

The McCrackens

Foreword by Sheri Sutterley

40th Anniversary Edition

Spelling Through Phonics



This book belongs to

40th Anniversary Edition

Spelling Through Phonics

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Foreword by Sheri Sutterley



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FOREWORD TO THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

“Good spelling, good writing, good reading!”

I had the opportunity to see Bob and Marlene McCracken present numerous times at conferences and seminars throughout the 1980s. They shared their ideas about the importance of engaging learners in quality literature, using big books and pocket charts, and of course, teaching phonemic awareness and phonics. They felt strongly about active participation, and each short lesson in *Spelling Through Phonics* encourages this, with students learning by writing on chalkboards, whiteboards, or in journals. These ideas had an enormous influence on my career as a kindergarten teacher.

As I think about *Spelling Through Phonics*, and the impact it has had on the teaching of reading and writing for forty years, I cannot help but reflect on the changes that have occurred in education throughout that time.

The book was written in the early 1980s, before technology advanced in classrooms, before various programs and reforms left us with higher expectations and lower outcomes in education, and way before COVID-19 pushed us out of school altogether! Think about it... when the McCrackens wrote *Spelling Through Phonics*, none of the countless events of the past four decades were known or taken into consideration. Yet, despite these changes in education, the principles of *Spelling Through Phonics* remain relevant.

What *Spelling Through Phonics* did was examine exactly how, based on research and practice, children learn to read and write. The McCrackens' findings were based on children's early phonemic awareness experiences and expanded into the first years of formal schooling.

When they wrote the book, kindergarten curriculum focused on “hearing the sounds of language” through stories, poetry, and song.

Kindergarten was a place where children could “play with language” and understand how print works. The curriculum was language-rich, focusing particularly on oral language. That beginning instruction of language was the foundation for early reading and writing in grades 1 to 3. In retrospect, it was a simpler time.

Today, expectations for children entering and exiting kindergarten have vastly changed, and what were once first-grade academics are now taught in kindergarten. Children are taught sight words; learn beginning reading strategies; write informative, opinion, and narrative stories; and are expected to meet many literacy standards that were once taught in grade 1. I wonder what the McCrackens would think about these changes?

Regardless of how we arrived at today’s classroom academic culture, *Spelling Through Phonics* provides an opportunity to re-examine how children naturally develop the ability to read and write. The McCrackens stressed phonics as the key to how words are formed. Their insights about speech as it relates to print, how letters are written and their corresponding sounds made, and how speaking patterns relate to phonetics are critical to understanding the most effective order to teach young learners to make meaning from print.

As I consider *Spelling Through Phonics* as a resource for today’s early learning classrooms, I am encouraged by its solid research foundation, which still applies to young learners. *Spelling Through Phonics* takes us through the McCrackens’ pedagogy and provides step-by-step instructional guidance to help us as teachers. The McCrackens’ believed that developing a strong background in phonemic awareness in the early years would lead to spelling and writing, and this is as meaningful now as it was when *Spelling Through Phonics* was written. The principles described here can be easily integrated into what you are already doing in your classroom using adopted programs or to meet your district’s standards.

The McCrackens’ belief in integrated English language arts to make meaning still holds true today. Take a step back in time to learn how to better teach today, as good practices are eternal.

Sheri Sutterley

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TURLOCK, CALIFORNIA, 2022

FOREWORD TO THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Marlene and Robert McCracken were an incredibly supportive and inspiring presence in reading and writing instruction for many years. It is gratifying, therefore, to see the publication of this anniversary edition of *Spelling Through Phonics*. In this fascinating and powerful little book, you will find the essence of effective and engaging instruction in spelling and phonics. It is usually the case that good, intuitive teaching runs well ahead of the strong empirical foundation that later comes along to support best practice—and the work of the McCrackens exemplified this trend. There is, indeed, a solid, respected research foundation that supports their emphasis on the following general instructional principles:

