i-Ready Diagnostic:
Assessing Phonological Awareness Skills in Older Students

Assessment Brief | August 2025

Overview

Phonological awareness is the ability to reflect on and manipulate the component sounds of spoken words (e.g., syllables, onsets and rimes, and phonemes). This skill is often assessed as students are learning to read, typically in Grades K–1, and sometimes in Grade 2. However, assessing phonological awareness in older readers can be problematic. This assessment brief provides information on the role of assessing phonological awareness in older, proficient readers and suggests more appropriate ways to evaluate foundational skills in these students. This brief additionally details how *i-Ready Diagnostic* measures phonological awareness through specifically created items available to older students in the Phonics domain.

The Role of Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate the component sounds in spoken words. It encompasses a range of skills, from recognizing rhyming words to understanding that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes). It is a crucial foundation for reading development, as it helps children understand how sounds relate to letters and words. It is important to teach children to recognize the sound structure of words, link those sounds to letters, and then blend and segment the sounds to read and spell words.

However, as students become proficient readers, assessing phonological awareness becomes an unnecessary component of an assessment of reading proficiency (for more information on this concept, see The Pitfalls of Phonological Awareness Screening Beyond Grade 1). Put simply, phonological awareness is not reading, but it does underpin successful reading. Proficient readers who demonstrate proficiency with decoding are implicitly demonstrating sufficient underlying phonological processing skills. When screening for reading difficulties, the best measure is the one that most closely reflects reading. For older proficient readers, that measure is decoding and reading fluency. As such, if a student demonstrates difficulty with decoding, it is appropriate to follow up with an assessment of phonological awareness skills, but this should not be the preliminary screening measure for students in Grades 2+.

The Challenges with Universally Screening Older Readers in Phonological Awareness

Older proficient readers appear to rely on print over sound to solve phonological awareness tasks. Success with some tasks may indicate proficiency with phonics and orthography, not phonemic awareness, while errors with other tasks may reflect the many discrepancies between graphemes and phonemes in English. For example, a proficient reader who is asked to segment the sounds in "take" may be aware there is a silent e in the spelling of "take" and try to represent that letter in their response. This reflects an awareness of spelling rather than a lack of phonological awareness. Improper interpretation of these data can lead to the misidentification of students in need of reading intervention. Thus, the following questions become increasingly important:

- Do assessments of phonological awareness accurately and validly measure older proficient readers' phonological processing proficiency?

- Does performance on phonological awareness assessments correlate to older proficient readers' reading proficiency, and is it predictive of literacy outcomes?

Fortunately, research has provided some answers to these important questions. Elhassan, Crewther, and Bavin (2017) examined the contribution of phonological awareness (PA) to established readers ages 9–12. They concluded:

> *"PA did not influence performances on any of the reading measures examined for the fluent reader group. The results support the notion that <u>fluency is characterized by a shift from conscious decoding to rapid and accurate visual recognition of words</u>."*

Similarly, Hogan, Catts, and Little (2005) measured the relationship between Grade 4 reading outcomes and PA proficiency in Grades K and 2. They concluded:

> *"PA assessment provides information about reading in Grade K but loses its predictive power at Grade 2. At that time, PA and word reading become so highly correlated that <u>PA does not add information to the prediction of Grade 4 reading</u>."*

How Bridging Items Assess Foundational Skills on the *i-Ready Diagnostic* in Reading

Given these research findings and other similar findings, *i-Ready Diagnostic* in Reading does not assess phonological awareness after Grade 2 as part of the assessment's standard flow. **In fact, a team lead by Carborough and Ehri (1998) found that many mature readers are unexpectedly inaccurate on phonological awareness tasks.** When evaluating students' foundational skills, it is important to use items that are developmentally appropriate to

accurately measure students' reading strengths and needs.

Special items, known as "bridging items," have been developed to be included in the Phonics domain of the *i-Ready Diagnostic* to more accurately assess the phonological and phonemic awareness skills of students who are familiar with the sound spellings of words. Bridging items refer to questions that present letters to students but allow students to draw on their knowledge of sounds in spoken language to arrive at the correct answer. Essentially, bridging items include scaffolds, helping students connect the abstract nature of questions about spoken sounds to written letters that they are learning about in their reading instruction.

The items that follow provide examples of ways that students who have been exposed to reading instruction, or are familiar with the sound spelling of words, can be assessed. These items can provide a more accurate picture of the role that phonological awareness may be playing in their reading performance, and especially which students may benefit from instruction in the sounds of spoken language alongside instruction of the relationship of those sounds to letters in print.

