What Is Phonics?

The sun beat down on me hotter than I had ever felt it. I could feel the steam sizzling up from the tarmac as I stepped off the plane. Here I was in Guayaquil, Ecuador. My charge was to teach a class of second graders—many of whom had limited English abilities—to read. It was my first year teaching and I had journeyed far from Coal City, West Virginia, where I had first learned about the mysteries of books. As I walked toward the airline terminal, the enormity of the challenge and responsibility I had accepted struck me. I suddenly felt even hotter!

Each year millions of teachers enter classrooms across our nation (and the world) with this same challenge. They have to make key decisions as they wrestle with the question of how best to teach children to read. Considerable discussion and debate center around answering this critical question. The debate rages on not only in classrooms, but in universities and at school board meetings everywhere. However, this book is not about that "great debate." It is designed to help you better understand our unique and sometimes complex language and how you can use that knowledge to better teach children to read. Its focus is on phonics—the relationship between sounds and their spellings—and how helping children understand this important piece of the reading "puzzle" can help develop fluent readers who have a passion for books and who understand how books can provide pleasure and information.

> "At one magical instant in your early childhood, the page of a book—that string of confused, alien ciphers—shivered into meaning. Words spoke to you, gave up their secrets; at that moment, whole universes opened. You became, irrevocably, a reader."
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> —Alberto Manguel

Phonics: What and Why

According to a 1992 poll conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 62% of parents identified reading as one of the most important skills their children needed to learn. In 1994 the same polling firm conducted a survey for the American Federation of Teachers and the Chrysler Corporation and found that almost 70% of teachers identified reading as *the* most important skill for children to learn.

This is where it all began—my first class on my first day!

With such agreement on the importance of reading, how do we best teach children to read? What should be the goals of early reading instruction? The following goals are often cited:

1. automatic word recognition (fluency)
2. comprehension of text
3. development of a love of literature and a desire to read

The first goal—automatic word recognition—is the focus of this book. To become skilled readers, children must be able to identify words quickly and accurately. To do so, they must be proficient at decoding words. Decoding words involves converting the printed word into spoken language. A reader decodes a word by sounding it out, using context clues, using structural analysis, or recognizing the word by sight. In order to sound out words, a reader must be able to associate a specific spelling with a specific sound. Phonics involves this relationship between sounds and their spellings.

Phonics is not a specific teaching method. In fact, there are many ways to teach it. However, what most types of phonics instruction do have in common is that they focus on the teaching of sound-spelling relationships so that a young reader can come up with an approximate pronunciation of a word and then check it against his or her oral vocabulary.

Approximately 84% of English words are phonetically regular. Therefore, teaching the most common sound-spelling relationships in English is extremely useful for readers. As Anderson et al. (1985) write, "English is an alphabetic language in which there are consistent, though not entirely predictable, relationships between letters and sounds. When children learn these relationships well, most of the words in their spoken language become accessible to them when they see them in print. When this happens, children are said to have 'broken the code.'"

One of the arguments against teaching phonics is that the approximately 16% of so-called irregular English words appear with the greatest frequency in text (about 80% of the time). As you will discover throughout this book, these words are not as "irregular" as they may seem. Although they must be taught as sight words, the reader has to pay attention to their spelling patterns in order to store them in his or her memory. Some detractors of teaching phonics also contend that reading develops in the same way as speaking—naturally. Foorman (1995) responds by saying "humans are biologically specialized to produce language and have done so for nearly 1 million

The Connection Between Decoding and Comprehension

Phonics instruction helps the reader to map sounds onto spellings. This ability enables readers to decode words. **Decoding** words aids in the development of and improvement in word recognition. The more words a reader recognizes, the easier the reading task. Therefore, phonics instruction aids in the development of **word recognition** by providing children with an important and useful way to figure out unfamiliar words while reading.

When children begin to be able to recognize a large number of words quickly and accurately, **reading fluency** improves. Reading fluency refers to the ease with which children can read a text. As more and more words become firmly stored in a child's memory (that is, the child recognizes more and more words on sight), he or she gains fluency and **automaticity** in word recognition. Having many opportunities to decode words in text is critical to learning words by sight. The more times a child encounters a word in text, the more likely he or she is to recognize it by sight and to avoid making a reading error (Gough, Juel, and Roper-Schneider, 1983).

Reading fluency improves **reading comprehension**. Since children are no longer struggling with decoding words, they can devote their full attention (their mental energies) to making meaning from the text. As the vocabulary and concept demands increase in text, children need to be able to devote more of their attention to making meaning from text, and increasingly less attention to decoding. If children have to devote too much time to decoding words, their reading will be slow and labored. This will result in comprehension difficulties.

years. Such is not the case with reading and writing. If it were, there would not be illiterate children in the world."

