



Department  
for Education

# The reading framework

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# Contents

Introduction	4
Aims	4
Overview	5
Section 1: The importance of reading and a conceptual model	10
Why reading matters	10
The Simple View of Reading	16
Section 2: Language comprehension in Reception and key stage 1	21
Developing talk	21
Poetry and rhymes in Reception and year 1	29
Story times in Reception, year 1 and year 2	31
Section 3: Word reading and spelling	40
Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics	40
Teaching a systematic programme in Reception and key stage 1	50
Assessing word reading	58
Section 4: Developing fluency	60
Fluency: speed and accuracy	60
Progressive fluency	61
Section 5: Pupils who need the most support	66
Keeping up from the start	66
Older pupils who need to catch up	68
Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities	77
Section 6: What skilled readers can do	81
About the reading brain	81
What a skilled reader can do	82
Section 7: Choosing and organising books	85
Decodable' books for pupils learning to read	85
Organising book stock	89
Section 8: Developing a reading for pleasure culture	91
Keeping all pupils reading	91
Book club	92

Promoting books	93
Class reading time	98
Reading aloud to pupils	101
Section 9: Reading across the curriculum	103
Access to lessons across the curriculum	103
Talk and discussion across the curriculum	103
Selecting texts across the curriculum	104
Section 10: Teaching reading in the English lesson	107
The purposes of reading in English lessons	107
Section 11: National assessments	120
EYFS Profile	120
The phonics screening check	120
Key stage 2 assessments	122
Section 12: Leadership and management of reading	123
Headteachers and leaders	123
Section 13: Supporting pupils' reading in key stage 3	130
Identifying pupils who need support when moving from primary to secondary school	130
Appendices	133
Appendix 1. For parents: reading stories to children	133
Appendix 2. Supporting children's thinking	134
Appendix 3. Guidance for managing talk in pairs	136
Appendix 4: For teachers: preparing to read a story	137
Appendix 5. An alphabetic code chart	141
Appendix 6. Pronouncing phonemes	144
Appendix 7. Decodable texts for pupils beginning to learn to read	146
Appendix 8. Guidance for choosing a phonics programme	148
Appendix 9. Building a mental model	151
Appendix 10. Content domains for key stage 2 assessment	156
Appendix 11. Considering text choice at key stage 3	157
Appendix 12. Glossary	159
Appendix 13. Research underpinning this Framework	167

## Introduction

Reading is fundamental to education. Proficiency in reading, writing and spoken language is vital for pupils' success. Through these, they develop communication skills for education and for working with others: in school, in training and at work. Pupils who find it difficult to learn to read are likely to struggle across the curriculum, since English is both a subject in its own right and the medium for teaching. This is why the government is committed to continuing to raise standards of literacy for all.

## Aims

By the end of year 6, pupils' reading and writing should be sufficiently fluent and effortless for them to manage the general demands of the curriculum in year 7, across all subjects and not just in English.<sup>1</sup>

This document's key objective is to help schools to meet the expectations set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework and the national curriculum. It aligns with Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework.

It provides guidance about how reading should be taught in primary schools. It focuses on supporting leaders and teachers to make sure that their pupils start secondary school as confident readers, able to engage with the challenges of a wider curriculum. This is not only valuable to primary schools, but also to secondary school teachers to understand how reading is taught from the very beginning and how it develops before pupils enter year 7. It outlines some of the different challenges of teaching reading in the secondary curriculum and provides support for secondary schools in teaching pupils who have not yet met those expectations in reading.

Its audience is primary and secondary schools in England, other key stage 3 educators, initial teacher training (ITT) partnerships, specialist provision and others.

The guidance aims to:

- set out some of the research underpinning the importance of talk, stories and systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in Reception, the importance of 'fidelity to the

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (2013). 'The national curriculum in England. Framework document, September 2013' London: Department for Education

programme' in phonics<sup>2</sup>, and the DfE's evidence-informed position on the best way to teach reading

- support schools to evaluate their teaching of reading from Reception to year 9 and to identify how to improve provision if weaknesses are found
- provide practical support for high-quality teaching of SSP, fluency and comprehension, including assessment
- explain the importance of systematic phonics teaching for older pupils who are at risk of failing to learn to read because they cannot decode well enough
- support schools in motivating pupils to develop a love of reading
- support schools working with parents to help their children learn to read.

Key points are listed at the end of each section to support leaders and teachers to audit their current practice.

ITT partnerships may wish to consider using the guidance with primary and secondary teachers to develop their understanding of teaching reading and to give them informed and practical support. For beginning readers and pupils with very low proficiency in reading, teaching will focus on word reading, and especially systematic synthetic phonics. For more proficient readers, it will focus on fluency, comprehension and engagement with texts.

The document is based on teachers' experiences, classroom observations, assessments and research, as well as advice from and the contributions of experts. It also reflects the experiences of many primary and secondary schools that excel in the teaching of reading, including those in the English Hubs programme, administered by the Department for Education (DfE).<sup>3</sup> The references to research provide schools, ITT trainees, and those who teach them, with sources for further reading. The appendices give additional support, including a glossary.

## Overview

### Why reading matters

The guidance begins by setting out the social, cultural and economic importance of reading before outlining a conceptual model of it. The national curriculum programmes of

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<sup>2</sup> Rose J (2006). 'Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report' Department for Education and Skills, page 21

<sup>3</sup> The UK government's Department for Education is responsible for education in England.

study for reading are based on this model, which consists of two dimensions: language comprehension and word reading.

## Language comprehension

The guidance discusses the importance of talk and stories, and the critical links between these, especially the role stories play in developing young children's vocabulary and language. It also considers the role of poetry, [rhymes](#) and songs in attuning young children to the sounds of language.

It explains how teachers might expand children's store of words through talk throughout the day, within the curriculum and, in particular, through stories. Listening to and talking about stories and non-fiction develops children's vocabulary, because they meet words they would rarely hear or use in everyday speech.

Understanding vocabulary is vital for comprehension at all stages – both reading and listening – and so for all pupils' wider learning and progress.

## Teaching word reading and spelling

The national curriculum is designed to make sure that all pupils are able to read and write fluently and proficiently by the time they leave year 6, so that they can make progress at secondary school. A vital element of this is the early and successful teaching of phonics, complemented throughout the school years by teaching that promotes fluency and comprehension.

Understanding that the letters on the page represent the sounds in spoken words underpins successful word reading. Pupils' knowledge of the English alphabetic code – how letters or groups of letters represent the sounds of the language – supports their reading and spelling.

This guidance explains why teachers themselves also need to understand the alphabetic code: evidence supports the key role of phonic knowledge and skills in early reading and spelling.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is the government-designated What Works Centre for Education, providing authoritative advice on evidence to improve teaching and learning. The EEF considers synthetic phonics to be one of the most secure and best-evidenced areas of pedagogy and recommends all schools use a systematic approach to teaching it. The DfE's [Early Career Framework](#), which was quality assured by the EEF, sets out the expectation that all early career teachers learn about phonics and says that SSP is the most effective approach for teaching pupils to decode. Schools should therefore be confident in the rationale for teaching SSP as part of their teaching of reading.

Data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLs) in 2016 showed a significant improvement in the reading performance of boys in England (reducing the gap between boys and girls by 11 points since 2011)<sup>4</sup>, a finding that could be attributed to the roll out of systematic phonics programmes in England since 2010. More recent PIRLS data from 2021 show that only 11 countries, including England, did not experience a significant drop in attainment since 2016.<sup>5</sup> The solid foundation in reading given to pupils in England shows that it was able to withstand the pandemic's disruption. The data also show that the gap between boys and girls has narrowed further, attributed both to a decrease of four points in the average achievement of girls but, more importantly, to a further improvement (by two points) in the scores of boys.<sup>6</sup> The data shows, however, that work still remains to nurture all pupils' love of reading.

## **Children at risk of reading failure**

Pupils who fail to learn to read early on start to dislike reading. The guidance emphasises that pupils need to keep up with their peers rather than be helped to catch up later, at a point when learning in the wider curriculum depends so much on literacy. Where pupils make insufficient progress, extra efforts should be made to provide them with extra practice and support from the beginning.

In evaluating primary schools' teaching of reading, Ofsted's inspectors pay particular attention to pupils who are reading below what is expected for their age.<sup>7</sup>

## **Leadership and management**

Since the national curriculum is statutory in state-maintained primary and secondary schools, teachers are required to teach a programme of systematic phonics from year 1. The EYFS statutory framework also refers to the first stages of systematic phonics.

Ofsted inspects how well primary schools teach their pupils to read using SSP. Inspectors listen to pupils reading, visit lessons, consider schools' policies for teaching reading, and take account of data from the phonics screening checks. Schools that need

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<sup>4</sup> McGrane J and others (2017). 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): National Report for England' London: Department for Education

<sup>5</sup> Lindorff A. and others (2023). 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): National Report for England' London: Department for Education

<sup>6</sup> Lindorff A. and others (2023).

<sup>7</sup> Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. It inspects services providing education and skills for learners of all ages in England. It also inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

to improve their teaching of phonics may find the [section on word reading and spelling](#) particularly useful.

At secondary level, Ofsted expects that ‘all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) ... are able to read to an age-appropriate level and fluency (if not, they will be incapable of accessing the rest of the curriculum, and they will fall rapidly behind their peers)’.<sup>8</sup>

The guidance on [leadership and management \(Section 12\)](#) highlights the roles of school leaders in successfully implementing a programme of systematic phonics, and training and supporting their staff to teach reading as effectively as possible.

## COVID-19 recovery

The DfE recognises that extended school restrictions have had a substantial impact on children and young people’s learning and is committed to helping pupils make up learning they have lost because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As reading is so important for accessing the rest of the curriculum, ensuring pupils catch up on their reading is essential. Accurate assessment to identify next steps is vital. Making progress depends on quality first teaching: this guidance articulates what the excellent teaching of reading looks like. It also offers guidance on targeted support for those with severe or persistent needs in reading. See [Section 5](#) for more information.

Reading also offers important emotional benefits, enabling pupils, through listening to and talking about stories, to talk about their ideas and feelings and to lose themselves in books.

## Other sources of support

The [Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework](#) sets the standards that school and childcare providers must meet for the learning, development and care of children from birth to five in England.

[Development Matters](#), the non-statutory curriculum guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage, can help schools and providers meet the learning and development requirements set out in the EYFS.

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<sup>8</sup> Ofsted (2022). ‘School inspection handbook. Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005’ Manchester: Ofsted



The [SEND Code of Practice 2015](#) includes guidance on the role of Early Years providers and schools in identifying and supporting children with special educational needs (SEN), including those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

The DfE's 34 English Hubs offer support to primary schools to improve their teaching of early language, phonics in Reception and year 1, and reading for pleasure in Reception to year 6. The [English Hubs website](#) can help schools find their local English Hub, which can provide support and information.

Support from the EEF can be found here: [EEF - Education Endowment Foundation](#)

The National Professional Qualification in Leading Literacy is for teachers and middle leaders who have, or want to have, responsibilities for it across a school, year group, key stage or phase. More information can be found here: [Leading literacy NPQ](#)

[Ofsted's English Research Review](#), published in 2022, explores the research literature relating to English, including the research on how to teach reading.

Public libraries can offer support, both in terms of book provision and specialist knowledge, through [Libraries Connected](#) and the [Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians](#). For more information about how School Library Services can help schools, and to be connected to an SLS which could support you, visit [www.sls-uk.org/](http://www.sls-uk.org/).

# Section 1: The importance of reading and a conceptual model

## Why reading matters

I realized in a whiplash burst that those children, all mine for one year, might never reach their full potential as human beings if they never learned to read.<sup>9</sup>

Maryanne Wolf's sudden awareness, as a new teacher, of her responsibilities towards her young class highlights why reading matters. To the individual, it matters emotionally, culturally and educationally; because of the economic impacts within society, it matters to everyone.

## Developing children's spoken language

Becoming a fluent, skilled and attentive reader starts at the earliest stages, before children encounter a book for the first time, partly driven by the quality of their parents'<sup>10</sup> talk with them that expands their vocabulary and comprehension.

This does not appear to happen only in economically advantaged families. This is based on evidence including the example of a study of a group of Spanish-speaking families in the United States, which suggests that:

Infants who experienced more child-directed speech became more efficient in processing familiar words in real time and had larger expressive vocabularies...<sup>11</sup>

To the researchers' surprise, the differences between the families, who were all disadvantaged, in the amount of talk directed to the child were almost as large as those reported in Hart and Risley's much-quoted 1995 study, in which the families differed markedly in terms of their socio-economic circumstances: children with wider vocabularies typically came from wealthier families.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wolf M (2018). 'Reader, come home. The reading brain in a digital world' New York: HarperCollins

<sup>10</sup> The term 'parents' refer to parents and other carers.

<sup>11</sup> Weisleder A and Fernald A. (2013). 'Talking to children matters: Early language experience strengthens processing and builds vocabulary' Psychological Science 2013: volume 24, issue 11, pages 2143-2152

<sup>12</sup> Hart B and Risley TR (1995). 'Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children' Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing

All talk is useful, especially when directed to the child specifically. For instance, children expand their language and vocabulary when they listen to or join in with a story or rhymes in a well-scripted children's television programme or at a library 'Rhyme time', but an adult talking about it with them adds benefits. However, talk about books brings particular advantages.<sup>13</sup>

First, parents who engage their children in books prepare them to become committed and enthusiastic readers: they can transform their attitudes to reading.<sup>14</sup> Their children learn to focus and share the enjoyment of the story; they learn how stories start and finish, and how a plot unravels and is resolved; they learn that books can transport them elsewhere. Without this, as Wolf said, they cannot experience 'the exquisite joys of immersion in the reading life.'<sup>15</sup>

Second, book-related talk introduces children to language that they might not hear in ordinary conversation, especially the vocabulary of the book itself.<sup>16</sup> This primes them to understand what they read later, in their leisure reading and across the curriculum.

Researchers in the United States who had looked at the impact of parents reading with their children quoted the following figures in a news release about their findings:

Here's how many words kids would have heard by the time they were 5 years old: Never read to, 4,662 words; 1–2 times per week, 63,570 words; 3–5 times per week, 169,520 words; daily, 296,660 words; and five books a day, 1,483,300 words.<sup>17</sup>

The only effective route to closing this gap is for children to be taught systematically to read as soon as they start school. In this way, they do not have to rely on adults to read to them. Children who become engaged in reading can make huge progress in their

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<sup>13</sup>Science Daily (2019). <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/04/190404074947.htm>; see also Logan, J., Justice, L.M., Yumus, M., Chaparro-Moreno, L.J.. 'When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap' Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics June 2019, Volume 40, Issue 5, pages 373-386

<sup>14</sup> See [Appendix 1: For parents: reading stories to children](#)

<sup>15</sup> Wolf M (2018).

<sup>16</sup> For example, one study estimated, based on an assessment of the numbers of words in popular board and picture books, that children who are never read to at home are exposed to approximately 300,000 fewer words than children who are read to once day per day from birth to 5 years of age. Logan, J. and others (June 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Science Daily (2019).

literacy development simply through their independent reading, whatever the nature of their early experiences.

This is not to say, however, that all reading difficulties are caused by lack of conversation or engagement with books. Some parents provide the best possible opportunities for conversation and read to their children extensively, but their children still have more difficulty than most in learning to read. Schools should teach these children early and effectively, so that their difficulties do not restrict their full access to the curriculum and so that they also become engaged in reading.

## Reading for pleasure

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) said as recently as 2021 that 'PISA data consistently shows that engagement in reading is strongly correlated with reading performance and is a mediator of gender or socio-economic status'.<sup>18</sup> Whatever pupils' socio-economic background, making sure that they become engaged with reading from the beginning is one of the most important ways to make a difference to their life chances. For this to happen, however, they need to learn to read as fluently as possible and be motivated to continue reading.

In 2000, when the OECD analysed its data on the 15-year-olds who had taken part in that year's assessment, the literacy scores for pupils who were 'highly engaged in reading' were significantly above the international average; those who were 'poorly engaged' scored below it. This was the case whatever their family's occupational status. The OECD emphasised: 'Reading practices can play an important role in reducing the gap between the reading proficiency scores of students from different socio-economic backgrounds.'<sup>19</sup> But pupils cannot be 'highly engaged' if reading words is a struggle. It is vital, therefore, that phonics is a priority in teaching reading.

Extensive international research shows that being a frequent reader is associated with a range of academic, social and emotional benefits. Far more than pleasure is at stake.

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<sup>18</sup> OECD (2021). ['21st-century readers: Developing literacy skills in a digital world'](#) Paris: OECD

<sup>19</sup> OECD (2002). ['Reading for change. Performance and engagement across countries. Results from PISA 2000'](#) Paris: OECD

Multiple studies suggest that enjoyment is associated with higher reading performance.<sup>20</sup> The recent 2021 PIRLS data for England showed that the pupils who said they liked reading the most scored, on average, 34 points more than those who said they did not like reading.<sup>21</sup> In effect, pupils who are reading regularly for enjoyment give themselves unofficial reading lessons, supporting their reading comprehension.<sup>22</sup>

Wide recreational reading expands pupils' knowledge about the world and about language, as well as their understanding of subject-specific academic and technical vocabulary.<sup>23</sup> Such knowledge eases their access to the whole curriculum. Higher performance in mathematics has also been found.<sup>24</sup>

Further, pupils who read regularly report heightened levels of social and emotional wellbeing.<sup>25</sup> For many, reading is a form of relaxation, a place to escape everyday challenges, a source of entertainment. Reading allows readers to adopt new perspectives, develop empathy and become more socially conscious.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> McGrane, J. and others (2017); Mullis, I. V. S., Martin, M. O., Foy, P., & Hooper, M. (2017). 'ePIRLS 2016 International Results in Online Informational Reading'; OECD (2010). 'PISA 2009 Results: Learning to Learn - Student Engagement, Strategies and Practices, 3'; OECD (2021); Toste, J. R., Didion, L., Peng, P., Filderman, M., & McClelland, A. M. (2020). 'A Meta-Analytic Review of the Relations Between Motivation and Reading Achievement for K-12 Students'. *Review of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320919352>

<sup>21</sup> Lindorff, A. and others (2023) p109

<sup>22</sup> Mol, S. E. and Bus, A. G. (2011). 'To Read or Not to Read: A meta-analysis of print exposure from infancy to early adulthood', *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 137, No. 2, pp. 267-296.

Torppa, M., Niemi, P., Vasalampi, K., Lerkkanen, M. K., Tolvanen, A., & Poikkeus, A. M. (2020). Leisure Reading (But Not Any Kind) and Reading Comprehension Support Each Other—A Longitudinal Study Across Grades 1 and 9. *Child Development*, 91(3), 876–900. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13241>

<sup>23</sup> Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1998). What Reading Does for the Mind. *American Educator*, 22, 8–17; Mol and Bus (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Sullivan, A., & Brown, M. (2015). Reading for pleasure and progress in vocabulary and mathematics. *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(1), 971–991. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3180>

<sup>25</sup> Batini, J., F., Luperini, V., Cei, E., Izzo, D. and Toti, G. (2021) The Association Between Reading and Emotional Development: A Systematic Review *Journal of Education and training studies* 9(1)12-48. DOI:10.11114/jets.v9i1.5053; Clark, C., & Teravainen-Goff, A. (2018). Mental Wellbeing, Reading and Writing: How Children and Young People's Mental Wellbeing Is Related to Their Reading and Writing Experiences. National Literacy Trust Research Report <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED593894.pdf> ;

Kennewell, E., Curtis, R. G., Maher, C., Luddy, S., & Virgara, R. (2022). The relationships between school children's wellbeing, socio-economic disadvantage and after-school activities: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Paediatrics*, 22(297). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-022-03322-1>

<sup>26</sup> Kidd, D., & Castano, E. (2019). Reading Literary Fiction and Theory of Mind: Three Preregistered Replications and Extensions of Kidd and Castano (2013). *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, 10(4), 522–531. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550618775410> ; Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., & Peterson, J. B. (2009). Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes. *Communications*, 34, 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.025>

However, recreational reading is declining, both nationally and internationally.<sup>27</sup> This decline is particularly marked for adolescents. Research by the National Literacy Trust in 2022 showed that the reading enjoyment of 8- to 18-year-olds was at its lowest level since 2005.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore essential that schools plan systematically to nurture pupils' desire to read. It cannot be left to chance.

## Motivation and cognitive differences

The OECD's report described the 'entangled relationship' between 'cognition and motivation, proficiency and engagement in reading'. Teachers cannot improve reading skills without also taking account of, for example, 'access to interesting and meaningful reading materials.'<sup>29</sup> The DfE's internal analysis of the data from PIRLS in 2006 suggested it was particularly narrative rather than information texts that made the most difference.<sup>30</sup> Although we tend to associate narratives with literature, they are simply stories and can bring subjects to life across the curriculum.

Children who are good at reading do more of it: they learn more, about all sorts of things, and their expanded vocabulary, gained from their reading, increases their ease of access to more reading. Conversely, those for whom reading is difficult fall behind, not just in their reading but in all subjects and a vicious circle develops. This is why the national curriculum says:

It is essential that, by the end of their primary education, all pupils are able to read fluently, and with confidence, in any subject in their forthcoming secondary education.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, as far back as the 1970s, evidence was emerging suggesting that 'reading for pleasure had a powerful influence on children's cognitive development, especially in terms of their vocabulary'.<sup>32</sup> It therefore seems that it is not just that the academically

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<sup>27</sup> OECD (2021).

<sup>28</sup> Cole, A., Brown, A., Clark, C., & Picton, I. (2022). Children and young people's reading engagement in 2022 Continuing insight into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on reading. National Literacy Trust Research Report [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Reading\\_trends\\_2022\\_-\\_Final.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Reading_trends_2022_-_Final.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> OECD (2002).

<sup>30</sup> Department for Education (2012). 'Research evidence on reading for pleasure' London: Department for Education

<sup>31</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>32</sup> From the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), which has followed the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970. Sullivan A and Brown M. (2013). 'Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading. CLS Working Paper 2013/10' London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, also Sullivan, A., & Brown, M. (2015)

able children read more but that they have become academically more able through the reading they have done.

## Economic and social argument

Teaching pupils to read as well as possible produces advantages for the individual. Without reading, it is much more difficult to access written information, on paper or online. Those who cannot read are also excluded from most social media. Crucially, being unable to read significantly narrows the range of work and life opportunities a person can access.

Reading benefits society, too, both economically and socially. Although estimates of the cost of low levels of literacy vary and the methods are often opaque, the costs to the UK are estimated to be very high. The foreword of a report published by the EEF in 2019 cites the cost to the UK to be around £20 billion per annum,<sup>33</sup> while other estimates are much higher.<sup>34</sup> In social terms, better reading might enhance opportunities for individuals to become more engaged politically, increase their tolerance and involve them in their communities more effectively.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

All educators have a fundamental role in ensuring all pupils learn to read: this means teachers, support staff, senior leaders, headteachers, local authorities, multi-academy trusts and initial teacher training (ITT) partnerships.

Extensive experience in early literacy indicates that, if children are taught well, their backgrounds, level of disadvantage, their disabilities and other variables, such as being a boy or summer born, should rarely prevent their learning to read.

Some research supports this: in 2010, for example, Shanahan and Lonigan summarised the findings of the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel, which was published in the United States in 2008. That report was an extensive meta- analysis of around 300

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<sup>33</sup> EEF (2019). [‘Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools Guidance Report’](#)

<sup>34</sup> World Literacy Foundation (2018). [‘The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy’](#)

<sup>35</sup> For example, one paper suggests better reading might enhance opportunities for individuals to become more engaged politically, increase their tolerance and involve them in their communities more effectively, but acknowledges that better evidence is required on these social benefits. Cherry G and Vignoles A (2020). [‘What is the economic value of literacy and numeracy?’](#)

studies. It also included meta-analyses of studies on teaching early literacy that had been published in journals. In their summary, Shanahan and Lonigan concluded:

It is possible that what works in early literacy works for all children, no matter their status and background...<sup>36</sup>

The following pages describe what needs to happen so that every pupil learns to read as well as possible, starting at the earliest stage.

## The Simple View of Reading

Reading has been described as the product of decoding and comprehension, a model first proposed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986, who called it the Simple View of Reading.<sup>37</sup> It has been fundamental in changing the debate about the teaching of reading over at least the last 20 years. It is frequently shown as a diagram (Figure 1, page 17, consisting of two axes and four quadrants: a horizontal axis for word reading (decoding) processes and a vertical axis for language comprehension processes.

The national curriculum programmes of study for reading reflect the model, presented as two dimensions: 'word reading' and 'comprehension'.<sup>38</sup>

## Language comprehension

Comprehension does not refer to reading itself but, rather, to the way in which we make sense of words, sentences and the wider language we hear or read.

Language develops through interaction with others. Inevitably, by the time they start school, some children understand more and know more words than others, because of the quantity and quality of the interactions they have already had with adults and others. Children who begin school with a poor understanding of language will need considerable support to develop their spoken language, if necessary throughout their school years.

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<sup>36</sup> Shanahan, T. and Lonigan, C.J. (2010). 'The national early literacy panel report: summary, commentary, and reflections on policies and practices to improve children's early literacy' *Educational Researcher*: volume 39, issue 4, pages 279–285. Also see the small scale longitudinal studies by Grant, M. (2014). '[The effects of a systematic synthetic phonics programme on reading, writing and spelling](#)'

<sup>37</sup> Gough, P.B. and Tunmer, W.E. (1986). '[Decoding, reading and reading disability](#)' *Remedial and Special Education*: volume 7, issue 1, pages 6-10

<sup>38</sup> Department for Education (2013).



## Decoding (word reading)

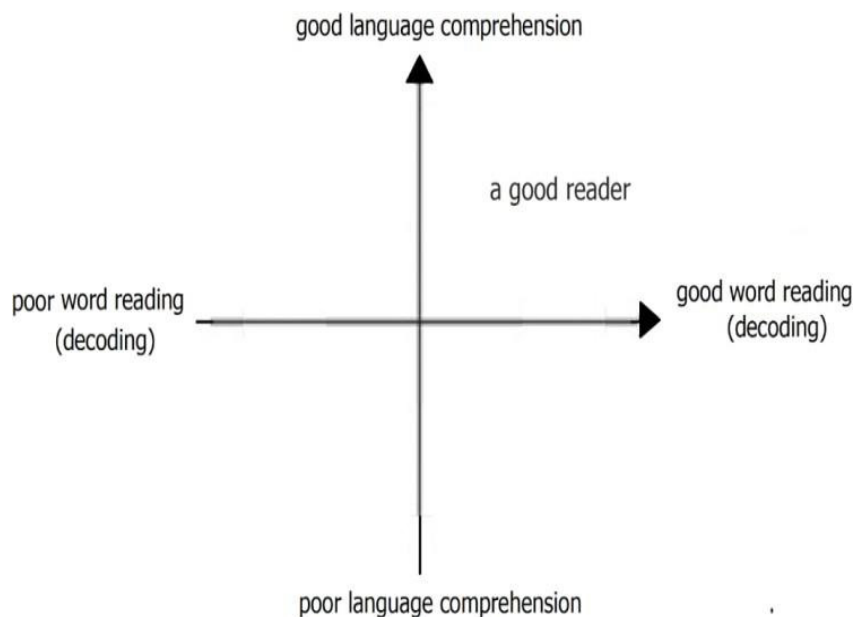
Decoding refers to:

- reading unfamiliar words (words that have not been read before) by saying the sounds corresponding to the letters in the words and then blending the sounds together, either aloud or silently
- reading familiar words accurately and silently 'at a glance'<sup>39</sup>, that is, no longer saying the sounds consciously.

This document uses the terms 'decoding' and 'word reading' interchangeably, as in Gough and Tunmer's original description of the Simple View of Reading.

In contrast to spoken language, written language is a relatively recent cultural invention. Most children do not develop the ability to read without direct teaching. For children who begin school with a poor understanding of language, being able to decode words is essential for equality, because their understanding of language, their vocabulary and their knowledge of the world will expand rapidly when they can read for themselves.

Children need both good language comprehension and good word reading to become good readers.



**Figure 1: The knowledge of a good reader**

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<sup>39</sup> 'at a glance' is the helpful term used by Daniel Willingham. It does not mean children should be taught to memorise whole words. Willingham, D. (2017). 'The reading mind' San Francisco: Jossey- Bass

## **Implications of the model for beginner readers**

Word reading and language comprehension require different sorts of teaching.

When children start learning to read, the number of words they can decode accurately is too limited to broaden their vocabulary. Their understanding of language should therefore be developed through their listening and speaking, while they are taught to decode through phonics.

However, when they can read most words 'at a glance' and can decode unfamiliar words easily, they are free to think about the meaning of what they read. They can then begin to develop their understanding of language through their reading as well as through their listening.

## **Implications of the model for beginners' writing**

We might think of writing similarly. Composition might be considered as the reverse of language comprehension; encoding (spelling) is the reverse of decoding (word reading). Writing might therefore be described as the product of composition and transcription.

But before children can write independently, it helps if they are able to say (aloud or just to themselves) what they want to write. Proficiency in spoken language gives them more that they can write about and more words for what they want to say. Their expressive and receptive language develops through talk and listening.

In learning phonics, children learn to spell familiar words accurately and how to form letters. When they can do this, and can spell any word in a way that is at least phonically plausible, they can begin to write down what they want to say.

## **Implications of the model for more experienced readers**

Once pupils can decode accurately and speedily, reading a lot is the principal way they develop as readers. Putting in the 'reading miles' allows pupils to practise their reading, building experience with increasingly complex texts, encountering new knowledge, gaining new language, including vocabulary, and developing their fluency.

