

How to Use Readable Text with Beginners

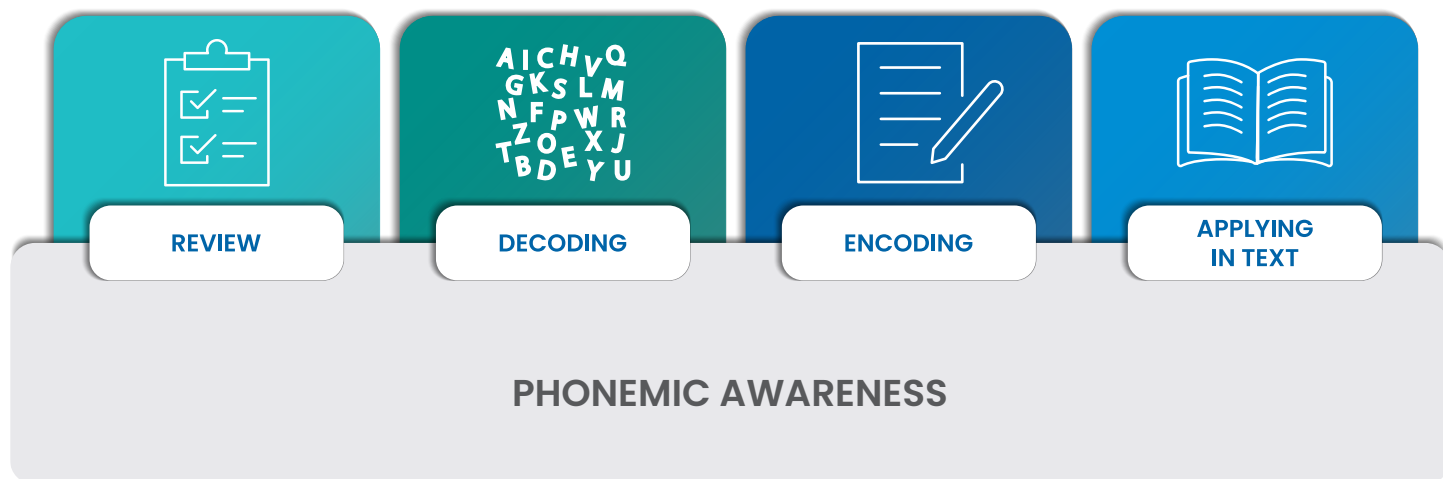


Texts do not teach students—teachers do. For this reason, the preparation and instruction teachers provide before and during text reading is critical. Even with texts that are research based and well designed, teaching is essential. This paper provides suggestions for planning and previewing texts, focusing on the types of words that might be challenging to readers. It also includes a collection of simple strategies that teachers can use for both formative assessment and practice. The paper includes a checklist of skills to ensure student success and guidance for word prompting during reading that reflects the most recent research.

Planning: Coordinate texts within a systematic and explicit phonics and morphology curriculum.

For students to apply what they know to reading connected text, they must be taught how the code works. Thus, the first step to using texts appropriately has nothing to do with the texts themselves, but instead the instruction that precedes the texts. This instruction includes a) systematic, cyclical review of graphemes, high-frequency words, and morphemes (10%–20% of instructional time); b) practice decoding words; c) practice encoding/spelling words (without copying from word cards); d) embedded phonemic awareness; and e) applying knowledge in text (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1999; Castles et al., 2018; Connor et al., 2007; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2009; Moats, 1998).

Texts are one part of a comprehensive phonics and morphology lesson.



Systematic phonics and morphology instruction follows a scope and sequence.

Texts are not readable to students if they have not been taught the high-frequency words and patterns in the text. For this reason, a phonics and morphology scope and sequence that matches the content of the texts is essential. This example shows a five-week unit in Grade 1 and the graphemes being taught.

