A SOUND APPROACH
Using Phonemic Awareness to Teach Reading and Spelling

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Illustrated by Ken Stampnick
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Introduction

Arianna* sighed and gazed at her friends before turning her attention back to her teacher. The other children were happily engaged in a game of make-believe at the classroom house-center, which involved many props and a great deal of giggling. But Arianna sat, small and silent, at a table at one end of the classroom staring at the simple three-letter word before her. She knew what was expected of her, as this was by no means the first such session. Laura, who was her kindergarten teacher at the time, pointed to the word *but*, printed in perfect ball-and-stick block letters, and said encouragingly, “Arianna, I want you to say each sound, then read the word.” Arianna dutifully responded “/b/ - /a/ - /t/” as Laura pointed to each letter in turn. But, when Laura asked hopefully, “Now what word does that spell?” Arianna responded with her usual blank stare.**


The session ended, as did all the previous ones, when Laura finally took pity on Arianna for having sat so long and so patiently. “That’s the word *but*, Arianna. Let’s read the word together: baaaat.” And with that, Arianna bounded off to the house-center, leaving Laura shaking her head in consternation. What puzzled her was that Arianna knew all 26 letters of the alphabet and the sounds most commonly represented by those letters. Why then, could she not sound out words?

*Some students’ names have been changed.
** In this volume, phonemes are represented by common spelling patterns and are enclosed in slash marks.
That event took place almost a decade and a half ago. At that time, Laura was an experienced primary teacher and I had just recently graduated with my teaching degree. The high-needs urban elementary school where we taught was overcrowded and, while we each had our own kindergarten classes, we shared the same classroom. We believed then, as we do now, that the most important gift we could give our students was a strong foundation of literacy skills, and the majority of our efforts were directed at laying that foundation. Alongside many constructivist methods, we taught our students “old-school phonics.” We taught them to identify the shapes and sounds of letters and then encouraged them to “sound out” unfamiliar words as needed. Armed with the ability to identify by sight a handful of frequently used words, most of our students were off to a good start, enthusiastically decoding simple texts. But we were puzzled and intrigued by students who, like Arianna, knew the names and sounds of the letters but could not sound out words.

Our initial solution was to give students like Arianna more instruction in phonics. Our rationale was simple: if they could not do it, then they must need more practice. We gave them practice in small groups with manipulatives; we gave them pen-to-paper activities; we coached them individually. Ironically, the students in our classes who could do the phonics activities were the ones who did not seem to need the practice, whereas the students who seemed to need the practice could not master the activities. No matter how many phonics activities we threw at them, students like Arianna simply could not sound out words. By the end of that year, we had given up on phonics instruction entirely for them and had adopted a strictly wholistic approach to reading. In our heart of hearts, however, we knew that we had failed them.

The following year, Arianna had moved on, but some of our new students were experiencing the same difficulties. We were determined to find a way to reach these students. We started by surveying the existing literature relating to reading instruction and came across a surprising number of studies that linked phonemic awareness to reading ability. At that time, few of our colleagues could not even pronounce the term, let alone define it. We decided that, if phonemic awareness was so important to reading acquisition, then we would learn enough about it to be able to teach our students.

Since that time, we have learned that decoding, or a child’s ability to sound out words, is dependent on two factors. First, the child must have an understanding of how the alphabet works as a code for speech sounds. Arianna already knew that the letter b represented the sound /b/, the letter a represented the sound /a/, and so on. What was missing was the second piece of the puzzle: the child’s phonemic awareness, that is, the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds, or phonemes, that comprise
spoken words. Arianna’s story is a cautionary tale. Had we understood the concept *phonemic awareness* and its significance to the acquisition of literacy skills, we would have provided Arianna with instruction targeted to develop her phonemic awareness and consequently her decoding skills. Arianna’s problem was not that she could not learn through phonics but, rather, that her underdeveloped phonemic awareness prevented her from being able to access phonics as an effective reading strategy.

