



Courtesy of Rick Harrington Photography



## READINESS SKILLS

### Background and Key Characteristics

The two best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness (Adams, 1990; Beck & Juel, 1995; Chall, 1996; Stanovich, 1992). These skills open the gate for reading. Without a deep knowledge of the English letters and an awareness that words are made up of sounds, students cannot learn to read. Also important in early reading instruction are other foundational skills (e.g., concepts of print) and a basic understanding of story structure, vocabulary, and the language of instruction.

English is an alphabetic language. To read in English, students need to understand the alphabetic principle (that our letters stand for sounds) and recognize these letters in various contexts and forms (e.g., uppercase, lowercase, manuscript, cursive, different fonts). Students also have to be skilled at distinguishing visually similar letters (e.g., *E* and *F*, *b* and *d*). Letters can be distinguished by their position on a line; their length; their size; whether

*Students who recognize letters with accuracy and speed have an easier time learning the sounds associated with them.*

## 4 BEST EFFECT

### “The Alphabet Song”

- Sing the song as a warm-up to daily instruction.
- Sing the song as a transition between activities.
- Slow down when singing the letters *L, M, N, O, and P*.
- Point to an alphabet chart while singing the song, and sing parts softly to listen for how well students know the letters.

they contain horizontal, vertical, diagonal, or curving lines; whether they have descenders (parts that extend below the line); and their orientation.

Learning the alphabet begins with “The Alphabet Song.” Many students enter school knowing this song and recognizing some letters, such as those in their name. The goal, however, is to get students to rapidly name all the letters. Students who recognize letters with accuracy and speed have an easier time learning the sounds associated with them (Adams, 1990).

Students learn the alphabet best through “active exploration of the relationships between letter names, the sounds of the letter names, their visual characteristics, and the motor movement involved in their formation” (Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 1996). This

results from direct instruction and multiple exposures to print, including the wide use of alphabet books.

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that words are made up of a series of discrete sounds (phonemes). A student who is phonemically aware is able to pick out and manipulate sounds in spoken words. A related term is *phonological awareness*. It is an umbrella term that includes both awareness of words at the phoneme (sound) level and awareness of larger word units, such as syllables and onset and rime.

Phonemic awareness deals with sounds in spoken words, whereas phonics involves the relationship between sounds and written letters or spellings. As a result, phonemic awareness is most commonly associated with oral activities, and phonics is associated with print. However, research shows that the combination of letter work and phonemic awareness is quite powerful, especially for more sophisticated skills like phoneme substitution, addition, and deletion. These skills are generally addressed after students have begun reading, and the use of print in these activities helps students (Adams, 1990). When students begin learning letter-sound relationships, combining phonemic awareness and phonics can accelerate students’ progress (Ehri & Roberts, 2006). Prior to that, the activities are oral.

There are five basic types of phonemic awareness activities, all designed to increase student understanding of how sounds work in words. See the following. Note that the individual activities in Activity Types 2–4 are presented in a progression from easy to complex.

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## FIVE BASIC TYPES OF ACTIVITIES

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### Activity Type 1: Rhyme and Alliteration

1. Rhyme (Begin by having students identify rhyming words, then progress to having them generate rhyming words.)
2. Alliteration (Say aloud a sentence containing words that mostly begin with the same sound, as in “Six seals sell sandwiches at the seashore,” and have students identify the repeated sound.)
3. Assonance (Say aloud a sentence containing words that mostly have the same vowel sound, as in “The leaf, the bean, and the peach are all within reach,” and have students identify the repeated sound.)

### Activity Type 2: Oddity Tasks (phoneme categorization)

1. Rhyme (e.g., “Which word does not rhyme—*sat*, *mat*, or *pan*?”)
2. Beginning consonants (e.g., “Which two words begin with the same sound?”)
3. Ending consonants (e.g., “Which two words end with the same sound?”)
4. Medial sounds (long vowels—e.g., “Which word does not have the same middle sound?”)
5. Medial sounds (short vowels—e.g., “Which two words have the same middle sound?”)
6. Medial sounds (consonants, as in words like *kitten* or *lesson*)

### Activity Type 3: Oral Blending

1. Syllables (Say the syllables in a word and have students put them together, as in “*ta . . . ble*.”)
2. Onset and rime (Say the onset and rime in a word and have students put the sounds together, as in “/s/ . . . *at*.”)
3. Phoneme by phoneme (Say a word sound by sound and have students string together the sounds, as in “/s/ . . . /a/ . . . /t/.”)