Over the course of year 2 and into key stage 2, the focus of the teaching of reading therefore shifts from decoding towards ensuring pupils get this print experience and support with spoken language, both through teacher-led reading sessions and independent reading:

As their decoding skills become increasingly secure, teaching should be directed more towards developing their vocabulary and the breadth and depth of their

reading, making sure that they become independent, fluent and enthusiastic readers who read widely and frequently.<sup>40</sup>

At key stage 3, pupils continue to develop an appreciation and love of reading, understand increasingly challenging texts and read critically through reading widely:

Reading at key stage 3 should be wide, varied and challenging. Pupils should be expected to read whole books, to read in depth and to read for pleasure and information.<sup>41</sup>

Pupils will also be expected to read in other subjects to access new information and build their subject knowledge. This reading will also contribute to reading miles and fluency.

However, pupils who are not yet reading fluently as they get older require further timely and targeted support. They also require substantial practice in reading texts that include only the words they can decode at their current stage of reading development.

Ultimately, pupils need to become skilled readers, able to understand any books that they want to read, as well as the texts they need to read to be successful at school and in life.

## These models and the following sections

What follows reflects these models of reading and writing, namely that:

- language comprehension and composition develop by pupils listening to and talking about stories and other literature, by talking and discussion throughout the curriculum, and (especially while they are learning to read) by learning poetry and songs. ([Section 2](#))
- decoding and encoding can be taught through a systematic synthetic phonics programme ([Section 3](#))
- once pupils can read, their language comprehension is driven by the amount they read – their ‘reading miles’ – as well as the books and other texts they continue to hear read to them, and opportunities to listen and speak
- spelling is more difficult than word reading and so schools should continue to teach spelling systematically in year 2 and key stage 2.

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<sup>40</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>41</sup> Department for Education (2013).

- older pupils, in primary and secondary schools, who continue to struggle with decoding also need to be taught through a systematic synthetic phonics programme ([Section 5](#))
- pupils with identified SEND ([Section 5](#)) who struggle to decode and read words 'at a glance' are likely to derive most benefit from direct reading instruction that focuses on systematic synthetic phonics
- listening to, thinking deeply about and discussing a wide range of texts, including literature, develops pupils' love of reading and enhances their vocabulary
- reading widely, both in school and in their own time, establishes pupils as readers.

## Section 2: Language comprehension in Reception and key stage 1

### Developing talk

Young children typically gain several new words a day, acquiring vocabulary at an ‘astonishing rate’.<sup>42</sup> Yet by the time they start school, some children will have heard millions more words than others.<sup>43</sup> The number of words a child has heard and can speak by the age of three is a predictor of later language development, so these early vocabulary gains are critically important.<sup>44</sup>

A language-rich environment is one in which adults talk with children throughout the day. The more children take part in conversations and discussion, the more they will understand once they can read and the more vocabulary and ideas they will have to draw on when they can write.

Spoken language runs through the national curriculum programmes of study for English and all seven areas of learning and development in the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework.

### Back-and-forth talk across the curriculum

Underpinning the 2021 reforms to the Early Years Foundation Stage was the aim of improving early years outcomes for all children, particularly disadvantaged children, in the critical areas that build the foundations for later success, such as language development and literacy.<sup>45</sup> This includes reducing the language gap between children from language-rich homes and those from homes in which spoken language is not as varied or as rich.

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<sup>42</sup> Oakhill J, Cain K & Elbro C (2015). ‘Understanding and teaching reading comprehension. A handbook’ Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>43</sup> One study found that children from higher-income homes will have heard 32 million more words than children from lower-income homes. A more recent conservative estimate gives a 4 million word gap at age four between the highest and lowest SES groups. See Hart B and Risley TR. ‘The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3’ *American Educator*: Spring 2003. Also see Jill Gikerson and others. ‘Mapping the Early Language Environment Using All-Day Recordings and Automated Analysis’ *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*: volume 26, issue 2, May 2017, pages 248-265

<sup>44</sup> Hart, B. and Risley, T. R. (Spring 2003).

<sup>45</sup> Department for Education (2021). Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage London: Department for Education

The progress of these children depends on adults engaging them in high-quality dialogue and direct teaching so that they can:

- articulate what they know and understand
- develop their knowledge across all areas of learning, using the vocabulary they need to support learning.

Critical to this are children's back-and-forth interactions with adults:

[These] form the foundations for language and cognitive development. The number and quality of the conversations they have with adults and peers throughout the day in a language-rich environment is crucial.<sup>46</sup>

These back-and-forth interactions involve the adult in:

- thinking out loud, modelling new language for children
- paying close attention to what the children say
- rephrasing and extending what the children say
- validating the children's attempts at using new vocabulary and grammar by rephrasing what children say if necessary
- asking closed and open questions
- answering the children's questions
- explaining why things happen
- deliberately connecting current and past events ('Do you remember when...?')
- providing models of accurate grammar
- extending children's vocabulary and explaining new words
- connecting one idea or action to another
- helping children to articulate ideas in well-formed sentences.

Some pupils, especially those who speak English as an Additional Language, need more explicit teaching of vocabulary, including through the use of visual images.

To develop and extend children's language takes careful, deliberate planning in each area of learning or subject, with opportunities built in for plenty of repetition.

- What do we want children to know and think about?
- What vocabulary is associated with this knowledge and thinking?

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<sup>46</sup> Department for Education (2021).

- How can we engage the children in back and forth talk that supports their knowledge and thinking?
- What photos could we take that would reinforce the vocabulary and language after an activity or visit?
- Which books could be read aloud and shared before and afterwards?
- Which songs might introduce or reinforce the vocabulary?

For example, a class visit to a fire station might generate a range of vocabulary related to its different aspects – the [semantic](#) field or word field – such as the following.

Semantic field	Examples
fire	blaze, flames, heat, smoke, plumes, extinguish
emergency	emergency, accident, harm, dangerous, trapped, (blue) light, siren
safety and rescue	protect, shield, escape, first aid, rescue, save, tackle
protective clothing	visor, helmet, gloves, soles, material
properties of materials	transparent, see-through, fire resistant, strong, tough, unbreakable, fireproof, protective, waterproof
equipment	fire engine, truck, reel, hose, ladder, turn-table, water, cutters, axe, air tanks, thermal imaging camera, torch
personal characteristics	brave, courageous, speedy, quick-thinking, daring, heroic

Following up the visit in the classroom, adults can reinforce the language and vocabulary: talking about the photographs taken on the visit, or recalling and naming specific features of the fire-fighters’ clothes or the fire engine. For example:

‘Do you remember why the firefighters have to wear special gloves? ... Yes, to keep their hands cool and protect them from the heat.

What did their gloves look like? ... That’s right! That’s a good word. They did look “stiff” but, actually, they said they were very comfortable.

Do you remember how they could bend their fingers easily in them? They could hold even the tiniest objects when they were wearing them.'

Once it has been introduced, opportunities arise to repeat and consolidate the vocabulary in different contexts, such as when describing the characteristics of a hero or heroine or exploring the properties of materials.<sup>47</sup>

The table above focuses on extending vocabulary related to a fire station visit. To give another example, on a woodland walk, adults might select from some of the following adjectives to focus on in back and forth talk with children: rough, bumpy, narrow, wide, curved, symmetrical, mottled, speckled, spiky, sharp, thorny, pointed, delicate, young. However, they might also make sure they use and reinforce specific [prepositions](#), such as between, underneath, up, down, inside, around and over. For example:

'The oak tree bark has bumps like long fingers. Can you feel the deep lines between each bump?'

'What does the acorn feel like? ... Yes, it is smooth, but it's rough underneath.'

'Lift the log up gently. What can you see underneath it? Can you see anything inside it? Put it down very gently.'

'Look, Harry is wrapping his arms around the huge trunk.' 'Let's climb over this big log. Who is going to climb over it first?'

Later, by making a book from the photographs taken on the walk, teachers can revisit the language used and the children can learn to describe the events in greater detail on each 'reading'.

'What did we do?'

'What can you see in this photo?'

'Do you remember when we all climbed over the big log?'

'And here's Miraj, running his fingers across the rough bark. Look, you can see that the large bumps had even more tiny bumps on them.'

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<sup>47</sup> The national curriculum year 1 programmes of study for science require pupils to be taught to 'describe the simple physical properties of a variety of everyday materials'.



The Early Learning Goal (ELG), the Natural World, refers explicitly to children ‘drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class’.<sup>48</sup>

More generally, sharing and discussing pictures in non-fiction books offers opportunities to broaden children’s experiences beyond the immediate and the local. For example, books about space, other countries, animals, exploration, and courageous people from a range of occupations and ethnic backgrounds are rich sources of vocabulary and knowledge.

As well as building important knowledge, this extends their familiarity with words that support understanding across domains. Enriching and widening children’s vocabulary will support later reading comprehension.<sup>49</sup>

Extending children’s familiarity with words across domains is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who might not otherwise meet such vocabulary.

## Listening

Children need to be taught when to listen, to know what good listening looks like, and they need praise. Teachers need to develop listening skills over time, deliberately building up the time that the children listen with attention and concentration. If pupils struggle to listen and retain what they have heard, teachers should assess why this is and build in appropriate interventions if necessary. Children should not become habituated to listening inattentively in the Early Years.

Ways of supporting good listening include:

- Deciding on a signal to alert children to listen.
- Showing children what good listening looks like through the teacher’s own behaviour:

‘Wait a minute, I need to listen carefully.’

‘Let’s be quiet so I can concentrate on what you’re saying.’

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<sup>48</sup> The level of development children should be expected to have attained by the end of the EYFS is defined by the early learning goals (ELGs). Department for Education (2021).

<sup>49</sup> Department for Education (2021).

as well as reinforcing and praising good listening, with examples:

- ‘I could tell you were going to say something interesting: I could see you were listening carefully and concentrating.’
- ‘You must have listened carefully during assembly yesterday to have remembered that!’
- ‘Well done for telling everyone what your partner just shared with you – good listening.’
- ‘Well done for using that special word from the story yesterday. I am pleased you listened hard.’

## Talking with a partner and giving feedback

Teachers need to help children articulate their ideas in well-formed sentences, by scaffolding, extending and developing their ideas.

They all need to practise their skills of listening to, talking with a partner and giving feedback to the group. Learning the routines of back-and-forth talk is particularly important for children who have less experience of such talk before they come to school. Teachers in later key stages should continue to establish and reinforce these routines for their pupils.

Pairing children with their partners, ready for responding together, encourages them to discuss a question, problem or idea and agree on their joint response. Because their answer belongs to both of them and they will have practised it first, they grow in confidence when asked to respond in front of others. The teacher can observe the pairs talking and select those with helpful answers to develop the discussion.

If the teacher chooses which pair feeds back to the group, rather than responding only to pairs who might raise their hands, this can help to make sure that all the pairs are ready to contribute. If children think they might not be selected, they might not engage fully. By establishing strong routines for responding to questions and suggestions, children will be more likely to pay attention because they know they will be expected to respond; the teacher will know what they have understood, because they will have listened carefully to what the children have been saying and will have heard any misconceptions. (See [Appendix 2: Supporting children’s thinking](#) and [Appendix 3: Managing talk in pairs.](#))

## Speech, language and communication needs

For children who have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), the strategies already described should be even more focused (see [Appendix 2: Supporting children’s thinking](#)). In particular, noise should be reduced where possible and the children seated where they have the best chance of hearing and paying attention. Reducing noise is important for all children.

Help is available for schools to identify and support children who have speech, language and communication needs.

## Practices that can reduce interaction with children

### Collecting evidence

Teachers do not have to collect and record evidence of children's achievements for the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.

Ofsted reported in 2017 that some leaders and staff during the course of its survey were spending teaching time 'on collecting and recording children's achievements, often through photographs, captions and written notes'. Inspectors found that:

... with the exception of literacy and numeracy, many teachers were devising tasks simply to tick off and record elements of the early learning goals rather than developing a proper plan that focused on progression in learning.<sup>50</sup>

Observation puts the adult in a state of judgement rather than interaction. Every moment spent in observing, recording, collecting and compiling evidence takes teachers' time away from teaching, including talking.

Teachers should draw on their knowledge of children to make a summative assessment of each individual at the end of the Reception year. This is sufficient to assess the child's level of development in relation to each of the Early Learning Goals.

### 'Hands up'

Asking children to respond to 'hands up' is a common part of schools' teaching but it can cut down opportunities for learning and talk.

Schools should consider the drawbacks of a 'hands up' approach to children answering questions. Those from families who are accustomed to talking already have the confidence and oral skills to grasp opportunities to speak, and will engage themselves readily in questions and answers. Other children, however, might hold back from responding, including shy ones, those who are new to learning English and those whose oral skills are less well developed. As a result, the language gap widens further.

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<sup>50</sup> Ofsted (2017). ['Bold beginnings: The Reception curriculum in a sample of good and outstanding primary schools'](#) Manchester: Ofsted

If six children raise their hands and only one is chosen to answer, the other five are excluded, even if they had something worthwhile to say, while 24 further children may stay silent altogether (see [Talking with a partner and giving feedback](#)).

### Noisy environments

When children are learning to read and write, a noisy environment, where other activities are taking place at the same time, makes it difficult for them to hear what the teacher and other children are saying, particularly for those who have hearing difficulties or impairments, those with speech, language and communication needs and those who find it difficult to pay attention. If these children cannot hear clearly, their chances of responding are immediately limited. Calm classrooms give them the best chance to interact and make progress in reading and writing.<sup>51</sup>

### Audit: Language comprehension

Language comprehension	Current practice
A clearly defined curriculum extends children’s language and vocabulary in each of the Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning, and in year 1 for each subject.	
Children are taught routines for back-and-forth talk.	
Activities are used effectively to develop children’s language.	
Non-fiction books related to experiences and activities are read with children and made available for them to share at school and at home.	

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<sup>51</sup> As well as teacher experience reflecting this, there is some research about the impact of noise on learning in these two studies: Erickson LC and Newman RS (2017). [‘Influences of background noise on infants and children’](#) and Marsh JE and others (2017). [‘Failing to get the gist of what’s being said: background noise impairs higher-order cognitive processing’](#) *Frontiers in Psychology*: volume 6

Language comprehension	Current practice
A clearly defined curriculum extends children’s language and vocabulary in each of the Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning, and in year 1 for each subject.	
Effective procedures identify and support children with speech, language and communications needs (see <a href="#">Appendix 2: Supporting children’s thinking</a> ).	
Teachers are aware of practices that could reduce interactions with children.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Poetry and rhymes in Reception and year 1

Through enjoying rhymes, poems and songs, and reciting poems or parts of longer poems together as a class, teachers can build children’s strong emotional connection to language.

Poetry in language-rich classrooms builds shared memories for all children.

The predictability of rhymes in poems and songs also helps children to memorise and re-use newly acquired words and phrases.

Learning poetry and songs using ‘call and response’ allows children to join in gradually. Each repetition strengthens their vocabulary, embedding new words.

Word knowledge exists on a continuum. As each word is acquired in the young child’s lexicon, it moves from the barest familiarity to an in-depth knowledge of that word, with all manner of associations and contexts.

As the children say each word of a poem, the [cadence](#) of the lines helps to convey the meaning and the mood. Children pick up the rhythm and, by speaking more slowly, gain awareness and control of their voices.

Learning rhymes, poems and songs is an end in itself. However, learning poems including traditional nursery rhymes such as ‘Hickory Dickory Dock’, ‘Little Jack Horner’ and ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep’ can also heighten children’s awareness of the individual sounds within words through [alliteration](#), [assonance](#) and [rhyme](#). For instance, because rhymes share the same end sound, they alert children to the contrast of the [phonemes](#) at the start of each word, as well as the repeated phonemes at the end, as in ‘dock’/ ‘clock’, ‘Horner’/‘corner’ and ‘Incy’/‘Wincy’.<sup>52</sup>

## Choosing poems

Teachers should identify a core set of poems for each year group, including rhyming poems, poems where [alliteration](#) is a strong feature, word games, traditional songs and rhymes, nonsense rhymes, and poems that are particularly rhythmical. Those chosen should be able to withstand a lot of repetition, elicit a strong response and extend children’s vocabulary in different areas of learning.

## Audit: Poetry, rhymes and songs

Poetry, rhymes and songs	Current practice
The daily poetry, rhyme and singing session is a priority.	
Poems, rhymes and songs for each year group are listed.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

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<sup>52</sup> In ‘Incy’/‘Wincy’, the rhyme is made by adding a phoneme (/w/) to the start of the second word rather than by contrasting the two initial sounds. Other examples of rhymes made by adding one initial phoneme are ‘argy-bargy’ and ‘okey-dokey’.

## Story times in Reception, year 1 and year 2

### Choosing stories and non-fiction to read aloud to children

The decisions we make about how we educate our children are rooted in our beliefs and attitudes. The challenge is to reflect those beliefs and attitudes in the stories and non-fiction children listen to and, later, in what they read for themselves. This is equally important for older pupils. (See [Reading Aloud](#) in section 8.)

Literature is probably the most powerful medium through which children have a chance to inhabit the lives of those who are like them. All children need to imagine themselves as the main protagonist in a story: celebrating a birthday, going shopping, being ill, having a tantrum, having their hair cut, worrying about a new sibling, being the superhero, going camping, visiting the seaside and having adventures.

Children also need to learn about the lives of those whose experiences and perspectives differ from their own. Choosing stories and non-fiction that explore such differences begins to break down a sense of otherness that often leads to division and prejudice.

The challenge is to make sure that the right books support all children to thrive, whatever their background. Teachers need to choose those that will engage all of them emotionally. As Maryanne Wolf wrote:

We know that emotional engagement is the tipping point between leaping into the reading life or remaining in a childhood bog where reading is endured only as a means to other ends.<sup>53</sup>

Teachers are the best people to promote a love of reading because children, particularly young children, care what their teachers think about the stories they read aloud. If teachers show they love the story, the children are likely to respond in the same way. However, this does not mean that teachers should choose only the books they loved as children.

These are suggested questions to help choose suitable books for reading aloud. A single book is unlikely to meet all the criteria below, although a full selection should do so.

Teachers could also contact other specialists, such as children's librarians, for advice.

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<sup>53</sup> Wolf M (2008). 'Proust and the squid. The story and science of the reading brain' Cambridge: Icon Books

## Choosing books

Does the book:

- elicit a strong response – curiosity, anger, excitement, laughter, empathy?
- have a strong narrative that will sustain multiple readings?
- extend children’s vocabulary?
- have illustrations which are engaging and reflect children from all backgrounds and cultures?
- help children connect with who they are?
- help children to understand the lives of people whose experiences and perspectives may be different from their own?

## Core ‘read aloud’ stories and non-fiction

Use ‘Choosing books’ (above) as a guide.

- Identify a core set of stories for each year group.
- Consider a range of stories set in the UK and around the world, both traditional and modern, as well as non-fiction.
- Refresh the list regularly, at least once a year, as new books are published, and new teachers arrive, to avoid its being set in stone.
- Encourage teachers to familiarise themselves with the stories their class will know from previous years.
- Supplement the core ‘read aloud’ stories with others of the teacher’s choice.
- Consider sharing the list with parents, and explaining its purpose, so they could buy or borrow the books.

## Living the story

Everybody loves a good story. Even small children who have difficulty focusing in class will sit with rapt attention in the presence of a good storyteller. But stories are not just fun. There are important cognitive consequences of the story format. Our minds treat stories



differently than other types of material. People find stories interesting, easy to understand, and easy to remember.<sup>54</sup>

When teachers read aloud to a class, they try to replicate for children what it feels like to have someone's undivided attention while sharing a story. This is why reading aloud should be a priority.

### **Thriving on repetition**

It is not just the number of different stories children listen to that matters. On each re-reading, their familiarity with a story deepens and, with that, comes a greater emotional engagement. Wolf quotes the writer Ann Fadiman when she reflects on what re-readings bring:

'the former [reading] had more velocity; the latter had more depth.'<sup>55</sup>

When children ask for a story to be re-read, in effect they are asking for another chance to explore the language, the characters and their feelings, and to relive the emotions they felt on the first reading. They hear the same words read in the same way and gain a sense of comfort in knowing what follows. They wait for their favourite bits, ready to join in or ready to be scared, even when they already know what happens. Their attachment to the story equips them to retell it and, when they have learnt to read, encourages them to read it for themselves.

### **Preparation and practice**

The main aim of storytelling is to breathe life into the words, capturing children's attention rather than simply entertaining them.

Reading aloud therefore requires preparation. How to emphasise particular words, phrases and sentences needs planning so that the children understand the story as a whole. Rehearsal and frequent practice also improve the story-teller's confidence.

Consider the following in preparing a reading:

- voice(s)
- pauses
- word meanings

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<sup>54</sup> Willingham, D. (2017).

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Wolf, M. (2018).

- asides
- memorable words and phrases.

[Appendix 4: For teachers: preparing to read a story](#) contains further guidance on preparation. Filming some reading aloud can be helpful, because teachers are often their own best critics.

### **First and subsequent readings**

Before a first reading starts, the teacher can build up children's anticipation during the day: 'I've got a new story by Elizabeth Laird. It's called 'Gobblechops'.<sup>56</sup> I'm really looking forward to reading it with you'; 'Let's clear up a bit earlier today, so I've got time to read the new story.'

Once the children have been told the name of the author and the title, and the story has been introduced, the reading should start: 'This is a story about Amir, whose dad gives him advice on how to deal with a monster under his bed.' The first reading should be left to weave its own magic, with no questions, no explanations and no requests for the children to predict what might happen.

On the second reading, asides, voices and actions can explain the meanings of new words in context.

If the story is read aloud in a similar way each time, the children can gradually join in with particular words and phrases, and even respect the pauses.

### **When children know the story well**

Dramatising the story can be motivating, once the children know it well, and it can hold their interest and focus.

Dramatization of stories is unique in that it requires the basic teaching skills of listening, observing closely, and harnessing the imagination of everyone in exploring new ideas.<sup>57</sup>

Role play can also help children to reflect on how a character might think, feel and behave at key moments, and explore motives and intentions. Asking all the children to adopt the same role at the same time is an opportunity for everyone to participate. For example, saying 'Hello, wolves! Show me your paws, show me your twitching nose, show

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<sup>56</sup> Laird, E. and Lucander, J. (2019). 'Gobblechops' London: Tiny Owl Publishing

<sup>57</sup> Cremin, T., Flewitt, R., Mardell, B. and Swann, J. editors (2017). 'Storytelling in early childhood: Enriching language, literacy and classroom culture' Abingdon: Routledge

me your sharp pointy teeth...' puts all of them quickly into role as the wolf, not just wondering about pretending to be one, which might be the case with simply saying, 'Imagine you are the wolf'.

The following questions for role play are designed to explore a character's motives. With minor adaptations, they can be used for any story and directed to any character in it.

### **Role play – example questions**

(Little Red Riding Hood)

OK, wolves. Little Red Riding Hood is coming towards you...

What do you want?

How will you get it?

What are you thinking?

How do you feel?

What are your options?

What will you do?

What will you say?

### **Using stories and rhymes to develop vocabulary and language**

Stories are a rich source of language – vocabulary and syntax. Good writers know how to entice young children into their texts. Through listening to repeated readings, and talking about what they have heard, the children have multiple exposures to vocabulary and the language of stories. Continued talk about words, as well as opportunities to use them, helps children to absorb the language. Teachers can also emphasise memorable words and phrases (see [Appendix 4: For teachers: preparing to read a story](#)).

Through stories, children encounter vocabulary that they are unlikely to hear in everyday conversation but will come across in writing, once they can read for themselves. Isobel

Beck has called such vocabulary 'second tier' words.<sup>58</sup> All the following vocabulary, for example, occurs in a single picture book:

bellowed, startled, barged, sneaked, grinned, dreadful, stomped, refused.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, another story uses all the following:

explore, discovered, wondered, enormous, barely, unexpected, shrink, tumbled.<sup>60</sup>

A robust approach to vocabulary involves directly explaining the meanings of words along with thought-provoking, playful, and interactive follow-up.<sup>61</sup>

Teachers can explore these words and explain them – not just in the context of the story but also as children might use or hear them in their own lives, as in these examples of 'startled', 'barge' and 'bellowed':

Everyone was startled when the balloon popped at her party.

Tanim was startled by the lion's roar at the zoo.

It is always startling when the fire alarm rings in school.

Don't barge past your sister, please – there are plenty of biscuits.

Don't barge past those younger children, please.

My mum bellowed when she saw the paint on the carpet.

The team bellowed when Jodie deliberately pushed Anya over.

Mr Banks bellowed at the children when they ran next to the swimming pool.

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<sup>58</sup> Beck, I.L., McKeown, M.G. and Kucan, L. (2013). 'Bringing words to life: robust vocabulary instruction' New York: The Guilford Press

<sup>59</sup> Willis, J. and others (2017). 'I'm in charge' London: Nosy Crow

<sup>60</sup> Percival, T. (2018). 'Ruby's worry' London: Bloomsbury

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, the activities described in Chapter 4 of Beck's 'Bringing words to life'.

## Reading with children at home

Children benefit hugely from listening to family members reading aloud to them. Teachers might consider making a film for parents to illustrate the benefits of sharing and talking about stories aloud and how teachers read stories aloud to their own class.

## Book corners in the Early Years

The books themselves are the most important aspect of any book corner. It should be the words of the stories and not the props that transport children to different worlds: the mysterious forest, the dark and dripping cave, the moated castle. Well- chosen books should capture children's imagination to such an extent that they become unaware of whether they are sitting on a beanbag, an ordinary classroom chair or a bench in the book corner. Time might therefore be better spent on selecting, displaying and promoting the books in the book corner than on decorating it.

Ideally, every book corner should be a mini library, a place for children to browse the best books, revisit the ones that the teacher has read to them, and borrow books to read or retell at home. Every child should be able to spend time in their book corner. Children will want to share books with others, especially if they are 'books in common' that they know their friends have heard before. They will also be interested to look at books which feature well-known fictional characters or are new and tempting.

Every book in a book corner should be worth reading aloud. The focus should always be on what would make the biggest difference to children's reading habits, including:

- not displaying too many books at once
- refreshing the display
- making the books attractive and easy for children to find.

The more choice that is presented, the less children are likely to engage. Bookshops, for instance, reduce the number of books on display by using outward- facing shelving and tables, so customers can find new books easily. They also refresh their displays to highlight topics, titles or authors they hope will attract customers.

Teachers might consider displaying only the books that have been read aloud to children, such as 30 or 40 storybooks. Some children in the class will only be able to retell the story; others will be able to re-read it for themselves. Different books can be introduced gradually, including those the children will have heard during story-time.

Ideally, books the children have listened to recently should be displayed at their eye level on outward-facing shelves. At the start of the school year, it is also worth including around 20 of the children's favourites from the previous year. These can occupy lower shelves or boxes. Books that have been previously read could be stored in extra boxes

for children to read and retell again, at school and at home. A book that is dull and dog-eared should be removed, unless it is particularly well loved.

The 'decodable' books matched to the school's phonics programme are best stored separately so that teachers can select from them, both for children's reading in class and for them to take home.

## Audit: Story times

Story times	Current practice
The daily time for stories is a priority.	
Teachers prepare the story reading so they can capture children's attention.	
Extra small-group story times are timetabled for children with speech, language and communication needs.	
Staff have a wide knowledge of traditional and contemporary children's literature.	
High-quality stories to read aloud to children, including traditional and modern stories, are organised, listed and shared.	
In stories and other books, children encounter others whose experiences and perspectives are both similar to and different from their own.	
Teachers re-read stories and talk with children about them to build familiarity and understanding.	
Some stories are dramatised with children when they know the story well.	
'Second tier' vocabulary is explored in wider contexts, once children know a story well.	
Books are made available for parents to share with their children at home.	
Teachers explain to parents the benefits of reading aloud at home.	

Story times	Current practice
Book corners are appealing to children and uncluttered.	
Children have time to browse, and re-read or retell stories that have been read to them.	
<p><b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b></p>	

## Section 3: Word reading and spelling

### Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics

To teach word reading and spelling successfully, teachers need to understand the principles underpinning the teaching of word reading (decoding) and spelling (encoding). This should include understanding how the alphabetic code of English represents the sounds ([phonemes](#)) of the language with single letters and groups of letters ([graphemes](#)).

#### Phonemes

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that signals a contrast in meaning. For example:

- the difference between the words ‘gap’ and ‘cap’ is the difference between the phonemes /g/ and /k/ at the start of each word<sup>62</sup>
- the difference between ‘fine’ and ‘fight’ is the difference between the phonemes /n/ and /t/ at the end
- the difference between ‘stale’ and ‘stile’ is the difference between the phonemes /ae/ and /igh/ in the middle of each word.

English has about 20 [vowel](#) phonemes and 24 [consonant](#) phonemes.<sup>63</sup>

#### Graphemes

A grapheme is a letter or group of letters that usually represents a single phoneme. A grapheme can consist of:

- one letter, for example, ‘b’ – in big
- two letters (a [digraph](#) or a [split digraph](#)), for example, ‘sh’ in ship, ‘a-e’ in make
- three letters (a [trigraph](#)), for example, ‘igh’ in light
- four letters, for example, ‘ough’ in bough, ‘eigh’ in weight.

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<sup>62</sup> This document shows individual letters between single quote marks and sounds between slashes. For example, the letter ‘m’ usually represents the sound /m/.

<sup>63</sup> Regional pronunciations mean that the number of phonemes cannot be fixed precisely. For example, in the south of England, ‘u’ in ‘put’ and ‘u’ in ‘but’ correspond to two different phonemes, but in the north ‘put’ and ‘but’ rhyme, so ‘u’ in ‘put’ and ‘u’ in ‘but’ correspond to the same phoneme.