For the next decade, we continued to read and investigate phonemic awareness through the academic literature and through our own teaching practice. We worked collaboratively to develop and refine a phonemically driven approach to reading and spelling for both beginning and struggling readers. We began conducting professional-development seminars, first for teachers at local school boards, then at reading conferences across North America. Laura completed her master of education degree, specializing in literacy, and in her master’s thesis she examined the phonemic awareness skills of kindergarten students. She took a position as a special-education teacher, conducting school-based action research that examined the effects of phonemic awareness instruction on the reading skills of struggling readers in grades one to eight. She is currently a literacy coach and resource teacher in Burlington, Ontario.

I resigned from my elementary-school teaching position and began working privately as an educational consultant, specializing in phonemic intervention and remediation. The students I tutored were identified with, or considered to be at-risk for, reading and/or spelling disabilities. I completed my master of education degree, specializing in literacy, and the focus of my master’s thesis was on the intersection of professional development and teachers’ knowledge of phonemic awareness. I am currently a full-time doctoral student and have taught literacy courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels at the University of Toledo.

This book is the result of our ongoing investigations. Since that time almost 15 years ago when we taught Arianna, we have developed and refined a phonemically driven approach to reading and spelling instruction. We have taught hundreds of beginning and struggling readers, aged five to 14 in large groups, in small groups, and individually, and we have had the kind of success that years ago we never would have dreamed possible. We have taught and learned from beginning readers; young students identified with reading and spelling problems, and other learning disabilities; and older students who, despite having undergone years of remedial instruction, still struggled with reading. With very few exceptions, our students have experienced great success. Laura now claims that, finally, after 30 years in the profession, she knows how to teach reading. Our goal in writing this book is to share what we have learned from other researchers and, just as important, what we have
learned from our own students. We know that, with the right approach, teaching children to decode and encode can be relatively simple, fun, and enormously rewarding for both students and teachers.

Throughout this book, we usually refer to reading in terms of *decoding*. But this is not to suggest that we consider the two words (*reading* and *decoding*) to be synonymous. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Decoding* refers to the process by which students are able to look at the arbitrary visual symbols that we call *letters* and translate them into spoken words. Colloquially, this process is referred to as *sounding out*. Reading, on the other hand, is an infinitely more complex cognitive process that carries implications far beyond the mere recitation of words on a page.

In order for students to be highly skilled as readers, they must be able to understand, interpret, and critically examine the message inherent in a text. However, like any other complex skill, reading can be broken down into requisite sub-skills. Let us examine reading from a top-down perspective. Please note that this discussion is not intended to be comprehensive or reflective of the considerable complexities of the overall reading process. Rather, it is intended to enable us to deconstruct and examine discrete elements of the process.

Let us begin by asking ourselves the following question: if our students are to become highly skilled readers, what knowledge and skills must they acquire? They must be able to (a) understand what they read and (b) apply critical and analytical thinking skills to texts. Skilled reading can therefore be broken down as shown in figure I.1.

Let us now turn our attention to the knowledge and skills that are required for students to be able to comprehend what they read. Reading comprehension implies three elements. First, students must be able to decode text fluently. Second, they must have well-developed background knowledge to be able to connect with the text as well as sufficient knowledge of the vocabulary that they will encounter. And, third, they must have well-developed comprehension skills. These elements are represented in figure I.2.
Now, let’s examine the term fluency in decoding more closely. What are the knowledge and skills that students need to acquire in order to decode text fluently? As shown in figure I.3 (page 6), students need (a) a thorough knowledge of the alphabetic code and (b) well-developed phonemic awareness skills.

The model identified in figures I.1, I.2, and I.3 is highly simplistic and thus cannot possibly do justice to the complexity of the reading process. It does, however, demonstrate the importance of decoding skills to a child’s acquisition of skilled reading. This is a top-down model, but if we are to teach our students the sub-skills necessary to be skilled readers, we need to approach reading instruction from the bottom up, for, if children lack phonemic awareness and alphabetic coding skills, they are necessarily unable to decode. If children are unable to decode, their comprehension skills are adversely affected; and, without the ability to comprehend what they read, students have no hope of becoming highly skilled readers.

