

# A Brief Overview of the History of Beginning Reading Materials

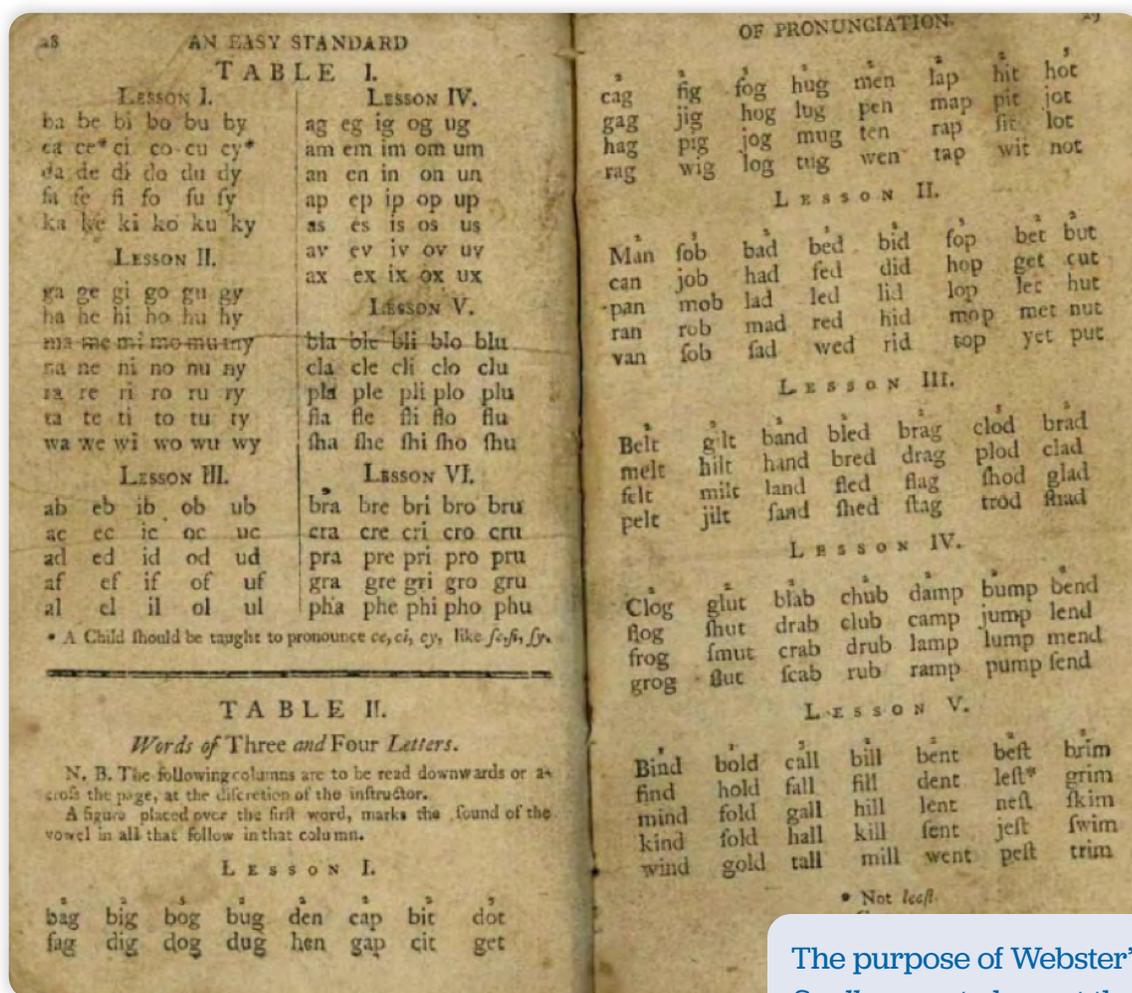




# How Have Textbook Designers Historically Attempted to Build Beginning Reading Materials?

To solve the beginning reader's dilemma, materials in the US have historically taken different forms. It is helpful to understand some of these formats, because it provides context around the materials we see today. This overview is not comprehensive but a sampling of some of the most widely used beginning reading materials across the eras.

**Noah Webster's *Blue Back Speller*:** In 1783, Webster published his famous *Blue Back Speller*, which contained organized lists of syllables and words that were grouped by pattern and difficulty. True to the title, the purpose of text was to lay out the common patterns found in English spelling, not unlike decodable texts. In the example here, Table I, Lesson III contained common syllables (e.g., *-ab, -eb, -ib, -ob, -ub*). Table II, Lesson II contained words with short vowels grouped by phonogram (e.g., *man, pan, ran, van, bed, fed, led, red*). As text difficulty increased, words were organized by two, three, and four syllables. In addition to the lists of words were passages for moral instruction.