The number of graphemes in a word usually corresponds to the number of phonemes – hence the term '[grapheme-phoneme correspondence](#)' (GPC). In a few cases, one grapheme represents two phonemes, for example in the word 'uniform', the first grapheme 'u' represents /y/ and /oo/.

To simplify the language, some programmes use the terms 'letter-sound correspondences' or 'letter-sounds' to refer to GPCs.

## The alphabetic code

Letters are a code, a way of writing down the sounds of speech.

Phonemes are the basis of the code, and the letters are the code.<sup>64</sup>

English has a complex alphabetic code: 26 alphabet letters have to do duty, singly or in combination, to represent the 44 or so sounds (phonemes) of English and they do so inconsistently. In Spanish, German and Welsh, for instance, one grapheme almost always represents the same phoneme. English, however, has more than 70 common correspondences between phonemes and graphemes and hundreds of rare ones.

## History of the English alphabetic code

Our complex alphabetic code has come about because English has absorbed many different languages (and, to a small extent, alphabets) through religion, invasion, trade and other reasons. The language continues to change, absorbing more words and generating entirely new vocabulary.

Since, at first, people spelt words as they said them or heard them and the pronunciation of words has changed over time, it is not surprising that many different spellings have existed for a single word. The word 'night', for instance, has been spelt as *naecht*, *naeht*, *nahht*, *nyht*, *nycht*, *nieht*, *nighte* – and in other ways.

Current spellings may also reflect a word's origins. The word 'yacht' was possibly originally a Dutch word. The sounds we hear now are: /y/ /o/ /t/. The first and last sounds

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<sup>64</sup> McGuinness, D. (2004). 'Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tell Us about How to Teach Reading' Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, page 13

are straightforward to spell; it is only the spelling of the middle sound that is unusual, because 'ach' is now pronounced /o/.<sup>65</sup>

Dr Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 was probably the most influential factor in the reforming and standardising of English spelling, although it did bring some problems.

The words the language has absorbed is one reason why, in reading and in spelling English, the relationship of graphemes to phonemes is like this:

1. one grapheme usually represents a single phoneme<sup>66</sup>
2. different graphemes can be used to represent the same phoneme
3. a grapheme can represent different phonemes in different words (although this is less common).

This table gives examples.

### Summary tables English alphabetic code

#### 1. One grapheme usually represents a single phoneme

Description of example	Grapheme	Example word
Graphemes (of one, two, three and four letters) represent a single phoneme <sup>67</sup>	b	<u>b</u> ig
	sh	fi <u>sh</u>
	air	h <u>air</u>
	augh	ca <u>ugh</u> t

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<sup>65</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary refers to this word's spellings as having been 'various and erratic' since its first recorded appearance in print in the 16th century.

<sup>66</sup> An exception is 'x', representing the two phonemes /k/ and /s/, as in 'fox': /f/ /o/ /k/ /s/.

<sup>67</sup> Note that a [consonant cluster](#) such as 's' 't' and 'r' at the start of 'street' consists of three separate phonemes: /s/, /t/ and /r/.

## 2. Different graphemes can be used to represent the same phoneme

Description of example	Grapheme	Example word
Graphemes (of one or more <a href="#">vowel</a> and <a href="#">consonant</a> letters) represent the single phoneme /oɪ/	o	<u>o</u> ld
	oa	bo <u>oa</u> t
	ow	cro <u>ow</u>
	oe	to <u>oe</u>
	o-e	sto <u>o-e</u>
	ough	dough <u>ough</u>

## 3. A grapheme can represent different phonemes in different words (less common)

Description of example	Grapheme	Phoneme
The grapheme 'ea' represents three different phonemes in three unrelated words	ne <u>ea</u> t	/ee/
	he <u>ea</u> d	/e/
	gr <u>ea</u> t	/a_e/

Phonics gives children the key to unlocking this alphabetic code for their reading and spelling. This is why teaching phonics for reading and spelling is a cornerstone of the programmes of study for English in the national curriculum.

Many publishers produce one or more alphabetic code charts for classroom display, illustrating the correspondences between phonemes and graphemes.

The appendices include an alphabetic code chart ([Appendix 5](#)) for adults, listing the main phonemes in English, with example words.

## Synthetic phonics

Phonics is a body of knowledge that is necessary for pupils to learn to read and spell, at whatever age.

Because of the complex alphabetic code of English, young children learning to read are taught explicitly the correspondences between letters and sounds (graphemes and phonemes), as well as the skill of blending the individual sounds together to read. The term 'synthetic' phonics refers to the verb 'synthesise', meaning 'to combine'. The skill of segmenting words into their individual sounds is needed for spelling.

Word reading and spelling are ‘reversible processes’.<sup>68</sup> Reading involves blending sounds to say a whole word; spelling involves segmenting a whole word to identify the sounds in it.

Evidence shows that teaching phonics is the best way to teach children to read words, e.g., the EEF considers phonics to be one of the most secure and best-evidenced areas of pedagogy, recommending all schools use a systematic approach to teaching it.

There is convincing evidence of the value of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), including the seven-year study by Johnston and Watson undertaken in Clackmannanshire, published in 2005, which has been especially influential in England.<sup>69</sup>

In the United States, a seminal national study in 2000 described how:

... synthetic phonics programs produced stronger growth in reading than control programs in most of the different reader groups...

The impact was ‘significantly greater for at-risk kindergartners and first graders’. The authors concluded that ‘synthetic phonics programs were especially effective for younger, at-risk readers’.<sup>70</sup> The same alphabetic code underlies reading and writing in English regardless of differences between children.

In England, the national curriculum requires maintained schools to teach reading using systematic phonics.<sup>71</sup> When inspecting the curriculum, Ofsted’s inspectors consider whether:

- the sequence of reading books shows a cumulative progression in phonics knowledge that is matched closely to the school’s phonics programme
- teachers give pupils sufficient practice in reading and re-reading books that match the grapheme-phoneme correspondences they know, both at school and at home

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<sup>68</sup> Rose, J. (2006)

<sup>69</sup> Johnston, R. and Watson, J. (2005). ‘The effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment: a seven year longitudinal study’ Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Central Research Unit. Also see <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/phonics/technical-appendix/>

<sup>70</sup> Shriver, E.K. (2000). National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. ‘Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: reports of the subgroups (00-4754)’ Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office

<sup>71</sup> Department for Education (2013).

- reading, including the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics, is taught from the beginning of Reception.<sup>72</sup>

### Decoding (word reading)

To decode words, children are taught to look at graphemes in written words from left to right and to say each corresponding phoneme in turn. Then they blend the phonemes to say the whole word.

Children:

1. see the written word 'cat'
2. say the corresponding three phonemes /k/ /a/ /t/
3. blend the three phonemes to say the word 'cat'.

Children:

1. see the written word 'sheep'
2. say the corresponding three phonemes /sh/ /ee/ /p/
3. blend the three phonemes to say the word 'sheep'.

The pronunciation of some words might need tweaking once the sound has been pronounced. For example, a child reading 'mountain' for the first time might pronounce the 'ai' as a long sound, but then recognise they have heard the word and pronounce it more naturally.

Many children need extra support to blend words with [consonant clusters](#), particularly when they occur at the start of words. Consonant clusters (also known as '[adjacent consonants](#)' or 'consonant blends') consist of separate phonemes and children should be taught to pronounce each one before blending them.

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<sup>72</sup> Ofsted (2022).

Example word	Phonemes in word (total)	Phonemes in consonant cluster
s-p-i-n	4	/s/ /p/
c-l-u-m-p	5	/c/ /l/ and /m/ /p/
ch-o-m-p	4	/m/ /p/
s-p-l-a-sh	5	/s/ /p/ /l/
s-t-r-ee-t	5	/s/ /t/ /r/
th-r-ee	3	/th/ /r/
f-l-air	3	/f/ /l/

To support children to blend phonemes into words, it helps if teachers pronounce the sounds as purely and clearly as possible (see [Appendix 6: Pronouncing phonemes](#)). SSP programmes provide guidance.

### Encoding (spelling)

To encode words, children are taught to identify the phonemes in spoken words first. This is also referred to as ‘segmenting’ spoken words. Then they write the graphemes that represent the phonemes.

Children:

1. hear the spoken word ‘dog’
2. say ‘dog’ – /d/ /o/ /g/
3. write the three corresponding graphemes ‘d’, ‘o’, ‘g’ to spell the word ‘dog’.

Children:

1. hear the spoken word ‘goat’
2. say ‘goat’ – /g/ /oe/ /t/
3. write the three corresponding graphemes, ‘g’, ‘oa’, ‘t’ to spell the word ‘goat’.

It is more difficult for children to spell ‘goat’ than ‘dog’, because the sound /oe/ has different common spellings from which they must choose.

Children learn to read more quickly than they learn to spell correctly. This is why their progress in reading must not be held back by whether or not they can spell accurately.

The national curriculum also says that reading and spelling should be taught alongside one another, ‘so that pupils understand that they can read back words they have spelt’.<sup>73</sup>

The more graphemes children learn to read and write, the more words they will be able to read and spell, and, as they decode unfamiliar words, they encounter new vocabulary.

Young readers encounter words that they have not seen before much more frequently than experienced readers do, and they may not know the meaning of some of these. Practice at reading such words by sounding and blending can provide opportunities not only for pupils to develop confidence in their decoding skills, but also for teachers to explain the meaning and thus develop pupils’ vocabulary.<sup>74</sup>

Phonics continues to play an important role in spelling, even after key stage 1, because ‘teachers should still draw pupils’ attention to GPCs that do and do not fit in with what has been taught so far’ in terms of spelling.<sup>75</sup>

As they are taught to spell, children have opportunities to practise writing the letters they have been shown how to form.

## **Systematic synthetic phonics programmes**

Systematic synthetic phonics programmes (SSP) are for pupils of all ages who are learning to read. These programmes have three things in common: they teach pupils GPCs, to blend phonemes into spoken words and segment spoken words into phonemes.

However, programmes use programme-specific systems and terminology such as actions, [mnemonics](#), prompts, key words and routines to teach knowledge and skills. It is important not to confuse pupils by mixing material from different programmes or across different classrooms – hence the phrase ‘fidelity to the programme’. For example, one programme might use the term ‘[split digraph](#)’, while another might refer to ‘magic e’ for the same vowel GPC in a word such as ‘late’.

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<sup>73</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>74</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>75</sup> Department for Education (2013).

## Teaching grapheme-phoneme correspondences

Programme writers select which GPCs they are going to prioritise for teaching, as well as their order, so that the GPCs generate the most words at each stage of the programme.

Most programmes start with a simple code: approximately one grapheme for each of the 44 or so phonemes (maybe including a few common alternative spellings such as 'c', 'k' and 'ck' for the sound /k/).

A complex code follows, starting with the most common alternative graphemes. As the programme introduces more graphemes, the number of words a pupil can read increases rapidly.

Given that there are hundreds of GPCs, SSP programmes focus on the most common that will generate the most words. As they read, pupils then have the confidence to apply this knowledge to decode words that contain rarer GPCs.

Some programmes continue to teach phonics for spelling, once pupils can read, including teaching further [morphemes](#), as well as GPCs.

## Common exception words

Programmes include a few [common exception words](#) to enable pupils to read texts. These words are kept to a minimum in the early stages, for example:

said to was I the me no of all he you  
they she we are my be some so were go no

The national curriculum refers to these as 'common exception words' (sometimes referred to as 'tricky words'), because they contain GPCs that are unusual or have not yet been taught. Pupils are taught to read and spell these by noting the part that is an exception to what they have been taught so far. For example, in the word 'said', 's' and 'd' correspond to the phonemes /s/ and /d/ as usual, but 'ai' corresponds to the phoneme /e/, which is unusual.

## High frequency words

Pupils should not be asked to learn lists of high frequency words. They can read most of these in the usual way, by saying the sounds and blending them, when they have learnt the GPCs in the words, e.g. 'mum' and 'came'. Synthetic phonics programmes teach others systematically as exception words, e.g. 'said' and 'to'.

## Capital and lower-case letters

Programmes teach that each lower-case letter has a corresponding capital letter; they share the letter name and represent the same sound. Pupils are taught, for example, that



both 'a' and 'A' are called /æ/ and are usually pronounced /a/. Some programmes teach the names of letters only once pupils have learnt to say the sounds.

### 'Decodable' books and texts

Experienced readers can decode the specialist words in a book about advanced physics, even if they cannot understand them. However, most texts are not decodable for children who are beginning to learn to read.

The national curriculum says that pupils should be taught to:

... read aloud accurately books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words.<sup>76</sup>

This is why schools should invest in books that have been carefully structured in cumulative steps for pupils learning to read, so that they can decode every word as their knowledge of the alphabetic code increases. These books are often referred to simply as 'decodable' books. They give pupils the opportunity to develop their fluency in reading individual words and texts.

Older pupils who have not yet learnt to read also need such books (see [Section 5](#)).

### Audit: Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics

Principles underpinning the teaching of phonics	Current practice
Teachers understand the nature of the English alphabetic code.	
Teachers understand the principles underpinning a programme of synthetic phonics.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

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<sup>76</sup> Department for Education (2013).

# Teaching a systematic programme in Reception and key stage 1

## Daily phonics lessons

Daily phonics sessions should begin as soon as children start their Reception year, but they are also vital for pupils of all ages who are still learning to read.

Learning to read and write letters develops phonemic awareness rapidly. It seems easier for children to identify phonemes in words when they know how they correspond to letters, because letters provide visible and concrete symbols for sounds.<sup>77</sup>

Phonics sessions might be only ten minutes long in the first few days. However, by the end of Reception, children will need about an hour a day, maybe split into different sessions for different activities, to consolidate previous learning, learn new content and practise and apply what they have learnt. This includes reading books matched closely to their phonic knowledge, practising handwriting and spelling, and writing sentences from dictation.

High-quality whole-class or small-group teaching is an efficient and effective way of ensuring good progress for the majority of children, 'given the expense and impracticality of delivering instruction individually'.<sup>78</sup> This should not undermine, however, the value of one-to-one or small-group support for the few pupils who need extra help to keep up and catch up (see [Section 5](#)).

When teachers are engaging and motivating, children mirror their teacher's mood and attitude, pay attention and enjoy learning. Teachers should:

- be clear about objectives for any session and make sure that the children understand them (e.g. 'By the end of this week you will all be able to read these sounds; today we are learning the first one.')

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<sup>77</sup> Some evidence supports using letters from an early stage, including 'PA [phonemic awareness] instruction with letters produced larger effects on PA and reading than instruction without letters', Ehri LC and others (2001). 'Phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis' *Reading Research Quarterly*: volume 36, number 3, page 255. Also see Johnston, R. and Watson, J. (2004). 'Accelerating the development of reading, spelling and phonemic awareness skills in initial readers' *Reading and writing: an interdisciplinary journal*: volume 17, number 4, pages 327–357

<sup>78</sup> Ehri LC and others (2001). 'Systematic phonics instruction helps students learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis' *Review of Educational Research*: volume 71, number 3

- expect all children to participate throughout phonics sessions, for example by using ‘call and response’
- make the most of the time for teaching and use activities that maximise the number of words children read and spell
- make sure that children practise using the knowledge they have been taught in previous lessons until they can use it automatically, thus freeing up their capacity to learn new knowledge
- support the children to connect the new knowledge with their previous learning
- demonstrate new learning in bite-sized chunks
- ensure children are given opportunities to apply what they have learnt
- praise the children for working hard and paying attention, being specific about what they have done well
- use assessment to determine next steps clearly, including identifying children who might need immediate extra support.<sup>79</sup>

## Direct teaching

All children (and other pupils who are learning to read) should take part in high-quality phonics sessions. For some of the time, the teacher should teach directly. All the children should participate by listening and responding, and by practising and applying what they are learning.

For reading, children should:

- revise GPCs taught in earlier sessions
- be taught new GPCs
- practise reading words containing those GPCs
- be taught how to read [common exception words](#)
- practise reading ‘decodable’ phrases, sentences and books that match the GPCs and exception words they already know.
- re-read these to build fluency

For writing (spelling and handwriting), children should:

- practise segmenting spoken words into their individual sounds
  - choose which letter or letters to represent each sound
  - practise a correct pencil grip
- 

<sup>79</sup> Ofsted (2022).

- be taught the correct start and exit points for each letter, which should not include 'lead-in' strokes from the line (see below)
- respond to dictation from the teacher, practising writing words in sentences that include only the GPCs and exception words they have learnt.

Dictation is a vital part of a phonics session. Writing simple dictated sentences that include words taught so far gives children opportunities to practise and apply their spelling, without their having to think about what it is they want to say.

At other times, the children should be given tasks that allow them to practise and apply what they have been taught to read and write independently, while the teacher identifies and helps those who need more support.

A systematic programme is essential for teaching phonics. Opportunities sometimes arise, however, to teach more. When that happens, teachers can respond naturally and briefly. For example, after teaching that /j/ is represented with 'j', George might say that his name has the same sound but no 'j'. The teacher could praise his careful listening and show him how 'ge' in his name represents /j/.

## Handwriting in Reception and year 1

Learning to form letters and spell words requires considerable effort and attention. While some pupils who have SEND may need reasonable adjustments, the vast majority of children should be taught how to sit with correct posture on a chair at a table, using a tripod grip to hold a pencil. Developing the right habits from the beginning allows children to write comfortably and legibly.

Schools should consider the advantages to children of delaying the teaching of joined handwriting. Nearly all the headteachers in the schools Ofsted visited for its 'Bold beginnings' survey did not teach a [cursive](#) or pre-cursive script in Reception. They told inspectors that they believed:

... it slowed down children's writing, at a point when they already found manual dexterity tricky and the muscles in their shoulders, arms and hands were still developing.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ofsted (2017).

## Written composition

Children's writing generally develops at a slower pace than their reading. Before they can write independently in a way that can be read by others, they need to know:

- what they want to say
- how to identify sounds in words
- at least one way to spell each of the sounds of English
- how to form letters.

This is also important for older pupils learning to read and write.

With plenty of practice in writing from dictation, children will find it easier to write independently. Then they can begin to write down their ideas. However, expecting children to write at length early on results in cognitive overload and might damage their motivation to write, both at this stage and later. Extra time for writing is unnecessary at this early stage.

At first, teachers should support children to compose sentences out loud, without requiring them to write. As their spelling develops, they can begin to write sentences using the GPCs they have been taught so far, spelling some words in a phonically plausible way, even if sometimes incorrectly, for example: 'me and my frens went in a cafai and had caix'.

As children's knowledge of the alphabetic code increases, teachers should encourage correct spelling.

## Resources

Well-organised teaching spaces allow children to focus on what they are learning.<sup>81</sup> Resources for children to refer to should be in a place where they can find or see them easily.

Phonics should be taught in a quiet space. Children need to have the best chance to hear clearly and pay attention, because extraneous noise hinders their progress.

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<sup>81</sup> Fisher, A.V. and others (2014). 'Visual environment, attention allocation, and learning in young children: when too much of a good thing may be bad' Association for Psychological Science: volume 25, issue 7

Researchers have also found that highly decorated walls in primary schools undermine children's ability to concentrate and absorb teachers' instructions.<sup>82</sup>

A carpet close to the teacher enables young children to sit easily during direct teaching, while tables and chairs allow them to sit and write properly, without balancing materials on their laps.

Letter cards, friezes and posters showing GPCs should match the phonics programme the school has chosen.

## Using 'decodable' books and texts

A systematic phonics programme includes sufficient 'decodable' books or texts, so that children can practise, at school and at home, their increasing knowledge of GPCs and their blending skill in meaningful contexts.

This is also necessary for older pupils who have not learnt to decode well enough, that is, pupils who still need to decode, individually, each word they meet in regular texts.

'Decodable' books and other texts make children feel successful from the very beginning. They do not encounter words that include GPCs they have not been taught. If an adult is not present, they are not forced to guess from pictures, the context, the first letters of a word or its shape (see [Appendix 7: Decodable texts](#) for examples). 'Decodable' books and texts that children read should run alongside or a little behind the teaching of the GPCs, so that they always feel a sense of achievement when they are asked to read such books.<sup>83</sup>

It is important that children practise their reading with 'decodable' books or texts. They speed up the time they need to gain sufficient accuracy to read a wide range of children's literature. It is helpful, therefore, if teachers explain to families how they can help their children to read such books when they bring them home.

## Organising 'decodable' books

Ofsted reported that in some schools visited for its 'Bold beginnings' survey:

... developing children's reading accuracy was hindered by the way [the schools] organised their reading books into bands. These schools mixed a range of reading

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<sup>82</sup> Burnet, K. (2014). ['Study Shows Classroom Decor Can Distract From Learning'](#)

<sup>83</sup> Programmes might also provide other written material (such as simple sentences) that reflects this

schemes, bought at various times, many of which used different approaches to the teaching of reading. Inspectors found that this did not ensure that children read books at the right level of difficulty.<sup>84</sup>

So that beginner readers read books at the right level of difficulty, teachers should make sure their organisation of these books is matched closely to the order in which GPCs are introduced in the programme. For example, a book that includes the word 'play' should be placed so that children are not asked to read it until the digraph 'ay' has been taught.

## Activities that can hinder learning

If children do not practise reading and writing enough, they fail to make sufficient progress. Activities must be high quality, practical, efficient and focused on the main goal – reading and spelling using phonics.

Children enjoy well-designed activities that focus on phonics. They feel successful and recognise that they are learning to read and write.

## Examples of activities that can hinder learning

Activities such as painting, colouring, modelling, playing in the sand and water tray are valuable for developing language, knowledge, cooperative play, fine motor skills, imagination and creativity. Using them as vehicles for practising phonics not only takes away the integrity of the activities but also does not provide sufficient practice in word reading, for example, when 'fishing' for words in a water tray, or painting or making models of letters.

A failure to make sure that all children are participating fully can hinder learning by limiting the amount of time for practice. For example:

- asking one child to write on the board while others only watch
- asking one child to read letters and words while others wait for their turn
- playing games that involve turn-taking, e.g. 'Phonic Bingo'.

Some practices may confuse children, make it more difficult than necessary for them to learn, or discourage them, such as when the teacher:

- asks children to write independently before they have the necessary skills: they do not know how to do it
- 

<sup>84</sup> Ofsted (2017).

- corrects spelling without appreciating that a child has identified a sound correctly, but not the correct grapheme
- demonstrates phonically plausible but incorrect spellings: the danger is the children may remember the wrong spelling<sup>85</sup>
- asks children to identify and count sounds in a spoken word after reading it: identifying sounds in a spoken word is important for spelling but not for reading
- tells a story about a sound or letter with so much detail that children focus on the story more than on what they need to learn.

Poor classroom routines can also get in the way of learning, especially when:

- routines and activities change frequently and too much time is lost in explanations
- children are seated where they cannot see the teacher's face or resources and therefore cannot pay full attention
- children are not shown how to use the classroom's posters and charts for support when they are reading and spelling
- displays about reading and writing are overly elaborate so that children cannot use them effectively
- posters and charts other than from the school's selected phonics programme are used to decorate the classroom.

Finally, sitting on the floor and writing on a mini whiteboard does not help children learn to hold a pencil and form letters correctly. To write, they should sit comfortably on a chair at a table. Using a whiteboard also means there is no paper record of the work, for the child, the teacher, or the parent.

The report of the Rose Review drew attention to 'weak practice in schools that were otherwise generally effective in teaching phonic work'; it stressed the need for 'vigilance in ensuring consistently high quality'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> An adult should not show children spellings that are phonically plausible but incorrect, even if simply demonstrating to them.

<sup>86</sup> Rose, J. (2006)



## Audit: Teaching a systematic programme

Teaching a systematic programme	Current practice
The school has adopted a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme for all pupils who are learning to read.	
Direct teaching of phonics takes place every day for all children from the start of the Reception year until they can decode.	
Interactive lessons ensure all children participate fully.	
Teachers review GPCs already taught and provide further practice when children have gaps in their knowledge.	
Children are taught correct letter formation and practise it daily.	
Children are given tasks that allow them to practise and apply what they have been taught.	
Children practise reading only with books or texts that are decodable for them at that stage of their learning.	
Children read a decodable book or other decodable text most days.	
Resources are organised effectively.	
The organisation of books is matched closely to the order in which the phonics programme introduces GPCs and exception words.	
Enough books or texts are available at each stage of the phonics programme for children to practise reading.	
Teachers are aware of activities that might hinder children's progress in learning to read and write.	

<p>Parents are informed about the phonics programme: what is taught; how they could provide extra practice to develop accuracy and fluency; how the school will support children to keep up from the start through extra practice.</p>	
<p><b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b></p>	

## Assessing word reading

### Formative assessment

Teachers should pay attention to pupils' misconceptions and adjust teaching minute by minute through the lesson: reviewing a GPC; repeating a step to support blending; explaining the meaning of an unfamiliar word in response to a puzzled look, or directing attention to a pupil who has lost focus.

### Summative assessment

In contrast, the aims of summative assessment are about:

- providing teachers with information about what each pupil has learnt in a given period
- providing leaders with information about which pupils might benefit from additional support.

What is important is that teachers and leaders are clear about 'what they are drawing from their data and how that informs their curriculum and teaching'.<sup>87</sup>

Summative assessments for phonics for pupils in Reception and year 1, for example, might be termly or half-termly. It is up to schools to decide, on the basis of the guidance

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<sup>87</sup> Ofsted (2022).

in the phonics programme they have chosen, at what points they collect such information.

### Individual records of progress

The programme's assessment should pinpoint any gaps exactly, including whether the pupil needs help in learning GPCs, sounding out words or reading words 'at a glance', and their speed and fluency in reading texts.

Individual records of progress – not simply group records – are vital, particularly for those who are at risk of not meeting the expected standard of the phonics screening check and failing to learn to read, as well as for older pupils who are not proficient in word reading.

Pupils new to the school should be assessed immediately on arrival. See [section 5: pupils who need the most support](#).

### Audit: Assessment

Assessment	Current practice
Teachers understand the difference between formative and summative assessment in relation to reading.	
Teachers use formative assessment throughout a lesson.	
Teachers assess pupils' GPC knowledge, skill in blending GPCs into words and reading words 'at a glance', and the speed pupils can read these words in a text.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Section 4: Developing fluency

Fluent decoding allows us to understand what we read. Because the reader has gained accuracy and automaticity in word reading, the brain's resources are available to focus on lifting the meaning from the page: connecting the words and sentences, and making connections across the text.

As pupils gain fluency, their motivation increases: they start to enjoy reading more and are willing to do more of it.

### Fluency: speed and accuracy

Researchers generally define and measure fluency in terms of the number of words within a passage read correctly per minute.<sup>88</sup> As well as speed, accuracy also influences fluency.<sup>89</sup> The national curriculum refers to pupils reading words comprising the year 1 GPCs 'accurately and speedily', reflecting this concept of fluency.<sup>90</sup>

Fluency gives the reader the choice to read at a speed that allows for comprehension and can be adapted to the purpose of the reading. Beginner readers, however, whatever their age, do not have a choice about speed because they are still engaged in decoding the words on the page.

Pupils do not pass through a magic barrier and suddenly become fluent. There is no point in pupils reading speedily if the words they read are wrong – for example, if they read 'place' for 'palace'. Equally, accuracy on its own is not useful, unless they can read at a sufficient rate to support comprehension. Both accuracy and speed are essential.

Researchers have also suggested prosody as an indicator of fluency. However, a reader is unlikely to show a good grasp of prosody if they cannot already read the words with appropriate pace.

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<sup>88</sup> Pikulski, J. J., & Chard, D. J. (2005). Fluency: Bridge between decoding and reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(6), 510-519, Rasinski, T. (2014). Fluency matters. *International electronic Journal of elementary education*, 7(1), 3-12, Hudson, R. F., Lane, H. B., & Pullen, P. C. (2005). Reading fluency assessment and instruction: What, why, and how? *The Reading Teacher*, 58(8), 702-714

<sup>89</sup> Juul, H., Poulsen, M. and Elbro, C. (2014). 'Separating speed from accuracy in beginning reading development' *Journal of Educational Psychology*: volume 106, issue 4, pages 1096-1106

<sup>90</sup> 'Fluency is typically measured as the number of words read correctly per minute. Thus defined, fluency is by definition influenced by accuracy as well as speed, and not a pure measure of speed.' Juul, H., Poulsen, M. and Elbro, C. (2014).

## Progressive fluency

Many factors contribute to fluency. Maryanne Wolf reached the ‘unsettling conclusion’ that:

reading fluency involves every process and subskill involved in reading. ... [It] is influenced by the development of rapid rates of processing in all the components of reading.<sup>91</sup>

It might be helpful to consider the idea of progressive rather than absolute fluency. The teacher helps pupils to gain reading fluency at each stage in the same way that a piano teacher helps a pupil to gain musical fluency at each grade.

The piano teacher supports the child to practise playing a piece of music fluently at that grade. Once the child can play the piece automatically, the teacher draws attention to the expression marks and the phrasing. Together they decide how the piece will be performed. At each grade, the complexity of the music increases, but the actual process of becoming fluent remains the same.

## Developing fluency while teaching pupils to decode

Practising to gain automaticity in decoding needs to begin by focusing on accuracy. This is also true for older pupils who need support. This means pupils must first work out a word by sounding and blending. Most of them have to do this several times before they can read it accurately ‘at a glance’. Re-reading a text, therefore, gradually increases the number of words in it that they can read ‘at a glance’. Urging pupils to read at speed will not increase their fluency: they can read only at the speed they can decode.

### Recognising familiar words ‘at a glance’

Some pupils can decode a word by sounding and blending once; later, whenever they come across the same word, they read it ‘at a glance’. Most pupils, however, have to decode a word overtly several times in different contexts before it becomes familiar enough to read ‘at a glance’.