- *Developmentally grounded instruction:* The McCrackens argued that “children must be taught directly at their levels of understanding,” and spelling and phonics instruction provides the strongest case for this. The McCrackens understood that an instructional program into which all children are expected to fit—to be “all on the same page”—is a program that will, sadly, create struggling readers and writers.
- *Integrating word study with content and writing:* This ensures that children understand and appreciate the purpose of spelling as a convention of writing.
- *Penmanship:* Even in a digital age with innumerable ways to interact with print that do not involve the sensorimotor aspects of writing, research has underscored the critical importance of children using a pencil or other marker that leaves the trace of their efforts. Tapping or scrolling screens does not provide nearly the same neuromuscular coordination with thinking and language.

The McCrackens' specific scope and sequence for spelling and phonics study is also well grounded:

- Explore several consonants first, well before the first short vowel is introduced.
- Explore the more common long vowel patterns before moving on to the more ambiguous patterns.
- Explore, by grade 3, some of the basics of morphology, or the ways in which meaningful word elements—prefixes, suffixes, and base words—combine.

This solid research foundation is important to keep in mind in today's classrooms. Over the years, the curriculum has inched ever earlier into kindergarten. The phonics correspondences and skills I taught in first grade many years ago now constitute the kindergarten standards and expectations. The McCrackens would not be pleased with this trend; they strongly believed that “there should be no formal teaching of reading or writing in the kindergarten classroom.” The good news, however, is that most young children should be able to develop these understandings if the more “formal” focus on phonics is reasonably paced and developmentally grounded—reflecting, in other words, the sound principles and practices of reading and writing that the McCrackens describe in *Spelling Through Phonics* and their other instructional books.

You are in for an exciting exploration. As you read and reflect upon this insightful work, you will realize and appreciate that you are learning from true master teachers.

Shane Templeton

FOUNDATION PROFESSOR OF LITERACY STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO, 2012

PREFACE

Children can learn to spell fairly easily if they are taught so that they come to understand *how print works*. If children are taught, they can discover that English writing is an alphabetic system in which letters are used to indicate speech sounds. With this understanding and further teaching, they can become literate. We use the word *discover* advisedly because children do not learn how print works by learning the alphabet and the letter sounds, and by being told that English writing is an alphabetic system; they must intuit the phonemic nature of speech by being taught in ways that allow them to acquire the awareness that (1) we speak in a flow of individual words, (2) each word is composed of a limited number of sounds, and (3) the sounds of speech are represented alphabetically in a left-to-right sequence.

Although this system may seem obvious to the adult, and although many children intuitively come to understand the alphabetic nature of our writing system, too many children do not; they see spelling as a memorization of letter combinations. This makes learning to spell an overwhelming task. Further, if children fail to understand how print works, that letters are used systematically to represent speech, they do not transfer the phonics they learn to reading.

We advocate teaching reading and writing concurrently, as language skills, beginning both formally in grade 1. With this simultaneous teaching, phonics is used to teach spelling as a requisite writing skill that is used naturally in reading with very little direct teaching.

Spelling Through Phonics was created by Marlene to enable at-risk children to learn about print. She found that teaching children phonics as a spelling/writing skill virtually eliminated the nonreader and the nonwriter.

First used for at-risk children, and since used extensively with whole classes, it is now recognized for teaching ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students as well. Affirmation of that

success came in an unsolicited letter from Sherry Fletcher, who works in Maryland. She noted that ESOL pupils have particular difficulty with phonemic awareness and that *Spelling Through Phonics* helped in developing that crucial skill. She wrote:

There is a strong sense that ESOL teachers are looking for more viable reading instruction and that phonemic awareness needs to be part of that instruction.... Your work has stimulated much of my thinking and attempts to puzzle out an effective reading program for my bright, eager, but woefully under-achieving second language learners. With the *Spelling Through Phonics* program they have a surge of success, and gain confidence and real skills that sustain them through the tough task of becoming fluent readers.