UNIT 3 The Underwater World			
WEEK	PHONICS FOCUS	UNIT TEXTS	
11	Beginning Blends cr-, fr-, dr-, tr-	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More Than Fish• At the Sock Hop• A Trip in a Sub	
12	Additional Beginning Blends br-, gr-, sn-, sw-	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Brill Skill• A Big Trip• Top to Bottom	
13	3-Letter Consonant Blends scr-, spl-, spr-, str-	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To Spot Big Fish• Stop, Spot, Snap• At Hot Springs	
14	Ending Blends -sk, -st, -mp, -nd, -nt	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In a Grass Patch• A Big Sea Plant• Is It a Plant?	
15	Long a : a_e ; Short a	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Whale Tale• An Odd Animal• Sea Shapes	

The phonics focus is reinforced in the three texts provided for each week. The content and words are also cumulative. For example, texts for Week 13 will not only contain words with the target patterns (e.g., *scr-, spl-, spr-, str-*) but also patterns from Weeks 11 and 12 (e.g., *br-, cr-, dr-, fr-, gr-, sn-, sw-, tr-*).

In addition to the attention to words, these unit texts also have a cohesive, knowledge-building content focusing on aquatic animals.

This is an example of how a readable text is structured to coordinate with phonics and morphology instruction. The back cover includes a listing of words that match the target phonics skill (i.e., *a_e*) as well as the high-frequency words (e.g., *Super Words people, other, too, write*). Because every single word of every single text need not be decodable, texts will also include Unit Words and Story Words that are critical to a unit’s content. Story Words are non-decodable words that are essential to a particular book’s content (in this example, *food, body, and tail*). Unit Words (in this example, *sea, animal, water, and deep*) are similar but stretch across the entire unit. To compensate for these words being less decodable, they are often repeated across stories within a unit that matches the content. As described in the next section, these word lists on the back of readers can be used to help frontload for successful, fluent reading.



Target Words:

a_e

- shoppes (p. 1)
- scales (p. 2)
- make (p. 5)
- name (p. 6)
- saves (p. 7)

Super Words:

- people (p. 2)
- other (p. 2)
- too (p. 3)
- write (p. 7)

Unit Words:

- sea (p. 1)
- animal (p. 3)
- water (p. 5)
- deep (p. 6)

Story Words:

- food (p. 2)
- body (p. 3)
- tail (p. 4)

Target Words:

a_e

- shapes (p. 1)
- scales (p. 2)
- make (p. 5)
- name (p. 6)
- saves (p. 7)

Super Words:

- people (p. 2)
- other (p. 2)
- too (p. 3)
- write (p. 7)

Unit Words:

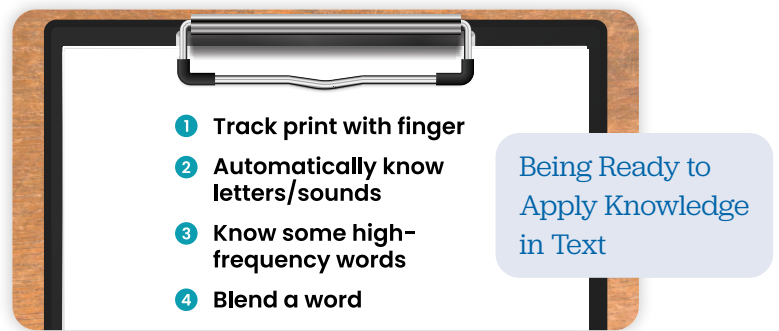
- sea (p. 1)
- animal (p. 3)
- water (p. 5)
- deep (p. 6)

Story Words:

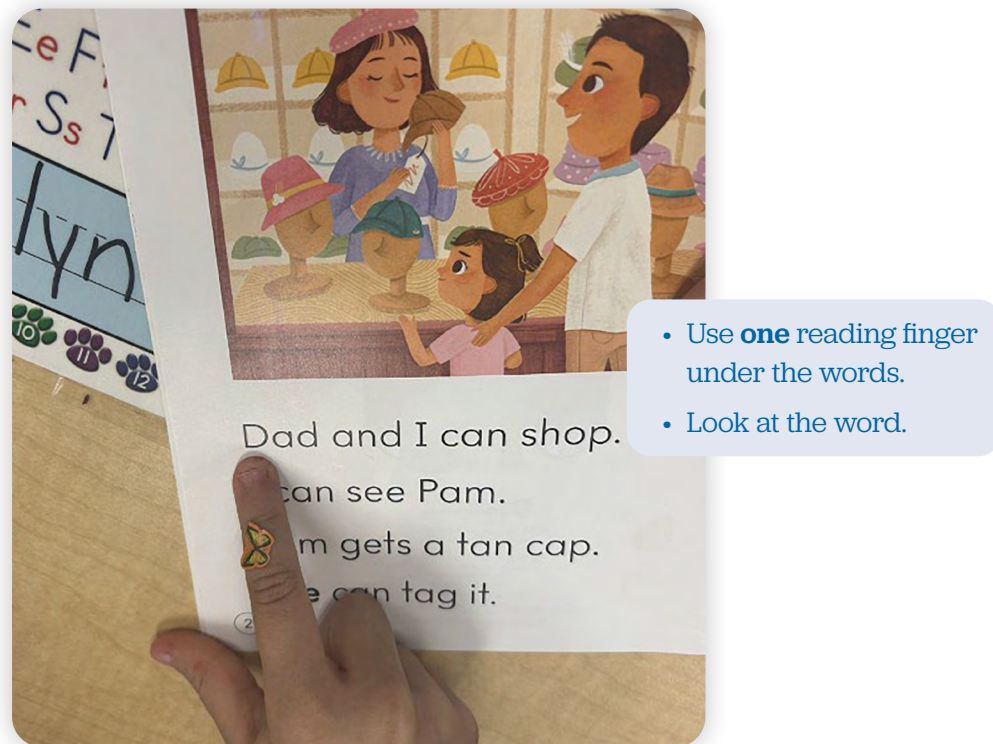
- food (p. 2)
- body (p. 3)
- tail (p. 4)

Planning: Make sure students have the skills they need to read the texts.

In addition, there is a collection of skills students need in order to be ready to apply their knowledge in text. This includes being able to track print with a finger, starting at the beginning of the word and sliding through to the end. This seems obvious, but often young children gloss over words, touching the middle or even end of the words. Sometimes they are not even looking at the words. Reading is a very specific skill, and words are read from left to right.



In this example, a Grade K student has a sticker on her “reading” fingers and works to point specifically to words. In fact, in one study, young children could differentiate between words and pictures, but when asked, “Where do I read?,” only 58% pointed to words (Farry-Thorn & Treiman, 2022).



In addition, students need automatic recognition of letter sounds. Even the simplest books have at least 75 words, and with an average of 3.5 letters per word, that’s more than 250 letters. To read words, students must recognize letter sounds in a fraction of a second. Students also must recognize a handful of high-frequency words—ones that are essential to even the simplest sentences (e.g., *the*, *to*, and *of*).