Pupils learn to read words ‘at a glance’ more easily if, when they first decode a word by saying the sounds and blending them, they know what it means: the written word is a

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<sup>91</sup> Wolf, M. and Katzir-Cohen, T. (2001). ‘Reading fluency and its intervention’ *Scientific Studies of Reading*: volume 5, issue 3, pages 211-239

label for what the spoken word represents. A pupil therefore might be more likely to read 'dog' at a glance than 'cog', and 'splash' rather than 'stash'.

The more words pupils can read at a glance, the sooner they see beyond the word as consisting of a series of letters to decode and can focus on what the word means.

### **One teacher with one pupil**

It is difficult for teachers to find the time to listen to pupils reading individually. However, if they did, the teacher could choose a book closely matched to the GPCs the pupil knew, and the number of words the pupil would be likely to be able to read at a glance. The teacher would start by showing interest in the book, connecting it to something the pupil knew about or had read before.

The teacher would expect the pupil to sound out unfamiliar words and would praise them for doing so. The teacher might re-read a sentence or a page to the pupil to help them keep track of what was going on and explain the meaning of a word in the context of the story. Sometimes they might re-read sections together. At the end of the reading, the teacher might say, 'You could read this to your dad tonight. He'll be so impressed'. Above all, the teacher would make the process interactive and meaningful.

The next day, they might start a new book together or re-read the same book so the pupil could read more words at a glance and notice more of what they were reading.

### **One teacher with many pupils**

However, classroom teachers do not usually have the advantage of listening to one pupil read at a time. They need to replicate, for the whole class, what they would do with just one. This means:

- deciding how to organise pupils into groups so they can practise reading a 'decodable' book or text. This might be within the main class or group phonic lesson, or in groups throughout the day
- choosing the book or text that matches most closely the GPCs that the group knows and taking account of the pupils' skill in blending the sounds in words that are unfamiliar
- noting which words might need explaining
- clarifying the purpose of any re-readings: to increase the number of words pupils can read at a glance, or perhaps to discuss the plot of the story, the characters and their motives
- deciding which 'decodable' book each pupil will take home to read.

As their knowledge of GPCs and the words they can read at a glance increases, the pupils can gradually read longer books.

They will also learn to draw on other knowledge of words, for example, common spelling patterns, such as the [morphemes](#) ‘un-’, ‘-ing’, ‘-ly’ and ‘-ed’. Eventually, they will no longer need the support of books deliberately structured to be decodable for beginners and will be able to read any age-appropriate literature.

## Continuing to develop fluency once pupils can decode

Once pupils can decode most unfamiliar words speedily and read many familiar words at a glance in texts written to match the GPCs they know, they have taken their first steps towards fluency. However, for many pupils, becoming a fluent reader takes a considerable and continuing investment of time. There are no short cuts.

Fluency develops progressively as pupils are introduced to and re-read books that include new vocabulary and language structures that they might not otherwise have read for themselves, as well as challenging ideas. Their familiarity with a text is critical to building fluency.

The teacher has a vital role in choosing and reading aloud books that will motivate pupils to read gradually more demanding texts. Such experiences also improve their access to books that many of their peers can read independently. Pupils might re-read a passage from a story read aloud in an English lesson, a section from a non-fiction text from a history lesson or a demanding poem that all the class has learnt by heart.

See [Section 7: Organising and promoting books](#).

In English and in other lessons, teachers should continue to provide pupils with practice in decoding unfamiliar words from a text they are about to read, both single and multi-syllabic words, and those containing rarer GPCs. They should also explain their meanings, drawing on [morphology](#) where it is helpful.

In addition, the more frequently teachers read aloud across the curriculum, the more pupils experience the impact of fluent reading – what it sounds like and how it makes them feel. Over time, they begin to understand how a reader might share meaning through choosing which words to emphasise, and how pace, intonation and volume can be controlled. (See [Section 8 reading aloud to pupils](#))

In English lessons, teachers might therefore:

- share how they plan to read aloud a text, showing how they decide the best words to emphasise, the pace, the voices, pauses and how they use punctuation to help them (See [Appendix 4](#))
- help pupils to practise doing the same, by asking them to work with a partner to prepare a short text, poem, or part of a text to read aloud or to perform to the

class. As pupils re-read the text, the number of words they read automatically and accurately increases; their intonation reflects their improving understanding.

- consider using other strategies such as
  - echo reading, where the teacher reads a text aloud sentence by sentence or line by line and pupils echo the teacher's reading, copying its pace, intonation and emphasis
  - choral reading where pupils can be allotted different lines to practise reading together.

See [Section 10: Teaching reading in the English lesson](#).

### **Extra practice**

Some pupils benefit from repeating the activities above in small groups to increase their fluency.

On other days pupils might choose to read and reread joke books, silly poems aloud to each other.

They also benefit from reading aloud the same texts home and build up their reading miles.

See [Older pupils who need to catch up](#)



## Audit: Developing fluency

Developing fluency	Current practice
Teachers develop pupils' fluency while they are learning to decode and continue to develop it once pupils can read words at a glance.	
Teachers understand why fluency is essential for pupils' reading comprehension.	
Accurate decoding is assured before pupils move on to read a new book.	
Teachers explain the meaning of new words to pupils to increase their vocabulary and accelerate their reading of words at a glance.	
Pupils, from the earliest stage, re-read books to practise and improve their fluency.	
In all lessons, teachers provide practice in decoding unfamiliar words from a text pupils are about to read and explain their meaning.	
Teachers provide pupils with a wide range of familiar poetry, stories and non-fiction books to read in school and at home.	
Teachers read aloud to pupils, across the curriculum, providing a model of fluency.	
Teachers use a range of strategies to support and develop pupils' fluency.	
Teachers provide extra practice for pupils who need support in developing fluency.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Section 5: Pupils who need the most support

### Keeping up from the start

Teachers should aim for all pupils to keep up with the school's chosen phonics programme, ensuring teaching time is sufficient for the content to be taught within the timescales the programme sets out. In particular, pupils should practise reading each group of graphemes speedily before they are expected to blend them to read words.

Some pupils need extra support from the beginning. Assessment ([section 5: pupils who need the most support](#)) should identify such pupils – if not already identified – as soon as they begin to fall behind their peers. Therefore, individual records of progress – not simply group records – are vital, particularly to identify pupils who are at risk of not meeting the expected standard of the phonics screening check and failing to learn to read. Teachers, working with others if necessary, should investigate possible reasons, such as whether a pupil might have a hearing or visual impairment, or speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

To enable pupils to keep up, they should be given extra practice, either in a small group or one-to-one, whether or not a specific reason has been found. The extra practice should:

- be provided by a well-trained adult: teacher or teaching assistant
- take place in a quiet place, at a regular time every day so that pupils become familiar with the routine
- be a school priority, with maximum efforts made to avoid disruption or cancellation
- be consistent with the school's mainstream phonics programme
- include activities that secure the important phonic knowledge and skill the pupils have not grasped.

The emphasis should be on pupils:

- consolidating the work they have already met in their main class or group phonics session, with bite-sized steps so all of them can achieve success every day
- revising grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs)
- practising oral blending of spoken sounds to pronounce words
- reading words by saying the sounds and blending them
- filling in their individual knowledge gaps of the GPCs they have previously been taught but not secured.

In addition, writing these words and then reading them back helps pupils to remember how to read them. They should say the sounds in the words as they write them from dictation.

These pupils should continue to read ‘decodable’ books, that is, books that include only words with GPCs they have been explicitly taught, until they can blend sounds to read new words fluently and automatically.

For various reasons, some parents cannot support their children’s reading at home. Schools should provide extra opportunities for these pupils to read to adults and to listen to adults reading to them.

### **Audit: Keeping up from the start**

<b>Keeping up from the start</b>	<b>Current practice</b>
Phonics lessons are of the highest quality to reduce the likelihood that pupils might need extra support.	
Children at risk of falling behind are identified within the first three weeks of their starting in their Reception year. They should continue to be assessed until they can read fluently.	
These children have extra daily phonics practice with a well-trained adult.	
Each pupil receiving extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; their attendance; time at the school, and previous teaching.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Older pupils who need to catch up

After year 1, learning in the wider curriculum depends increasingly on literacy. Pupils who cannot read well enough do not have full access to the curriculum. Those who fail to learn to read early on often start to dislike reading. They read less than others – and less often – and do not accumulate the background knowledge and vocabulary from reading that their peers do. The word-rich get richer, while the word-poor get poorer.<sup>92</sup>

These pupils cannot read fully what is written on the board and accompanying texts nor complete written tasks that depend on this. They are unlikely to admit they do not understand and fall even further behind. When the teacher asks pupils to discuss a question, they might encourage their partner to do the talking and thus they avoid giving feedback to the class. Increasingly, their attention goes into working out how to get through lessons without their peers noticing their poor reading. They can withdraw, become anxious or misbehave.

## Identifying pupils who need support

Many key stage 2 and 3 classrooms have pupils with differing levels of poor word reading. It is important to identify whether they need support in decoding or reading fluency.

This section provides guidance about identifying pupils who need support either in decoding, fluent word reading or both – whether they are in year 3 or later years.

In secondary schools, standardised reading tests can be a useful first step in identifying these pupils. These, however, can only give an approximate indication because the tests focus on comprehension rather than decoding and fluency.

It is likely that pupils with a reading age (RA) of 8 or below will need the support of an SSP programme, though few will need to start at the beginning and pupils with RAs of 8 and 9, are likely to need support in developing their reading speed and fluency.

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Merton is credited with creating the term 'Matthew Effect': Merton RK (1968). 'The Matthew effect in science' *Science*: volume 159, pages 56-63. Keith Stanovich and others applied the term to the idea that, in reading, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

<https://childrenofthecode.org/library/refs/mattheweffect.htm>

It is then important to assess all pupils with a reading age of 9 and below using a diagnostic assessment for word reading (which might be from the school's phonic programme).

The diagnostic or phonic programme's assessment should pinpoint where they need support exactly: which GPCs they need to learn so they can decode more unfamiliar words, the familiar words they can read 'at a glance', and the speed by which they read.

## **Pupils who need the support of an SSP programme**

The phonics programme a school chooses for catch-up provision should be an SSP programme, as for beginner readers. However, for older pupils who are still at the earliest stages of learning to read, schools might want to avoid SSP programmes specifically designed for younger pupils and consider age-appropriate lessons, as well as reading materials that develop pupils' decoding and fluency.

Pupils who need the support of an SSP should start at the highest point in the programme that is necessary for them to make progress – not from the beginning. This might mean some pupils will need to be taught individually; others can be taught in groups if they are working with pupils at the same level of phonic knowledge.

They need to be taught by someone who has been fully trained in how to teach the school's programme in bite-sized steps so that they achieve success every day.

This should happen immediately, so they do not miss lessons to have intervention teaching for longer than necessary. (See [organising and teaching catch-up](#) below.)

They will make fast progress if they receive a few months of intensive daily teaching at their specific level; they should not need this extra support indefinitely. Late arrivals to the school may also need focused support in word reading, particularly those who are new to the English education system or whose first language is not English.

It is vital that pupils are assessed carefully and reassessed frequently so they can continue to access the programme at a point where they can make the fastest progress.

Those with learning difficulties may need longer, but every pupil needs to master the alphabetic code whether they have special educational needs or not.

## **Pupils who need support to develop fluency**

The Standards and Testing Agency says that around 90 words per minute is a good indicator of when pupils 'start to read with sufficient fluency to focus on their

understanding'. However, some pupils, it says, might read more slowly than this while still being able to understand what they are reading.<sup>93</sup>

Pupils who can read the words in the last 'decodable' texts of an SSP programme are unlikely to need further support from it: they can now decode many unfamiliar words and read many familiar words at a glance. However, some of them still read too slowly to take in the meaning of what they are reading.

Adults need to give these pupils a considerable and continuing investment of time. It is vital that they have frequent practice to increase their confidence and fluency. They would benefit from extra time in a small group every day to develop their fluency.

See [Continuing to develop fluency once pupils can decode.](#)

In English and in other lessons, teachers should know who these pupils are and continue to provide them with practice in decoding unfamiliar words from a text they are about to read, both single and multi-syllabic words, and those containing rarer GPCs. They should also explain their meanings, drawing on [morphology](#) where it is helpful.

Here are four examples of pupils who need support. None has been diagnosed with SEND.

#### **Harry in year 4**

Harry is in year 4. He did not meet the standard of the national phonics screening check in year 1 or when he took it again in year 2. With a lot of hesitation, he read about 20 of the 40 items in the check. He cannot read many words 'at a glance', that is, without sounding them out.

He struggles at school. He finds it difficult to access new information and being unable to read prevents him from joining in fully with most lessons. He feels embarrassed and becomes either withdrawn or badly behaved. As a result, his potential is underestimated and he is often misunderstood. He feels reading is not for him.

He talks knowledgeably and enthusiastically about his interests, especially tortoises and terrapins, but he lacks sufficient vocabulary and relevant background knowledge to make sense of many of the stories his teacher reads aloud to the class.

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<sup>93</sup> Standards and Testing Agency (2018). 'Teacher assessment frameworks at the end of key stage 1. For use from the 2018/19 academic year onwards.' London: STA

Teachers provide pictures and diagrams in an attempt to make learning accessible for him; they also ask confident readers or teaching assistants to read for him. Neither will help him read. Harry's learning will improve only when he can read well.

At the moment, Harry does not and cannot say: "I am Harry. I am a reader."

### **Next steps for Harry**

Harry's assessment shows that he has significant gaps in his knowledge of GPCs which means he cannot decode many unfamiliar words. He needs plenty of daily practice in:

- filling in any gaps in his GPC knowledge through the school's phonics programme
- reading the GPCs he has been taught
- decoding unfamiliar words with the GPCs he knows
- reading familiar words 'at a glance'
- reading books that use the GPCs he has learnt.

In addition, he needs to listen to stories read aloud in story times. And, in due course, he will need to learn everything that Amina (below) needs to learn.

### **Amina in year 4**

Amina is also in year 4. She met the standard of the phonics screening check in year 1 but read each word slowly. She could not read seven of the check's 20 nonsense words.

At the end of year 2, she did not reach the expected standard in reading. Although, by that point, she knew many GPCs and could blend them to decode, the number of words she reads 'at a glance' is too low to allow her to read with sufficient fluency to pay attention to and thus understand what she is reading.

The books she is able to decode are below the level of what she can understand, that is, below the level of her language comprehension. She can understand more sophisticated stories, but she depends on others to find time to read them to her. Her poor decoding restricts her capacity to read books that would engage her and that she would enjoy.

Amina loves listening to and talking about stories but never chooses to read on her own. In fact, she does everything she can to avoid reading. In class reading time, she flicks through the pages of a book in the same series that her best friend is reading. No-one knows she can't read it. She is not one of the class's 'target children' because, ostensibly, she 'passed' the screening check; she also joins in articulately and confidently with conversations about texts that are read aloud to the class.

At home, even though she has a case full of books that her parents and other relatives have bought her, she is inventive at coming up with reasons not to read on her own. When her dad makes her work out a word, she gets frustrated. In turn, he gets frustrated

because he feels she won't try. Amina thinks she is not as clever as other children in her class and she has more or less given up on learning to read.

Amina quietly struggles at school. Because she cannot read what is on the board or a worksheet, she finds it tricky to grasp what her teacher says and often drifts off. Her parents have been told that she'll catch up, that she just needs a bit more time because she is summer-born. But without urgent and targeted teaching, Amina won't catch up.

At the moment, she does not say: I am Amina, I am a reader.

### **Next steps for Amina**

Amina's assessment shows that she has only a few gaps in her knowledge of GPCs. She can decode many unfamiliar words, but does not have the confidence to attempt unfamiliar longer multi-syllabic words. It shows that she can read the texts towards the end of the phonics programme at around 50 words per minute.

Amina, although further ahead than Harry, also needs to continue to be taught to read through a systematic and rigorous synthetic phonics programme. She needs plenty of daily practice in:

- filling in any gaps in her GPC knowledge through the school's phonic programme
- decoding unfamiliar words, both single and multi-syllabic, containing GPCs she has learnt
- reading familiar words 'at a glance'
- reading lively, well written, phonically [decodable books](#) containing the GPCs she knows – right to the last stages of the school's phonic programme
- re-reading these books to develop fluency
- reading familiar books the teacher has read aloud (see [section 7: organising book stock](#)).

The more words she can read 'at a glance', that is, without sounding out overtly, the speedier her reading will become.

She also needs further support in English lessons and in other subjects to develop fluent reading. See [Section 4: Developing fluency \(Continuing to develop fluency once pupils can decode\)](#).

### **Mia and George in year 7**

Year 7 also has pupils who need support. Each of these pupils in year 7 – and in later years – has suffered for longer as the gap between them and their peers grows wider. Although they did not receive the support they needed in key stage 2, secondary teachers assume they had received focused teaching on phonics and believe that this



teaching must have failed them – and therefore they need something different. They do not.

Mia and George are now faced with a huge amount of reading in every lesson – in one day their peers read about the Norman invasion in history, a supermarket visit in French, cell structure in biology and they read ‘Macbeth’ in English. Mia and George cannot achieve success at school because their progress depends upon their learning academic vocabulary – and this depends on their ability to decode new words rapidly. Their motivation to learn and attitude towards school are at the lowest possible level. They are demoralised and have become recalcitrant. They have no choice but to hide the fact they cannot read. George disrupts lessons so he can be sent out of class; Mia switches off in lessons and then copies her friend’s work.

### **Next steps for George in year 7**

Assessment shows that George has significant gaps in his knowledge of GPCs. This means he cannot decode many unfamiliar words. He therefore needs plenty of daily practice in:

- reading the later GPCs in the SSP programme
- decoding unfamiliar words which contain only the GPCs he already knows
- reading familiar words that he can decode ‘at a glance’
- reading books that match the GPCs he has learnt.

He then needs the same support that Mia (below) receives.

### **Next steps for Mia in year 7**

Mia can decode many unfamiliar words, but she is not confident to attempt longer and unfamiliar multi-syllabic words. Her assessment shows she has only a few gaps in her knowledge of GPCs and that she can read the texts towards the end of the SSP programme. She can read these texts between 60 and 70 words per minute. Therefore, she does not need further support from such a programme.

However, she needs daily support and plenty of practice in:

- decoding unfamiliar words, both single and multi-syllabic, containing GPCs she has learnt
- re-reading familiar books and passages from other texts the teacher has recently read aloud.

See [Continuing to develop fluency once pupils can decode](#).

## **Pupils who need support to understand what they read**

Reading is one of the principal ways we learn new things. So, a key way to improve comprehension is for pupils to read a lot and to listen to and talk about texts read to them.

Vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge are likely to overlap considerably in the classroom. The more a reader knows about the topic, the easier it is for them to integrate new information from the text with what they already know to build a mental model. ([Appendix 9](#) explores the concept of mental models in more detail.) To support pupils' comprehension, teachers need to build both pupils' knowledge of words and the ideas that they represent.

Some pupils, however, will struggle with comprehension. This is likely to be because they do not have sufficient vocabulary or background knowledge, although these are not the only causes of comprehension difficulties. Until pupils are reading sufficiently fluently to focus on what is written, it is neither necessary nor desirable to assess their reading comprehension.

Further, background knowledge is intrinsically linked with skilled reading. But lower-skilled readers who have good knowledge of a topic are able to use it to compensate for their otherwise weaker language comprehension. Therefore, teachers should be cautious when considering the results of a single reading comprehension assessment on a single subject.<sup>94</sup>

## **Pupils who need support to overcome other barriers to reading**

Schools may also need to deal with other barriers in order to teach pupils to read. These could include their motivation or behaviour, especially for older pupils who have not been taught to read for many years. Developmental barriers, such as auditory or visual impairments, might also need to be diagnosed through specialist assessments.

Good language development is essential for learning to read. Some pupils may need additional support for this, but that is unlikely to mean that teaching SSP should be delayed: it can happen in tandem. It also does not mean that such pupils need a different kind of teaching for reading.

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<sup>94</sup> Smith, R., Snow, P., Serry, T. and Hammond, L. (2021). 'The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension: A Critical Review' in 'Reading Psychology', Volume 42, 2021, Pages 214-240

## Organising and teaching catch up

Providing catch-up teaching for word and text reading is vital, however difficult it may be to organise sufficient time, space and staff (see [Section 12: Leadership and management](#) on ways to handle this difficulty). School leaders and special educational needs co-ordinators in primary and secondary schools must take responsibility for ensuring all these pupils make rapid progress. Given that many secondary teachers and support staff will not have had training to teach reading, it is essential to provide this. Sections 1 to 6 provide important background reading before training is provided for a school's chosen SSP programme, including explaining how reading develops and how primary schools teach reading.

It is vital that pupils are assessed carefully and reassessed frequently so they can access the programme at a point where they can make the fastest progress. Very few pupils will need to start at the beginning of it. It is especially important that these interventions are time-limited and monitored closely for effectiveness.

Although, ideally, in primary and secondary schools, reading interventions would be timetabled outside lesson time, this is not always possible. But since good reading is essential if pupils are to access the full curriculum, schools will need to make difficult choices about what activities pupils have to miss. Leaders may also have to overcome the concerns of teachers and of parents about pupils' absence from some mainstream lessons. Neither the DfE nor Ofsted can direct what is appropriate in individual schools, but both support schools in their decisions where they have a clear rationale for their choices and evidence of their impact.

Leaders should invest in a strong team, committed to making sure these pupils catch up. Ideally, they should be school staff or long-stay tutors, rather than external teachers or tutors who might stay only a short time. They should be trained, supported and coached.

Where possible, teaching should happen at the same time every day, so that the pupils know what is planned and do not have to cope with changes. While in primary schools, it may be possible for interventions to happen in the same place every day, this is harder to manage in secondary schools. Leaders may have to be creative to achieve this. It is vital that leaders support and monitor interventions closely and the impact on pupils' progress is evaluated regularly (see [section 12: Leadership and management](#)). It is therefore important to choose a programme that allows for this.

To continue to develop these pupils' language and vocabulary, and encourage a love of reading, teachers should make sure that they listen to and discuss the same texts that their peers listen to in story time and book club time (see [section 8: developing a reading for pleasure culture](#).) However, then asking them to read the texts by themselves and complete written comprehension activities wastes their time and further demoralises

them, because their decoding skills do not yet allow them to read well enough. Written composition might also be too challenging for some of them.

### **Audit: pupils who need more support**

<b>Pupils who need more support</b>	<b>Current practice</b>
Assessments identify pupils with poor word reading and fluency as soon as possible.	
Sufficient support accelerates progress, including for new arrivals and pupils who are learning English as an additional language.	
Each pupil receiving daily extra support is profiled to identify any special educational needs or disability (if not already identified); any speech, communication and language needs; time at the school; their attendance, and previous teaching.	
Leaders manage the timetable effectively, so pupils receive sufficient time to catch up with their decoding and fluency. (It is likely that pupils may need to miss other lessons, or form time, while they catch up.)	
Well-trained staff make sure that pupils get effective teaching to catch up rapidly.	
Leaders support and monitor interventions closely and the impact on pupils' progress is evaluated regularly	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities

The wide range of learning difficulties experienced by pupils with identified SEND can have a significant impact on children's and young people's access to the curriculum. This section concentrates on good practice for those with moderate to severe SEND and complex needs.

Literacy is as important for these pupils as for their peers and teachers should be ambitious about teaching them to read and write. These pupils have to navigate the same written language, unlock the same alphabetic code, learn the same skills, and learn and remember the same body of knowledge as their peers. These are critical in helping them prepare for adulthood.

Schools are expected to enable access to appropriate phonics instruction for pupils who have complex needs. Under the Equality Act 2010, they are required to make reasonable adjustments to enable pupils with disabilities to have full access to the curriculum and to be able to participate in it.

Consensus is growing among academics and teachers that the best reading instruction for pupils with SEND is SSP, taught by direct instruction.<sup>95</sup> They can learn to read and write and can make progress towards or attain functional literacy.

In a 2021 French study of pupils with learning disabilities, Sermier said:

These findings suggest that students with [special educational needs] benefit from phonics-based programs integrating research-based approaches and techniques.<sup>96</sup>

Similarly, a recent systematic review for children with autism by Arciuli and Bailey concluded:

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<sup>95</sup> Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition From Novice to Expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19(1), 5–51.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100618772271>

<sup>96</sup> Sermier, D. and others (2021). 'Effects of a phonics-based intervention on the reading skills of students with intellectual disability' *Research in Developmental Disabilities*: volume 111

...comprehensive instruction that incorporates [phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency and reading comprehension] ...is not only appropriate for children with autism but also effective.<sup>97</sup>

The view that children learn in different ways is under scrutiny. Dehaene has said:

...it is simply not true that there are hundreds of ways to learn to read. Every child is unique... but when it comes to reading we all have roughly the same brain that imposes the same constraints and the same learning sequence.<sup>98</sup>

Evidence suggests that most pupils with moderate to severe and complex needs are not 'visual learners', as previously thought. Trembath, for instance, in a small study, found 'no evidence of a prominent visual learning style in children with ASD,<sup>99</sup> while Kathy Cologon has noted that, for pupils with Down's syndrome:

Sight-word learning on its own is insufficient for reading development and teaching with this approach alone is contrary to current evidence-based practices in literacy instruction.<sup>100</sup>

SSP, rather than a whole-word approach, provides pupils with moderate to severe and complex needs the best opportunity to gain functional literacy. Pupils who have a hearing or visual impairment are generally able to access phonics teaching if they have some hearing or vision.

Instruction should be accessible to all these pupils. Teachers should:

- provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to read and spell, by direct instruction, progressing systematically with carefully structured, small and cumulative steps
- use instructional routines that become familiar
- provide materials that limit distraction; are clear, linear and easy to follow; are age-neutral or age-appropriate and can be adapted further, such as being reduced to individual items

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<sup>97</sup> Arciuli, J. and Bailey, B. (2021). 'The promise of comprehensive early reading instruction for children with autism and recommendations for future directions' *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*: volume 52, issue 1, pages 225-238

<sup>98</sup> Dehaene, S. (2009). 'Reading in the Brain' London: Penguin Random House

<sup>99</sup> Trembath, D. and others (2015). 'Accurate or Assumed: Visual Learning in Children with ASD' *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*: volume 45, pages 3276-3287

<sup>100</sup> Cologon, K. (2013). 'Debunking myths: Reading development in children with Down Syndrome' *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*: volume 38, number 3

- provide opportunities for work on vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension
- provide multiple opportunities for overlearning (recall, retrieval, practice and application at the level of the alphabetic code, word, sentence and text).

Teaching should:

- be at a suitable pace for the pupil because progression through a programme will be much slower than for their typically developing peers
- be daily, with well-paced, well-planned lessons that are engaging and motivating
- take full account of each pupil's individual strengths, weaknesses, knowledge and understanding, and profile of needs.

Some pupils may need additional strategies, such as for those who:

- have physical disabilities that affect their fine motor control for holding and manipulating objects, e.g. use of desktop manipulatives, alternative writing strategies
- are pre- or non-verbal, e.g. use of alternative communication strategies, such as selecting their response from auditory choices anchored to visual symbols or place-markers
- have both fine motor difficulties and are pre- or non-verbal, e.g. use of low- or high-tech eye gaze strategies.

## **A note on specialist provision**

This document is primarily written for mainstream schools where, with the right support, the vast majority of pupils will be able to make expected progress. Nevertheless, much of this document will also be relevant and useful for teachers and leaders in specialist provision.

The range of need in special schools is broad. Some pupils may leave school reading at the level expected for their age while, for others, success may mean reading basic words and text in the world around them with confidence. Attainment may be different, but the process of learning to read is the same for those with moderate to severe SEND and complex needs. Because the rate of progress may well be slower, the time taken is likely to be longer.

## **A note on specific learning difficulties**

This framework does not offer guidance on specific conditions that may affect a pupil's progress in learning to read. Teachers should continue teaching phonics for as long as pupils need it.

## Dyslexia

Dyslexia is 'a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling'.<sup>101</sup>

Dyslexic pupils may take longer than other pupils to embed their knowledge of GPCs and may need supporting in small incremental steps from the very beginning so they achieve success each day. However, systematic synthetic phonics is the best evidenced way to teach decoding, including for these pupils.<sup>102</sup> They should be assessed regularly to ensure that any gaps in their knowledge are remedied quickly and effectively.

## Other conditions

A very few pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) might not be able to access direct literacy instruction. For pupils who are working at Standard 1 in the pre-key stage 1 standards, it may not be appropriate to begin teaching them to read.<sup>103</sup>

Following on from the SEND Green Paper consultation, the Department for Education will publish SEND National Standards and related practice guides.<sup>104</sup> These will clarify the nature of evidence-based provision for a variety of special educational needs and disabilities.