Sample 1
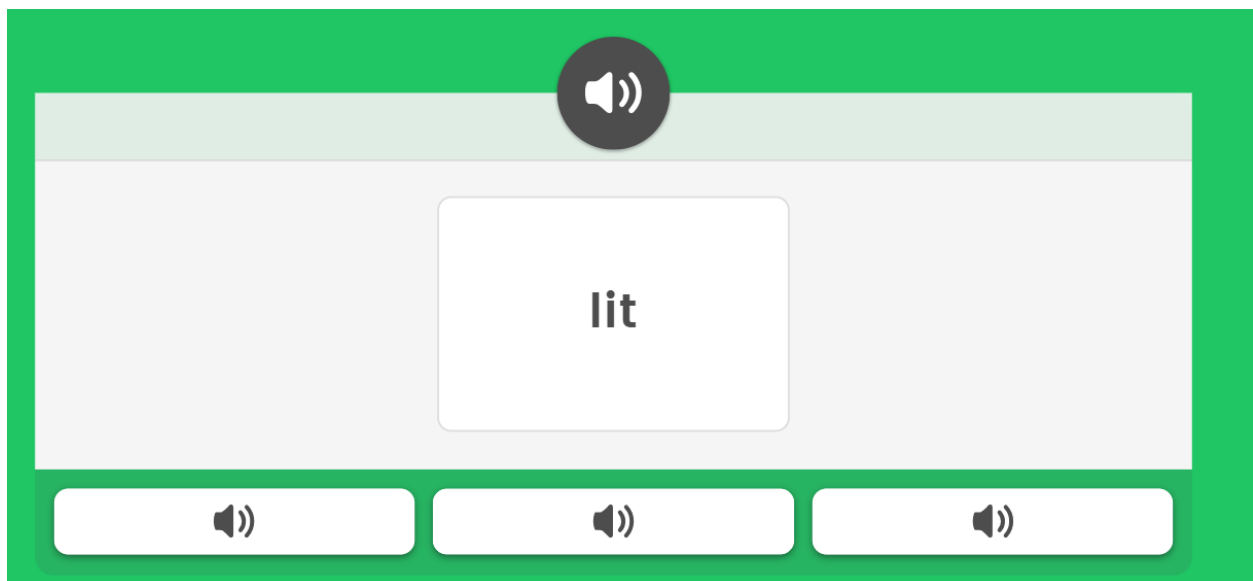
This item reads:

"Listen to the word lit. Now add the sound /f/ just before /t/. Find the new word."

The responses are life, lift, fill. The correct response is lift. In this item the student adds the interior phoneme /f/ to transform a CVC to a word that includes a final blend. Although this item is featured in the *i-Ready Diagnostic*'s Phonics domain because it can be solved by working with the letters, it is designed so that students can incorporate phonological awareness into their

performance, just as older readers blend these skills when reading text.

Sample 2
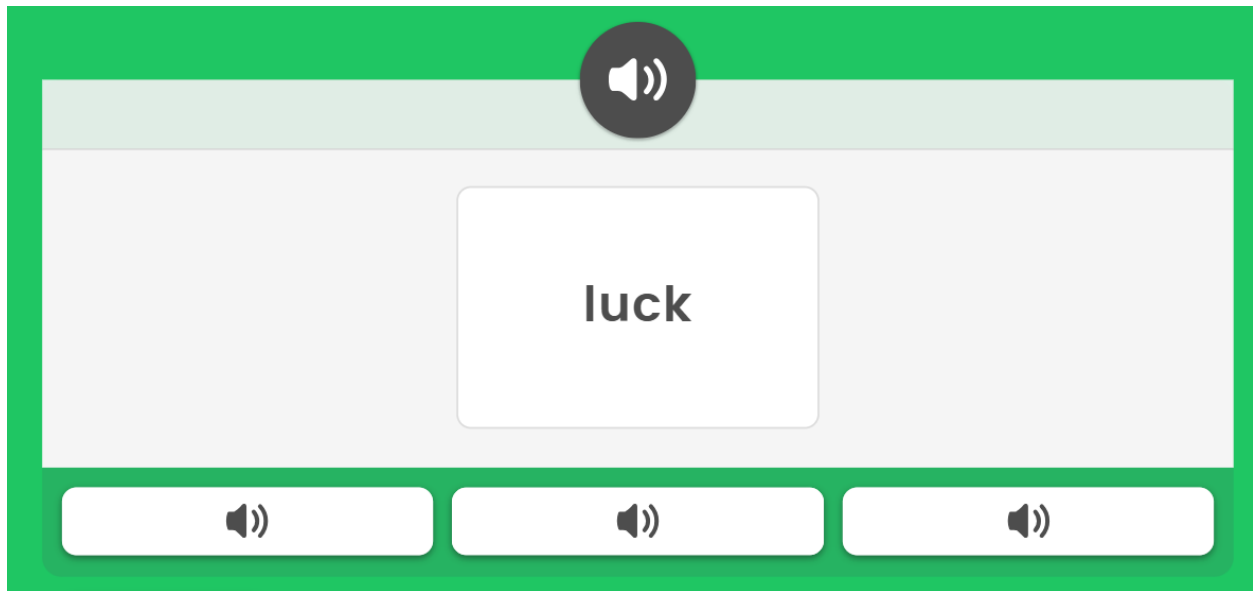
This item reads:

"Add the sound /p/ to the beginning of the word luck. Find the new word."

The responses are cup, puck, pluck. The correct response is pluck. The student adds the exterior phoneme /p/ to transform a word without a blend to a word that includes an initial blend. As with the item above, this item, which is part of the *i-Ready Diagnostic's* Phonics domain, addresses phonemic addition skills that are synonymous with phonological and phonemic awareness development, but with the presence of letters to scaffold the traditional thinking for older students.

Sample 3
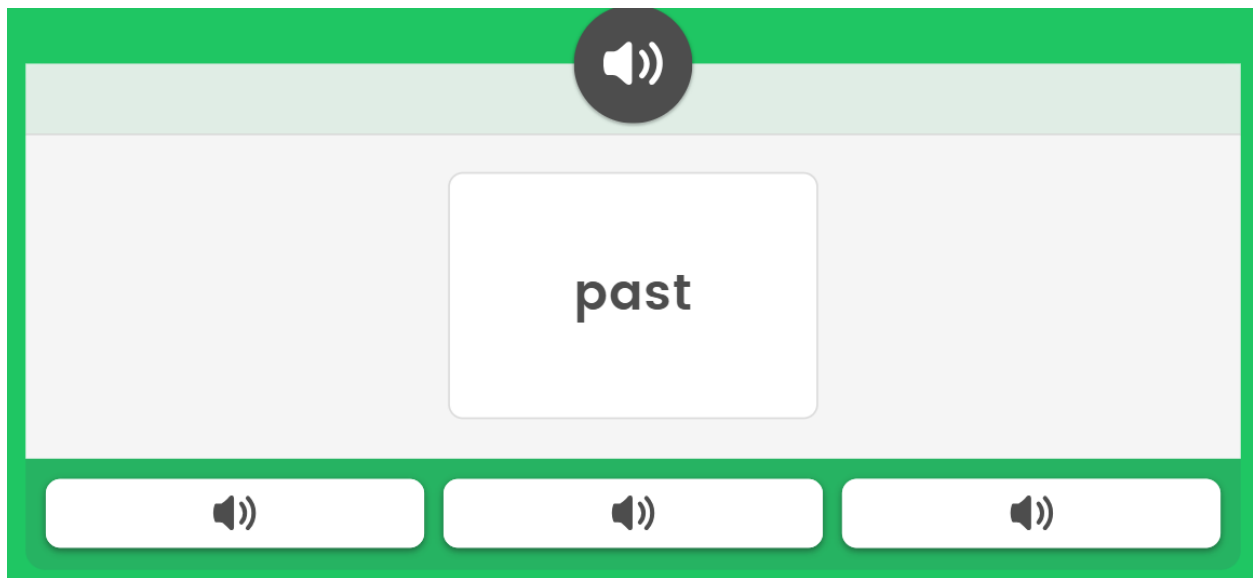
This item reads:

"Listen to the word past. Take away the sound /t/. Find the new word."

The responses are tap, pass, pat. The correct response is pass. The student deletes the exterior phoneme /t/ to transform a word that includes at least one blend to a word without a final blend.

These sample items provide specific, targeted information about a student's reading skills. Unlike the phonological and phonemic awareness items in the Phonological Awareness domain of the *Diagnostic* that focus only on sounds in words, bridging items allow students to rely on their knowledge of both the sounds and spellings of words to show what they know.

On the *i-Ready Diagnostic*, when students in higher grades demonstrate a need for further evaluation in foundational skills, they will be evaluated using the bridging items specifically developed for this purpose. In sum, requiring older proficient readers to take items assessing traditional phonological awareness skills will yield results that are at best redundant and, in many cases, possibly invalid and inaccurate. Including letters in items that target phonological awareness skills allows students with sound spelling knowledge to better show what they know and ultimately get the instruction they need next.