonological component of reading (Blachman, 1995).



#### **Structured Literacy** *Application*

- Students in pre-K through grade 1 engage in phonological awareness tasks at an oral level to say, detect, match, and produce rhyming words; blend words into sentences and syllables into words; and segment sentences into words and words into syllables.
- Subsequently, students in grades K through 2 and struggling readers in any grade engage in phonemic awareness tasks that require blending phonemes into spoken words and segment spoken words into phonemes.



## Orthography:

The writing system of language is known as orthography. The orthography of English consists of 26 letters that—singly or as groups (*e.g., th, ng, tch*)—represent the 44 phonemes in written words. Decoding begins with an understanding that spoken sounds are represented by letters (*i.e., the alphabetic principle*).

### The Science of Reading Evidence



### Structured Literacy Application

Proficient reading comprehension relies on automatic associations of sounds and letters (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). Well supported by research, instruction that matches sounds to letters or groups of letters (*i.e., phonics*) develops accurate decoding and spelling skills (Ehri, 2014; NICHD, 2000; Tremain, 2018). Repeated exposure to letter patterns when reading and spelling words builds letter patterns and words in memory, so words can be instantly recognized (Ehri, 2014). In addition to letter-sound patterns, instruction that aids students in determining where long words divide into syllables and how vowels in syllables are pronounced is beneficial to fluent reading. When reading is effortless, cognitive resources are available for the reader to focus on meaning (Perfetti, 1985).

- Students in grades K through 2 learn the reliable and frequently recurring patterns required to match sounds to letters or groups of letters (*e.g., digraphs, diphthongs*).
- Beginning in grade 1, students are taught the six orthographic syllable types—closed, open, silent-e, vowel-r, vowel pairs, and consonant-le—that facilitate the accurate recognition of monosyllabic and multisyllabic words.
- In grades 1 through 3, students are taught the four major syllable division patterns in English: VCCV, VCV, VCCCV, and WV.
- Students in grades 1 through 3 learn reliable patterns for spelling sounds as well as spelling rules that determine when a letter needs to be doubled, dropped, or changed.
- Students in grades K through 3 read grade-appropriate texts aloud to build fluency.



## Morphology

The study of morphemes, or meaningful units of words—prefixes, roots, suffixes, and combining forms—is known as morphology.

### The Science of Reading Evidence

Knowledge of morphemes facilitates decoding and provides a springboard for vocabulary development (Adams, 1990). As morphology combines phonology, orthography, and meaning, it bridges the gap between alphabetic reading (i.e., word-level reading) and comprehension. The more a reader knows about morphemes, the easier it is to instantly recognize and comprehend the long words that comprise increasingly complex text (Goodwin & Ahn, 2013; Henry, 2018).



### Structured Literacy Application

- Beginning in kindergarten and extending beyond, students learn common prefixes (e.g., un-, mis-, over-), inflectional endings (e.g., -s, -ing, -ed), and suffixes (e.g., -ful, -less, -ness) that are primarily of Anglo-Saxon/Old English origin and are foundational in early reading.
- Students in grade 3 and beyond are taught Latin-based prefixes, suffixes, and roots and Greek-based combining forms that comprise literary and informational texts across upper elementary and secondary curriculums.



*As morphology combines phonology, orthography, and meaning, it bridges the gap between alphabetic reading and comprehension.*



# Language Comprehension

The ability to derive meaning from words, sentence, and texts at a listening level is referred to as language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). To derive meaning from words, the reader needs vocabulary, knowledge, understanding of sentence structures, and the ability to infer what the author is implying; thus, explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction is as important to the development of language comprehension as it is to the development of accurate and automatic decoding. **The underpinning components of language comprehension include semantics, pragmatics, syntax, and discourse.**



## Semantics:

The meanings of words and the relationships of words are referred to as semantics. A reader's breadth and depth of vocabulary contributes to reading achievement.

### **The Science of Reading** *Evidence*



### **Structured Literacy** *Application*

As the primary goals of reading and writing are determining and communicating meaning, it is important for students to understand the meanings of words and how words function in sentences (NICHD, 2000; Soifer, 2018). Effective vocabulary instruction focuses on grade-appropriate Tier 2 words because these have the greatest utility across the curriculum (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). Additionally, because the majority of words in English have multiple meanings or shades of meaning, it is necessary for the reader to be flexible in determining the author's intended meaning of a word within a sentence (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018).