We do not claim that this book represents a comprehensive reading program. We recognize that any good reading program incorporates effective instruction in all the elements discussed so far (critical and analytical thinking skills, activating background knowledge, vocabulary development, comprehension skills, fluency, decoding), as well as guided practice that teaches students to integrate them. Rather, in this book, we focus on decoding (reading) and its reciprocal skill, encoding (spelling). Our goal is to help you, the teacher, develop the knowledge and skills needed to effectively assess and teach phonemic awareness and alphabetic coding skills, thus enabling your students, in turn, to become skilled decoders and encoders.

In chapter 1, we investigate phonemic awareness and its link to reading and spelling (decoding and encoding). In chapter 2, we explore the relationship between phonemic awareness and the related terms phonological awareness, phonics, and alphabetic coding. In chapter 3, we introduce a variety of simple, classroom-developed activities that require few materials and minimal preparation. These activities will help your students master the phonemic skills of blending and segmenting, and will reinforce their
decoding and encoding skills in a manner that is fun and success-based. In chapter 4, we demonstrate in a series of lesson plans how to apply blending and segmenting to reading and spelling. The lesson plans follow a systematic, logically sequenced approach that links phonemic awareness to phonics and teaches beginning readers and struggling readers, alike, the fundamentals of decoding and encoding.

Chapters 3 and 4 and the appendix provide you with a host of resources and reproducible materials that will enable you to begin incorporating phonemic awareness and alphabetic coding instruction into your literacy program without delay. These materials include reproducible assessments, sound cards, word cards, and short-vowel cue cards, as well as action pages, pictures pages, words-and-pictures pages, and story starters and riddles.

Throughout chapters 3 and 4 we include sidebars, all entitled Research to Practise, which recount some of our classroom experiences as well as our interactions with other educators in the context of our professional-development workshops. These items are intended to respond to common questions and concerns, to give you a “feel” for this approach to reading and spelling instruction, and to generally help you to learn from our mistakes. We hope you find these sidebars both entertaining and enlightening.

If you are relatively new to teaching, or if you are new to teaching a phonemically driven approach to reading and spelling, you may wish to read the book from cover to cover. The same holds true if you are interested in an in-depth examination of the topics phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, phonics, alphabetic coding, decoding, and encoding. If, however, you are familiar with the rationale for this approach, you may simply wish to flip to chapters 3 and 4 and make use of the instructional strategies that we present. Feel free to copy the reproducible materials in the appendix as they are, or modify them to better suit your needs and the needs of your students.

Many of the lessons in chapter 4 are scripted for you. Our rationale for this is simple. First, we consider specific examples to be illustrations rather than mere instructions. Second, we believe it important that a certain type of language be used. This language is not always comfortable, nor does it come
naturally at first. In our early days of using a phonemically driven approach, we would often find ourselves sitting in front of our students and feeling completely tongue-tied. After too many such experiences, we began scripting the lessons for ourselves, writing out little “cheat sheets” that we could refer to if we became stuck in the middle of a lesson. If you are already familiar with the language patterns we present in this book, you may wish to consider these scripts just as starting points or guidelines for your own lessons. If, on the other hand, you are like us in our younger days, you may choose to follow closely the scripts offered here.

It is our hope that you find the materials and activities included in this book easy to understand, fun, and easy to implement. Mastering phonemic awareness, decoding, and encoding skills is of vital importance to your students as they develop as readers and spellers. Our classroom experiences have demonstrated that the activities we present are inherently enjoyable for students and enormously rewarding for teachers.