This revised edition of our original work expands on the teaching rationale of the program and we hope that teachers new to *Spelling Through Phonics* will benefit from our years of experience. Most of all, we wish all the children who will learn from this teaching, “Good spelling, good writing, and good reading!”

1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM

Spelling Through Phonics describes a practical, easy-to-use method of teaching children how to spell. Children come to understand how the letters of our alphabet are constructed to form words and how words are constructed to become text. Practice is encouraged and monitored, and teaching occurs in short sessions each and every day.

Five Beliefs About the Teaching of Spelling

The *Spelling Through Phonics* approach embraces the following beliefs about the teaching of spelling:

1. Spelling is a skill and, like all skills, is acquired through teaching and meaningful practice.
2. English spelling can be learned only to the degree that alphabetic spelling is understood.
3. Spelling is a language skill; as such it is most efficiently taught in a way that helps the learner's brain understand how print works.
4. Teaching children how to spell is the most direct way of teaching how print works.
5. Teaching children how print works results in their acquiring basic word recognition skills, which can then be transferred and applied to reading and independent writing.

Writing Is an Alphabetic System

The creators of written English did not set out to make it chaotic. Rather, they set out to spell English systematically, incorporating its more than forty sounds. Unfortunately, they chose to use the twenty-six-letter Roman alphabet, limiting the representation of sound and making a completely regular phonetic system—one symbol equals one sound—impossible. Although most English spelling is rational, there are many examples of seemingly chaotic spellings of English words. These can be explained, but not to a six-year-old child trying to solve the mysteries of print. Tackling the seemingly chaotic spellings too soon can prevent a child from learning how letters and print work; until a child learns how letters go together to form words, they can never become a proficient speller of all words.

The first task is to get children to understand that English writing is an alphabetic system. When we teach children how to spell, we are having them *recreate* or *reinvent* the English writing system as the “creators” of our alphabetic system did. In this way, the children come to understand how English print works. We want to do this as efficiently as possible so that children are not confused and frustrated by the seemingly irregular spellings of English words.

Four Insights About Print

In order for children to understand the nature of the English writing system, they must grasp four basic insights about print. Children must:

1. begin to understand what a word is, and then learn the convention of leaving spaces between words when writing.
2. learn the relationship between speech and print and understand that when they say a sound, they write a letter. At the beginning of learning about print, this relationship must be kept simple so that children may grasp the alphabetic principle. To start the learning process, we teach that when they say one sound, they write one letter. We leave the teaching of spelling patterns until later, when children have a better understanding of how letters go together to form words.
3. realize that the letters are written in the sequence in which the sounds are uttered. They must learn the convention of writing in a left-to-right sequence.

4. understand *spelling patterns*. We define spelling patterns as any spellings that are not totally phonetic and when more than one letter is used to represent one phoneme. Patterns include the use of *s* or *es* to create plurals, endings such as *tion*, and long vowels with their multitude of spellings. When the concept of alphabetic writing is understood, patterns can be learned fairly easily.

Phonemic Awareness

There is great interest and concern about phonemic awareness in young children, and most evidence indicates that it is a requisite for reading, spelling, and writing. Phonemic awareness is the awareness that:

- we speak in a flow of individual words
- the words are composed of a limited number of sounds

There must also be an awareness of how many sounds are in each word. *Cat* and *mouse* each have the same number of sounds, while *basket* has more. (William Kottmeyer recognized this in the 1940s when developing his Dr. Spello books for remedial reading. He considered this ability a basic prerequisite for reading.) We suggest that children who come to school with this phonemic awareness are those who have been filled since birth with talk, and with stories, poetry, rhymes, and songs, many of which they have committed to memory.

We suspect that the alliterative quality of poetry, rhyme, and song has a great deal to do with children becoming aware of phonemes. We have commended Jack Prelutsky's *Ride a Purple Pelican* to hundreds of kindergarten teachers, who have told us that children want to hear these poems over and over again. Charlotte Diamond, Raffi, and other entertainers who have made children's songs so popular, are helping children to attain phonemic awareness.