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<sup>101</sup> Rose, J. (2009) Identifying and teaching children and young people with literacy difficulties, Department for Children, Schools and Families: London

<sup>102</sup> EEF (2021) Phonics [Phonics | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](https://www.eef.org.uk/Phonics)

<sup>103</sup> Standards & Testing Agency (2020). Pre-key stage 1: pupils working below the national curriculum assessment standard Teacher assessment framework [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1109303/2021\\_Pre-key\\_stage\\_1\\_-\\_pupils\\_working\\_below\\_the\\_national\\_curriculum\\_assessment\\_standard.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1109303/2021_Pre-key_stage_1_-_pupils_working_below_the_national_curriculum_assessment_standard.pdf)

<sup>104</sup> Department for Education (2023). SEND and alternative provision improvement plan: right support, right place, right time London: [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\) and Alternative Provision \(AP\) Improvement Plan](#)



## Section 6: What skilled readers can do

### About the reading brain

As adults, reading has become automatic and effortless for most of us. We are not usually conscious of the huge amount of processing our brains do when we read, unless something happens to draw it to our attention, such as when we turn over two pages at once and realise that the part-sentence at the top of the following page makes no sense. Maryanne Wolf, neuroscientist and reading specialist, has described our brain's speedy processing as we read the black marks on the page and the impact this has.<sup>105</sup>

She explains that, when we start to read, without a single moment of conscious awareness, our eyes sweep systematically across the page, making small movements (called 'saccades') which allow our brain to take in about seven letters (or letter spaces) at once.<sup>106</sup> As a result of these, we are already previewing and starting to process what we will read a millisecond later. As highly skilled readers, we automatically associate specific letters with specific sounds, and specific letter patterns with specific words.

While our brain is gathering this visual information, it is sending it to its language areas for processing. As soon as that happens, in the next milliseconds, we start to take in the text's meaning, implications and nuances. We generate inferences and hypotheses, constantly predicting what may be coming next; we draw on what we already know and adjust our ideas as we absorb new information. Knowledge, both from our reading and from real life, feeds into this new reading. If we forget what has just happened or want to check something, our eyes flit back quickly to pick up the information we need.

For us, as fluent adult readers, all this happens unconsciously. Now imagine a much younger reader, a skilled nine-year-old reader. We'll call him Jamal.

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<sup>105</sup> Wolf, M. (2008).

<sup>106</sup> Noticing the spaces between words, as well as the letters that form them, contributes to comprehension. The number of letters or spaces in a saccade varies, depending on the language being read and the reader's fluency. See chapter 5 of Snowling, M.J. & Hulme, C. (eds.). *The science of reading. A handbook* (2005). Oxford: Blackwell.

## What a skilled reader can do

### Jamal

Jamal has always loved listening to the stories his father read at home and those his Reception teacher read at school. Every week they enjoyed choosing books for bedtime stories from their local public library. Jamal made rapid progress in learning to read letter-sounds and blending the sounds into words. He read books closely matched to the GPCs he knew and, by the end of Year 1, he no longer needed the support of 'decodable' books.

His later teachers also read stories aloud twice a day. The pupils sang songs and learnt rhymes. The teacher knew that a story re-read was a chance to explore the language, the characters and their feelings, and to allow pupils to relive the emotions they felt on the first reading. Jamal enjoyed waiting for his favourite bits, ready to join in, ready to be scared or to laugh. By the end of Year 1 Jamal could read these stories for himself.

By the age of eight, Jamal had become a skilled reader.

He reads widely: stories, comics, articles about ecology, space, and books about history and sport borrowed from the class library and his local public library. He reads in one week what other children of his age read in a year.

He reads because he is intrigued by the stories; he wants to know what happens next. He reads Spiderman comics, adventure-filled novels and articles about his greatest interest – palaeontology. He reads because he is curious about the world; the more he learns, the more he discovers that there is to learn. Jamal loves reading and is motivated to read more.

Over time, Jamal has built up sufficient reading stamina to read for extended periods, often not noticing that time has passed while he has been lost in his book. He reads attentively.

Each time he reads, new knowledge connects with, builds on and sometimes replaces what he already knows. The networks in his brain grow and grow. The more he knows, the less his attention has to struggle with processing new information or vocabulary;<sup>107</sup> he is then freer to learn more. He is motivated to comprehend because he knows he can.

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<sup>107</sup> Willingham, D. (2006). 'How Knowledge Helps'. Article published on the website of the American Educator, Spring 2006; <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/spring-2006/how-knowledge-helps>

There are no short cuts to comprehension. Inference and prediction depend upon knowledge, and knowledge depends upon reading a lot.

For readers like Jamal, these three strands of reading – being able to read, choosing to read and spending time reading – reinforce one another, forming a virtuous circle.

## A reading mind-set

Jamal has become an accomplished and experienced reader. His sense of self is also tied up with seeing himself as a reader: 'I am Jamal. I read.

As a result of the teaching he had in Reception and Year 1, Jamal learnt to read speedily, accurately and effortlessly. Without conscious thought, he can:

- read the vast majority of the words he meets at a glance
- decode any new word speedily and accurately
- access the meanings of words through their spellings.

His facility in lifting the words off the page frees him to construct meaning. He can:

- create a mental model, amending and updating what he knows with new information
- draw on his experience and knowledge, to make inferences, automatically filling in the gaps at sentence level, across the text, and between the text and what he knows already
- consider the meaning, implication and nuance of every word, drawing upon a wide and deep vocabulary and body of knowledge, much of which he has acquired from his previous reading and experience
- understand when the precise meaning of a specific word is vital for understanding and when it can be skipped
- draw upon his knowledge of sentence structure, including punctuation
- constantly anticipate what might be coming next and consider how it aligns with what he already knows
- spot when his understanding has broken down, and rewind to pick up past information
- read silently, sometimes drawing on prosodic information to hear the voice of the narrator and characters.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Willingham, D. (2017), pages 66–68

Jamal can read well. He can do all of these things only because he reads a lot.

## **A reading future**

As Jamal continues through school, his reading – and the knowledge he has gained from it – will hold him in good stead. At secondary school, the books he used to read at primary school will allow him to understand and appreciate the poetry and novels he studies in English lessons, and meet the challenge of reading complex texts across the curriculum that use subject-specific terminology and structural features. He has the stamina and resilience to persevere, even when a text proves challenging. His teachers encourage his reading for pleasure by introducing him to a wide range of fiction and non-fiction.

## Section 7: Choosing and organising books

The stage of pupils' reading development and the purposes for which they are reading determine the types of books they need to read. These types are likely to include:

- 'decodable' books/texts for learning to read (see [Appendix 7: Decodable books](#))
- books for pupils to read independently (post-'decodable' reading books):
- picture books, including graphic novels for older pupils.
- 'page-turners', both long and short
- literature
- books/texts for the wider curriculum, including non-fiction
- 'hi-lo' books.<sup>109</sup>

### Decodable' books for pupils learning to read

SSP programmes organise their 'decodable' books to reflect the order in which the GPCs are to be taught in the programme. Since pupils build up their GPC knowledge cumulatively, teachers can thus be sure that pupils should be able to decode every word in each 'decodable' book they read from that programme, provided they are read in the prescribed order.

These books are carefully graded by level or colour. However, a system of levels or colour banding that includes books with words that are not aligned with the progression of a school's SSP programme, or that includes books where pupils are expected to guess words from the first letter, from pictures or context cues, or from syntax, should be avoided. This is because pupils should be reading 'books that are consistent with their developing phonic knowledge and that do not require them to use other strategies to work out words'.<sup>110</sup>

This is also true of books that pupils take home to read. Schools should help parents to understand that books sent home for their children to read should match the GPCs they can already decode.

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<sup>109</sup> Daniel Willingham (2017).

<sup>110</sup> Department for Education (2013).

## **Books for pupils to read independently (post-‘decodable’ reading books)**

By the time pupils are reading the last ‘decodable’ books in a phonics programme, they will already be able to read a wide range of other books. It is vital that pupils read widely and frequently to increase their confidence and fluency.

Suggesting books for pupils to read for themselves at this stage is far less straightforward than it was when they were reading books organised simply by the GPCs they knew.

The extent of the reading challenge for pupils, in terms of a text’s vocabulary and length, now depends to a large degree on how familiar they are with it and whether they are motivated to read it. Selecting books that the teacher has read aloud and that the class has enjoyed together motivates pupils to read books that include new vocabulary and language structures that they might not otherwise have read for themselves, as well as challenging ideas.

In one week, a pupil might choose to read, at school or at home, a picture book they have listened to in story time, a story from a series of easy page-turners introduced in book club time, a non-fiction text introduced in a history lesson, re-read their favourites from a book of silly poems and practise reading a challenging poem that the class have learnt by heart.

If schools organise books into book band levels, teachers should select which of these books they think their pupils will enjoy and be able to read successfully, and introduce these to specific groups of pupils in book club time.

Limiting pupils to choosing unfamiliar books from a narrow level or colour band might not inspire them to read widely and often, and therefore this does not develop sufficiently their ability to read fluently and confidently.

### **Picture books, including graphic novels for older pupils**

Teachers should read aloud a wide range of picture books suitable for older pupils, and make these available for pupils to take home.

### **Page-turners, long and short**

Teachers should provide books that are likely to give the most pleasure, so that all pupils feel encouraged to put in the reading miles before they read more challenging books independently: sets of short, popular easy-read page-turners, hi-lo books (see below), joke books, irreverent books – anything that helps to establish the reading habit.

## Literature

Engaging pupils in literature gives them access to all the things we can learn from great books and stories. They should read, listen to and talk about contemporary and classic writing by a broad and diverse range of authors, where the depth of ideas and language allows for rich discussion and study.

All pupils should encounter characters, situations and viewpoints that mirror their own lives, so they understand that they matter. Books, however, should also give them a window into the lives of others. For some pupils, stories might be the only place where they meet people whose social and cultural backgrounds and values differ from their own.

These books should be introduced in English lessons, story times and book clubs, and used to support subject knowledge development.

In addition to the ideas for choosing books at Reception and year 1, the following might be considered. Not all books will reflect all criteria.

### Choosing literature

Does the book:

- contain a 'big' idea at its heart, for example, the power of friendship or the ability of power to corrupt
- reflect a diverse range of voices and characters, reflecting the background of pupils in the school and society more widely
- have rich, lyrical language
- have the potential to develop pupils' wider knowledge
- deliberately widen horizons by offering culturally rich content
- offer opportunity for pupils to encounter a different genre or format so they have a chance to experience a wide range of literary forms and develop their own opinions and preferences?

Older pupils can also benefit from listening to, studying and reading books from the past which still resonate today – texts from our literary heritage. Knowing these stories and characters allows pupils to recognise references and allusions in other texts that they read and join in with wider conversations. Pupils can enjoy making sense of a challenging text together as a class, a sense of achievement that comes when the seemingly incomprehensible suddenly becomes clear.

As in Reception and year 1, teachers and English subject leads might identify a core set of literature for each year group that can either be read aloud in story times or read by pupils in English lessons, including high-quality contemporary and classic texts: fiction, non-fiction, poetry and prose. Teachers should also engage their pupils in choosing new books. Refreshing the list of core books regularly, as new books are published and new teachers arrive, will avoid its being set in stone.

Consider:

- encouraging teachers to familiarise themselves with the stories their class will know from previous years
- supplementing the core ‘read aloud’ stories with others of the teacher’s choice – and pupils’ interests.
- sharing the list with parents, and explaining its purpose, so they could buy or borrow the books.
- investing in multiple copies of books, and later books in series of books, for pupils to take home and read.

By selecting the texts together, teachers and school leaders are more likely to have up-to-date knowledge of children’s literature. Teachers should, however, have the opportunity to select their own favourite literature to share with pupils.

## **Books and other material for subject lessons, the wider curriculum, including non-fiction**

The curriculum should include books and other texts to support the content in each history, geography, and science lesson. Without books to read, pupils are dependent on remembering what the teacher says.

Reading ‘about’ gives a purpose to reading, increases pupils’ reading miles, develops their knowledge and understanding, and can be source of engagement and motivation for many pupils. This is true whether a pupil is seven or fourteen. (See [section 9: reading across the curriculum.](#))

### **Hi-lo books**

‘Hi-lo’ books provide high interest content at an easy reading level: histories of famous people, books about underwater life, biographies, semi-fictional stories based on real events and so on. Pupils can accumulate background knowledge across the whole curriculum, learning a lot about a little under the radar of easy reading.

These books, along with easy-read page-turners, not only provide immediate engagement, but also lead towards the pleasure of reading more challenging books in English lessons and in other subjects.



## Organising book stock

Public libraries and bookshops do not colour-band their books. They organise their stock to make it accessible and attractive to readers. This section suggests ways of organising and promoting books, so that pupils are well supported to choose them by and for themselves.

### The school's central library

Any bookshop or public library with a large children's section will organise its stock into broad age-range categories, for example:

- picture books for toddlers and young children
- stories for younger readers and older readers
- poetry for younger and older readers
- non-fiction for younger and older readers.

A school's library is, in effect, its main bookshop. Categories for organising a school library's stock might include:

- core literature by year group (multiple copies for lessons)
- non-fiction by subject and year group where books support the curriculum
- picture books for younger readers
- picture books and graphic novels for older readers
- poetry books; younger readers; older readers
- very short page-turners (can be read by young readers or older readers who need extra practice)
- short page-turners (can be read by young readers or older readers who need extra practice)
- sets of long page-turners (can be read by young, advanced readers or older readers)
- short 'hi-lo' non-fiction (can be read by young readers or older readers who need extra practice)
- longer hi-lo fiction (can be read by young, advanced readers or older readers)

Fiction and poetry might be ordered alphabetically in broad age-ranges. Teachers might define the ages of 'younger' and 'older' readers.

### Classroom book areas in primary schools

The best classroom book areas are like mini bookshops. The challenge is to offer pupils choice, without overwhelming them. Teachers might consider:

- choosing books from the main school library and organising these under ‘very short reads’, ‘short reads’, ‘long reads’ and books that the class has listened to
- starting the year with a range of 30 to 50 books, with a few copies of some single titles (including favourites from the previous year)
- refreshing the stock regularly by introducing different books from the school library throughout the year, with pupils’ help, and returning others to free space
- putting books at eye level so pupils can see easily what is available
- presenting as many books as possible face-out, so that the cover, author and title engage pupils’ attention.

Every book must be worth reading or help pupils to put in the reading miles. Books that are unlikely to achieve either of these aims should be discarded.

## **Libraries**

Local public libraries and School Library Services are an important resource for teachers, parents and children. They provide access to books, offer advice and training on children’s literature, and provide a wide range of activities and schemes that support children’s development as readers beyond school. See [Other sources of support](#) in section 1 for more information.

## Section 8: Developing a reading for pleasure culture

The sections that follow focus on developing pupils as readers from year 2 through to key stage 3, beginning with the idea that all pupils, including Harry and Amina (and George and Mia in secondary), need to put in the ‘reading miles’ to become readers. To do this, teachers need to ensure that all pupils can read at a speed that allows them to enjoy and understand the books they want to read for themselves. Emotional engagement makes a key contribution to pupils’ development as readers.

### Keeping all pupils reading

It is impossible to mandate that pupils read for pleasure, but teachers can inspire pupils and engage them in reading widely. This depends, however, on embedding a school culture that values and supports reading for pleasure. This is a collective responsibility. Schools should also acknowledge pupils’ developing interests and changing habits as they move from primary to secondary school.

To nurture the reading habit, schools need a strategic approach rather than simply an eclectic mix of ‘reading for pleasure’ activities. Evaluation should take place regularly. Competitions, dressing up days and other promotional activities should be built into wider strategic activity, such as being used to launch a new initiative. However, these activities on their own are not enough to motivate all pupils to read regularly at home.

Core strategies to encourage sustained, voluntary reading include:

- adults reading aloud regularly, including in class or form time
- informal book talk, including recommendations from peers and adults
- encouraging library use, including the local public library
- providing time to read
- sociable reading environments, reading together and sharing books.<sup>111</sup>

As pupils become older, competing demands can make it harder for them to sustain their reading habit. It is also far less likely that, by that stage, their parents and carers will be reading with and to them. If pupils rarely read at home, the responsibility therefore falls

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<sup>111</sup> Cremin, T., Mottram, M., Powell, S., Collins, R., & Safford, K. (2014). *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for pleasure*. Routledge; Cremin, T., Hendry, H., Rodriguez, Leon, L., & Kucirkova, N. (Eds.). (2022). *Reading Teachers: Nurturing Reading for Pleasure*. Taylor & Francis

on schools to ensure these pupils have the time and motivation to read widely and often, as well as opportunities to discuss their reading.

As the national curriculum says, pupils in key stage 2 should:

participate in discussion about both books that are read to them and those they can read for themselves, taking turns and listening to what others say.<sup>112</sup>

At key stage 3, pupils should:

develop an appreciation and love of reading, and read increasingly challenging material independently through... choosing and reading books independently for challenge, interest and enjoyment.<sup>113</sup>

## Book club

Book club is a time to recommend books to pupils for class reading and reading at home. In a primary school, this might be organised at the end of story time, replace a story time, during English lessons or be an additional opportunity to share favourite books. In a secondary school, book club might be called library time and happen in a library session. Making tempting books available is important for all pupils, but especially for those who have limited or no access to books at home.

As adults, we look back fondly on the page-turners that contributed to our own fluent reading when we were young: J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, Jacqueline Wilson's Tracy Beaker series, the Horrible Histories books, and comics such as Marvel and Beano.

Jamal has become a fluent reader simply by reading a lot. As soon as he could read by himself, he devoured easy-read page-turners. No-one quizzed him on these books; no-one bribed him. His parents' and teachers' support paved the way for him to develop agency over his own reading.

Amina (Mia in secondary), however, does not get pleasure from reading and, unlike Jamal, cannot imagine choosing to read. She needs to be helped to understand that it could be a desirable activity and to learn what she is missing by not reading.

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<sup>112</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>113</sup> Department for Education (2013).

Harry (George in secondary) cannot and will not gain pleasure from reading independently until he is taught to read. (See [Section 5. Pupils who need the most support.](#))

Pupils must be offered a feast of books: easy reads, books about how things work, graphic novels, joke books, irreverent books, books about animals – anything that might hook them into reading – as well as the more challenging books they will listen to in story times and study in English lessons. For some pupils, the hook into reading may be non-fiction, for example, a book on climate change recommended by a science teacher. Importantly, they need to be offered books they might choose to read over and over again.

This section considers persuasive strategies to help pupils to choose books to read independently.

## Promoting books

### Teacher as influencer

As adults, we might choose to read something by an unknown author if it had been recommended by another author whose work we had already enjoyed or by a friend whose judgement we trusted.

In terms of influencing pupils' reading, teachers are the best promoters. Pupils are willing to trust the judgement of a teacher who says, 'I think you'll really enjoy this one,' not least because they feel that the teacher knows them well enough to care about their likes and dislikes. In secondary schools, a school librarian may be best placed to play the role of influencer. But to play this role effectively, teachers and librarians need to know the books that their pupils will enjoy and not just those that they would like them to read.

Book club is a space on the timetable – not time squashed in as an afterthought – for teachers to promote books and for pupils to make recommendations to each other. In primary schools, teachers should consider providing a book club for every year group at least once a week for 20 minutes. Pupils should see it as sacrosanct, the best time of the week and one to look forward to, an occasion for browsing, exploring and discussing books.

Secondary schools have additional timetabling challenges, but book club (or library time) should happen at least fortnightly with an adult (or adults), either a librarian or another adult with a particular interest in reading. Leaders should not expect this to take place in the time allocated in the curriculum to English. The adult will be best placed to encourage pupils to choose books they are interested in and make sure that they always have something engaging to read in tutorial time. In this way, pupils can be actively

encouraged to put in the reading miles and develop more positive attitudes to and pleasure in reading.

Time in book club might also be set aside for pupils to read with a partner, reading a non-fiction book, a comic or children's newspaper together.

Book club is also a good opportunity for pupils to choose a book for class or tutor reading time and for reading at home.

### **Promoting books for book club**

- Know the books you want to promote, the pupils' interests and the books they like.
- Recommend books with similar themes, settings and characters: 'If you liked this book, you might also like ...'
- Find series of books by the same author or illustrator.
- Promote other teachers' and the headteacher's suggestions
- Display your own pupils' reading selection in a 'story suitcase'.
- Read a teaser from a book that will be arriving soon.
- Remind pupils of the books that you have read in story times.
- Invite pupils to register to read a book, such as one that has just been read to them, e.g. signing up on a list or reserving that book for later. This can initiate conversations about the book between peers who have read the same text.

### **Increase anticipation for book club**

- Encourage anticipation for the book club. Show excitement about and interest in the books you are going to share
- Choose those that are appropriate for pupils at different reading levels and that might interest different children.

For each book teachers could:

- Reveal the cover, author and illustrator.
- Introduce the type of book commenting on whether it is a short or long read
- Describe the setting or a few key characters.
- Read part of the opening, at least to a point where pupils would want to carry on reading by themselves.
- Read some dialogue aloud to introduce characters and bring them alive.
- Read intriguing extracts that might be key to the plot, without giving too much away.

Jamal might choose to read any of the books on offer while Amina (Mia) might choose very short ones about something that catches her interest. Harry (George) should be encouraged to choose books for someone to read to him until he can read for himself.

## Peer influencers

Teachers might keep track of the books that popular pupils are reading. For instance, Jordan is a very well-liked pupil in the class, although not the most voracious reader. Jordan might be asked for a three-word review for a book he has enjoyed. His positive reaction is likely to encourage other pupils to read the same one, because they are keen to enjoy what Jordan has enjoyed. (He might also like to share his favourite books with younger pupils in assembly.)

- Check what pupils are enjoying, so they can recommend books to each other.
- Advertise what others have enjoyed through classroom displays, signs and sticky notes in the books themselves: 'Pupils who read this book also enjoyed...'
- Ask pupils to provide a two- or three-word book review and offer them vocabulary suggestions: 'page-turner', 'fascinating', 'engrossing', 'intriguing', 'hilarious', 'ridiculous', 'heart-wrenching', 'excellent characters', 'scary and sad', 'made me angry', 'tedious' (rather than 'boring').
- Set up a pupils' noticeboard for their own notes about books, and photos of themselves reading the books at home.
- Maintain 'Top Ten' lists of fiction and non-fiction.

## Choice and motivation

To be able to make recommendations, steering individuals out of their comfort zone and encouraging them to try new books, teachers need a good knowledge of literature and of their pupils as readers. This should form part of keeping subject knowledge up to date.<sup>114</sup>

Being able to choose is a powerful motivator. Pupils are much more likely to enjoy reading if they have chosen the book because it appeals to them rather than because they have been told to read it.

Not all pupils, however, are adept at making choices and many, at least initially, will need support, especially if faced with too much variety. This is especially true for pupils, such as Amina (Mia), who is not an enthusiastic reader. She is unlikely to take those first steps

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<sup>114</sup> Department for Education, Teacher Standards (2021) [Teachers' standards – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/90222/teachers-standards-2021.pdf)

without help. Harry (George) will also need support in choosing books that an adult can read to him at home and in class reading time. Many other pupils might also need help to step over the threshold of a new book and to inhabit it. This is not the remit only of English teachers. Any adult who knows the pupil and their interests can help to motivate reluctant readers. Jamal, too, also needs support to challenge him and to sustain his engagement as a reader.

Pupils will not always pick a text they enjoy every time or one that captures their attention, any more than adults do, but through reading widely, talking about books and discussing how to choose them, they will gradually develop their personal tastes and interests and, in the process, find increased pleasure in reading.

## Rewards

Schools that are determined to support all pupils to develop the habit of reading recognise intrinsic motivation is more closely associated with reading achievement than extrinsic motivation (reading for recognition, reward or to please others).<sup>115</sup>

Pupils' motivation should be driven by curiosity, recommendations, engagement with familiar characters and so on: perhaps through reading a book in a series that the teacher has introduced in book club time, a poetry book the teacher has read in class or a friend's recommendation. It should not be driven by their determination to move onto a next level or band, or to gain a certificate for reading more words. Rewarding pupils in this way may offer a short-term boost, but the motivational effect quickly wears off. It says, in essence, 'This task is useful but undesirable, so here is a reward for doing it.' The danger is that calculation replaces motivation: 'If I choose easier books, I can read more books and words.' Further, if pupils' focus is on counting the number of new books or words, they are unlikely to re-read a book, even if they loved it. They begin to value themselves and others according to the number of books read or the 'level' at which they are reading.

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<sup>115</sup> Orkin, M., Pott, M., Wolf, M., May, S. & Brand, E. (2018). 'Beyond Gold Stars: Improving the Skills and Engagement of Struggling Readers through Intrinsic Motivation' *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 34.3 203-217; Hebecker, K., Förster, N. and Souvignier, E. (2019) Reciprocal Effects between Reading Achievement and Intrinsic and Extrinsic Reading Motivation *Scientific Studies of Reading* 23,(5):, 419–436 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2019.159841> doi: 10.1080/10888438.2019.1598413



If teachers choose to give rewards occasionally, they should make sure these are related to reading, for example book vouchers or books.<sup>116</sup>

To check that pupils have read all of a book or to decide whether to move a pupil up to the next level, teachers may be tempted to make sure that they answer questions on each one. However, this might well put pupils off reading. Amina, for instance, does not gain anticipatory pleasure as she turns each page because she is focusing hard on trying to remember the plot and the characters' names. Her anxiety intensifies but her love of reading does not. Having to answer questions on every book read may also reduce pupils' motivation to read more.<sup>117</sup> Yet, reading more – increasing the reading miles – and wanting to read more is exactly what pupils need to do to become readers.

Teachers should also be wary of restricting pupils to reading books from within one coloured level or band and labelling pupils as being on a specific colour. They should consider how pupils might feel embarrassed at being on a lower colour than their peers.

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<sup>116</sup> Clark, C.R., & Rumbold, K. (2006). Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview.; Department for Education (2012).

<sup>117</sup> Schiefele, U., Schaffner, E., Möller, J. and Wigfield, A. (2012). Dimensions of Reading Motivation and Their Relation to Reading Behavior and Competence. Reading Research Quarterly. 47. 10.1002/RRQ.030.

## Audit: Book club

Book club	Current practice
Book club, for every class, is timetabled without interruptions.	
Teachers take time to get to know their pupils as readers and know their likes, dislikes and interests.	
Teachers have up-to-date subject knowledge of literature and other books that help pupils to put in the reading miles.	
Teachers use a range of promotional activities to 'hook' children into reading.	
Teachers emphasise the intrinsic rewards of reading for pleasure, rather than use extrinsic motivations, e.g. quizzes and prizes. Where rewards are offered, these are reading based.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Class reading time

Setting aside time for pupils to read independently, such as at the end of book club or at another time of the day, helps them to build fluency. It also increases the vocabulary and ideas they encounter, in turn improving their understanding. Putting in the reading miles is important.

Class reading time is an equitable activity because every pupil, including those who do not read regularly at home, can learn to appreciate the benefits and pleasure of regular, sustained reading.

At its best, class reading time is enjoyable, something on the timetable the class looks forward to. It provides the chance for pupils to settle down and be transported into the world of a good book. To achieve this, however, needs careful planning. Simply asking pupils to find a book and read quietly is unlikely to make the time as valuable as it might be.

## **Finding time for class reading time**

Schools need to consider where time for reading can be set aside so that it happens regularly and without interruption. In secondary schools, this might be form time or tutor time.

It can be easy, however, for such sessions to be skipped altogether or combined with tasks such as taking the register or handing out homework sheets. But this devalues the importance of reading in pupils' eyes, turning it into simply a time-filler while something else is going on. It also significantly decreases the time for pupils actually to read.

Needless to say, reading time should never be used as a sanction. If the aim is to develop enthusiasm and a desire to read, framing reading as a punishment is unlikely to support this message.

## **Organising class reading time**

To help everyone to concentrate, the classroom should be as quiet as possible.

Pupils should already have chosen a book during book club or library time. Harry (George) will need someone who can listen to him read his current 'decodable' book or who can read to him.

The most comfortable place for pupils to read is likely to be at their tables. If other space is available, maybe book corners or library areas in primary classrooms, it is important that pupils can settle and concentrate quickly. The time should be spent on enjoying reading rather than taken up with moving somewhere else.

Given that form tutors in secondary schools are unlikely to have a variety of books in their own classrooms, schools should ensure that pupils have a book with them throughout the day, chosen in library time (or book club). This relies on scheduling library time for every class, led by an appropriately trained adult. This may be the school librarian, form tutor or other adult with a particular interest in reading.

In some schools, adults may occasionally have time to provide a role model by reading their own book in this time. However, valuable teaching time might be better spent reading with pupils who need more support.

## Audit: Class reading time

Class reading time	Current practice
All pupils benefit from class reading time, including those who need the most support with their reading.	
Class reading time, for every class, is timetabled efficiently and effectively, without interruptions.	
Space in classrooms is organised so that pupils can concentrate on reading and do not disturb others.	
Teachers use class reading time to support pupils, listening to them read, discussing texts with groups or supporting pupils to choose.	
Behaviour and routines are established so that pupils spend as much time as possible actually reading.	
Pupils have a book with them throughout the day.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Reading aloud to pupils

As with younger children, reading aloud to older pupils is a key way of supporting their development as readers, ‘even though pupils can now read independently’.<sup>118</sup> Teachers should consider providing story time for every key stage 2 class, at least four times a week for 20 minutes.

In key stage 3, form tutors might consider reading aloud during tutor time; subject teachers might also consider reading texts aloud: to provide a model of fluent reading, to support pupils’ comprehension of a text and to show them how to pronounce unfamiliar vocabulary.

Reading aloud fosters positive attitudes, enhances pupils’ motivation to read, and develops vocabulary and other knowledge, including of books, authors and genres that they might not choose to read for themselves. It also contributes indirectly to their fluency, as they listen to an accomplished reader bring a text to life.

Daily ‘story time’ might sometimes be viewed as an indulgence at key stages 2 and 3 or it can find itself being squeezed or skipped to accommodate other demands. However, if done well, it is a powerful driver for improving pupils’ reading and all-round education, as well as having a positive impact on their social and emotional wellbeing. It can also be a time of genuine enjoyment for the whole class, a shared experience sparking reflection and discussion. Pupils should be seated comfortably (probably at their tables), with no distractions.