#### Activity Type 4: Oral Segmentation (including counting sounds)

1. Syllables (Say or clap a word by syllables—explain that each syllable has one vowel sound or “chin drop.”)
2. Onset and rime (Say a word by onset and rime. The *rime* is the vowel and everything after it in a syllable. The rime in *sat* is *at*. A word with more than one syllable has more than one rime. The *onset* is the consonant, consonant blend, or consonant digraph that precedes the rime. The onset in *sat* is *s*.)
3. Phoneme by phoneme (Say a word sound by sound and/or count sounds.)

#### Activity Type 5: Phoneme Manipulation

1. Initial sound substitution (Replace the first sound in *man* with /p/.)
2. Final sound substitution (Replace the last sound in *bad* with /g/.)
3. Vowel substitution (Replace the middle sound in *hat* with /o/.)
4. Syllable deletion (Say *noble* without *no*.)
5. Initial sound deletion (Say *sat* without /s/.)
6. Final sound deletion (Say *make* without /k/.)
7. Initial phoneme in a blend deletion (Say *slip* without /s/.)
8. Final phoneme in a blend deletion (Say *nest* without /t/.)
9. Second phoneme in a blend deletion (Say *slip* without /l/.)
10. Initial sound addition (Add /s/ to the beginning of *at*.)
11. Final sound addition (Add /t/ to the end of *res*.)

Why is phonemic awareness so important? Many students struggle with phonics because they don't have the prerequisite phonemic awareness skills other

## 4 BEST EFFECT

### Phonemic Awareness Terms

- *Rime* = the vowel and everything after it in a syllable
- *Onset* = the consonant, consonant blend, or consonant digraph that precedes the rime in a syllable
- *Phoneme* = sound
- *Initial* = beginning, *medial* = middle, *final* = ending

children acquire through years of being read to, singing nursery rhymes, and playing with sounds through songs. Research shows that approximately 20% of students lack phonemic awareness (Shankweiler & Liberman, 1989). Without early preventive measures, many of these students will fall behind their peers in reading and/or be diagnosed with a learning disability. These readers tend to read less, have fewer exposures to print, and are less likely to memorize large numbers of words, further falling behind their peers.

However, phonemic awareness can be taught. And, it doesn't take a great deal of time to bring many students' phonemic awareness skills up to a level at which phonics instruction begins to make sense. In some studies (Honig, 1995), as few as 11–15 hours of intensive phonemic awareness training spread out over an appropriate time period produced results. "The purpose of training is to help children respond to reading instruction more effectively. Specifically, it helps children understand how spoken language is represented by the alphabetic system" (Torgeson & Bryant, 1994). The goal of this instruction is understanding how words work.

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# Best Practices and Look-Fors for Success



*Source:* Images courtesy of Pixabay (cat: Elisabeth Rijsken; hat: PublicDomainPictures; pan: Walter Bichler).

The most important aspects of teaching readiness skills include the following:

**1. For phonemic awareness, focus on the “power skills” of oral blending and oral segmentation.** I call these the power skills because they are directly linked to early reading and writing success in the most powerful way. For example, if a student can’t orally blend the sounds to form a word (e.g., you say three sounds like /s/, /a/, /t/, and the student can’t string them together to make *sat*), then that student won’t be able to sound out the word *sat* when he sees it in print. Why? Because what the student must do is attach a sound to each letter and orally string together those sounds to make a real word.

Likewise, if a student can’t orally segment a word (e.g., you say *sat*, and the student can’t break it apart into its three constituent sounds—/s/, /a/, /t/), then that student will struggle writing words. Why? When we first learned to write words, we said the word in our minds, then thought about each sound in the word and attached a letter or spelling to that sound.

**2. Teach the phonemic awareness skills in progression from the easiest to the most complex.** For example, teach students how to blend syllables before you teach them how to blend onset and rime. You can teach activities from multiple activity types simultaneously. That is, students can be clapping syllables and identifying rhyming words in the same instructional cycle. It is not essential to master one activity in one activity type before moving on. Your goal is to create an overall awareness of how words work. Use your state standards (e.g., the Common Core State Standards) as a guideline for which skills should be taught at each grade level.

**3. Provide supports for students during phonemic awareness activities.** For example, initial exercises might include picture cards to help students remember the words being compared (e.g., pictures of a *cat*, *hat*, and *pan* in a rhyme activity). Limit the number of items in an exercise (e.g., two to start) and slowly increase the number as students become more proficient or as a challenge for advanced learners (up to four or five). Also, use manipulatives to make the activities concrete where applicable. One classic example of this is the use of Sound Boxes and counters during oral segmentation exercises, as shown below.