We strongly believe that kindergarten children should be taught language awareness skills informally: through chanting, memorizing, dramatizing, and the teacher's tracking of language. (Unfortunately, it seems to us, many school districts and parents/guardians are demanding that five-year-old children do much more. Both formal

phonics and journal writing are required in many kindergartens.) Having stated our preference, we believe that children who are beginning phonics and writing must develop two basic understandings about speech and print, both of which have to do with phonemic awareness:

1. *Children need to be aware that written English is broken into words.* Written language is very different from spoken language, where we speak in phrases or sentences, stopping only for emphasis. Many children, when beginning to write, show that they have not grasped this convention of written English. They join all their written words together in a stream of sounds that, to them, resembles speech. Children need lots of practice in discerning what a word is, in speech and in print. It is easy for them to confuse words, syllables, phrases, and common sayings. *How are you?* is often identified by children as one word. So, we practice saying and listening until we agree that it is three words, only to then have children identify *Halloween* as three words!
2. *Children need to work with the similarities among words.* When children listen, they hear *differences*. To respond to the request, “Please pick up your hat,” as opposed to “Please pick up your bat,” the child pays attention to a single phoneme difference among fifteen phonemes. The child does this without difficulty, not realizing that there were fourteen like phonemes as well as the one that is different. To spell, and thus write, “Please pick up your hat (or bat)” (Ples pik up yur hat/bat), children are responding to fourteen *likenesses* as well as the one different phoneme, a very different skill than responding to differences in speech as they get meanings.

Children are not ready for written language work until they have learned oral language skills. We strongly support a kindergarten program that emphasizes oral language, thinking, and concept development and a primary program that continues the emphasis while adding the formal teaching of written language skills. Without the oral language base, learning to work with print—both as a reader and a writer—is likely to fail.

But this is not new. In 1966, Dolores Durkin examined the background of children who came to school reading.¹ She found only one common factor: someone had read to them many times. In 1975, the Bullock Report noted: “Reading is secondary to and dependent upon the growth of language competence in the early years” and “Talk is a means by which they [young children] learn to work and live with one another.... It is fed by nursery rhymes and singing games, by the stories that teachers and children tell and the poems they read.”² In 1986, Gordon Wells, in a seminal study, reported only one factor was of importance in predicting how well a child would read and write at age ten: how many times the child had been read to before coming to school.³ In 1994, Steven Pinker, summarizing his research about language learning, supported the notion that oral work before writing is critical: “Writing is clearly an optional accessory; the real engine of verbal communication is the spoken language we acquired as children.”⁴ Dr. Ronald L. Cramer of Oakland University, Michigan, identified the following six experiences that make early writing and reading possible:⁵

1. literary exposure at home, preschool, and school
2. experience with stories, storytelling, nursery rhymes, and language play
3. exposure to print and oral language in a nurturing, meaning-rich environment
4. being read aloud to from stories, poems, and nursery rhymes
5. a focus on children’s world of meaning
6. encouragement at home and school—the intangible necessity

If being read to thousands of times is an informal way of attaining phonemic awareness—as we believe it is—then all of the above observations support phonemic awareness as a crucial factor in learning how print works.

1 Dolores Durkin, *Children Who Read Early: Two Longitudinal Studies* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1966).

2 *A Language for Life: Report of the Committee of Inquiry Appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science Under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1975), xxxv, 62–63.

3 Gordon Wells, *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986).

4 Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

5 Dr. Ronald L. Cramer, Unpublished manuscript (Rochester Hills, MI: Oakland University, 1994).

Phonemic awareness has been around for a great many years, but it is still not taught within most classrooms or spelling programs. Reading, writing, phonics, and spelling are rarely taught in an integrated fashion. Despite numerous professional pleas to teach holistically, the efforts of whole language advocates, and the use of textbooks using a literary base, most schools still teach spelling and phonics as separate skills in separate time blocks. Schools still teach reading and writing separately. Schools rarely teach language with skills (reading, writing, phonics, and spelling) as an integral but sub-part of the lessons.