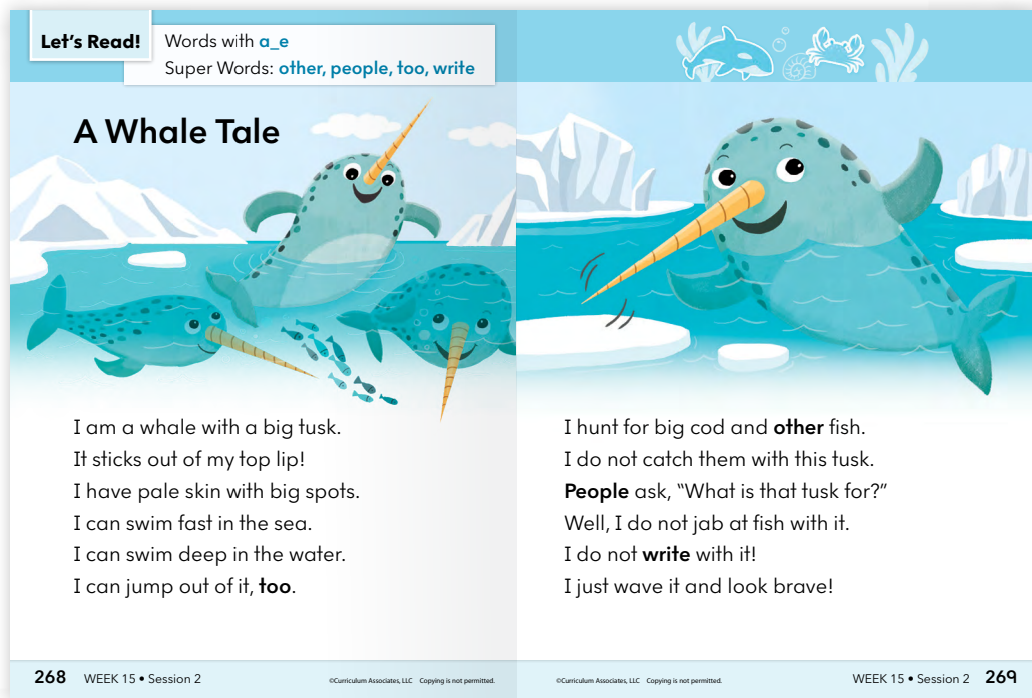
Lastly, and probably most importantly, students need to be able to blend separate sounds to form a word. At times, teachers assume that if students can name the individual sounds in words, then they know how to blend. However, /k/ /a/ /t/ is not *cat*. Blending is a reading milestone that for many students requires a great deal of modeling and practice. There are several techniques for word blending, including extended phonation in which sounds are continuously blended without stopping (e.g., *mmmmaaan*, *mmaan*, *man*) (Gonzalez-Frey & Ehri, 2021). Before reading connected texts, students should be able to blend individual words and provide a natural pronunciation of the word.

Before Reading: Frontload for success.

The model in previous eras for introducing new books to students often involved the teacher prereading the entire text for the children, usually because many of the words were not readable to students. If the teacher must read the text to the children, then it is not accessible to them. However, this does not mean that some type of preparation is not in order. Beginning readers can shut down when they see pages full of text, even if words are completely readable to them. In addition to teaching students how to blend, there are several other steps educators can take to support students as they apply their knowledge in readable texts.

Preview the texts for challenging words, and practice them before reading.

Even with readable texts, some words can be challenging for students. Identifying these words ahead of time so they can be practiced can be helpful.



Words that present challenges may be those that have multiple morphemes, consonant clusters at the beginning or end (e.g., *jump*, *bent*, *tusk*), and/or unknown meanings (e.g., *pale*, *tusk*). In this example, the word *tusk* is not a word that many young children have heard before. It also may be challenging from a decoding standpoint with the *-sk* at the end. Simply decoding the word, defining it, and even pointing to the picture would help students.

As mentioned, sometimes words with two- or three-letter consonant clusters, especially at the end of words, can be challenging (e.g., *jump*, *tusk*, *stick*). Similarly, words with inflectional or derivational suffixes can also be challenging (e.g., *spot-s*, *stick-s*), as can words with more than one syllable (e.g., *water*). Pulling challenging words out, practicing them, and explaining them supports a more fluent, enjoyable, and confident first reading.

Ask students to practice reading challenging words listed on the back cover in the text.

Before reading the words in connected text, have students practice reading the list on the back cover of the book. This simple “checkpoint” can help determine which words might be challenging or require a little more practice. In this example, a Grade K student is checking off words she knows how to read. At the end, she will have some words unchecked, some words she needs support with, some she couldn’t read, and some she was unsure about. Then the teacher will help her practice the words that gave her trouble. It is very important that this activity *not* be a group activity in which an unsure student can echo others or piggyback on responses. When students individually decode words, teachers really know what they can do in a reading situation. When most of the students need support with the words and cannot read them, that is a clear indicator that they are not ready to read the book, often because they need more practice blending words. This is good practice to do in a small group because it keeps everyone busy, and with a teacher nearby, providing corrective feedback is easy.



Target Words:

at

Nat (p. 3)
pat (p. 8)
cat (p. 8)

an

can (p. 2)
tan (p. 2)
pan (p. 3)
Nan (p. 4)
van (p. 7)

ap

cap (p. 2)
map (p. 6)

ad

Dad (p. 2)
had (p. 4)

am

jam (p. 3)
yam (p. 4)
Kam (p. 6)
Sam (p. 7)

ag

tag (p. 2)
bag (p. 3)

Practice decoding words from books.