**4. Many software and training programs exist to help students who struggle with phonemic awareness.** I recommend finding those based on the most current research and that have a body of data to support their effectiveness. Use them with your struggling readers during small group differentiated instruction time.

**5. Below are examples of strong instructional routines for both oral blending and oral segmentation.**

### Oral Blending Routine

#### Step 1: Introduce

Tell students the purpose of the activity. Say, “We will be blending, or putting together, sounds to make words.”

#### Step 2: Model (I Do)

Say each sound in a word. Model how to blend the sounds to make the whole word. Start with two-letter words (e.g., *am*, *is*), progress to consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words (*sat*, *man*) starting with continuous sounds that can be stretched (e.g., /f/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /r/, /s/, /v/, /z/), progress to words that begin with stop sounds (e.g., *bad*), then

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progress to words beginning with consonant blends (e.g., *slip*). You will progress as students begin showing consistent success with the current level of activity. For some students, this may occur quickly, within a few weeks. For others, it will take much longer. The goal is to continually and gradually stretch students by introducing activities of slightly more complex skill demands. Say, “I am going to put sounds together to make a word. I’ll say each sound in the word. Then I will blend the sounds together to say the word. Listen: /s/, /a/, /t/, /sssaat/, sat. The word is sat.”

### **Step 3: Guided Practice/Practice (We Do/You Do)**

Provide a word sound by sound for students to practice putting together (blending the sounds) to form a whole word. Say, “Listen to the sounds. Blend, or put together, the sounds to say the whole word: /f/, /i/, /sh/.”

### **Corrective Feedback**

When students make mistakes, stretch together (or sing) the sounds. Move your hands from right to left as you move from sound to sound to emphasize the changing sounds. Repeat the routine using the same word, asking students to respond without you.

## **Oral Segmentation Routine**

### **Step 1: Introduce**

Tell students the purpose of the activity. Say, “Today we will be segmenting, or taking apart, a word sound by sound.”

*Note:* It is ideal to use Sound Boxes (or Elkonin boxes—named after the Russian researcher who created them) to help students see and feel each sound in the word. Other tactile approaches include modeling how to stretch the sounds (like a rubber band) before students segment the word, or moving your hands from right to left (or down your arm) as you move from sound to sound.

### **Step 2: Model (I Do)**

Model how to segment the sounds in a word. Start with two-letter words (e.g., *am*, *is*), progress to CVC words (*sat*, *man*) starting with continuous sounds that can be stretched (e.g., /f/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /r/, /s/, /v/, /z/), progress to words that begin with stop sounds (e.g., *bad*), then progress to words beginning with consonant blends (e.g., *slip*). Say, “I am going to say a word, then I will say it sound by sound. As I say each sound, I will place one counter in each box. Listen: *sat*. Now I will say *sat* sound by sound [stretch each sound three seconds so students can hear each discrete sound]: /s/ [place counter in first box], /a/ [place counter in second box], /t/ [place counter in third box]. The word *sat* has three sounds: /s/, /a/, and /t/ [point to each box as you say the sound].”

### **Step 3: Guided Practice/Practice (We Do/You Do)**

State words (at least 6–10) for students to segment phoneme by phoneme, or sound by sound. Do the first word with students. Say, “Listen to the word. Segment, or break apart, the word sound by sound.” (Use Elkonin boxes, or Sound Boxes, as a support early on. You can use Sound Boxes for CVC words, short-vowel words with consonant blends and digraphs, and even some simple long-vowel words. However, as spellings become more complex, such as words with a final *e*, the boxes will be less useful, and students should have enough experience segmenting words to not need them.)

### **Corrective Feedback**

When students make mistakes, stretch the word using the rubber band technique. Have students repeat. Then use the Sound Boxes to model how to place one counter on each box as you stretch the word and move from sound to sound. Repeat the routine using the same word, asking students to respond without you.

### **Connect to Spelling**

Use segmentation and the Sound Boxes to help students transition to spelling words. After students have segmented a word, have them

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replace each counter with a letter (or letters) to spell the word. This breaking apart and then putting together of words with print will accelerate students' understanding of how words work. Say, "What is the first sound in the word *sat*? /s/. What letter do we write for the /s/ sound? *s*. Write that letter in the first box." Continue with the rest of the word.