We know that teaching children *how to spell* is different from teaching them to memorize words in order to spell them. (Most adult writers know how to spell; they can spell thousands of words by merely applying what they know about print, even though the application is largely intuitive. They spell /shun/ at the end of an unknown word *tion* without even thinking about it.) Teaching spelling is best done as part of a program that focuses on content and the oral exploration of ideas, followed by reading and writing. And with required writing, we reinforce spelling and phonics. Phonics makes sense as a writing skill; we find that once phonics is understood, children transfer and use phonics in reading as they need it.

We have found that almost all children benefit from being taught *how print works*. Even some children who come to school with lots of being-read-to experience make very wrong assumptions about print and become frustrated in trying to figure out how print works. *Spelling Through Phonics* directly teaches phonemic awareness and the understanding that the English writing system is alphabetic. Children who have been read to extensively grasp these understandings within four to eight weeks of teaching from *Spelling Through Phonics*. Other children take longer, sometimes the whole of grade 1 with daily teaching, before they develop sufficient phonemic awareness to grasp the principle of alphabetic writing; then they suddenly blossom. However, without this understanding, they never become literate.

In our other works, *Reading Is Only the Tiger's Tail*; *Reading, Writing & Language*; and *Stories, Songs & Poetry to Teach Reading & Writing*,⁶ we describe in detail a way of teaching literacy that

⁶ *Reading Is Only the Tiger's Tail*, 1972, 1987; *Reading, Writing & Language*, 1979, 1995; *Stories, Songs & Poetry to Teach Reading & Writing*, 1986. All from Peguis Publishers, Winnipeg, Canada.

encompasses a wide range of approaches including spelling. In this book, we will not attempt to describe the daily writing program except to say that children in primary grades should engage in a variety of writing and recording activities every day.

Penmanship

Often, teachers ask us whether good penmanship is important, and they worry about how much they should push children to write neatly. We agree with the Bullock Report, cited earlier, that states:

The ability to write easily, quickly and legibly affects the quality of a child's written output, for difficulty with handwriting can hamper his flow of thoughts and limit his fluency. If a child is left to develop his handwriting without instruction, he is unlikely to develop a running hand, which is simultaneously legible, fast flowing, individual, and effortless to produce. We therefore believe that the teacher should devote time to teaching penmanship and to giving children ample time to practice.

We think all children like to do things well; they like to be proud of what they do. The job of the teacher is to make it easy for children to do well. Part of our task is to make sure that the child has the correct writing tools and knows how to use them.

WRITING TOOLS

Pencils: Use normal size pencils of a good length so that they can be held comfortably. Teach children how to hold a pencil, then remind them gently to hold the pencil correctly until it becomes easy and natural. It is no kindness to allow children to hold pencils or pens in a way that will make writing difficult for the rest of their lives; that is a great disservice to children.

Paper: The size of the paper is important. (Young children need large sheets of paper for art activities, not for writing activities.) Beginning writers need only a few lines to write on; the rest of the page can be blank to allow for a drawing. We strongly recommend the use of

exercise books such as those commonly used in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The book's size is just right for young hands, and the quality of the paper is good.

a.

b.

— —	— — — — — — — — — —
— —	— — — — — — — — — —
— —	— — — — — — — — — —
— —	— — — — — — — — — —

Use lined paper (a) 5/16" or (b) bisected 7/16"

The lines on the paper should be of a width that allows children to print the letters, not requiring them to draw them. Frequently the paper given to beginning writers has too much space between the lines, making it difficult for them to print letters with ease. We have used 5/16" lines or bisected 7/16" lines successfully.

The quality of paper used by children should allow them to erase with ease. Erasing a mistake should not cause a hole in the paper, making a worse mess than the original mistake.