In primary schools, the books read aloud might be either the same texts studied in English lessons or reading sessions or additional texts. It is important that pupils have the opportunity to listen to a wide range of whole books during their time at school rather than just a series of extracts. The national curriculum says that reading aloud should include whole books so that:

... [pupils] meet books and authors that they might not choose themselves.<sup>119</sup>

Story times and [Appendix 4, Reading aloud](#) (For teachers: Preparing to read a story) provide practical advice for reading aloud effectively.

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<sup>118</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>119</sup> Department for Education (2013).

Harry, Amina and Jamal's year 4 class has story time every day. At their school, all teachers read aloud to pupils from Reception to year 6, choosing the time that suits them: before lunch, straight after lunch or at the end of the day. Although the pupils and teachers refer to it as 'story time', the pupils listen to a wide range of fiction, non-fiction and poetry.

Their class has just finished listening to 'The Tale of Despereaux' by Kate DiCamillo, which they enjoyed immensely. To coincide with the ending, the teacher collected as many other books as she could by this author, from the school library and other classrooms, and has displayed them so the class can choose to read one if they wish. The pupils can also sign up to read 'The Tale of Despereaux' once it was free. Over half the class does so, eager to get their hands on the story they have enjoyed so much.

In secondary school, George and Mia's year 7 story time happens in form time when their form teacher, a biology teacher, reads to them. He has always been a keen reader himself and enjoys choosing texts that his form group will enjoy listening to. Other subject teachers read aloud to other form groups.

## Section 9: Reading across the curriculum

### Access to lessons across the curriculum

The whole curriculum matters in developing pupils' reading comprehension, because good comprehension depends upon knowing a lot.

However, reading successfully in any subject depends upon pupils' ability to read accurately and fluently, so that they can direct their attention to the knowledge they will learn from the text rather than to decoding it.

Pupils who cannot read well need urgent support (See [Section 5: Older pupils who need to catch up](#)). It is vital that all teachers know who these pupils are and how they can provide extra support in the lesson until they can read. It is especially important for key stage 3 teachers who, generally, will not see and teach these pupils every day.

### Talk and discussion across the curriculum

Talk and discussion should continue to form an important part of all lessons into key stages 2 and 3 in all lessons, including English lessons.

Discussion is not just talking; it is a way of thinking deeply about new knowledge and ideas, as well as a way of learning something new. Making sure that pupils talk throughout the lesson is particularly important for those who are learning English as an additional language.

One aim of the spoken language element of the national curriculum is that all pupils 'use discussion in order to learn; they should be able to elaborate and explain clearly their understanding and ideas.'<sup>120</sup> Asking for 'hands up' cuts down pupils' opportunities for learning and talk. Confident pupils grasp the opportunity to talk; others hold back and let those pupils do the talking.

Using paired talk as part of whole-class discussion is therefore one way of ensuring that all pupils contribute. Whole-class interactive strategies with choral and partner discussion helps pupils understand what they learn and remember what they have learnt. (See

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<sup>120</sup> Department for Education (2013).

Section 2, [Talking with a partner and giving feedback](#) and [Appendix 3 Guidance for managing talk in pairs](#)).

## Selecting texts across the curriculum

Reading across the curriculum supports the knowledge and vocabulary to be learnt each subject. Each subject has its own purposes and will need different types of texts. They should be accessible and written at an age-appropriate interest level to encourage pupils to learn more about a subject. Teachers should draw their attention to a text's organisational features: tables, glossaries or embedded tasks.<sup>121</sup> The knowledge being taught, however, should always be the core purpose of the lesson. The texts should build on pupils' prior knowledge and vocabulary from previous reading, thus preparing them to understand increasingly complex texts.

A recent working paper from the United States (awaiting peer review) supports the important role of background knowledge. It reported that Colorado pupils attending schools that used the Core Knowledge curriculum had significantly improved reading comprehension results relative to comparable peers in other schools.<sup>122</sup>

Teaching reading is not just a matter of teaching reading. The whole curriculum matters, because good readers have broad knowledge in civics, history, geography, science, the visual arts, and so on. But it is not just 'The curriculum has a lot of stuff in it'. Sequence matters too because students can only encounter so much new content at any one time.<sup>123</sup>

Carefully selecting texts for each year group is therefore important to support curriculum planning. Without such texts, pupils must rely on remembering what the teacher has said. When pupils read, they can control the pace they learn. They can stop and think before moving ahead. Allowing pupils to re-read texts means that pupils can reflect on ideas, allowing for deeper exploration of a topic than a lesson has time for.

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<sup>121</sup> Embedded tasks are common mini tasks, for example comprehension questions, that feature commonly in textbooks and worksheets.

<sup>122</sup> Grissmer, D., Buddin, R., Berends, M., Willingham, D., DeCoster, J., Duran, C., Hulleman, C., Murrah, M., and Evans, T. (2023). A Kindergarten Lottery Evaluation of Core Knowledge Charter Schools: Should Building General Knowledge Have a Central Role in Educational and Social Science Research and Policy? Working Paper No. 23-755. Available at <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai23-755>

<sup>123</sup> Willingham, D. (2017).



## Preparing pupils to read the text

Preparing all pupils to read the text will support their comprehension and interest, as well as engaging pupils such as Harry and Amina (George and Mia in secondary) in the lesson.

- Introduce the text, including drawing attention to any features that are particular to that text.
- Identify and explain new vocabulary that is essential to pupils' understanding, first demonstrating how to decode each word, also drawing on its morphology and etymology where possible and explaining its meaning in the context of the passage, in pupil-friendly language rather than from a dictionary, without asking pupils to guess.

'Call and response' could be used for pupils to practise reading the words. The teacher might:

- Ask pairs to review their meanings with each other.
- Review previous vocabulary.
- Read the text aloud to the class before pupils read.
- Pair pupils to read the text alternately, allowing them to read at their own pace.
- Prepare questions that partners can discuss at points in the text.

Additionally, for Harry and Amina (George and Mia), until they can read, teachers should re-read the text aloud, stopping to discuss ideas and clarify the meaning of words and phrases.

In a year 4 history lesson, the teacher might explain that, although they are reading a story about Caesar's invasions of Britain in 55 BCE, it is non-fiction. The teacher might build pupils' anticipation for the text by telling them about the 'secret expedition to Britain before the invasion'. She will introduce the vocabulary essential to understanding the text, sharing images on the whiteboard to illustrate the terms 'legion', 'standard' and 'legate'. She will remind them to break down the word 'reconnaissance' (re/con/ai/ssance) to sound it out. At the end of the lesson, she will draw their attention to other books about the Romans that they could choose to read for themselves, either in class reading time or at home.

In a year 7 science class, the teacher might take the time to explain the more precise nature of scientific language and, in particular, instances of polysemy (where one word has many meanings) such as 'concentration', with its everyday meaning being different from its subject-specific meaning. In geography, where pupils are reading about micro-plastics on Mount Everest, they can read a single text from different perspectives: environmental, political, economic.

## Audit: Reading across the curriculum

Reading across the curriculum	Current practice
Whole-class interactive strategies with choral work and partner discussion help pupils understand and remember what they are learning.	
Subject leaders work with class teachers to agree on which texts pupils will read in science and the humanities.	
Pupils have the chance to read texts to explore ideas from lessons in more depth, learning at their own pace	
All pupils, including those who are not yet reading fluently, have access to the key knowledge in a lesson	
Reading across the curriculum contributes to the reading culture; pupils are motivated to read related fiction and non-fiction in their own time	
Whole-class interactive strategies with choral work and partner discussion help pupils understand and remember what they are learning.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Section 10: Teaching reading in the English lesson

This section is concerned with teaching reading directly, through ‘explicit instruction and conscious effort’.<sup>124</sup> This works in tandem with all the other opportunities pupils need to become confident, keen readers.

For pupils who can decode well, effective teaching supports pupils to develop as readers through:

- introducing a wide range of literature and non-fiction that they could not or might not choose to read independently
- explanations, modelling and support from the teacher for different aspects of reading, including fluency
- allowing pupils to think deeply and discuss a range of rich and challenging texts.

However, for pupils such as Harry (George in secondary), the vocabulary gap between them and their peers widens every day. They do not accumulate the background knowledge that comes from reading. Leaders need to make a difficult decision about whether, during this session, the time might be better spent teaching him to read. (See [section 5: Pupils who need the most support](#).)

Leaders also need to decide how to support Amina (Mia in secondary) in the lesson. For example, they might decide that pupils are taught together while the teacher is reading but, while pupils are reading aloud to each other, Amina (Mia) has support in a small group.

### The purposes of reading in English lessons

Effective reading teaching needs to be planned carefully so it supports pupils to become confident readers, able to construct coherent mental models of the texts they encounter.

However, reading teaching is about far more than this. Through the books and poems they encounter, through the characters and situations that they meet, and the discussion that surrounds the text, pupils have a chance to experience the excitement, wonder and fascination that can come from reading, to feel what it is like to lose themselves in a story.

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<sup>124</sup> Seidenberg, M.S. (2017) *Language at the speed of sight*. New York: Basic Books.

In the short term, reading lessons help pupils to become better readers, but reading lessons are also an opportunity for them to come to see themselves as readers, with all the benefits that this can bring. Great reading teaching make a difference to pupils' reading in the moment, but it also helps to build a reading habit in the future.

In addition, reading teaching which introduces engaging literature, with the teacher on hand to support pupils' growing understanding, gives them access to all the things we can learn from great books and stories. Lessons allow them to listen to and read beautiful language and encounter profound ideas. They allow pupils to engage with a wide range of human experience: why characters make the choices they make, and why they feel what they feel. It gives them the chance to consider ideas beyond their own experience, and encounter concepts that might never occurred to them before, as well exploring universal moments:

The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – that you'd thought special, particular to you. And here it is, set down by someone else, a person you've never met, maybe even someone long dead.<sup>125</sup>

Reading lessons need to create readers, not just pupils who can read.

## Supporting pupils to construct a mental model

If we think back to what made Jamal a skilled reader who chooses to read regularly, reading sessions needs to be planned to develop these aspects. However, these elements are interrelated and the extent to which a pupil might draw on each to understand a text will vary, depending on the text and their own knowledge.

Comprehension is an outcome, not a skill to practise, and so it does not make sense to divide up the elements of skilled reading and teach them separately. Instead, reading lessons should focus on supporting pupils to construct a mental model of a specific text so that they understand its meaning. The knowledge, experience and insight that pupils gain from reading a text alongside the teacher then support them to understand and enjoy the texts they choose to read independently. (See [Appendix 9: building a mental model.](#))

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<sup>125</sup> From Alan Bennett's play 'The History Boys'

## Staying in the story

Considering the author's craft can be useful where the lesson's objective is to develop pupils' writing: they can understand how, for example, an author has used a linguistic feature to create a particular effect. However, it can also break the spell which a great story can cast, preventing a listener from becoming absorbed in what is being read. If our aim is to inspire pupils to read in their own time as well as teach them to be skilled readers, questions and discussion about a text should stay within the text; it should not be analysed separately.

Compare these two questions, either of which a teacher might use for discussion:

1. How does Joseph feel now as he hears claws beginning to climb the tree behind him?
2. How does the author show that Joseph is afraid? Find the words and phrases which show this.

For the first question, the pupils are still in the world of the story, sharing in Joseph's feeling of terror. For the second, they are asked to be detached observers, evaluating an author's vocabulary choice. Consider how substituting question 1 for question 2 might have an impact on their enjoyment.

Secondary teachers should be careful to avoid treating the key stage 3 curriculum as an opportunity to begin preparing pupils to read and analyse the kinds of texts that are likely to be examined at GCSE level.

## Reading in English lessons

Reading can support all the areas of the English curriculum: spoken language, writing and spelling, and grammar and punctuation. The texts pupils read will contribute to these areas; for example, the class novel might prompt a writing task. However, if the reading in English lessons is merely transactional, undertaken only because it leads to writing or illustrates how a language feature works, the short-term goals are in danger of jeopardising the longer-term benefits of sustained reading.

Pupils would often gain more simply by reading or listening to a rich text, absorbing the teacher's occasional explanations and commentary and joining in with discussions, rather than by spending time analysing its grammatical features or using it as a model for writing.

## Choosing texts for reading lessons

Careful text choice is crucial for teaching reading successfully, especially if the texts are to engage pupils, perhaps emotionally (because they are funny or exciting), cognitively

(because they are interesting and prompt them to think) or because pupils are invested in the characters and their situations. Simply finding text extracts online is unlikely to fulfil these aspects of motivation.

The texts selected are likely to fall into the category of literature, that is, books both contemporary and classic, by a diverse range of authors, where the depth of their ideas or language allows for rich discussion and study. Pupils should also encounter characters, situations and viewpoints that reflect their own lives but allow them, too, to understand the lives of others.

The text for a reading lesson can be more challenging than a pupil might be able to understand independently because the teacher is there to support comprehension, explaining the meaning of words and phrases or elaborating on key ideas. Teachers and English leads should also consider the relationship between the texts selected across the whole of the key stage and beyond to check that they are sequenced carefully and equip pupils with the ability to understand increasingly complex texts they may meet in later key stages. (See [Appendix 11: choosing texts in key stage 3.](#))

The challenge is to ensure all pupils can access a demanding text, even those, such as Harry (George), with less well-developed language or reading skills. This might be achieved by careful pre-teaching of, for example, some key vocabulary or background knowledge for a small group of pupils; support within the session, for example targeted questioning or further explanations to ensure all pupils understand; or the chance for a smaller group to re-read the text after the initial reading.

### **Full texts and extracts**

Reading lessons could involve reading a longer novel over several weeks. It might be read exclusively in these sessions or might be read as a class novel at other times, with the teacher 'zooming in' to study a particular moment in more depth or illustrate a specific teaching point.

Reading lessons may also be organised around shorter texts, either individual texts such as poems or short non-fiction pieces or extracts from longer ones. If teachers use extracts in this way for teaching narrative, they should consider using multiple extracts from the same book, or extracts from the class novel or selected short stories. Leaders should make sure that teachers are not using extracts simply as a means of covering a range of writing; they should make sure that pupils read and enjoy whole texts in the rest of the reading curriculum, either through a text-based English curriculum or by listening to full novels read aloud.

The national curriculum says that at key stage 2:

Pupils should continue to have opportunities to listen frequently to stories, poems, non-fiction and other writing, including whole books and not just extracts, so that

they build on what was taught previously. In this way, they also meet books and authors that they might not choose themselves...<sup>126</sup>

Reading and listening to whole books, not simply extracts, helps pupils to increase their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, including their knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of Standard English.

## Elements of reading in English lessons

Reading in English lessons is likely to feature a combination of the teacher reading aloud and pupils reading, both interspersed with discussion and the teacher's explanations and modelling. Teachers need to judge how to combine these elements, both when planning reading lessons and 'in the moment' as they respond to pupils' needs. This section considers who is reading:

1. The teacher reading aloud
2. Pupils reading
3. The teacher's modelling and explanations
4. Questioning

### 1. The teacher reading aloud

Reading lessons will often be built around the teacher reading aloud, with pupils listening and thinking.

Unlike story times, when the focus is purely on listening and enjoying a book and stopping to discuss words or ideas would disturb the flow of the story, the reading in English lessons is more likely to be interspersed with discussion. The teacher will often be explaining new words, language patterns and ideas, pausing, for example, to:

- think out loud about which character the pronoun 'he' refers to in a sentence
- think out loud about the content of the text, for example commenting on an unexpected plot twist
- introduce new vocabulary by briefly explaining a key word
- share a key piece of knowledge, for example briefly explaining the historical context to an event

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<sup>126</sup> Department for Education (2013).

- connect the story to pupils' own experience

as well as asking pupils to discuss things (see section below).

For most reading sessions, when the focus is on building understanding and enjoyment, the teacher (rather than a pupil) should read the text aloud, without pupils following the text. This allows pupils to listen, concentrate and think, as well as to hear a model of fluent reading. It also helps to keep a story moving along.

Pupils listening to a less than fluent peer are unlikely to appreciate key moments of a story, especially if the reading depends on bringing prosodic elements to life, such as the characters' voices or the tone of the text. If pupils are asked to read aloud, it tends to create a league of readers, where some are asked to read and others are not. (See [Appendix 4 for the features of effective reading aloud.](#))

Reading a whole text without stopping too often for discussion ensures that pupils have the chance to encounter lots of different texts, rather than analysing a small number in detail. The experience they build up is invaluable for developing aspects of accomplished reading, especially for pupils who cannot or do not read a great deal in their own time. Like daily story time, listening to a text being read without interruption allows pupils the pleasure of enjoying a story or fascinating piece of non-fiction. This is important whether the pupils are seven or 14.

Reading teaching which is based on rich and challenging texts being read aloud by the teacher is especially valuable for pupils such as Amina (Mia). They have access to texts at the level that Jamal can read independently, so they encounter the same ideas and language that he already meets. The teacher is able to stop and explain words or give background information when necessary.

In today's session, for example, the class is continuing to read from a poetry anthology. First, they listen to the teacher read the poem 'January Cold Desolate' by Christina Rossetti, before discussing the poet's description of the months. While the subject matter (the changing weather from month to month) is familiar and accessible to the whole class, not all the language is. This leads to some direct teaching of the words 'desolate', 'scorched' and 'keen' (which most pupils know in the sense of 'enthusiastic', but not in the sense of 'sharp'). Developing the pupils' vocabulary has been a natural part of the process of reading and understanding an unfamiliar text in this lesson.

Reading lessons also provide a valuable way of encouraging pupils' wider reading. For Jamal, the texts the teacher shares are not necessarily the ones he would choose to read independently, even if he could, so he broadens his knowledge of literature and is introduced to new authors.

The last text the class read was 'Odd and the Frost Giants' by Neil Gaiman. The teacher made sure several books by the same author were displayed prominently in the book



corner and now Jamal is reading Gaiman's 'The Graveyard Book' and enjoying it immensely.

## 2. Pupils reading

In other reading sessions, teachers will plan for pupils to read, individually or in pairs. [Section 5: Pupils who need the most support](#) outlines how this time might be spent most effectively for pupils who cannot yet read the texts being used in English lessons.

Partner or paired reading can be effective as everyone is involved, with pupils taking turns reading aloud a sentence, paragraph, page or whole text to one another. Pupils who read at the same level might share a text or more fluent readers might read to those who are less fluent. For this to work successfully, pupils need to be clear what their role is, especially when listening. For example, are they listening to offer feedback on their partner's reading or concentrating on the meaning of the text?

On occasions, pupils will benefit from reading aloud to the class, but it is likely this will be after practising and preparing their performance, perhaps as part of work to develop fluency (see [section 4](#)).

### Fluency

Time should also be spent in developing pupils' fluency during English lessons. See [Section 4 Fluency](#).

## 3. The teacher's modelling and explanations

Showing what skilled readers do to create a mental model (see [Appendix 9](#)) is a vital part of teaching. Reading lessons provide an opportunity to make explicit to pupils how a skilled reader makes sense of a text, works out the meaning of an unfamiliar word or incorporates a new idea into existing background knowledge. The teacher occasionally stops to think aloud, commenting as they read.

This approach can be used successfully in shared reading (with the whole class reading a text together), in small group reading, or when an adult is reading with an individual child who would particularly benefit from support.

Teachers might:

- model how ideas in the text and ideas from pupils' background knowledge are combined to make meaning
- show how to decode the unfamiliar word and then explain its meaning
- comment on and consider the impact of specific words or phrases
- model how a skilled reader fills in the gaps as they read.

The box below provides examples of each of these. However, in reality, a teacher would use each of these strategies sparingly and certainly not for every paragraph.

This section of 'The Wind in the Willows' by Kenneth Grahame illustrates these approaches:

'The afternoon sun was getting low as the Rat sculled gently homewards in a dreamy mood, murmuring poetry-things over to himself, and not paying much attention to Mole. But the Mole was very full of lunch, and self-satisfaction, and pride, and already quite at home in a boat (so he thought) and was getting a bit restless besides: and presently he said, "Ratty! Please, I want to row, now!"

The Rat shook his head with a smile. "Not yet, my young friend," he said; "wait till you've had a few lessons. It's not so easy as it looks."

The Mole was quiet for a minute or two. But he began to feel more and more jealous of Rat, sculling so strongly and so easily along, and his pride began to whisper that he could do it every bit as well. He jumped up and seized the sculls so suddenly that the Rat, who was gazing out over the water and saying more poetry-things to himself, was taken by surprise and fell backwards off his seat with his legs in the air for the second time, while the triumphant Mole took his place and grabbed the sculls with entire confidence.'

While reading, the teacher could:

- Model how a skilled reader fills in gaps as they read:

Well, the text doesn't say that the Rat and Mole have been out for a long time, but 'the afternoon sun was getting low' and it was morning when they met, so they must have been enjoying their picnic all afternoon.

- How ideas in the text and ideas from background knowledge are combined to make meaning:

The boat they're in must be a rowing boat– the small ones you sometimes see on lakes and ponds in parks. Sculling must mean rowing and sculls must be the oars because Rat is 'sculling so strongly'. He would be good at rowing a boat because he's always lived on the river and goes out on a boat every day.

- The meaning of any unfamiliar of words and phrases:

I'm not exactly sure what 'murmuring' means here, but it says that Rat is murmuring poetry-things to himself, so it must means talking softly and quietly.

- The impact of specific words or phrases:

Even though Mole hasn't got much experience in boats, I think he's decided that he would be just as good at rowing as Rat. It says he's full of 'self-satisfaction and pride' and that he's 'more and more jealous of Rat'. Can you imagine how he's feeling, sitting and watching Rat do all the sculling?

- How readers anticipate what might happen next, and how this might motivate them to read on:

Hmm, I wonder what is going to happen now Mole has grabbed the oars? I wonder if rowing is going to be as easy as he thinks it is. I'm not so sure! Let's read on and find out...

In theory, these are comments that a teacher could make; in reality, they would not make all of them as it would spoil the flow. It would be more effective to use just one, depending on what they wanted to draw pupils' attention to.

Teachers might use pupil-friendly, light-touch terms, for example, by talking about how good readers 'stop and rewind' if they notice that their understanding has broken down or something does not make sense. They might encourage pupils to think about 'the film of the book' when supporting them to visualise a key moment, a character or setting. The teacher might think aloud, describing what they can visualise themselves or use questions to prompt pupils to create an image.

#### 4. Questioning

In addition to supporting pupils to form a coherent mental model through reflecting on the meaning of what they have read, effective questioning can deepen pupils' understanding, prompting them to think about the ideas and language used in the texts they read and hear, driving productive discussion and thus improving attainment. Questioning that promotes elaboration and flexible thinking will support pupils to integrate new ideas and knowledge into their existing schema. It is a principal part of good reading teaching, alongside a teacher's explanations.

To be as effective as possible, questions need to be text specific. Banks or lists of generic questions, perhaps found online, are unlikely lead to deep thinking or rich discussion.

Using questions to drive thinking and discussion in reading sessions and using questions for assessment are not the same. Giving pupils a short text or extract and asking them to answer questions about it is assessing reading, not teaching it; it may not even be assessing reading very well. While questioning is a useful pedagogical tool, on many occasions it is more efficient simply to tell pupils something than ask elaborate questions to reach the same point.

## Short-term teaching of comprehension strategies

Reading comprehension draws from pupils 'linguistic knowledge (in particular of vocabulary and grammar) and on knowledge of the world.'<sup>127</sup> It also depends on fluent word reading. A key purpose of the English lesson, therefore, is to help pupils to draw on their background knowledge to construct a coherent mental model of what they are reading or listening to.

Comprehension strategies, on the other hand, are the actions and processes that skilled readers use, usually unconsciously, to understand a text. They include:

- activating and using background knowledge
- generating and asking questions
- making predictions
- visualising
- monitoring comprehension
- summarising.

Therefore, reading lessons should not focus on limited objectives such as, 'We are learning to predict' or 'We are learning to infer'. Experienced readers draw on and use a variety of strategies all the time, not just one in isolation.

It has been suggested, however, that limited and focused teaching of reading comprehension strategies (RCS) can be beneficial, particularly for some readers in upper key stage 2. Findings by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) suggest they can be useful for lower-attaining pupils and that successful programmes have a typical length of around 10 weeks.<sup>128</sup> Research from by Professor Daniel Willingham has found that 'ten sessions yield the same benefit as fifty sessions.'<sup>129</sup> The implication seems obvious; RCS instruction should be explicit and brief. In other words, the benefits plateau; subsequent teaching ceases to have an impact.

However, a distinction should be made between such explicit, focused teaching of strategies in a structured programme, which should be time-limited, and what a teacher might do generally in the classroom to provide pupils with examples of them in action –

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<sup>127</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>128</sup> EEF (July 2021). '[Reading comprehension strategies](https://www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)' [Reading comprehension strategies | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](https://www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

<sup>129</sup> Willingham, D.T. and Lovette, G. (2014). Can reading comprehension be taught? Teachers College Record, 26.

that is, providing models of what skilled readers do all the time. For example, when reading aloud a story where the hero ventures into the heart of a volcano as part of a quest, the teacher might invite pupils to think about what they already know about volcanoes (that is, activating and using background knowledge). At a key point, the teacher might ask pupils to talk to their partner about what they think might happen next (predicting), partly to check that all of them have grasped what has just occurred in the narrative. The teacher might also remind pupils to visualise a character when they read aloud a description. Teachers must judge when it is appropriate to pause for such discussions and when the continuing narrative is all-important. Keeping inside the story is critical.

The national curriculum emphasises that comprehension develops:

through pupils' experience of high-quality discussion with the teacher, as well as from reading and discussing a range of stories, poems and non-fiction.<sup>130</sup>

It is better to spend time developing comprehension by increasing and activating pupils' knowledge than by teaching reading comprehension strategies. Pupils' knowledge can be increased by wide reading across genres and subjects, by focusing on the knowledge they need to understand specific texts, and by vocabulary instruction.

## **Preparing for the key stage 2 reading assessment**

The eight content domains that structure the key stage 2 reading tests (see [Appendix 10](#)) are intended for the test developers.<sup>131</sup> While pupils need to be taught some of that content discretely (such as how to summarise), the domains as a whole should not be used as a framework for teaching reading. Organising the teaching of reading around those domains, whether they are repackaged as 'reading skills' (predicting, retrieving information, making inferences etc.), translated into child-friendly language, or shared as a [mnemonic](#), will restrict pupils' access to the wider national curriculum and is likely to inhibit their enjoyment of reading. As the test framework says:

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<sup>130</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>131</sup> Standards and Testing Agency (2016). Key stage 2 English reading test framework: national curriculum tests from 2016

Some elements of the statutory national curriculum are not possible to assess using the current form of testing; they will need to be assessed by teachers as part of their statutory assessment of the complete national curriculum.<sup>132</sup>

Pupils will become better at each of the assessed aspects of reading when they read, think deeply about, and respond to texts through discussion and in writing.

The best way to prepare pupils for a reading assessment on an unseen text is therefore to:

- ensure that they can decode fluently, reading the great majority of words at a glance
- develop their vocabulary and strong background knowledge, building these up through wide and regular reading.

### Audit: Teaching reading in the English lesson

Teaching reading in the English lesson	Current practice
Teachers introduce all pupils to a wide range of literature in reading lessons that they either could not or might not choose to read independently.	
Teachers' explanations, modelling and support are effective in teaching reading.	
Pupils have many opportunities to think deeply and discuss a range of rich and challenging texts.	
Pupils develop their fluency through practice: both reading independently and in pairs.	
The English curriculum distinguishes clearly between 'staying in the story' to teach reading and examining the author's craft to teach writing.	

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<sup>132</sup> Standards and Testing Agency (2016)

Teaching reading in the English lesson	Current practice
Teachers introduce all pupils to a wide range of literature in reading lessons that they either could not or might not choose to read independently.	
Teachers' explanations, modelling and support are effective in teaching reading.	
Pupils have many opportunities to think deeply and discuss a range of rich and challenging texts.	
The reading curriculum focuses on complete texts rather than extracts.	
Interventions based on reading comprehension strategies (primarily for upper KS2) are time limited.	
Teachers design the reading curriculum around building knowledge rather than around test domains.	
<b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b>	

## Section 11: National assessments

### EYFS Profile

The EYFS Profile is a summative assessment which early years providers, usually schools, are required to complete for each child at the end of the Reception year.

Providers assess each child's level of development against 17 ELGs across all seven areas of learning in the EYFS, including literacy. For each ELG, practitioners must assess whether a child is meeting the expected level of development; if they are not at the 'expected' level, they are assessed as 'emerging'.

This assessment informs year 1 teachers about each child's development and learning needs. This is so that they can plan to meet the needs of all children and ensure that they move successfully from the EYFS into year 1.

Teachers no longer need to provide evidence to support their judgements.

### The phonics screening check

The government introduced its statutory phonics screening check in September 2011 for all pupils in year 1.<sup>133</sup> Its purpose is to assess whether pupils can read accurately a selection of words that include common GPCs: the first step in learning to read. It does not aim to assess reading comprehension or whether a pupil can read familiar words speedily.

The check is a short, light-touch assessment, based on the Standards and Testing Agency's assessment framework.<sup>134</sup> It takes about five minutes for a teacher or other trained adult to conduct with each pupil.

The pupil is asked to read 20 real words and 20 [pseudo-words](#). Pseudo-words have been described as 'the purest measure' of decoding ability.<sup>135</sup> Because they have no meaning (in English), they allow for specific assessment of how well pupils can use their knowledge of GPCs and their blending skill, independently of any knowledge of the word,

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<sup>133</sup> It can also be used quickly to check the phonic knowledge of pupils who are late arrivals in year 3 and above.