**6. For alphabet recognition, focus on a sensible sequence** (I'll address this in detail in the next section); separate confusing letters and sounds; teach the name, shape, and sound of each letter to mastery; assess for both accuracy and speed in recognition; connect handwriting to letter sounds; use mnemonics and action rhymes as appropriate; include multisensory activities (including sorts) to distinguish similar letters; adjust the pace based on student needs; and read tons of alphabet books.



*Courtesy of Rick Harrington Photography*

# Common Instructional Pitfalls

Many common pitfalls regarding teaching readiness skills exist. These include the following:

**1. There is an overfocus on rhyme, instead of the power skills of oral blending and oral segmentation, which have stronger reading and writing payoff.**

Recent research states that “focusing early phonemic awareness instruction on blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemes has been shown to produce greater improvements in phonemic awareness and future reading achievement in young children than time spent on rhyming and alliteration” (Reutzel, 2015). Although rhyme and alliteration activities and associated books are plentiful and loads of fun, the instructional benefit isn’t as strong as devoting the majority of your instructional time to working with words at the phoneme, or sound, level.

**2. The language of instruction used by some teachers causes confusion or isn’t specific enough to positively affect learning.**

For example, when teaching rhyme, I often hear teachers say, “Two words rhyme because they sound the same at the end.” To us—skilled readers and writers—we know what that means. When we see the words *mat* and *sat*, we know instantly that they rhyme. However, a beginning reader who learns the above definition of rhyme might think that *mat* and *bit* rhyme since they both “sound the same at the end.” That is, both end in the /t/ sound. So, why do words *really* rhyme? That’s what we need our students to understand deeply. Let’s look at *mat* and *sat* again. They rhyme because they both end in /at/. In order for a teacher to explain rhyme in a way that avoids possible student confusion, the language of instruction has to change and be more explicit. As a result, the teacher might say something like this: “The words *mat* and *sat* rhyme because they both end in /at/. Listen, /m/ . . . /at/, *mat*. /s/ . . . /at/, *sat*. Do you hear /at/ at the end of *mat* and *sat*? Yes. The two words rhyme because they both end in the /at/ sounds.”

**3. There is a lack of support during phonemic awareness exercises, such as not stretching sounds using hand signals or not using manipulatives (e.g., Sound Boxes, picture cards) during exercises to concretize the activity and support memory of sounds.**

These supports aid in student learning and should be included as scaffolds early on, then slowly removed to check student growth.

*Although rhyme and alliteration activities and associated books are plentiful and loads of fun, the instructional benefit isn’t as strong as devoting the majority of your instructional time to working with words at the phoneme, or sound, level.*



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**4. Not including letters in more sophisticated activities like phonemic manipulation because teachers have been taught that phonemic awareness activities that are only oral can slow or impede learning.** Yes, early phonemic awareness activities are purely oral. Also, there was an emphasis on separating phonemic awareness from phonics when it hit prominence in our national conversation in the early 1990s. Many teachers were taught the mantra “you can do phonemic awareness activities in the dark (because you only need to hear), but you need the lights on for phonics activities (to see the print).” However, the research is clear that when students begin learning letter sounds, slowly incorporating them into phonemic awareness tasks is beneficial. For example, doing an oral segmentation exercise with the Sound Boxes and counters, and following it up by having students write or place letter cards in each box to connect the sound to a spelling, is beneficial. Or, modeling how to do a phonemic substitution task using letter cards before students do it orally can help them better understand and visualize the activity. For example, if you want students to substitute the first sound in *mat* with /s/ to make a new word, begin by having them form the word *mat* with letter cards. Then ask them what the first sound in *mat* (that they will be replacing) is. Ask them to point to the letter that stands for that sound. Have them physically remove that letter card. Then ask them what sound they will replace the /m/ sound with (/s/). Ask them what letter stands for that sound

(s) and prompt them to place the s letter card in the same position that the m card was in. Ask them to read the new word formed (*sat*). This is a very concrete way to introduce a complex phonemic awareness task. We are missing opportunities to accelerate learning when we don't slowly incorporate letters into phonemic awareness activities as students progress through the skills.