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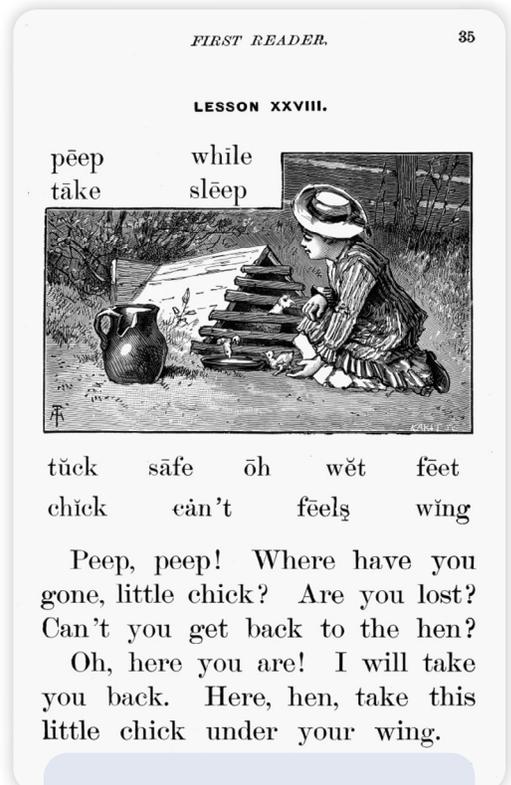
**William Holmes McGuffey's Eclectic Readers:** The first graded reading materials, McGuffey's *Eclectic Readers*, appeared in 1836 (Mathews, 1976) and included anthologies filled with individual stories "graded" from the easiest to the most difficult. Eventually, there were five readers. Between 1836 and 1920, McGuffey's *Eclectic Readers* were the most widely used instructional materials in the US, with about 132 million copies sold between 1836 and 1920 (Mathews, 1976).

In the First Reader, words were organized by spelling patterns (e.g., *peep*, *sleep*, *feels*) and presented in stories, not unlike today's decodable texts. As McGuffey's readers advanced into the second through fifth levels, word controls fell away and content became the focus with stories, moral lessons, poetry, and even information about bird species or unusual animals.

**Look-Say: Elson-Gray Basic Readers:** In 1934, the Elson-Gray *Basic Readers*, more commonly known as *Dick and Jane*, were guided by the research of William Gray and the Look-Say word-recognition method. The idea of the Look-Say method was *not* to sound out words or use phonics, but instead to a) look at the word and b) say it, memorizing words holistically. Like the McGuffey set, the readers were anthologies that grouped stories together.

To support the beginning reader, the series repeated words throughout a unit of text (e.g., Preprimer, Primer, First Reader1, First Reader2) and frontloaded high-frequency words. As this example shows, the words *come*, *and*, *see*, and *look*, were each repeated 17–60 times within this bound collection of stories.

On the back inside cover of each collection was a listing of all words in the book, the page upon which each first appeared, and the total number of times the word was repeated in the book. In this example, the word *no* first appears on page 3 and is repeated 30 times throughout the 58 pages of the book. The Look-Say approach did not emphasize spelling patterns. It was a curriculum that applied the bluntest of instructional tools: extreme repetition. It remained popular through the 1960s.



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**Vocabulary**

In the following table the number before each word gives the page on which the word first occurs in this book. The number in parentheses after the word shows how many times the word occurs.

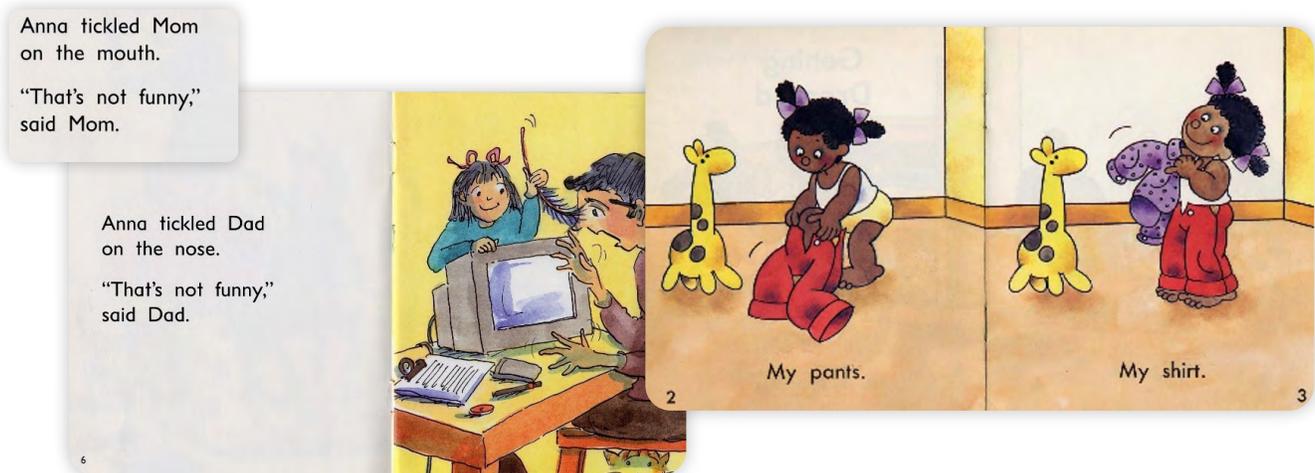
1. Tip (60)	22. Janet (29)	43. —
2. —	23. find (21)	44. —
3. no (30)	24. home (24)	45. —
4. here (49)	25. go (23)	46. —
5. —	26. —	47. —
6. —	27. —	48. —
7. come (40)	28. —	49. —
8. —	29. —	50. —
9. —	30. —	51. —
10. —	31. —	52. —
11. —	32. the (15)	53. —
12. Jack (36)	ball (34)	54. —
13. —	will (25)	55. —
		56. —
		57. —