<sup>134</sup> Standards and Testing Agency (2012). 'Assessment framework for the development of the Year 1 phonics screening check. For test developers' London: STA

<sup>135</sup> Gough and Tunmer (1986).



and how well they might work out unfamiliar words in their reading. (The check does not use pseudo-words that sound the same as a real word; for example, it would not include the pseudo-word 'bote'.)

Teachers should not ask pupils to read lots of pseudo-words to prepare for the phonics check. Instead, they should have as many opportunities as possible to practise their phonic knowledge and blending skill on reading familiar and unfamiliar real words.

The screening check has been developed systematically, for a specific purpose, and uses different graphemes in varying sequences from year to year, in line with the requirements of the assessment framework. Not all the GPCs that a teacher needs to assess will be included in any one year's check, so previous screening check papers are not an effective way to identify accurately the GPCs that need further practice or to track pupils' progress.

Any year 1 pupils who do not meet the expected standard are screened again in year 2.

The results from the screening check are not published at school level. However, Ofsted's inspectors use the results, alongside a school's policy for teaching reading, its assessments of phonics, and listening to pupils reading, as part of how they inspect reading.

## **The phonics screening check: only the first step**

Meeting the expected standard of the check does not mean that pupils are now readers. Many pupils may have read the words in it very slowly, even if they met the expected standard, like Amina, because speed is not part of it.<sup>136</sup> They still need considerable practice in decoding unfamiliar words speedily and reading familiar words 'at a glance'. They also need practice to build up stamina in their reading before they leave the security of books they know they will be able to decode. It is therefore important to find out if they can read books at the later stages of the school's phonics programme at a pace that allows them to focus on what they are reading.

The Standards and Testing Agency says that around 90 words per minute is a good indicator of when pupils 'start to read with sufficient fluency to focus on their

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<sup>136</sup> The two children who read 'plastic' slowly but successfully at the end of the training video for the check illustrate that speed of decoding is not a criterion. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-sample-materials-and-training-video>

understanding'. However, it also says that some pupils might read more slowly than this while still being able to understand what they are reading.<sup>137</sup>

## Key stage 2 assessments

The key stage 2 tests and assessments are an essential part of ensuring that all pupils master the basics of reading, writing and mathematics to prepare them for secondary school.

They help teachers and parents understand how pupils are performing in relation to the age-related expectations of the National Curriculum and enable schools to identify where they might need more support.

The English reading test focuses on comprehension (rather than fluency or word reading) and includes a mixture of text types presented at an increasing level of challenge.

[Appendix 10: content domains for Key Stage 2](#) assessment sets out the specific elements from the national curriculum that the reading test assesses. These should not, however, be used to plan the English curriculum. See [section 10: teaching reading in English lessons](#).

All papers are marked externally and each pupil is given both a raw mark and a scaled score. The raw mark refers to the number of marks the pupil achieved on the paper. For reading at key stage 2, the highest possible mark is 50.

Raw marks are converted into scaled scores. The scaled score allows results to be compared from one year to the next. A pupil who gains a scaled score of at least 100 will have met the expected standard; a pupil gaining 99 will be judged not to have met the standard. The maximum scaled score is 120. Because the tests may vary in difficulty each year, the number of raw marks needed to achieve a scaled score of 100 may change to reflect this variation.

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<sup>137</sup> Standards and Testing Agency (2018). 'Teacher assessment frameworks at the end of key stage 1. For use from the 2018/19 academic year onwards.' London: STA

## Section 12: Leadership and management of reading

### Headteachers and leaders

Headteachers are ultimately responsible for building the reading culture in their school and ensuring that the teaching of reading is as effective as possible.<sup>138</sup> In secondary schools, reading may be led by another senior leader, preferably a deputy headteacher, but oversight and overall responsibility remain with the headteacher.

Leaders have to make sure that everyone, including the special educational needs co-ordinator, and their ITT trainees, has the knowledge, skills, understanding and professional support to teach reading effectively and thus transform pupils' life chances.

This requires headteachers and senior staff in primary and secondary schools to:

- believe that all pupils can learn to read, regardless of their background, needs, abilities and age, and be determined to make this happen
- promote a culture of reading for pleasure, ensuring that the desire to read is at the core of the curriculum, including monitoring and evaluating provision regularly
- make sure all pupils make sufficient progress to meet or exceed age-related expectations, including those who need the most support (See [Section 4](#))
- build a team of expert teachers who know and understand the processes that underpin learning to read, and draw on expert training, practice and coaching to achieve this
- ensure that ongoing assessment, including of pupils' progress in phonics, is sufficiently frequent and detailed to identify those who begin to fall behind, and provide targeted support immediately<sup>139</sup>
- make sure pupils have access to engaging texts by developing links with organisations such as school and public library services, reading charities and others
- involve parents and families in supporting their children's reading.<sup>140</sup>

In addition, headteachers and leaders in primary schools must:

- make sure pupils are taught to read from the beginning of the Reception year

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<sup>138</sup> Ofsted (2010). 'Reading by six. How the best schools do it' Manchester: Ofsted

<sup>139</sup> Ofsted (2022).

<sup>140</sup> Ofsted (2010)

- adopt a rigorous, systematic programme that includes well-conceived and structured resources for teaching phonics (see [Section 3](#))
- develop a programme of reading aloud to all pupils from Reception to year 6 ([See Section 8](#))

As part of this, Reception and key stage 1 teachers have a responsibility to demonstrate their understanding of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in their teaching so that ITT trainees can learn from them how to teach early reading effectively.<sup>141</sup>

Headteachers and leaders in specialist provision must ensure that all pupils are given the opportunity to achieve their reading potential, by teaching SSP at a rate determined by each pupil's individual profile of needs.

### **Time for teaching**

Finding sufficient time to teach every pupil to read can be challenging. Headteachers have a duty to support teachers in making reading a priority and managing the curriculum realistically. This may mean pupils need to miss other lessons (or also form-time in secondary schools) to receive reading interventions. Headteachers should feel empowered to make these decisions. However, they have a responsibility to ensure that these interventions are effective and time-limited, taking care to limit the impact on any one subject of withdrawing pupils.

Leaders should set out strong, school-wide routines and make sure that all teachers reinforce these consistently to support pupils' learning. In primary schools, leaders should reinforce the routines of the SSP programme the school has chosen.

### **Implementing a programme of systematic synthetic phonics in primary schools**

It is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure that the teaching of reading is as effective as possible and that a programme of systematic synthetic phonics is implemented successfully. The programme should achieve excellent outcomes for all pupils, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implementation is a process rather than a single event; it needs to be planned and executed step by step, because, without careful implementation, different schools or even teachers within the same school using the same systematic programme can

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<sup>141</sup> Department for Education (2019). 'ITT Core Content Framework' London: Department for Education

achieve very different results. Ofsted has noted that ‘compliance [with the programme] does not always guarantee effectiveness’.<sup>142</sup>

DfE has validated SSP programmes for use in reception and key stage 1 in mainstream primary schools. School leaders should consider the programmes on this validated list before choosing one that best suits their school, and training all staff to use it. (See [Appendix 8: Guidance for choosing a phonics programme.](#)) Schools that have developed their own programme to teach SSP should ensure they provide what is described in this framework.

A complete SSP programme should provide:

all that is essential to teach SSP to children in the reception and key stage 1 years of mainstream primary schools, up to or beyond the standards expected by the national curriculum, and provides sufficient support for them to become fluent readers.<sup>143</sup>

Writers of phonics programmes provide detailed guidance about how to teach phonics, reading and writing.<sup>144</sup> With the right programme and teaching, all children can learn to read, including those with learning difficulties.

Care is needed when identifying learning difficulties early on. Stahl and McKenna have said:

...generally, labels serve to excuse our failures to teach [reading] by blaming the students for their failure. Rather, we should accept that some children are harder to teach, and we need to work harder to reach those children.<sup>145</sup>

Some pupils who are diagnosed with a learning difficulty no longer have such problems when they have learned to read.

It might also be said that labelling teachers or their teaching as failing serves to excuse leaders’ failures to put in place what teachers need. Headteachers are responsible for

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<sup>142</sup> Ofsted (2010).

<sup>143</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-teaching-materials-core-criteria-and-self-assessment/validation-of-systematic-synthetic-phonics-programmes-supporting-documentation>

<sup>144</sup> Schools using a programme they have developed themselves should provide similar detailed guidance.

<sup>145</sup> Stahl, K. and McKenna, M. editors (2006). ‘Reading research at work. Foundations of effective practice’ London: The Guilford Press

investing in the best teachers and teaching assistants they can find and scrupulously training or retraining them to teach phonics.

## Disciplinary reading in secondary schools

Reading in secondary schools is subject specific as well as general.<sup>146</sup> Headteachers are responsible for ensuring that subject specialists consider the specific approaches reading requires; these approaches are likely to differ from subject to subject. A 'one size fits all' approach to subject-specific reading across the school is therefore unlikely to be effective.

Headteachers and reading leads may find it helpful to refer to the EEF's guidance on disciplinary literacy for more information.<sup>147</sup>

## Building a team of expert teachers

### The literacy lead

In primary and secondary schools, headteachers should appoint a literacy lead (or reading lead), someone to manage the teaching of reading.<sup>148</sup> The post-holder should consider taking the National Professional Qualification in Leading Literacy (NPQLL). The NPQLL is designed to support current and aspiring literacy leads to learn how to teach and promote literacy effectively across the whole school, year group, key stage or phase.<sup>149</sup>

In primary schools, the literacy lead should become an expert in the school's chosen phonics programme for Reception and year 1 and the programme for catch up.

In primary and secondary schools, the literacy lead should:

- understand the principles underpinning a systematic synthetic phonics programme
- become an expert in the school's chosen phonics programme
- know how to assess pupils to identify the appropriate support what they need to support their decoding, fluency or both.

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<sup>146</sup> EEF (2019).

<sup>147</sup> EEF (2019).

<sup>148</sup> Ofsted (2010).

<sup>149</sup> More information about the qualification can be found at: [Leading literacy NPQ \(education.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/leading-literacy-npq)

In secondary schools, the literacy lead should understand systematic synthetic phonics, how to choose a phonics programme for pupils with reading decoding difficulties, and how to teach it and the plan for developing pupils' fluency. They also need to understand how to assess pupils who might have reading difficulties.

Together, the headteacher – or a senior leader in secondary schools – and the literacy lead should agree on:

- the detail of the role of the literacy lead
- expectations and assessment of progress for each age group
- in primary schools, timetables for teaching phonics in Reception and year 1 and extra practice for the pupils in Reception and year 1 who are making the slowest progress
- in primary and secondary schools, timetables for extra teaching for older pupils whose reading is below expectations
- the best organisation of teaching spaces and reading resources for these pupils
- systems to tackle any poor attendance and punctuality of the pupils who need the most support
- a timetable for practice and coaching for all staff who teach pupils to read, including pupils in Reception and year 1 and older pupils whose reading is below expectations
- how to promote a reading culture
- systems for staff cover
- how they will help parents to support their children's reading.

## Effective professional development

Effective professional development is likely to be sustained over time, involve expert support, coaching and opportunities for collaboration.<sup>150</sup>

All primary school staff responsible for leading and teaching reading should take part in professional development related to the chosen phonics programme: the headteacher, other leaders, special educational needs coordinators, newly qualified teachers, ITT trainees and others.

In secondary schools, English teachers, special educational needs coordinators and all staff responsible for teaching the phonics programme should take part in training related

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<sup>150</sup> Department for Education (2019)

to the phonics programme that has been selected for teaching pupils with poor reading skills.

In addition, secondary schools may consider providing a short session of professional development for all teaching staff to explain how phonics is taught and how to support pupils with word reading and spelling across the curriculum.

## Reducing teachers' workload

One of the ways leaders can reduce teachers' workload is to make sure teachers use the resources produced as part of a systematic synthetic phonics programme.

Ofsted reported that that 'the best of the products available to teachers for teaching systematic synthetic phonics were so well structured as to take much of the burden out of planning'. Ofsted also made the more important point that this gives teachers 'time to think about how to teach rather than what to teach and enabling them to focus on the needs of individual children'.<sup>151</sup>

## Audit: Leadership and management

Leadership and management	Current practice
The headteacher takes responsibility for building a strong reading culture.	
The headteacher believes that virtually all pupils can learn to read, regardless of their background, needs or abilities, and acts to make this happen.	
Professional development, including training, practice and coaching, is planned and effective so all staff become experts in teaching reading	
The literacy/reading lead has expertise in and experience of teaching phonics.	
The literacy/reading lead has sufficient, dedicated time to fulfil the role.	

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<sup>151</sup> Ofsted (2010).



Leadership and management	Current practice
In primary schools, sufficient time is planned for teaching phonics.	
In secondary schools, subject specialists consider the specific approaches required for reading in their own subject.	
Routines are strong, school-wide and reinforced consistently to support pupils' learning.	
Leaders use summative assessments to plan professional development.	
<p><b>Actions to be taken (by term)</b></p>	

## Section 13: Supporting pupils' reading in key stage 3

By the end of year 6, pupils' reading and writing should be sufficiently fluent and effortless for them to manage the general demands of the curriculum in year 7, across all subjects and not just in English.<sup>152</sup>

This document's key objective has been to help primary schools to make sure that their pupils start secondary school as confident and engaged readers, and to help secondary schools to teach any pupils who are not. It also helps secondary teachers to understand the complexity of teaching pupils – of whatever age – to read, including implications for subject-specific reading. It does not, however, offer guidance on teaching those subjects.

### Identifying pupils who need support when moving from primary to secondary school

The transition from primary to secondary school is an important step in pupils' reading development, as well as 'one of the most difficult [periods] in pupils' educational careers'<sup>153</sup>, one of vulnerability and challenge, especially for struggling readers. There have been concerns about the progress of these pupils for many years.<sup>154</sup>

Loss of learning over the summer holidays might account for some pupils' initial struggle in secondary school, but any dips rebound quickly<sup>155</sup> if pupils are already strong readers. Struggling readers, however, falter at the first secondary hurdle. They face a different teacher in every lesson who expects them to read texts that use subject-specific language, written in a range of structures, with glossaries, diagrams and embedded tasks. Pupils' success depends upon their learning academic vocabulary – and this depends on their ability to decode and understand this new vocabulary rapidly.

Therefore, the most important task, especially at transition, is to identify the pupils whose reading is poor and who, as a result, have negative attitudes towards school.

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<sup>152</sup> Department for Education (2013).

<sup>153</sup> Zeedyk M. S., Gallacher J., Henderson M., Hope G., Husband B., Lindsay K. (2003). Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: perceptions of pupils, parents and teachers. *Sch. Psychol. Int.* 24 67–79, page 68

<sup>154</sup> Higgins et al. (2015). Reading at the Transition (Interim Evidence Brief). Education Endowment Foundation.

<sup>155</sup> Shinwell, J., Defeyter, M.A. (October 2017) Investigation of Summer Learning Loss in the UK- Implications for Holiday Club Provision. *Front Public Health*, vol. 6 issue, page 270.

Every key stage 3 teacher must know who these pupils are and take action to support their reading during their lessons.

Section	Content
<a href="#">Section 5</a>	helps secondary teachers understand how poor readers struggle and shows how they should be identified and supported immediately
<a href="#">Section 9</a>	shows teachers how to support all pupils in lessons across the curriculum and, in particular, pupils who need support

## How pupils are taught to read in primary schools

To teach fluent word reading successfully, secondary teachers need to understand how both good word reading (decoding) and good language comprehension are fundamental to becoming a reader. The following sections are designed to help teachers understand the principles and practice of teaching pupils to read.

Section	Content
<a href="#">Section 1</a>	explains the Simple View of Reading
<a href="#">Section 2</a>	explains how teachers develop pupils' language comprehension
<a href="#">Section 3</a>	explains the principles underlying phonics and how to teach it systematically
<a href="#">Section 4</a>	explains how to develop pupils' reading fluency

## Understanding what a skilled reader can do

For us, as fluent adult readers, reading happens unconsciously. We are not usually conscious of the huge amount of processing our brains do when we read. Breadth, depth and frequency of reading matter. The more pupils read, the greater their knowledge and

comprehension. The more they know, the less their attention has to struggle with processing new information or vocabulary;<sup>156</sup> they are then freer to learn more.

Section	Content
<a href="#">Section 6</a>	explains the complexity of reading and how expert reading is achieved – not just by reading but also by reading a lot

## Developing pupils' engagement in reading

Ideally, pupils' engagement in reading is well established by the end of year 6 so teachers can build on this to keep adolescent pupils reading. Access to the widest range of engaging, diverse texts, both fiction and non-fiction, that might capture the interest of adolescent readers is vital to keep older pupils reading as other interests compete for their attention.

Section	Content
<a href="#">Section 7</a>	provides guidance on organising and promoting books
<a href="#">Section 8</a>	supports schools in developing a reading culture

Being able to read, choosing to read and spending time reading all reinforce one another, forming a virtuous circle.

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<sup>156</sup> Willingham, D. T. (2006). 'How Knowledge Helps'. Article published on the website of the American Educator, Spring 2006; <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/spring-2006/how-knowledge-helps>

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. For parents: reading stories to children

The following has been drawn together to provide the basis for a leaflet schools might create for parents and carers. Further guidance is available: 10 top tips for parents to support children to read.

### Introduction

Your child will bring home two books. One is for your child to read to you. It has been carefully chosen so that they can work out all the words. The other book has words your child may not be able to read yet. It is for you to read to your child and talk about together.

### How to read a story to your child

If you can find the time beforehand, read the read-aloud book to yourself first, so you can think about how you're going to read it to your child.

On the first reading:

- Make reading aloud feel like a treat. Make it a special quiet time and cuddle up so you can both see the book.
- Show curiosity about what you're going to read: 'This book looks interesting. It's about an angry child. I wonder how angry he gets...'
- Read through the whole story the first time without stopping too much. Let the story weave its own magic.
- Read with enjoyment. If you're not enjoying it, your child won't.

Read favourite stories over and over again. On later readings:

- Let your child pause, think about and comment on the pictures.
- If you think your child did not understand something, try to explain: 'Oh! I think what's happening here is that...'
- Chat about the story and pictures: 'I wonder why she did that?'; 'Oh no, I hope she's not going to...'; 'I wouldn't have done that, would you?'
- Link the stories to your own family experiences: 'This reminds me of when ...'
- Link stories to others that your child knows: 'Ah! Do you remember the dragon in ....? Do you remember what happened to him?'
- Encourage your child to join in with the bits they know.
- Avoid asking questions to test what your child remembers.
- Avoid telling children that reading stories is good for them.

## Appendix 2. Supporting children's thinking

These are some ideas for supporting children's thinking, which might be useful for trainees and new teachers.

### Effective strategies to support children's thinking

Strategy	Support
Give time	make sure you have given the child enough time to respond. Wait for at least six seconds.
Delay	make sure the child has waited until you have finished your request.
Focus attention	make sure the child is looking towards you and listening to your request.
Repeat	repeat the request again, after sufficient waiting time.
Simplify	break your request down into parts or make it simpler. e.g. instead of 'Before we go for lunch, we need to wash our hands' say 'First we'll wash our hands. Then we'll go to lunch.' The sequence of events is clearer.
Use questions to clarify	check the child understands by asking questions at a simple level first.
Focus on the feature	help the child focus on the feature they need to look at to be able to understand your question. e.g. if asking how two items are alike, draw attention to relevant similarities, such as colour or size.
Forced alternatives	give the child two choices. e.g. 'What is he doing? Is he running or jumping?'
Gesture	use gesture to help the child understand or to cue into the correct answer.
Rephrase	repeat the request in a different way. Don't do this too quickly, since the child may still be processing the first request. e.g. (1) 'Please could you pick up the litter from under your table?' (2) 'There is litter under the table. Please pick it up.'

Strategy	Support
Give time	make sure you have given the child enough time to respond. Wait for at least six seconds.
Sentence completion	<p>When asking questions that need a defined answer, model the response by beginning it, prompting the child to repeat how you start.</p> <p>Adult: What colour is it? ... It is .....</p> <p>Child: It is ... blue.</p> <p>Adult: How many sides does the shape have? The shape has ...</p> <p>Child: The shape has one, two, three, four ... five sides.</p>
Demonstration	<p>show the answer without talking and then ask again, while demonstrating.</p> <p>e.g. 'What will happen if we put water in this broken cup?'</p>
Experience the concept	<p>help the child to experience the answer.</p> <p>e.g. 'How does it feel? Let's touch it to see how it feels.'</p>
Relate known to unknown	<p>help the child to relate the request to previous experiences.</p> <p>e.g. 'Let's touch the spaghetti. The spaghetti feels hard. How will it feel after it is cooked? Remember when we cooked the potatoes? How did they feel?'</p>
Model thinking and comprehension monitoring	<p>'That's a hard question. I need to think about that.'</p> <p>'I've forgotten what you said. Can you say it again for me, please?'</p>

## Appendix 3. Guidance for managing talk in pairs

### Guidance for managing talk in pairs

Sequence	Guidance
Ask pupils to talk with their partners.	Listen carefully to identify which pairs might give feedback later and to pinpoint misconceptions.
Take feedback from one or two pairs.	Ask one partner to feed back to the group. Choose a different partner each time.
Repeat what pupils say and/or rephrase their response.	Make sure that all pupils know what was said. Take the opportunity to model correct grammar (see below).
Extend children's ideas.	Think aloud as you extend the idea, so the discussion moves forward.
Ask the pupils to repeat some sentences chorally.	As you extend the sentence, gradually add more detail and ask them to repeat the sentence at each step in unison.
Ask pupils, sometimes, to build on the ideas of others.	Repeat the pupil's idea and ask partners to turn to each other again to discuss the idea.
Model accurate grammar, particularly irregular past tenses and plurals.	Avoid correcting pupils in a way that makes them feel they have said something wrong. Model a correct response rather than asking them to repeat the correction.
Ask a question.	Ask questions about what happened before asking questions about why.



## Appendix 4: For teachers: preparing to read a story

These are some ideas for preparing to read a story effectively, which might be useful for trainees and new teachers.

Preparing a reading	Ideas
Anticipation	<p>Before story time, think of how to build up pupils' anticipation through the day. Say things such as: 'Today, I've got a new story by ...'; 'I'm going to read later'; 'I don't want anyone looking into my drawer for the new book.'</p> <p>Give clues to the new book you'll read later – reveal them gradually throughout the day.</p> <p>Hold their eyes with yours and gain their attention. Tell them the name of the author, reveal the title and then start to read.</p>
Pace	<p>Adjust the pace of the reading to match the sense of the story/ poem, as tension builds, and to reflect characters' ways of talking</p>
Voices	<p>Choose the best voice for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the narrator: a neutral voice that won't detract from the characters' voices or a voice that gives away what the narrator is thinking</li> <li>the main characters: high- or low-pitched? quick or slow?</li> </ul> <p>Not everyone can imitate accents successfully, but real life offers a multitude of voices to draw on: the 'trying to impress' voice, the 'listen closely, I've got a good piece of gossip' voice, the 'I will say this only once/firm voice', the 'Oh, I agree (even when you don't)' voice.</p> <p>Remember, the voices have to be maintained for the whole story. If there are too many, it can be difficult for the pupils to identify and recall them.</p>
Pauses	<p>Decide on the best places to pause to convey shock, concern or, sometimes, just to tease. Pausing builds anticipation.</p>
Cliff-hangers	<p>Decide the moment to stop each reading. Leave pupils wanting more. Dickens was a master at this; directors of TV mini-series do this at the end of every episode.</p>

Preparing a reading	Ideas
Anticipation	<p>Before story time, think of how to build up pupils' anticipation through the day. Say things such as: 'Today, I've got a new story by ...'; 'I'm going to read later'; 'I don't want anyone looking into my drawer for the new book.'</p> <p>Give clues to the new book you'll read later – reveal them gradually throughout the day.</p> <p>Hold their eyes with yours and gain their attention. Tell them the name of the author, reveal the title and then start to read.</p>
Pace	<p>Adjust the pace of the reading to match the sense of the story/ poem, as tension builds, and to reflect characters' ways of talking</p>
Voices	<p>Choose the best voice for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the narrator: a neutral voice that won't detract from the characters' voices or a voice that gives away what the narrator is thinking</li> <li>• the main characters: high- or low-pitched? quick or slow?</li> </ul> <p>Not everyone can imitate accents successfully, but real life offers a multitude of voices to draw on: the 'trying to impress' voice, the 'listen closely, I've got a good piece of gossip' voice, the 'I will say this only once/firm voice', the 'Oh, I agree (even when you don't)' voice.</p> <p>Remember, the voices have to be maintained for the whole story. If there are too many, it can be difficult for the pupils to identify and recall them.</p>
Word meanings	<p>When reading shorter books or poems, wait until the second reading to explain words.</p> <p>Tell the pupils what a word means: if they already know it, there is no point in asking; if they don't, the question is pointless and encourages only guessing. If only a few pupils guess, it will distract others from the story. Even if some pupils know the meaning, it might not be, in any case, the correct meaning in the context of the story.</p> <p>Use short asides to explain a word or a specific use of a familiar word to avoid disrupting the flow, such as "self-satisfaction" – Mole is pleased with himself; "sculling" – that means "rowing".'</p>

Preparing a reading	Ideas
Anticipation	<p>Before story time, think of how to build up pupils' anticipation through the day. Say things such as: 'Today, I've got a new story by ...'; 'I'm going to read later'; 'I don't want anyone looking into my drawer for the new book.'</p> <p>Give clues to the new book you'll read later – reveal them gradually throughout the day.</p> <p>Hold their eyes with yours and gain their attention. Tell them the name of the author, reveal the title and then start to read.</p>
Pace	<p>Adjust the pace of the reading to match the sense of the story/ poem, as tension builds, and to reflect characters' ways of talking</p>
Voices	<p>Choose the best voice for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the narrator: a neutral voice that won't detract from the characters' voices or a voice that gives away what the narrator is thinking</li> <li>• the main characters: high- or low-pitched? quick or slow?</li> </ul> <p>Not everyone can imitate accents successfully, but real life offers a multitude of voices to draw on: the 'trying to impress' voice, the 'listen closely, I've got a good piece of gossip' voice, the 'I will say this only once/firm voice', the 'Oh, I agree (even when you don't)' voice.</p> <p>Remember, the voices have to be maintained for the whole story. If there are too many, it can be difficult for the pupils to identify and recall them.</p>
Asides	<p>Use asides to show reactions to particular events:</p> <p>- 'I don't think this is appropriate!'</p> <p>- 'Oh, no. This isn't looking like things will turn out well for him.'</p>
Illustrations	<p>Decide which pictures, if appropriate, to show – and when.</p> <p>If you have decided to show a picture, give the pupils enough time to look at it.</p>

Preparing a reading	Ideas
Anticipation	<p>Before story time, think of how to build up pupils' anticipation through the day. Say things such as: 'Today, I've got a new story by ...'; 'I'm going to read later'; 'I don't want anyone looking into my drawer for the new book.'</p> <p>Give clues to the new book you'll read later – reveal them gradually throughout the day.</p> <p>Hold their eyes with yours and gain their attention. Tell them the name of the author, reveal the title and then start to read.</p>
Pace	<p>Adjust the pace of the reading to match the sense of the story/ poem, as tension builds, and to reflect characters' ways of talking</p>
Voices	<p>Choose the best voice for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the narrator: a neutral voice that won't detract from the characters' voices or a voice that gives away what the narrator is thinking</li> <li>• the main characters: high- or low-pitched? quick or slow?</li> </ul> <p>Not everyone can imitate accents successfully, but real life offers a multitude of voices to draw on: the 'trying to impress' voice, the 'listen closely, I've got a good piece of gossip' voice, the 'I will say this only once/firm voice', the 'Oh, I agree (even when you don't)' voice.</p> <p>Remember, the voices have to be maintained for the whole story. If there are too many, it can be difficult for the pupils to identify and recall them.</p>
Memorable words and phrases	<p>Colour your voice to give words meaning: whooped, wondered, wailed, or to convey an action: sprouted, quivered, squirmed.</p> <p>Emphasise memorable words and phrases. These will feed into pupils' vocabulary and awareness of the syntax of literary texts and increase their comprehension.</p>
Joining in with poetry and stories	<p>Recite the poems pupils have read and discussed during English lessons.</p> <p>Choose the poem carefully – and, as with stories, get to know it before you read, taking into account the actions above.</p>

## Appendix 5. An alphabetic code chart

The following chart lists the main phonemes in English with example words.<sup>157</sup> The order corresponds to the chart in [Appendix 6: Pronouncing phonemes](#).

The pronunciation of a few graphemes varies according to accent (noted with an asterisk). For example, the ‘u’ in ‘but’ is sometimes pronounced the same as the ‘oo’ in ‘foot’. To reflect different regional accents, the chart does not use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

The chart excludes many rare grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs), as well as graphemes that are likely to be taught as [suffixes](#), such as the ‘-ed’ representing the /t/ sound at the end of ‘jumped’. Words with less-common GPCs are in brackets.

Note: This chart is not suitable for teaching children to read.

<a href="#">Consonant</a> phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to the consonant phonemes
/p/	p <u>in</u> , ha <u>pp</u> y
/t/	t <u>op</u> , le <u>tt</u> er
/k/	<u>k</u> ey, <u>c</u> at, <u>du</u> ck (s <u>ch</u> ool, mos <u>qu</u> ito)
/ch/	<u>ch</u> ip, wa <u>tc</u> h
/f/	<u>f</u> ish, co <u>ff</u> ee, <u>ph</u> oto (rou <u>gh</u> )
/th/	<u>th</u> in
/s/	<u>s</u> un, <u>dr</u> ess, <u>c</u> ity (hou <u>s</u> e, prin <u>ce</u> , list <u>en</u> , sci <u>en</u> ce, <u>ps</u> ychology)
/sh/	<u>sh</u> ip ( <u>ch</u> ef, <u>s</u> ugar)
/h/	<u>h</u> at ( <u>w</u> ho)
/r/	<u>r</u> un, <u>ch</u> erry, <u>w</u> rite ( <u>rh</u> ino)
/l/	<u>l</u> ip, be <u>ll</u>
/b/	<u>b</u> oy, rabb <u>it</u>

<sup>157</sup> The chart is not definitive because the alphabetic code can be analysed in various ways.