- Students in grades 3 and beyond continue instruction with Latin- and Greek-based morphemes.
- Students in pre-K through grade 8 are taught grade-appropriate Tier 2 words (e.g., cover, author, title, compare, contrast, arrange, explain, fortunate, reluctant, coincidence) through user-friendly definitions, multiple contexts, repeated exposures, and discussion.
- Students learn and explain shades of meaning and their connotations.
- Students learn and explain the literal and nonliteral meanings of similes, metaphors, and other figurative expressions.



## Pragmatics:

The rules of conversation or discussion (e.g., eye contact, taking turns) and the use and interpretation of language in a particular context are referred to as pragmatics. Often called the “hidden curriculum,” it should not be assumed that students understand the content of pragmatics, nor that they will intuit this on their own.

### **The Science of Reading** *Evidence*

When taught explicitly and systematically, pragmatics facilitates the social use of language, fluent reading, and comprehension. This component is particularly important for English learners, students with deficits in executive function, and students with developmental language disorder (Gordon-Pershey, 2018; Pershey, 1997).

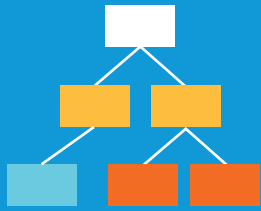


### **Structured Literacy** *Application*

- Students in pre-K through grade 8 learn the rules of conversation that are commensurate with their grade level.
- Students learn how context—as well as tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language—aid the use and interpretation of oral communication that involves idiomatic expressions, metaphors, sarcasm, rhetorical questions, and hyperbole.
- Students learn how features of spoken language are imitated in print with dialogue, bolded words, italics, capitalization, and punctuation to aid comprehension.



*When taught explicitly and systematically, pragmatics facilitates the social use of language, fluent reading, and comprehension.*



## Syntax:

Subsumed under grammar, syntax refers to the order and relationships of words in sentences as well as the structure of sentences in oral and written language.

### **The Science of Reading** *Evidence*



### **Structured Literacy** *Application*

The syntax component includes learning the parts of speech and the sentence structures that support reading comprehension and written composition. A reader's knowledge of pronoun references, verb tenses, and subject-verb agreement is predictive of reading comprehension (Foorman, Herrera, Petscher, Mitchell, & Truckenmiller, 2015; Foorman, Koon, Petscher, Mitchell, & Truckenmiller, 2015). Success with complex texts is dependent on a reader's understanding of sentences with multiple clauses, and particularly of the connective words that signal the relationships of clauses within and across complex sentences (Foorman, Koon, et al, 2015.; Friedberg, Mitchell, & Brooke, 2017).

- Students in pre-K through grade 8 learn the parts of speech and the structures of sentences—simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex—that are commensurate with their grade level.
- Students learn pronoun reference, verb tenses, and subject-verb agreement.
- Students learn the words that connect clauses within and across sentences and how these words signal the relationship between and among clauses (e.g., additional information, comparison, contrast, cause, effect).



## Discourse:

The organization of spoken and written communication is referred to as discourse. Students' proficiency in understanding words, phrases, and text at an oral and listening level predicts reading comprehension and writing proficiency.

### **The Science of Reading** *Evidence*



### **Structured Literacy** *Application*

The use of multiple strategies develops metacognitive skills and proficiency in understanding the organization of written communication. Strategies include comprehension-monitoring, graphic organizers, question-answering and -generation, cooperative learning, story structures, and summarization tasks (NICHD, 2000). Because developing a deep understanding of complex texts requires relating what is being read to what is already known, it is also important to spend instructional time boosting students' background knowledge through listening, reading, discussion, and writing (Adams, 1990; Willingham, 2006). The ability to make inferences that are implied by a text best differentiates students with good comprehension from students with poor comprehension at all ages (Cain & Oakhill, 1999) and can be taught explicitly (Oakhill & Cain, 2007; Yuill & Oakhill, 1988).

- Students in pre-K through grade 8 generate questions as they listen or read to monitor their understanding and answer questions after they listen or read to check their comprehension.
- Students use graphic organizers to identify salient elements and features of different text structures and orally summarize texts that are commensurate with their grade level.
- Students increase their background knowledge by listening to or reading widely on one topic to build a body of knowledge and words that allow them to compare and contrast related topics in discussion and writing.
- Students learn how to integrate their background knowledge with information in a text to infer information that is not directly stated in the text.