**5. Doing phonemic awareness well past the time students need it is another issue.** In many reading programs, phonemic awareness activities are part of daily instruction in Grade 2 and sometimes Grade 3. The reality is that once students get a basic understanding of how words work, these activities become less useful. Plus, some of the phonics activities, such as word building in which students are building a series of words that vary by only one sound spelling, have built-in phonemic awareness practice (students must think about the sounds in words, which sound is different, what spelling stands for that sound, and in which position of the word to make the change). Thankfully, the Common Core State Standards end phonemic awareness work in Grade 1, which will help to raise awareness of when these activities should cease for most early learners.

**6. Improper sequencing of activities is another common issue.** The list of phonemic awareness activity types presented earlier provides some guidance in proper sequencing. Remember that students don't have to master one activity type before progressing to a different activity type (e.g., rhyme before initial sound identification). Rather, a mix of activities at approximately the same level should be done during the same time period (e.g., several weeks of instruction), then should progress to slightly more difficult tasks as students begin showing competence with the existing activities. Take stock of the range of skills you must cover throughout the year and make sure all are introduced by the time you have completed two-thirds of your curriculum (school year). That will ensure enough time for students to practice the later-introduced skills to mastery. Reserving more complex skills for the final weeks or months of the school year will not give students enough practice opportunities to achieve mastery.

**7. Lacking cumulative assessment with respect to alphabet recognition and not testing both accuracy and speed cause some teachers to miss valuable opportunities to fine-tune their instruction and meet the diverse needs of their students.** That is, we need to monitor student growth in identifying letters and their sounds over a longer period of time to check mastery. Therefore, assessments should be cumulative and become longer as the year progresses. We should also assess whether or not students can identify the letter and sound (an accuracy check) as well as whether or not they can do

*The accuracy score tells you which letters are and are not being learned, and the speed score tells you which letters and sounds do and do not need more instruction and practice because of mastery issues.*

so automatically (a speed check). You might want to check each letter and sound identified correctly on an assessment and circle all those that were identified rapidly to get two scores for the assessment. Each provides you different and useful information. The accuracy score tells you which letters are and are not being learned, and the speed score tells you which letters and sounds do and do not need more instruction and practice because of mastery issues. If one student can identify all the letters accurately in 30 seconds and another can identify all of them accurately in two minutes, are these students at the same level with the same instructional needs? No. That is why adding a speed check is so vital to differentiating and planning future instruction.

**8. Some curriculum doesn't take into account confusing letters, separate instruction adequately, or provide supports to help students distinguish these letters.** My favorite trick to distinguish *b* and *d* is to ask students what letter comes after *b*. I write the letter *c* on the board. I then draw a straight line down the right side of *c* to make the letter *d* as I say, "You have to go through *c* to get to *d*." It works every time! Remember that letters differ in the direction of their extension (e.g., *b* and *p*, *d* and *g*, *q* and *d*), their left-right orientation (e.g., *b* and *d*, *q* and *p*, *g* and *p*), their top-bottom orientation (e.g., *m* and *w*, *n* and *u*, *M* and *W*), and their line-curve features (e.g., *u* and *v*, *U* and *V*). The letters that confuse students the most are those with reversible parts (e.g., *b* and *d*, *p* and *d*, *q* and *b*, *h* and *u*, *i* and *l*) (Popp, 1964). Recent research has also shown that letters that go in the opposite direction of writing, such as *d*, are particularly challenging for young readers and writers and will require more attention. The following four letter groups are especially difficult for students and should not be taught at or near the same time—*e*, *a*, *s*, *c*, and *o*; *b*, *d*, *p*, *o*, *g*, and *h*; *f*, *l*, *t*, *k*, *i*, and *h*; and *n*, *m*, *u*, *h*, and *r* (Manzo & Manzo, 1993).

# DAY CLINIC

## Examine Your Practices

Now it's your turn. Ask yourself the following questions to consider your instructional practices and materials as they relate to readiness skills.

1. What sequence am I using to teach the alphabet? Are confusing letters and sounds taught far enough apart so students can master one before the other is introduced?
2. Am I focusing my alphabet instruction on the letter's name, shape, and sound in ways that are interactive and multisensory?
3. Do I have mnemonics to help students remember letter sounds or distinguish those that are confusing?
4. Do I teach handwriting? Do I have my students say the sound each time they write the letter to reinforce the letter-sound relationship, connect it to the physical act of writing the letter, and accelerate learning?
5. Which phonemic awareness activities am I spending the bulk of my time on? Do I include enough oral blending and oral segmentation tasks weekly? Am I careful not to overfocus on rhyme?
6. Am I sequencing my phonemic awareness tasks from easiest to most complex?
7. Am I using manipulatives and other supports in my activities to scaffold the practice as long as students need these supports, but taking them away over time?