Heather Kenny
### Table 2.5: Recommended Sequence of Instruction for Blending, Segmenting, Decoding, and Encoding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>End-of-Year Objectives</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
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| K           | ✓ Students will recognize and be able to record the most common sounds associated with the 26 letters of the alphabet.  
              ✓ Students will be able to auditorally discriminate between all short vowel sounds, using kinesthetic mnemonic cues as needed.*  
              ✓ Students will be able to blend, segment*, read and spell two and three phoneme words (VC and CVC) that employ one-to-one mapping patterns.  
              ✓ With guidance, students will begin to use decoding skills to identify unknown words in context.*  
              ✓ Students will begin to use encoding skills to phonetically spell words in their own writing. | Lesson 1.1 (90–93)  
Activity 2.3 (45–46)  
Lesson 1.1 (90–93)  
Activity 2.4 (46–47)  
Lesson 1.2 (93–94)  
Lesson 1.3 (94–95)  
Lesson 1.4 (95–96)  
Lesson 1.5 (96)  
Lesson 1.7 (97–98)  
Lesson 1.6 (97) |
| 1           | ✓ Students will demonstrate mastery of all of the skills developed in the previous year.  
              ✓ Students will be able to discriminate auditorally between short vowel sounds rapidly and with automaticity.*  
              ✓ Students will recognize and be able to record the following digraphs: sh, ch, th, ck, er, ir, or, ur, ar.*  
              ✓ Students will recognize and be able to record three common spelling patterns for each of the long vowel sounds.*  
              ✓ Students will be able to blend, segment, read and spell single syllable words (including CVCC, CVC, CCCVC, CCCVC, CCCVC words)* using all familiar mapping patterns (including digraphs)*.  
              ✓ Students will independently decode simple words in the context of a story.  
              ✓ Students will use knowledge of digraphs to phonetically spell words in their own writing. | Activity 2.3 (45–46)  
Lesson 2.1 (99)  
Lesson 3.1 (101–103)  
Lesson 3.1 (101–103)  
Lesson 2.1 (99)  
Lesson 2.2 (99–100)  
Lesson 2.4 (101)  
Lesson 2.3 (100) |
| 2           | ✓ Students will demonstrate mastery of all of the skills developed in previous years.  
              ✓ Students will recognize and be able to record common spelling patterns for all phonemes.*  
              ✓ Students will be able to blend, segment, decode and encode words containing familiar spelling patterns.*  
              ✓ Students will use decoding as a primary word identification strategy (phonetic approximations) and use meaning and grammar cues to confirm the meaning of unknown words when reading independently.*  
              ✓ Students will use knowledge of common spelling patterns to approximate conventional spelling in their own writing.* | Lesson 3.1 (101–103)  
Lesson 3.2 (103–104)  
Lesson 3.3 (104–105)  
Lesson 3.4 (105)  
Lesson 3.6 (106)  
Lesson 3.5 (105–106) |

*These are crucial skills that are frequently under-developed in struggling readers.

Note: Although they are not represented on this table, many older readers who are struggling—those beyond second grade—will also need direct, targeted instruction in phonemic awareness, alphabetic coding, decoding, and encoding skills. For these students, we strongly recommend that you assess their knowledge and skill level prior to planning instructional interventions. (Reproducible Phonemic Awareness and Alphabetic Coding assessments can be found on pages 107 to 115.)
RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Teacher I am going to count all the sounds in someone’s name except for the last one. I want you to tell me the last sound. Ready? Diane. /D/-/i/-/a/…(The teacher extends one finger for each sound as she says them and then holds up a fourth finger, indicating that the students are to respond.)

Students /n/

Variation 8: Have students provide the last two sounds in each name. For example:

Teacher I’m going to say the first few sounds in a name and, when I hold up my fingers, I want you to tell me the last two sounds. Watch my fingers. Ready? Lisa: /L/-/ee/…(The teacher extends one finger, indicating that the students are to respond.)

Students /s/ (The teacher extends a second finger, indicating that the students are to respond.)

Students /a/

Activity 1.2: Blending Categories

Blending categories is a game that is very effective for students who are just learning to blend and for students who are struggling with the concept of blending. This activity can be used with large groups, small groups, or pairs.

Materials

- a list of categorized words; you may select a category of words based on a theme or a random category from the list on pages 51 and 52, or simply make up a list of your own

Instructions

Identify a category of words for your students and invite them to blend a word within that category. For example:

Teacher I’m going to say the sounds in the names of some animals. I want you to tell me the animals. The first one is /dl/-/o/-/g/. What animal it is?

Students dog

Continue with other words in the same category.

Extensions

Extension 1: Challenge students to think of words in a given category. Invite them to take turns segmenting the words and “being the teacher.”
Extension 2: Ask students to act out or demonstrate a category of actions or emotions. For example, say, “Show me your /h/-/a/-/p/-/p/-/y/ face.”