Super Words:

she (p. 2)
he (p. 6)

Unit Words:

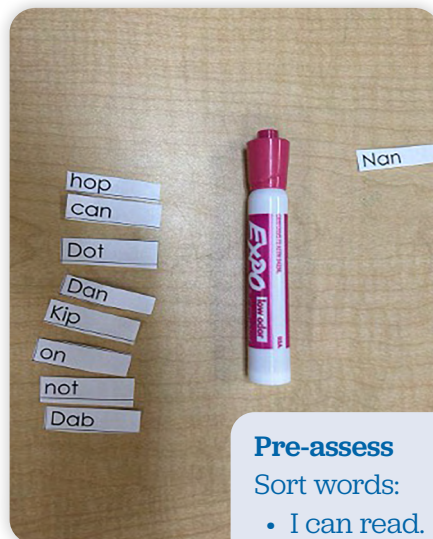
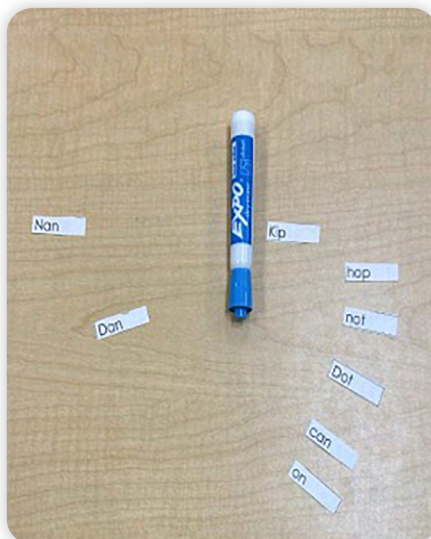
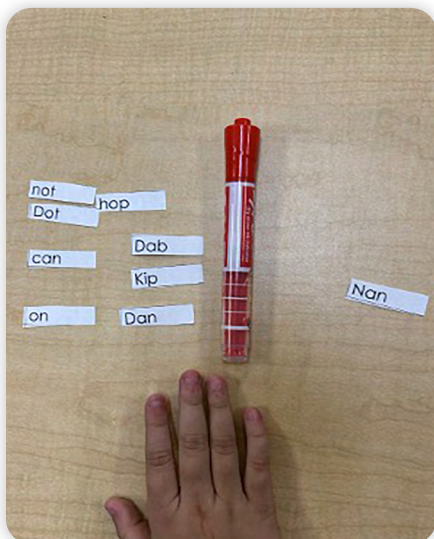
see (p. 2)
ball (p. 5)

Story Words:

shop (p. 1)

Ask students to sort words from the text into ones they know and ones they don't know.

A twist on the checklist approach is to ask students to sort words into known and unknown words. This serves as a formative assessment of sorts. With the sorting technique, teachers can identify troublesome words a bit faster because they are set aside visually. They can also easily see the words that are troublesome to most of the students. In this example, many of the students have identified the word *Nan* as one they don't know. What is interesting about this word is that it is the meaning of the word that is likely challenging them. They have never heard of the name *Nan*.