LETTER FORMATION

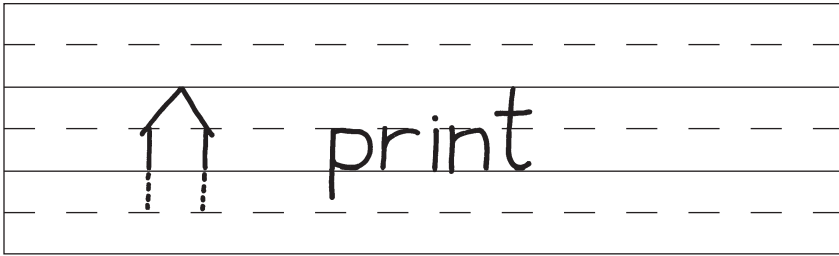
Children must learn how to form letters with ease, so a lesson in letter formation is given with each letter we introduce in the spelling lessons. Children usually practice the lowercase form first, making the letter many times on their chalkboards. The next day, we introduce and have them practice the capital or uppercase letter. Next, we teach them how to write with a pencil and how to practice each letter several times in their handwriting books.

We believe that the formation of the letters we teach beginning writers should closely resemble the letters they see when reading. Therefore, we have chosen to use *one-stroke* letters that can be easily made by children, and that closely resemble letters found in most books. (For seven years I taught third-grade children to transfer from printing one-stroke letters to cursive writing. I had no trouble with the transfer. *M.J.M.*)










PRACTICE

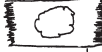








Children who are learning penmanship should have a handwriting book in which they practice. The letters they practice coincide with the letters they are learning in their spelling lessons. We take two days to teach each letter and have the children practice writing that letter during those days. The first day they practice the lowercase form, and the second day they practice the capital or uppercase form. Children write two or three lines of the letter and a row of words containing the letter that they have found in a book or posted around the room.

Children learn how to write on lines. We draw *houses* at the beginning of each line and guide the children to write on the *main floor*, or on the *main floor combined with upstairs or basement*. We also have them draw nine or more small pictures representing words that contain the letter for the day. Most of the words will have the letter in initial position. Children like working in this little book and will work for twenty to thirty minutes daily to get the handwriting practiced and to draw the pictures. (See page 182 for a sample page of the handwriting book with houses. It may be photocopied to create handwriting books for children.)



“Houses” help children write on lines

 Mike	 Morgan	 Mika
 music	 Mrs. James	 my book
 maple leaf	 mane	 Matthew
↑ M M M M M M		
↑ M M M M M M		
↑ March Mike Morgan		
↑		

 mat	 meat	 man
 mop	 mouse	 marbles
 mike	 meal	 me
↑ m m m m m m		
↑ m m m m m m		
↑ man mouse mat meat		
↑		

Samples from children's handwriting books

2

KINDERGARTEN

We believe there should be no formal teaching of reading or writing in the kindergarten classroom. If children initiate reading and writing or come to school already equipped with these skills, we do not prevent them from voluntarily reading or writing; however, we do not demand that children work in any *formal* ways with print. Kindergarten should be a place where many informal activities take place that make children aware of print and of the sounds of English.

Immersing Kindergarten Children in Language

There is growing evidence that children who have a full year to explore their worlds—to be filled with language by being read to, to *play read*, to dramatize books, to sing songs, and chant poetry—move into phonics, spelling, writing, and literacy with ease and success. Withholding formal instruction, even for those children who come to kindergarten already reading and writing, does not create problems in later achievement. Our personal experience with children has been that all children benefit from having a full year of being filled with the best of language before being asked to work formally with print. We know of no solid evidence that indicates that delaying the start of formal writing or reading until the beginning of grade 1, approximately age six, means that children will not progress normally and reach equally high literacy standards by the end of grade 4.

Kindergarten children need to be filled orally with all the written forms of language: songs, poetry, prose, fiction, and nonfiction. They need to memorize and sing lots of songs, chant lots of poetry, and hear and retell repeated parts of stories. They need to see and use the

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