Activity 1.3: Segmenting Categories

Segmenting is more difficult than blending, so it is best not to introduce your students to segmenting until they have experienced success at blending phonemes. Since segmenting can be challenging for some students, be sure to keep modeling both the word and the segmented form of the word until they are able to do it independently. This activity may be used with large groups, small groups, or pairs.

Materials

- a list of categorized words that contain between three and five phonemes (for teacher reference only); you may select a category of words based on a theme or a random category from the lists on pages 51 and 52, or simply make up a list of your own

Instructions

Identify a category of words for your students and invite them to segment a word within that category. For example:

Teacher I’m going to say each sound in a color word. The word is red. The sounds in the word red are /r/-/e/-/d/. (The teacher allows a one-second interval between each sound. She counts the sounds on her fingers as she says them aloud.) What word did I just say?

Students red (The teacher pinches her fingers together to visually cue the students.)

Teacher Now, say each sound in the word red.

Students /r/-/e/-/d/ (The teacher encourages her students to count the sounds on their fingers as they say the sounds aloud, then blend the sounds back together.) red

Continue with other words in the same category.

Extensions

Extension 1: As your students become proficient, you may choose not to model the answer. For example, simply ask, “Who can tell us the sounds in a color word?”

Extension 2: Ask your students to act out an emotion (happy, sad, excited, surprised, angry). For example, “Say the sounds in the word happy with a happy face.” Or, “Say the sounds in the word sad with a sad face.”

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Heather has been blending and segmenting with her daughter Claire since Claire could speak. Claire’s name, however, was problematic. Heather knew that, in theory, aire is not a single phoneme, but whenever she tried to break it down, it just did not sound right. So Heather treated aire as a sound chunk, segmenting her daughter’s name as /C/-/l/-aire rather than attempting to break up the final chunk and risk distorting the pronunciation. The same held true for several of our kindergarten and primary students who had the sound chunk aire in their names (Mary, Karen, Aaron). We firmly believe that, in the rare instances when you come across a sound chunk that just does not sound right when broken down, it is more important to be true to the pronunciation of the name than to break it down “correctly” and risk distorting it. The irony of this tale is that, despite “incorrect” modeling from her mother, once Claire was able to segment her name independently, she segmented it into the four “correct” phonemes.
## Lists of Categorized Words

### Family Members
- mother
- father
- sister
- brother
- grandma
- grandpa
- aunt
- uncle
- cousin

### Colors
- red
- green
- orange
- blue
- black
- white
- pink
- brown
- yellow
- purple

### Body Parts
- leg
- arm
- ear
- eye
- mouth
- knee
- elbow
- lips
- head
- toes

### Feelings
- happy
- sad
- glad
- mad
- silly
- funny
- tired
- thirsty
- upset

### Classroom Objects
- desk
- pencil
- clock
- eraser
- book
- pen
- crayon
- chalk
- chair

### Clothing
- shirt
- hat
- pants
- skirt
- dress
- scarf
- sweater
- jeans
- belt
- mitts

### Items Found in the Kitchen
- fork
- knife
- spoon
- fridge
- stove
- table
- chair
- pan
- pot
- plate
- bowl

For Activities 1.2 and 1.3
### Directions
- up
- down
- under
- over
- beside
- above
- north
- south
- west
- east

### Animals
- dog
- cat
- mouse
- cow
- horse
- pig
- sheep
- lamb
- hen
- chick

### Fruits and Vegetables
- apple
- orange
- peach
- pear
- plum
- grapefruit
- peas
- corn
- lettuce
- beans

### Numbers
- one
- two
- three
- four
- five
- six
- seven
- eight
- nine
- ten

### Weather Words
- sunny
- windy
- rainy
- clear
- cold
- hot
- warm
- cool
- snowy
- icy

### Community Helpers
- teacher
- nurse
- doctor
- baker
- butcher
- pilot
Step 2: Introduce multiple spelling patterns. For example:

**Teacher** The sound /er/ can be spelled with the letters, *er*, *ur*, and *ir*. Let’s look at our spelling list (refer to chart paper or overhead). The sounds in the word *her* are */h/-/er/.

Step 3: Record the sounds in the word *her* beside the word on the chart paper or overhead transparency (see sample, figure 4.3).