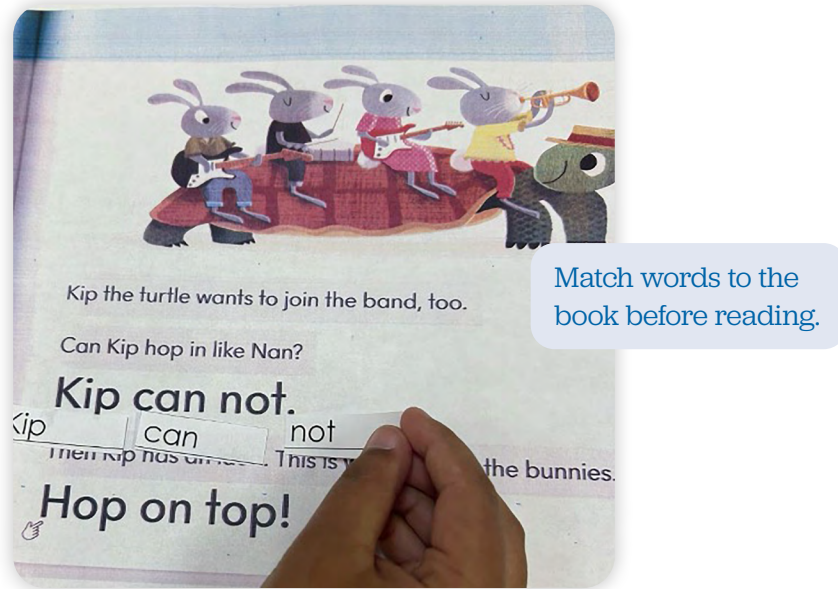
Pre-assess

Sort words:

- I can read.
- I cannot read.

Match target words from the text to those in the story or passage.

After practicing reading words, teachers can show students that the words they just read are in their books. This is a very concrete activity to amplify skills transfer. Very simply, after reading words from the text, students go into the text and match the words with those in the book. In this example, Grade K students are reading from the Student Worktext. They read the large words, and the teacher reads the smaller words.



Do a book walk before reading, focusing on challenging words.

In the past, “picture walks” have been used to help students become familiar with a book’s content and vocabulary by focusing on the images. The idea with these “picture walks” was to prompt the recognition of words. However, since words, rather than pictures, are essential to reading, “picture walks” are not recommended. A similar technique used in the past was “prereading” a text for students, often because the words themselves were not accessible to students.

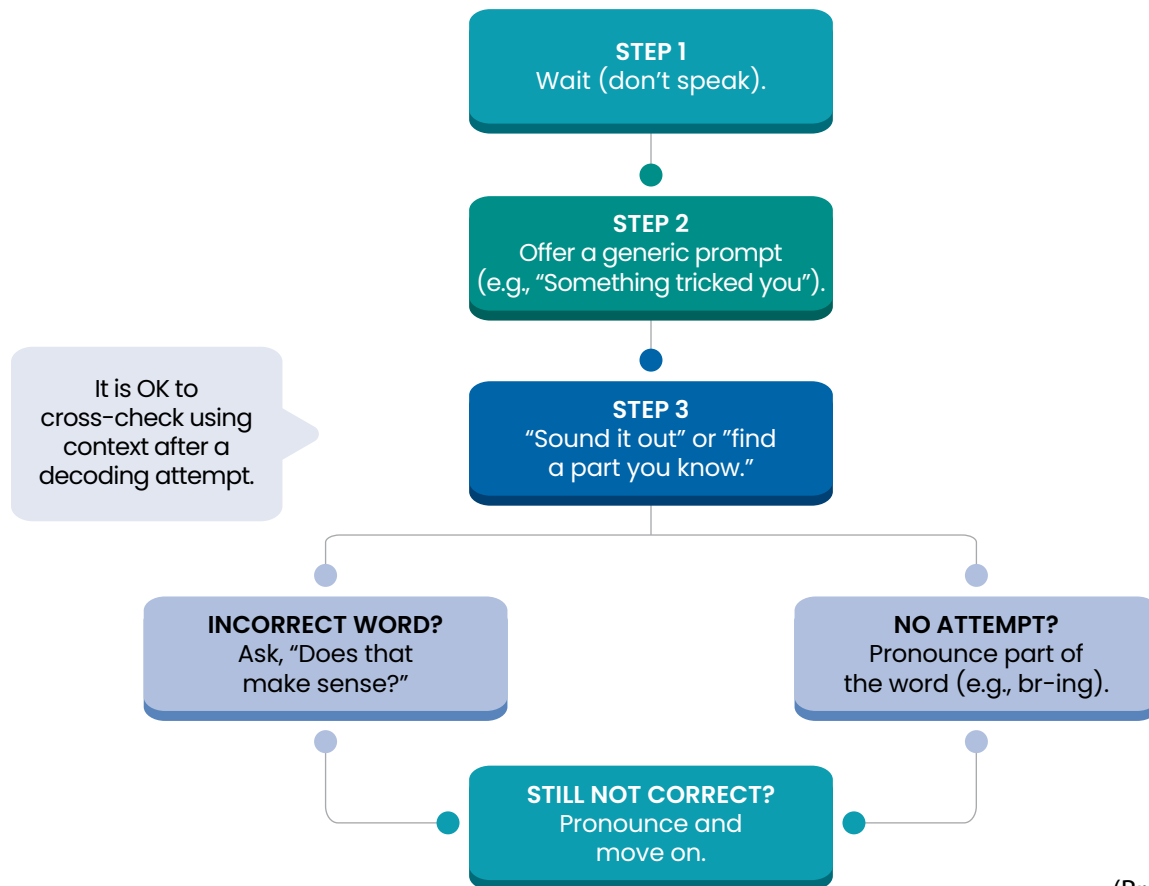
Instead of prereading or doing a “picture walk,” do a **book walk** concentrating on the words that might be challenging to readers. Focus on *students* practicing specific *words*—not teachers.