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**Leveled/Little Books:** After research and development in the 1970s, Marie Clay developed Reading Recovery, a one-on-one tutoring program for Grade 1 students experiencing difficulty. The approach used sets of “little books” in a child-friendly size. These books were given alphabetic difficulty labels across 30 levels (e.g., A, B, C, D). Theoretically, any two little books with the same levels were of the same difficulty.

The levels were purportedly based on the following features: predictable language, repetitive sentences, syntax that mirrored oral language, content familiarity, length, font size and spacing, and match between print and pictures. Fountas and Pinnell (2002) extended the approach to building beginning reading texts for all children. In part, the texts were designed to provide readers with equal opportunities to apply the three-cueing approach to word recognition. Three-cueing, commonly depicted by a three-way Venn diagram with equal parts, asserted that word recognition occurred as readers used three different types of cues—meaning, graphophonemic, and syntactic. Teachers would use three different prompting questions to cue students to “read” words (e.g., *Does it look right? Does it sound right? Does it make sense?*). This approach is now discredited.

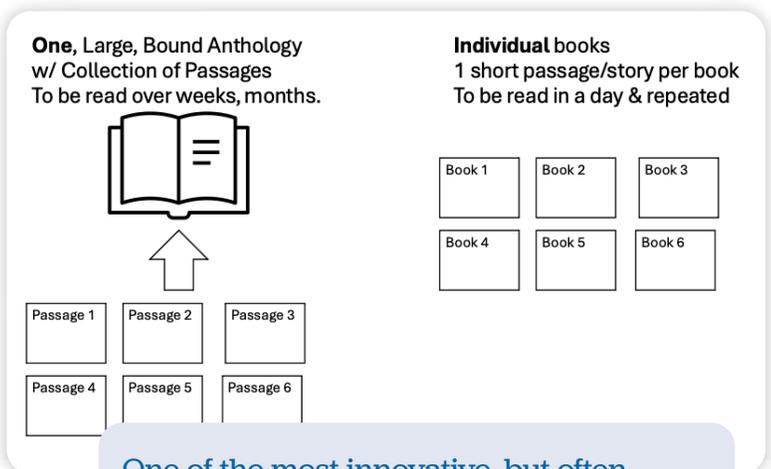
These examples show repetition of sentence stems, rhyming, and pictures figured prominently in the early levels of these books. Often the texts simply repeated sentences and then interchanged pictured words in the illustrations.



One of the most innovative, but often overlooked, features of the little book approach was the individual book format. In previous eras, texts for beginners had always come in anthologies of passages bound together—the basal reader. Passage by passage, these collections were read over weeks and months.

Each Reading Recovery little book is designed to stand alone and be read daily. Books at a given level are interchangeable.

The impact of this individual book design cannot be underestimated. Increasingly, many beginning reading materials, regardless of internal structure (e.g., decodable) come in individual books.



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# Summary

So what? Why is it important to understand various beginning reading formats used over different eras? This overview illustrates several points. First, history shows that for about 300 years, US textbook authors have seen the need to design texts specifically for the needs of beginning readers. Most design features appear to address the beginner's dilemma by supporting word recognition. Second, the patterns show that a collection of word features tends to ebb and flow, namely word frequency and decodability. One feature may dominate design in one era, and another dominate in another era, but these two seem to come up repeatedly. Third, in the Look-Say era, systematic repetition of words was built into text design to support learning. Fourth, the overview points to innovations that have stayed, like the individual book format.

Although it would be difficult to determine one superior approach across these many eras, we have learned from this evolution. Materials must be developmentally responsive and must build capacity for independent and context-free word recognition. In addition, these texts should be structured so that several word features are considered, rather than simply one.

# References

Elson, W. H., Gray, W. S., Keck, C. M., Craig, R. E., & Rice, R. J. (1934). *The Elson basic readers: Book one*.

Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2002). *Leveled books for readers, grades 3–6: A companion volume to guiding readers and writers*. Heinemann.

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