**Teacher** In the word *her*, the sound */er/* is spelled with the letters *e* and *r*. Now let’s listen to the sounds in the word *sir*: */s/-/ir/*. (The teacher segments and records *sir* beside the word *sir* on the chart paper.) Now, say the word *sir*.

**Students** *sir*

**Teacher** Let’s count the sounds together. (The teacher extends one finger for each sound as she counts.)

**Students** */s/-/ir/*, *sir*

Arrange students in small groups and provide each group with a set of word cards for the vowel digraph being taught. Instruct the students to take turns drawing a card, reading the word, and leading the group in segmenting each sound in the word.

**Lesson 3.2: Sorting by Spelling Patterns**

**Materials**

- word cards for the vowel digraph being taught (one set per group); find reproducible masters for these between pages 148 and 187
- spelling-sounds sorting mat (one per group); find this as a reproducible master on page 188 (if you wish, use a photocopier to enlarge it to 11" x 14")
- a copy of the spelling-the-sound sheet for the vowel digraph being taught, reprinted on chart paper or overhead transparency

**Instructions**

Have students sort cards according to the spelling of the sounds. Prepare playing cards by cutting out the individual word cards and laminating them. Make a pile. Pass out a spelling-sounds sorting mat to each student and instruct them as follows:

**Teacher** Today we’re going to sort words according to the spelling of our new sound. Which new sound did we learn?

**Student** */er/*
Teacher  Right! Let’s write that sound at the top of the page. (The teacher writes /er/ in the appropriate place on his or her sorting mat, and one student in each group does the same on their copy.) The sound /er/ can be spelled with er, ir, or ur. Let’s write in those spellings. (The teacher writes each of the spelling patterns at the top of his or her column, and one student in each group does the same on their copy.)

Draw the top card from the pile of word cards and hold it up so that the students can see it. For example:

Teacher  The first word is her. The sounds in the word her are /h/ /er/. How is the sound /er/ in the word her spelled?

Student  e…r

Teacher  I’m going to put the word her under the heading er on my sorting mat. (The teacher writes her in the appropriate column.) Now I want you to use your word cards to sort each word according to the way the sound /er/ is spelled.

Have your students work in pairs or small groups to sort the word cards according to the spelling of the selected sound and place the words in the appropriate column on their sorting mats. For additional practice, encourage students to orally segment and read each word aloud before sorting.

Lesson 3.3: Segmenting and Recording Words

Materials

- a spelling-the-sounds sheet for the vowel digraph being taught (one copy per student); find reproducible masters for these between pages 147 and 184
- spelling-sounds sorting mat (one copy per student); find a reproducible master for this on page 188

Instructions

Have students record words according to the spellings of the sounds. Provide each student with a spelling-the-sound sheet for the appropriate sound and a spelling-sounds sorting mat. Instruct students to (1) read the list of words; (2) segment each word into individual sounds; (3) spell the sounds on the lines beside each word; (4) circle the letters that spell the new sound in each word; (5) write each word in the appropriate column on the sorting mat.

Note that the sounds /ay/, /ie/, and /ue/ can be spelled with vowel-consonant-e. For example, in the word cape, the /ay/ is spelled with a-consonant-e. After segmenting and recording the word cape, draw an arrow from the e to the a
SPELLING-THE-SOUND SHEET
The Vowel Digraph /er/ with er, ir, ur

her       _____  _____
sir       _____  _____
fur       _____  _____
hurt      _____  _____  _____
bird      _____  _____
third     _____  _____
under     _____  _____  _____  _____
after     _____  _____  _____  _____
burst     _____  _____  _____
thirst    _____  _____  _____
enter     _____  _____  _____
swirl     _____  _____  _____  _____
WORD CARDS FOR THE VOWEL DIGRAPHS

SPELLING THE SOUND /er/ with er, ir, ur

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>her</th>
<th>sir</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fur</td>
<td>hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bird</td>
<td>third</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>under</td>
<td>after</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WORD CARDS FOR THE VOWEL DIGRAPHS

SPELLING THE SOUND /er/ with er, ir, ur

burst   thirst
enter   swirl
fern     turn
first   shirt