List three ways you can modify your alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness instruction over the next month. Record the results of these changes in the chart that follows, then progress to other changes as needed.

Change	Effect on Student Learning
Change 1	Outcome
	Future Modification
Change 2	Outcome
	Future Modification
Change 3	Outcome
	Future Modification

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## 4 BEST EFFECT

### My Favorite Manipulatives

- Sound Boxes for oral segmentation exercises
- Oversized letter cards for word-building activities (e.g., Living Words, in which students hold the cards in the front of the classroom and line up to spell a word)
- Magnetic letters for a host of phonics activities (also available as an app)
- Interactive whiteboard activities with spinners, spinning cubes, and movable letters and pictures for high engagement

Select your favorite (or strongest) alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness lessons. I suggest selecting a week's worth of lessons for one letter (alphabet recognition) and an oral blending and/or oral segmentation lesson (phonemic awareness). You might also wish to write a sample lesson for each yourself—taking an existing lesson and modifying it. Meet with your grade-level teachers and share these lessons. Evaluate their effectiveness and brainstorm ways to fine-tune them to accelerate students' mastery.



Available for download at <http://resources.corwin.com/blevinsphonics>

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# Next Steps to Leap Forward

If you have fairly strong readiness skills instruction in place, there are several ways to take that instruction to the next level and ensure all students are benefiting from it.

**1. Analyze specific instructional moments and compare them to your overall instructional goals.** Ask yourself, “Can I accomplish more with this activity? Can I accelerate my students’ learning?” A simple example of this occurred when I was working on handwriting with a group of Grade 1 students. I noticed that they were dutifully forming the letter on each line of their page, writing the letter 20 or more times. However, my students didn’t seem to have full focus on the activity. Some were even chatting quietly with classmates while writing their letters. So, I asked myself, “What am I *really* trying to accomplish with this activity?” Sure, I wanted my students to correctly form the target letter, but when I thought about how that connects to early reading and writing growth, I realized that what I *really* wanted my students to acquire was a series of things: forming the letter properly and efficiently, connecting the letter to its associated sound, and creating a motor-skill link between the action of writing that letter and its sound. As a result, I asked my students to start saying the sound of the letter each time they wrote it. We were working on the letter *s*. So a chorus of “/s/, /s/, /s/, /s/” rang throughout the classroom as students wrote. At the end of the short activity, my students had practiced writing the letter about 20 times, and I had reinforced the letter–sound connection, thereby accelerating their mastery. This is the kind of thinking we need to do with all our phonics-related activities. If we consider how each activity connects to actual reading and writing, then ways to amplify the activity to move closer and faster to those goals can change what students do during the activity.

**2. Build in daily fluency work for mastery learning.** There often isn’t enough cumulative review of letter sounds in most curricula. This can be corrected using some simple exercises. For example, keep a letter card set for all the letters and spellings you have taught so far in the year. This can be a simple stack of cards (the letters and spellings written on individual index cards), a set of cards on a ring for easy storage, or a set of alphabet/spelling cards provided by the publisher of your reading or phonics program. Each morning, as a warm-up to the day’s activities, quickly flip through those cards as students chorally say the letter name and/or sound (depending on what you are focusing on). This should take no more than a minute or so. No more! This daily warm-up is a regular review and reminder of past learning. It also serves as a great formative assessment tool. Observe students

throughout the activity. If the volume decreases for a letter sound, that might indicate a lack of mastery. Also keep an eye out for those students who respond *after* they hear other students respond, or don't respond at all. Take note of those students and the letter sounds causing the most difficulties. Use this information to adjust instruction and form small groups for extended teaching and learning.

**3. Use instructional transitions to review skills.** Many readiness skill lessons require materials, such as big books, letter cards, photo cards, magnetic letters, or other manipulatives. Often too much time is lost during a lesson distributing, organizing, and collecting these materials. To avoid this, list skills you want to review for the week (e.g., previously taught letter sounds, a lower-level phonemic awareness skill). Then, during these transition times, use these activities. Keep in mind that every minute of your day is instructional. These in-between times are ideal for singing “The Alphabet Song,” doing a quick phonemic awareness task (e.g., First Sound—say a word and ask students to chorally say the first sound), or reviewing action rhymes associated with each letter. These activities not only provide important review; they also focus students' attention (increasing time on task) and decrease behavioral issues common to these transitional times.