Guide students through the book, asking them to identify words they can read or practice words that might be challenging (Mesmer, 2019). Below are some sample prompts:

- “Look on this page. Do you see any words you can read?”
- “Do you see words that have a silent e?”
- “I see one that also has an -s on the end. Which is it?”
- “Let’s look at this word [*tusk*]. What does that say? What does it mean?”
- “Do you see any words that might be tricky? Can we practice those words together?”

During Reading: Use research-based prompting.

One of the most important things that happens during reading is prompting. This is language teachers provide when students come to a word and are stuck (e.g., “Sound it out” or “You know that word; we just read it.”) Although rarely done in a thoughtful or systematic way, prompting forms a very powerful part of the curriculum. What we say to students during connected reading encourages certain approaches and discourages others. As previously mentioned, the now-discredited “three-cueing” system often generated improper prompts such as, “Look at the picture.” Teachers have now abandoned that approach and instead, first, point to the graphemes and morphemes in words. However, some believe that contextual prompts (e.g., “Does that make sense?” or “Is that a word you know?”) should be abandoned altogether. This is not true. When it comes to using context, it is not a matter of *if* but *when*. Context and meaning are used to cross-check the pronunciation of words (Davis et al., 2021; Solari et al., 2017).



(Brown, 1999)

Here is an approach to prompting with students. The first step to take when a student is stuck is to wait. Often students will decode the word if a teacher does not jump in too quickly. A second step to take, if the student has mispronounced the word, is, “Something tricked you.” This is a generic prompt that lets the student know they did not pronounce the word correctly. The third step is to ask the student to start the sounds in the word or asking the student to look for “parts you know.” If, after an attempt, the student misreads the word, *then* ask the student to use context. Good readers *do* cross-check decoding attempts with the content of what they are reading. A final reminder: Do not turn reading a book into a phonics lesson (e.g., “OK, in this word *shriek*, the *sh* is /sh/ and then you add the *r* so it’s /shr/, and here the sound /e/ is with these letters *ie* . . .”). Offer three quick prompts and move on. If there is a great deal of pausing and prompting as students read a book, then the book might be too challenging, or the student is not ready to read it.

Summary

Even with careful design and features that developmentally match students' needs, texts still require specific approaches at the planning and instructional stages. Reader–text match is always an interaction between what readers bring, what the text offers, and that activity in which the text is used. At the planning stage, readable texts must be used within the context of a systematic, comprehensive, and explicit phonics and morphology program with a scope and sequence. Effective use of texts will depend on students reviewing previous patterns and words, decoding words, encoding/spelling words, and embedded phonemic awareness instruction. Prior to presenting a text for students to read, teachers should review the text for words that might be challenging to readers from a meaning or decoding perspective. Using the text supports on the inside covers, educators can provide practice and formative assessment opportunities for readers to engage with challenging words. Also, teachers should make sure that students possess the skills needed to read, namely, automatic recognition of letter sounds, knowledge of high-frequency words, and the ability to blend words together. During reading, teachers should pay close attention to how they prompt students when they encounter decoding challenges. Focusing first on word parts and graphemes will provide opportunities for decoding.

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