Clearly, then, most children need instruction in learning to read. One of the critical early hurdles in reading instruction is helping children grasp the alphabetic principle. That is, to read, children must understand that this series of symbols we call the alphabet maps onto the sounds of our language in roughly predictable ways. This alphabetic principle is a key insight into early reading. Phonics instruction helps children to understand the alphabetic principle. And it enables children to get off to a quick start in relating sounds to spellings and thereby decoding words.

But isn't comprehension the most important part of reading? How does this ability to decode words help a reader understand a text? The flowchart on page 8 illustrates that strong decoding ability is necessary for reading comprehension. However, it is not the only skill a reader needs in order to make meaning from text. And sounding out words is not the only way to figure out an unfamiliar word while reading.

When they read, children need to be able to use three cueing systems. These systems represent signals in text that interact and overlap to help the reader understand what he or she is reading. The cueing systems are graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic.

1. **Graphophonic cues** involve a reader's knowledge of sound-spelling relationships. Phonics instruction helps children to use these cues.

2. **Syntactic cues** involve a reader's knowledge of the grammar or structure of language. This knowledge helps the reader to predict what type of word might appear in a certain place in a sentence. For example, it might be a naming word (noun), an action word (verb), or a describing word (adjective). This cueing system also involves an understanding of word order and the use of function words, such as *the* and *an*. For example, read the following sentence and choose a word to fill in the blank:

   We saw the _____ on the road.

   All possible words to fill in the blank must be naming words. You determined this from your knowledge of English syntax.

   When children enter school, most of them have an understanding of the basic syntactic structures of English. However, oral language is different from "book language." Written material might pose difficulties for some children because their oral language patterns differ so much from the more formal language patterns of text. Reading many books aloud will help these children gain an understanding of the more formal syntactic structures used for writing.

3. **Semantic cues** involve a reader's knowledge of the world. World knowledge helps the reader use cues in the text to discover the meaning of a word that fits into a specific place in a particular sentence. Readers use their semantic knowledge to determine whether a text makes sense.

Ten Important Research Findings About Phonics

Countless research studies have been conducted on phonics instruction. Much of this research has focused on the usefulness of phonics instruction and the best ways to teach children about sound-spelling relationships. Below are ten of the top research findings regarding phonics.

1 Phonics Instruction Can Help All Children Learn to Read

All children can benefit from instruction in the most common sound-spelling relationships in English. This instruction helps children decode words that follow these predictable relationships.

Phonics instruction is particularly beneficial for children at risk for learning difficulties—those children who come to school with limited exposures to books, have had few opportunities to develop their oral languages, are from low socioeconomic families, have below-average intelligence, are learning English as a second language, or are suspected of having a learning disability. However, even children from language-rich backgrounds benefit from phonics instruction (Chall, 1967). As Chall states, "By learning phonics, students make faster progress in acquiring literary skills—reading and writing. By the age of six, most children already have about 6,000 words in their listening and speaking vocabularies. With phonics they learn to read and write these and more words at a faster rate than they would without phonics."

Phonics instruction is therefore an essential ingredient in early reading instruction. The purpose of this instruction is to teach children how to read with accuracy, comprehension, fluency, and pleasure. The early ability to sound out words successfully is a strong predictor of future growth in decoding (Lundberg, 1984) and comprehension (Lesgold and Resnick, 1982). Weak decoding skills are characteristic of poor readers (Carnine, Carnine, and Gertsen, 1984; Lesgold and Curtis, 1981). Readers who are skilled at decoding usually comprehend text better than those who are poor decoders. Why this is so can be gleaned from the work of cognitive psychologists. They contend that we each have a set amount of mental energy to devote to any task. Since decoding requires so much of this mental energy, little is left over for higher-level comprehension. As decoding skills improve and more and more words are recognized by sight, less mental energy is required to decode words and more mental energy can be devoted to making meaning from the text (Freedman and Calfee, 1984; LaBerge and Samuels, 1974).

In addition, successful early decoding ability is related to the number of words a reader encounters. That is, children who are good decoders read many more words than children who are poor decoders (Juel, 1988). This wide reading results in greater reading growth.

Phonics instruction also helps to get across the alphabetic principle (that the letters of the alphabet stand for sounds) by teaching the relationships between letters and the sounds they represent. Beginning readers learn better when their teachers emphasize these relationships (Chall, 1996).

Three Golden Rules

Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson et al., 1985) makes the following three recommendations regarding phonics instruction:

1. Do it early.
2. Keep it simple.
3. Except in cases of diagnosed individual need, complete basic instruction by the end of second grade.

2 Explicit Phonics Instruction Is More Beneficial Than Implicit Instruction

According to Chall (1996), "systematic and early instruction in phonics leads to better reading: better accuracy of word recognition, decoding, spelling, and oral and silent reading