**4. Add articulation work for students who struggle with letter sounds or for English learners in whose native language the sound isn't used.**

Focus on the position of the lips, teeth, and tongue. For example, ask students to put their hand in front of their mouth as they make the /p/ sound. Ask them if

Especially for  
ENGLISH  
LEARNERS

#### 4 BEST EFFECT

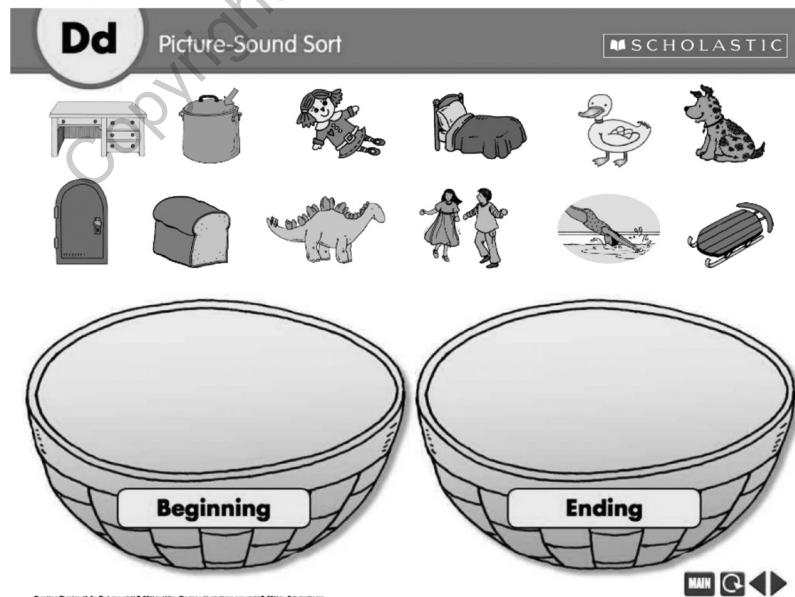
##### Quick Daily Letter-Sound Review

- Use a cumulative set of letter cards (containing all the letter sounds taught to date) and flip through them quickly as a 30- to 60-second lesson warm-up.
- Create a letter path on the floor. Have students walk the path as they say the letter name. Repeat with the letter sound.
- Point to letters on the alphabet chart or alphabet wall frieze in random order as students say the letter name and sound.
- Show a letter card to each student before lining up. The student must give the letter name, the sound, and a word beginning with that sound.

they feel a puff of air. (They should.) Then ask them to repeat the sound as they put their hand on their throat. Ask them if they feel a vibration, or shaking. (They should not.) Repeat with the /b/ sound. Point out that both sounds are made in the same way (the lips start out together, followed by a puff of air), but they differ because the /b/ sound causes the throat to vibrate or shake. Another example is to have students make two similar sounds, like /a/ and /e/, and focus on how their mouth “feels” when they make each sound (the position of the lips, jaw, etc.). You might even have students watch as a partner makes the sound or watch as they make the sound while looking in a small mirror. Then connect the feeling of each sound (/a/ or /e/) to the letter that stands for the sound. The goal is for students to become so accustomed to how each sound “feels” when they form it and how this “feeling” is different for each sound that when they go to write a word with a short *a* or short *e*, they will connect the way their mouth feels with the correct letter.

**5. Include apps and whiteboard activities during whole group and small group instruction.** These activities also make for great independent and partner activities for students to complete when you are meeting with other students during small group differentiation time. Below are some examples.

The following activity is from *Teaching the Alphabet* by Wiley Blevins (2011a). Similar sound sort whiteboard activities are easy to create yourself. You need a few pictures of items with the target sounds and two containers in which to sort the pictures.



Source: Blevins (2011a).

*Reading Raven* ([www.readingraven.com](http://www.readingraven.com)) has a range of activities and levels. To make purchasing apps worth your while, I recommend looking for those with the widest range of activity levels so they can be used for the majority of your students and over an extended period of time.