## The Principles—How to Teach

*Structured Literacy* instruction of all the aforementioned components across the grade levels is characterized by these principles: explicit, systematic, cumulative, diagnostic, and responsive (Birsh & Carreker, 2018; NICHD, 2000). These principles further distinguish *Structured Literacy* as being informed by the Science of Reading.

### Reading Comprehension = Decoding + Linguistic Comprehension

- Phonology
  - Orthography
  - Morphology
  - Syntax
  - Semantics
  - Pragmatics
  - Discourse
- **Explicit means that concepts and skills are directly taught and practiced.** It should not be assumed that students will learn skills and concepts implicitly.
  - **Systematic refers to a logically ordered presentation of concepts and skills that progresses from simple to complex.**  
A scope and sequence orders specific details about the concepts and skills to be taught, which align not only to state standards but also to reading science.
  - **Cumulative indicates that new learning is built on prior learning.** As underpinning concepts and skills are taught and practiced to automaticity, students' knowledge continuously increases through the introduction of more complex concepts and skills.
  - **Diagnostic and Responsive signify that students' instructional needs and strengths are identified,** and instruction is designed accordingly. Students' progress is frequently monitored, with adjustments to instruction (e.g., more time, slower pace, smaller group size) made as needed.

# The Hallmark of *Structured Literacy* Instructional Practice

The quintessential hallmark of *Structured Literacy* instruction in pre-K through grade 3 is the presence of the two critical components of reading comprehension—decoding and language comprehension—along with all their underpinning components and the instructional practice that aligns with the principles. **The following table illustrates examples of classroom instructional practice that align or do not align with *Structured Literacy*.**

Not Aligned	Aligned
<p>To practice segmenting spoken words into syllables, a small group of kindergarteners works independently without teacher feedback. The students collect various items from the classroom and place them in a container. One student chooses an item and names it. The other students say the name and then clap out the syllables. Students take turns choosing items.</p>	<p>To practice segmenting spoken words into syllables, a small group of kindergarteners works with the teacher. The teacher says a word. The students repeat the word and then clap out the syllables, with the teacher scaffolding as needed. The teacher uses the word in a sentence. Words progress from two to four syllables in length.</p>
<p>Even though phonics is being taught, when students encounter an unfamiliar word while reading, they are encouraged to guess the word based on cues and confirm that their guess makes sense, fits the sentence, and/or looks right.</p>	<p>Phonics is being taught in a first grade classroom. When students encounter an unfamiliar word while reading with the teacher, they are encouraged to look at the word and look for letter patterns they have learned, so they can accurately sound out the word. <b>For example</b>, students notice that a short word ends in e and determine that the vowel will be long when they sound out the word.</p>
<p>Invented spelling is encouraged to motivate students as writers and becomes the norm for acceptable spelling.</p>	<p>Invented spellings are used diagnostically to determine what a student knows and needs to know. As necessary, sound-letter patterns or rules are taught or retaught.</p>
<p>Spelling instruction is the memorization of lists of words that are organized around a common sound with multiple spellings, often with no indication of when to use each of the different spellings.</p>	<p>Because reliable spelling patterns and rules are explicitly, systematically, and cumulatively taught, students are able to sound out an unfamiliar word and match a best-bet spelling to each sound to spell the word correctly. Only words with spellings that do not conform to reliable patterns and rules are memorized (<i>about 15% of words</i>).</p>
<p>Without explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction in grammar or syntax, students are encouraged to adjust their reading rate to demonstrate awareness of and accommodate multiple clauses in a sentence.</p>	<p>Students are explicitly taught how to identify clauses and the connective words (e.g., but, so, because) that join the ideas (e.g., show additional information, comparison, contrast, cause, effect) in two or more clauses within a sentence, which supports fluency, comprehension, and written composition.</p>



## Summary

**Structured Literacy instruction is informed by the Science of Reading**, which is the only proven way to ensure students can become proficient readers and confident learners across the curriculum.

Although this instruction is beneficial for all students, it is essential for students who are at risk for reading difficulties.

By implementing the components, principles, and instructional practice that align to both the Science of Reading and *Structured Literacy*, administrators, teachers, and parents are assured that all students will receive the multifaceted literacy instruction they need for reading and academic success.



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