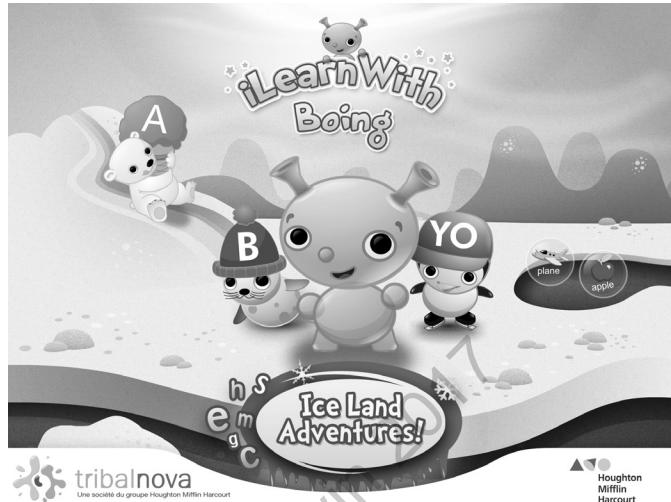
*Source:* Courtesy of Reading Raven.

*Starfall ABCs* is one of the most popular alphabet apps. The associated website, [www.starfall.com](http://www.starfall.com), has loads of great resources for teachers.



*Source:* Starfall ABCs retrieved from [Starfall.com](http://Starfall.com), © 2016 Starfall Education, reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

*iLearn With Boing: Ice Land Adventures!* ([www.ilearnwith.com/our-apps/literacy](http://www.ilearnwith.com/our-apps/literacy)) provides a wide range of fun and easy games for letter identification. Students respond well to interactive games like these that have enough practice to make them worth students' time and effort.



Source: Courtesy of iLearn With Boing: Ice Land Adventures! © 2014 Tribal Nova Inc. All rights reserved.

*BugbrainED* (<http://bugbrained.com>) is one of those rare apps that models for students how to segment and blend words. I always look for apps that provide the kind of teaching—albeit probably brief—or corrective feedback that is of a quality similar to what they might receive by a teacher or well-informed parent.



Source: Courtesy of BugbrainED.

# Success Ingredient I: Readiness Skills

Background and Key Characteristics	Best Practices and Look-Fors for Success	Common Instructional Pitfalls	Day Clinic: Examine Your Practices	Next Steps to Leap Forward
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition are the two best predictors of early reading success and must be addressed for phonics instruction to “work.”</li> <li>Students need to learn letter names, sounds, visual characteristics, and how to write them (motor movement).</li> <li>There are five major phonemic awareness activity types: rhyme and alliteration, oddity tasks, oral blending, oral segmentation, and phoneme manipulation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on oral blending and oral segmentation—the two phonemic awareness skills most closely connected to reading and writing growth.</li> <li>Teach the phonemic awareness skills in progression from easiest to most complex.</li> <li>Teach alphabet recognition from high-utility to low-utility letters and sounds and separate those that are visually or auditorily confusing.</li> <li>Provide lesson supports such as picture cards and manipulatives.</li> <li>Use software training programs for students needing extra support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overfocus on rhyme, instead of the power skills of oral blending and oral segmentation</li> <li>Weak language of instruction, causing learning confusion</li> <li>Lack of supports during phonemic awareness exercises</li> <li>Not including letters in more sophisticated phonemic awareness tasks (e.g., phoneme manipulation)</li> <li>Doing phonemic awareness well past the time students need it</li> <li>Improper sequencing of activities</li> <li>No cumulative assessment tool</li> <li>Not separating confusing or similar letters and sounds</li> </ul>	<p>Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What sequence am I using to teach the alphabet? Are confusing letters and sounds taught far enough apart so students can master one before the other is introduced?</li> <li>Am I focusing my alphabet instruction on the letter’s name, shape, and sound in ways that are interactive and multisensory?</li> <li>Do I have mnemonics to help students remember letter sounds or distinguish those that are confusing?</li> <li>Do I teach handwriting? Do I have my students say the sound each time they write the letter to reinforce the letter–sound relationship, connect it to the physical act of writing the letter, and accelerate learning?</li> <li>Which phonemic awareness activities am I spending the bulk of my time on? Do I include enough oral blending and oral segmentation tasks weekly? Am I careful not to overfocus on rhyme?</li> <li>Am I sequencing my phonemic awareness tasks from easiest to most complex?</li> <li>Am I using manipulatives and other supports in my activities to scaffold the practice as long as students need these supports, but taking them away over time?</li> </ul> <p><b>Try it!</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>List three ways to modify your instruction.</li> <li>Meet in grade-level teams and evaluate weekly lessons.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fine-tune instruction by analyzing specific instructional moments and compare to instructional goals.</li> <li>Build in daily fluency work for mastery.</li> <li>Use review skills for instructional transitions.</li> <li>Add articulation work for struggling students and English learners.</li> <li>Include technology (apps and whiteboard activities).</li> </ul>