Consonant phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to the consonant phonemes
/d/	<u>d</u> og, ladder
/g/	go, bigger ( <u>g</u> uide, <u>g</u> host, dialogue)
/j/	jet, <u>g</u> iant, bridge
/v/	<u>v</u> an (have, of)
/th/	<u>th</u> at
/z/	zip, f <u>izz</u> , <u>is</u> (cheese, sneeze)
/zh/	treas <u>ure</u> (camouflage)
/m/	<u>m</u> an, ham <u>mer</u> (com <u>b</u> , aut <u>umn</u> )
/n/	<u>n</u> ut, dinner (gone, <u>k</u> nee, <u>gn</u> at)
/ng/	ring, sink
/w/	<u>w</u> et, <u>w</u> heel (penguin)
/y/	<u>y</u> es (on <u>i</u> on)

Vowel phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to the vowel phonemes
/ee/	<u>f</u> ee <u>t</u> , be <u>a</u> ch, me, happy, <u>e</u> vening ( <u>k</u> ey, <u>f</u> ield, mach <u>i</u> ne)
/i/	dig (gym) happy*
/e/	<u>e</u> gg, he <u>a</u> d ( <u>s</u> aid, <u>a</u> ny)
/a/	cat
/u/	<u>u</u> p (c <u>o</u> me, y <u>ou</u> ng)
/o/	<u>o</u> n (w <u>a</u> nt)
/oo/ (short)	<u>oo</u> k (w <u>ou</u> ld) b <u>u</u> t*
/oo/ (long)	<u>oo</u> k*

Vowel phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to the vowel phonemes
/ee/	fe <u>e</u> t, be <u>a</u> ch, m <u>e</u> , happy, e <u>v</u> ening (k <u>e</u> y, f <u>i</u> eld, mach <u>i</u> n <u>e</u> )
/a-e/	ap <u>e</u> , r <u>a</u> in, pl <u>a</u> y, bab <u>y</u> (th <u>e</u> y, e <u>i</u> ght, st <u>e</u> ak)
/i-e/	k <u>i</u> t <u>e</u> , l <u>i</u> ght, m <u>i</u> nd, fl <u>y</u> , p <u>i</u> e (e <u>i</u> derdown)
/ou/	o <u>u</u> t, d <u>o</u> wn (bo <u>u</u> gh)
/oe/	b <u>o</u> ne, b <u>o</u> at, sn <u>o</u> w, g <u>o</u> (t <u>o</u> e, th <u>o</u> ugh, plate <u>o</u> )
/oi/	co <u>o</u> in, b <u>o</u> y
/aw/	s <u>a</u> w, s <u>a</u> uce, b <u>a</u> ll (ca <u>u</u> ght, th <u>o</u> ught) f <u>o</u> r (d <u>o</u> or, s <u>o</u> re, f <u>o</u> ur, w <u>a</u> rm b <u>o</u> ard)*
/ur/	b <u>u</u> rn, p <u>e</u> rson, b <u>i</u> rd (w <u>o</u> rk, e <u>a</u> rth)
/ar/	f <u>a</u> r f <u>a</u> st*
/air/	h <u>a</u> ir, squ <u>a</u> re, b <u>e</u> ar (th <u>e</u> re)
/ear/	n <u>e</u> ar, st <u>e</u> er (h <u>e</u> re)
/ə/ ( <a href="#">schwa</a> )	yog <u>a</u> , th <u>e</u> , anim <u>a</u> l, lem <u>o</u> n, sus <u>p</u> end (bor <u>o</u> ugh) bigg <u>e</u> r, doct <u>o</u> r, pol <u>a</u> r (col <u>o</u> ur, cent <u>e</u> re)*

Common combined phonemes	Words with graphemes that correspond to combined phonemes
/ks/	bo <u>x</u>
/kw/	q <u>ue</u> en
/yoo/	u <u>n</u> iform, d <u>ue</u> , cub <u>e</u> , f <u>ew</u> (n <u>eu</u> tral, b <u>ea</u> uty)
/əl/	litt <u>le</u> , tunn <u>e</u> l (pencil, anim <u>a</u> l)

## Appendix 6. Pronouncing phonemes

The chart provides guidance for pronouncing isolated [consonant](#) phonemes when teaching them. Vowel phonemes are easier to pronounce than consonant phonemes, when they are isolated from words.

Teachers should enunciate phonemes clearly, and avoid adding [schwa](#), to help children blend them to read words. For example, it is easier to blend the sounds /s/

/p/ /or/ /t/ than /suh/ /puh/ /or/ /tuh/ to read the word 'sport'.

The following sounds are unvoiced:

/p/ as in 'pin'

/t/ as in 'top'

/k/ as in 'key'

/ch/ as in 'chip'

/f/ as in 'fish'

/th/ as in 'thin'

/s/ as in 'sun'

/sh/ as in 'ship'

/h/ as in 'hat'

The next two are voiced:

/r/ as in 'run'

// as in 'lip'

The next four cannot be heard clearly in isolation, unless small [schwa](#) is added:

/b/ as in 'boy'

/d/ as in 'dog'

/g/ as in 'go'



/j/ as in 'jet'

The next four have a buzzing sound:

/v/ as in 'van'

/θ/ as in 'that'

/z/ as in 'zip'

/ʃ/ as in 'vision'

The next three are nasal sounds:

/m/ as in 'man'

/n/ as in 'nut'

/ŋ/ as in 'ring'

The next two cannot be pronounced clearly in isolation, unless they are pronounced as vowel sounds (/oo/ and /ee/) or a small schwa is added to the sound.

/w/ as in 'wet'

/y/ as in 'yes'

## Appendix 7. Decodable texts for pupils beginning to learn to read

The following four texts illustrate the importance of pupils reading books that are matched to the grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) they already know.

A Reception child learning through a typical systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme might know:

- the phonemes corresponding to each letter of the alphabet
- the phonemes corresponding to 'ck', 'sh', 'th', 'ng', 'ee', 'oo', 'or', 'ar'<sup>158</sup>
- exception words: 'to', 'the', 'we'.

The child would not be able to decode any of the deleted words in the first two books below (Books 1 and 2).

### Book 1: ~~What do they like to eat?~~

~~What does a bird like to eat?~~

~~A bird likes to eat worms.~~

~~What does a giraffe like to eat?~~

~~A giraffe likes to eat leaves.~~

~~What does a seal like to eat?~~

~~A seal likes to eat fish.~~

~~What do you like to eat?~~

### Book 2: ~~Splash!~~

~~Josh and Alex got their boots.~~

~~They went to the park.~~

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<sup>158</sup> The GPCs are not quoted from a published programme; they are examples only.

Josh ~~saw~~ a big ~~puddle~~. He ~~jumped~~ in it.

Splash! Alex got wet.

He ~~kicked~~ the ~~water~~.

Splash! Josh got wet.

Then ~~they~~ went ~~home~~.

~~Their~~ boots ~~were~~ full of ~~water~~!

The child could decode every word in the next two books below (Books 3 and 4).

### **Book 3: A Trip to a Planet**

Look up! A ship!

Will it land?

Yes. Let's run and see it.

A thing with three legs and six arms got off. Can we get in?

Yes, get in!

Up, up, up we went on a trip to a far planet. We had fun.

Then we went back.

### **Book 4: Shark Facts**

A shark is a fish.

It has fins and a soft skeleton to help it swim fast.

As soon as a shark pup is born, it can fend for itself.

Sharks keep dropping worn teeth and getting extra teeth.

A carpet shark can get as long as a truck.

## Appendix 8. Guidance for choosing a phonics programme

To help schools choose a suitable programme, the DfE provides a list of those that have been assessed and judged to comply with essential core criteria for an effective systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme. These criteria match the description of an SSP programme in this document.

It is not mandatory for schools to use a programme from the DfE's list. For catch-up for older pupils, schools may choose a programme that has not been developed specifically for younger pupils. Schools that choose to develop their own SSP programme, or choose a programme that has not been validated, should ensure their programme meets the guidance on good SSP teaching in this document. They are advised to read these pages closely to consider how the ideas can be reflected in their own practice.

A range of programmes follow the principles outlined in this document, but they vary considerably in other ways. Schools should therefore consider the following points.

### General

- Can the publisher point to studies, existing practice or evaluations as evidence of the success of the programme?
- Have school leaders spoken to staff in other schools where the programme is being used?
- Have school leaders and teachers visited other schools to see the programme being used and where excellent results have been achieved in the phonics screening check?
- Have any other new SSP programmes been considered?
- Is the programme deemed to be complete after two years or does the publisher provide further guidance and resources to build on the foundations?
- In multi-academy trusts, which SSP programme(s) are the other schools already using?
- Is the programme suitable for older pupils who need to catch up?

### Costs

- How is the programme accessed, e.g. with a licence online, only through training, in hard copy directly from the publisher, and what are the costs of these different options?
- How is training paid for, e.g. one fee for all staff in the school or a fee for each member of staff?
- What is the estimated total cost of the programme each year, including training and resources?

## Training

- What are the options for training, e.g. from a trainer visiting the school, by sending staff to a training venue, by webinar or by completing a course remotely? Are online training films available?
- To what extent are schools supported following training? How is the initial training reinforced and updated?
- What provision is made for teachers who are new to the school to access training individually?

## Groupings

- Does the programme recommend whole class grouping or grouping according to children's reading progress? To what extent might one arrangement suit your school more than another?

## Resources

- How are resources provided, e.g. ready-made, to photocopy, to print from online, only with training?
- Are resources non-digital, digital (e.g. electronic whiteboard, online software application) or both?
- What does the programme provide for the teacher to use with children, e.g. letter cards, word cards, alphabetic code charts, other resources to display to support learning?
- What does the programme provide for the children to practise and apply reading and writing words and sentences, e.g. plain texts, 'decodable' books, activity sheets, pupil books?
- What does the programme provide to support letter formation?
- Are the resources especially suitable for young children or suitable for both young children and older pupils who have not yet mastered the early stages?

## Parents

- Consider how the programme supports parents in helping their children to read at home, for example, through meetings and online support.

## A note about 'Letters and Sounds'

In 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published a new phonics framework and called it 'Letters and Sounds'. Its aim was to provide schools with a practical programme to teach children to read and write according to the principles of synthetic phonics. Copies of 'Letters and Sounds', including guidance and a handbook,

were provided free to state-funded schools and teachers received free training. As a result, many schools that had not previously taught synthetic phonics implemented 'Letters and Sounds' in their schools, thus improving standards of teaching and pupils' reading.

However, 'Letters and Sounds' relied on schools building a full programme of resources around the handbook and in many cases updating the progression to bring it in line with current best practice. Some schools did this very successfully, but in other schools 'Letters and Sounds' was poorly resourced and not used according to current best practice. That is why, in 2021, the government decided to remove it from its list of validated full phonics programmes.

For further information about Letters and Sounds from 2021, see the DfE blog, ['Teachers' questions answered'](#).

## Appendix 9. Building a mental model

### Mental models

When we read or listen to a text, we represent, in our minds, what is being described. We build a mental or situation model by linking information in the text with what we already know. Our model is unlikely to replicate the text perfectly – we rarely remember the author’s exact words – but it captures the meaning. As we read on and find out more, we integrate new details and insights into our model, including by making inferences, that is, by going beyond what the text states explicitly.

When we think about developing pupils’ comprehension, it can be useful to focus on helping them to build the most robust mental model they can.

To lift the words from the page and then build a mental model requires proficiency in both word reading and comprehension. Consider the example below:

After journeying across the Okavango Delta since dawn, we’d given up all hope. Forlornly, we turned our 4WD around and headed back to the lodge.

But then, as we crossed the crest of a hill, we saw them. There were five in total, a family. As we drew closer, I marvelled at the sheer enormousness of these great grey giants. They were immense, their legs like baobab trunks planted so firmly in the soil. Their vast ears fanned steadily, sending the sandy dust on their backs into swirling clouds. I watched as the smallest member of the group stumbled and its mother steadied it with a careful trunk. It seemed incongruous that something so large and powerful could behave so tenderly.

The ability of a reader to construct a mental model is rarely all or nothing but, rather, sits somewhere on a spectrum of understanding. The reader, perhaps, might understand the main ideas but miss some of the nuances. In the text above, for example, they might grasp that the narrator is watching a family of elephants, but might not appreciate his shift from disappointment after seemingly such a long journey, in vain, to one of awe at being so close to the magnificent creatures. While we are not told explicitly what the ‘great grey giants’ are, an experienced reader is still likely to be able to build a robust mental model, drawing on details to picture the animals and the landscape.

## Factors that influence comprehension

Reading comprehension relies on both knowledge and processes<sup>159</sup>, working together:

- background knowledge
- knowledge of vocabulary (breadth and depth)
- understanding sentences
- using text structure
- activating meaning
- making inferences
- comprehension monitoring

These are vital for comprehension; they are enriched by pupils' exposure to texts, through reading widely and listening to texts being read aloud.

### Background knowledge

Reading comprehension draws on background knowledge. The more a reader knows about the topic, the easier it is for them to integrate new information from the text and build a mental model. So, deeper background knowledge produces stronger comprehension.

In the text above about the elephants, not everyone will know where the Okavango Delta is, but reading about the narrator trying to find animals, with mentions of '4WD' and 'lodge', helps to place the setting as a safari, allowing the reader to make sense of the scene.

It is not necessary for a reader to know everything about a text in order to understand it; on the contrary, reading is one of the principal ways we learn new things.

### Knowledge of vocabulary

A strong correlation exists between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. As the national curriculum says:

Teachers should also pay attention to increasing pupils' vocabulary, ranging from describing their immediate world and feelings to developing a broader, deeper and

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<sup>159</sup> See A Castles, K Rastle and K Nation, 'Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert' in 'Psychological Science in the Public Interest', Volume 19, 2018, Pages 5–51 and Oakhill J, Cain K & Elbro C (2015).



richer vocabulary to discuss abstract concepts and a wider range of topics, and enhancing their knowledge about language as a whole.

## **Understanding the majority of the words used in a text is vital.**

Breadth of vocabulary (how many words we know) is important, but so is depth: how we know each word, its different meanings in varied contexts, and the nuances conveyed by a particular choice of word. In the text above, comprehension depends on understanding a critical mass of words, especially those that allow the reader to identify the animal: trunk, vast ears, great grey giants. Some less-familiar words and phrases – journeying, forlornly, given up all hope – add nuances that allow the reader to understand the narrator’s feelings.

Vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge are likely to overlap considerably in the classroom: in order to support pupils’ comprehension, we therefore need to build both knowledge of words and the ideas that they represent.

## **Understanding sentences**

Understanding the meaning carried by sentence structure, including grammar and syntax (the way in which elements of language such as words are organised to convey meaning), also affects comprehension. This includes appreciating how the position of words in a sentence alters meaning (‘its mother steadied it’ compared to ‘it steadied its mother’). It also includes aspects such as resolving pronouns or considering the implications of different conjunctions.

In the text above, the reader needs to resolve pronouns (‘we’ for the tour party, ‘I’ for the narrator, ‘them’ and ‘they’ for the elephants). The reader also needs to understand the relationship between clauses that show time and effect (they journeyed for a long time before seeing the elephants; their position changed as they crossed the crest of the hill; they drew closer so the narrator could see the elephants clearly).

## **Using text structure**

Readers also draw on their knowledge of texts and how they work to support their comprehension. A good knowledge of the structure of different texts allows pupils to know what to expect from different parts of the text. In non-fiction texts, knowledge of text structure and how information is sequenced and organised can allow pupils to navigate to find specific material.

With narratives, readers can use text structure to identify where their understanding might have broken down: a mismatch between their expectations of a typical story and what has happened in the one they are reading, for example. Some types of narrative

texts can present specific challenges to comprehension, for example texts with non-linear structures or multiple plot lines.

It is not just the quality of these three types of knowledge – background knowledge, vocabulary, and knowledge of language structures – that affects how a reader constructs their mental model. It is also about how the reader activates and uses such knowledge: the processes involved in reading.

## Activating meaning

Activating meaning refers to the process by which the reader moves from recognising a word in print, to activating its meaning and then integrating that meaning into the wider text. Doing this successfully depends on efficient word reading (lifting the word quickly and accurately from the page) and knowing its meaning or meanings, as well as applying the idea the word represents to the mental model.

In the text about the elephants above, a reader might read the word ‘marvelled’, unconsciously link it to their vocabulary knowledge (marvel: to be full of wonder) and understand how the narrator feels to be confronted with animals of this size.

## Making inferences

Making inferences is necessary when reading almost all texts. Successful inference draws on a reader’s background knowledge to fill in gaps, that is, what the text does not say but what the writer expects the reader to understand. Readers make inferences both globally (across the text and beyond the text) and locally (at sentence level).

Global coherence inferences, that is, at text level, connect ideas within the text and also with what the reader already knows: ‘the elephants were behind the hill, but now the vehicle has moved the party can see them’; ‘there must be a baby elephant in the family because it stumbles and the mother steadies it’; ‘it must hot and dry because the elephants are fanning themselves and it’s dusty- I’ve seen places like this on a wildlife documentary’.

Readers also make inferences at sentence level – local cohesion inferences: for example, recognizing the phrase ‘since dawn’ means that the party have been out for a long time without returning home to rest.

Since a reader draws on vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge and knowledge of language structures to construct a robust mental model, it does not make sense for pupils to practise making inferences discretely, as if it were a transferable skill. Teaching to develop pupils’ comprehension is better focused on:

- ensuring they can decode fluently

- developing their spoken language (including their vocabulary)
- deepening their knowledge through studying a knowledge-rich curriculum
- reading and discussing complex texts with them
- reading aloud to them
- encouraging them to read widely in their own time.

## Comprehension monitoring

Comprehension monitoring, an aspect of metacognition, involves the reader in checking their mental model of the text, whether it has broken down and, if so, acting to resolve that. For example, the reader might recognise that they have made an error during reading ('He's seen some big trees planted in the soil...oh no, they're legs like trees. That makes more sense!').

Good monitoring correlates closely with good comprehension. The purpose of the reading also seems to affect successful monitoring. For instance, when a situation demands high-level understanding, skilled readers can adapt their monitoring, checking their reading and understanding to make sure their mental model is as complete as it can be.

The extent to which a reader can construct a good mental model for any given text will depend heavily on the text itself. Technical, subject-specific language or a text about a topic with which they are unfamiliar will be more challenging than a text using everyday language or dealing with a known topic. This is why reading a variety of different texts that grow in challenge is so important for pupils. As with so much in reading development, experience leads to proficiency.

## **Appendix 10. Content domains for key stage 2 assessment**

The eight content domains for the key stage 2 national assessment for reading are:

- Give/explain the meaning of words in context
- Retrieve and record information/identify key details from fiction and non-fiction
- Summarise main ideas from more than one paragraph
- Make inferences from the text/Explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text
- Predict what might happen from details stated and implied
- Identify/explain how information/narrative content is related and contributes to the meaning as a whole
- Identify and explain how meaning is enhanced through choice of words and phrases
- Make comparisons within the text.

## **Appendix 11. Considering text choice at key stage 3**

Some texts studied are required by the national curriculum and, after key stage 3, by exam boards, but teachers still have a great deal of choice when choosing which texts their pupils will read. For example, at key stage 3, the national curriculum requires pupils to study a play by Shakespeare, but teachers can decide which play it should be. Teachers and heads of department must carefully consider the texts they choose.

### **Text complexity**

Text complexity relies on a number of related properties.

#### **Linguistic construction**

Complicated sentence structures and unusual or subject-specific vocabulary can be challenging. This is especially true of archaic texts which use what now appear to be antiquated forms of expression. Pupils need to be exposed to and develop familiarity with archaic language to be able to read, for example, James Madison, Frederick Douglass or Edmund Spenser later in their education.

#### **Text structure**

Linear narratives or expository texts about one topic are likely to be easier to understand than texts with non-linear structures or multiple plots.

#### **Content and subject matter**

Texts about common topics or subjects familiar to the reader are likely to be far less challenging than unfamiliar ones. A text that is written for specialists may make assumptions about the reader's background knowledge and thus make less of an effort to introduce ideas logically, making it more difficult for other, non-specialist or less specialist readers to follow.

#### **Cohesion**

Reflecting aspects of language, text structure and content, cohesion refers to how well the text is able to guide a reader through the key ideas. A cohesive text will sequence ideas logically, joining these with linguistic features to signpost meaning for the reader, making it easier to understand.

#### **Levels of meaning**

Allegorical or satirical texts, texts that use symbolism to share meaning or texts with an unreliable narrator are likely to make different demands on a reader than a more straightforward narrative.

In addition, comprehension relies on integrating new information from a text with existing knowledge, so it may be that the challenge is due to gaps in a pupil's knowledge rather than stemming from the properties of the text.

Justifying a text's complexity by attempting to calculate its linguistic complexity and then assigning it a score or level will not capture its challenge accurately or sensitively. Research does not support organising pupils' independent reading based on programmes or approaches that use these measures of complexity. They are not an effective way of improving pupils' comprehension.

In addition, the challenge a pupil faces might not always come from the properties of the text itself. Comprehension relies on integrating new information from a text with existing knowledge, so it may be that the challenge is due to gaps in a pupils' knowledge.

Teachers and English leads should also consider the relationship between the texts selected across the whole of the key stage and beyond to check that they are sequenced carefully and equip pupils with the ability to understand increasingly complex texts they may meet in later key stages.

## Appendix 12. Glossary

Terms marked with an asterisk are the definitions given in the Glossary for the programmes of study for English in the national curriculum.

Term	Guidance	Example
adjacent consonant	See <a href="#">consonant cluster</a> .	
alliteration	The same initial sound occurring in adjacent or nearby words.	In 'Hickory <b>D</b> ickory <b>D</b> ock', the sound /d/ is alliterative; in ' <b>R</b> ing a <b>R</b> ing o' <b>R</b> oses', the sound /r/ is alliterative.
antonym*	Two words are antonyms if their meanings are opposites.	hot – cold light – dark light – heavy
assonance	The same or similar vowel sound occurring in adjacent or nearby words without the end sound rhyming, often used to draw attention to the words.	In the phrase 'breath and bread', the repeated vowel sound /e/ is assonant; the words 'breath' and 'death' are rhymes.
cadence	The rise and fall in pitch of the voice, generated in literary works by the specific choice of rhythm and vocabulary.	
common exception words	Exception words are words with GPCs that are unusual or have not yet been taught in a programme.	In the word 'said', the 's' and 'd' correspond to the sounds /s/ and /d/ as usual, but the grapheme 'ai' corresponds to the sound /e/, which is unusual.
consonant*	A sound which is produced when the speaker closes off or obstructs the flow of air through the vocal tract, usually using lips, tongue or teeth.	/p/ [flow of air stopped by the lips, then released]  /t/ [flow of air stopped by the tongue touching the roof of the mouth, then released]
consonant	Most of the letters of the alphabet represent consonants. Only the letters a, e, i, o, u and y can represent vowel sounds.	Most of the letters of the alphabet represent consonants. Only the letters a, e, i, o, u and y can represent vowel sounds.

Term	Guidance	Example
consonant cluster	Two or more consonant letters in sequence that represent separate phonemes.	The letters <u>s</u> <u>t</u> and <u>r</u> in stream and the letters <u>m</u> and <u>p</u> in lamp are consonant clusters.
cursive script	Also known as joined handwriting. From the Latin verb 'currere', meaning 'to run'.	
decode	To convert written words into spoken language.	
'decodable' books	The term 'decodable books' is often used to describe books that have been structured in cumulative steps for children learning to read so that, as their knowledge of the alphabetic code increases, they can decode every word.	
digraph*	A type of grapheme where two letters represent one phoneme. Sometimes, these two letters are not next to one another; this is called a <a href="#">split digraph</a> .	The digraph <u>ea</u> in <u>ea</u> ch is pronounced /i:/. The digraph <u>sh</u> in <u>sh</u> ed is pronounced /ʃ/. The split digraph <u>i</u> - <u>e</u> in <u>li</u> <u>n</u> <u>e</u> is pronounced /aɪ/.
grapheme*	A letter, or combination of letters, that corresponds to a single phoneme within a word.	The grapheme <u>t</u> in the words <u>te</u> n, be <u>t</u> and a <u>t</u> e corresponds to the phoneme /t/. The grapheme <u>ph</u> in the word dol <u>ph</u> in corresponds to the phoneme /f/.
grapheme- phoneme correspondences* (GPCs)	The links between letters, or combinations of letters (graphemes) and the speech sounds (phonemes) that they represent.  In the English writing system, graphemes may correspond to different phonemes in different words.	The grapheme <u>s</u> corresponds to the phoneme /s/ in the word <u>s</u> ee, but...  ...it corresponds to the phoneme /z/ in the word ea <u>s</u> y.



Term	Guidance	Example
inflection*	When we add -ed to walk, or change mouse to mice, this change of <a href="#">morphology</a> produces an inflection ('bending') of the basic word which has special grammar (e.g. past tense or plural). In contrast, adding -er to walk produces a completely different word, walker, which is part of the same word family. Inflection is sometimes thought of as merely a change of ending, but, in fact, some words change completely when inflected.	dogs is an inflection of dog. went is an inflection of go. better is an inflection of good.
mnemonic	A device for supporting memory and recall.	A snake shaped like the letter 'S'
morpheme	See morphology. A free morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning that can stand alone. Some inflections are examples of bound morphemes.	See examples below. The word dogs consists of the free morpheme dog and the bound morpheme s, signalling the plural form.
morphology*	<p>A word's morphology is its internal make-up in terms of root words and suffixes or prefixes, as well as other kinds of change such as the change of mouse to mice.</p> <p>Morphology may be used to produce different inflections of the same word (e.g. boy – boys), or entirely new words (e.g. boy – boyish) belonging to the same word family.</p> <p>A word that contains two or more root words is a compound (e.g. news+paper, ice+cream).</p>	<p>dogs has the morphological make-up: dog + s.</p> <p>unhelpfulness has the morphological make-up:</p> <p>unhelpful + ness</p> <p>where unhelpful = un + helpful</p> <p>and helpful = help + ful</p>

Term	Guidance	Example
phoneme*	<p>A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that signals a distinct, contrasting meaning. For example:</p> <p>/t/ contrasts with /k/ to signal the difference between tap and cap</p> <p>/t/ contrasts with // to signal the difference between bought and ball.</p> <p>It is this contrast in meaning that tells us there are two distinct phonemes at work.</p> <p>There are around 44 phonemes in English; the exact number depends on regional accents. A single phoneme may be represented in writing by one, two, three or four letters constituting a single grapheme.</p>	<p>The word cat has three letters and three phonemes: /kæt/</p> <p>The word catch has five letters and three phonemes: /kæʃ/</p> <p>The word caught has six letters and three phonemes: /kɔ:t/</p>
phonemic awareness	<p>This refers to the ability to distinguish phonemes in spoken words. It should be distinguished from phonological awareness.</p>	
phonological awareness	<p>The general ability to attend to the sounds of language as distinct from the meaning.</p>	
polysemous	<p>A word having more than one meaning.</p>	<p>keen (enthusiastic person; sharp or biting, such as wind)</p> <p>prime (the most important thing; a whole number that is divisible only by itself or 1)</p>

Term	Guidance	Example
prefix*	<p>A prefix is added at the beginning of a word in order to turn it into another word.</p> <p>Contrast <a href="#">suffix</a>.</p>	<p><u>o</u>vertake, <u>dis</u>appear</p>
preposition*	<p>A preposition links a following noun, pronoun or noun phrase to some other word in the sentence. Prepositions often describe locations or directions, but can describe other things, such as relations of time.</p> <p>Words like before or since can act either as prepositions or as conjunctions.</p>	<p>Tom waved goodbye <u>to</u> Christy. She'll be back <u>from</u> Australia <u>in</u> two weeks.</p> <p>I haven't seen my dog <u>since</u> this morning.</p> <p>Contrast: I'm going, <u>since</u> no-one wants me here!</p> <p>[conjunction: links two clauses]</p>
pseudo-word	<p>A pseudo-word resembles a word in a language because it uses GPCs and spellings that are likely to occur in that language. However, the word does not actually exist as a real word in that language.</p>	<p>Examples of pseudo-words in English: emp, blant, meck, tubbin</p> <p>The following are not pseudo-words in English because the letters do not occur in these places in this order in English words: ckelt, wellsch</p>
rhyme	<p>A word rhymes with another word when the final stressed <a href="#">syllable</a> shares the same sound.</p>	<p>The words 'red' and 'shed' rhyme. The words 'red', 'said' and 'gingerbread' also rhyme because they share the same end sound, although the spellings of those sounds differ.</p>
root word*	<p>Morphology breaks words down into root words, which can stand alone, and suffixes or prefixes which can't. For example, help is the root word for other words in its word family such as helpful and helpless, and also for its inflections such as helping.</p> <p>Compound words (e.g. help-desk) contain two or more root words. When looking in a dictionary, we sometimes have</p>	<p><u>pl</u>ayed [the root word is play]</p> <p>un<u>f</u>air [the root word is fair]</p> <p>foot<u>ba</u>ll [the root words are foot and ball]</p>

Term	Guidance	Example
	to look for the root word (or words) of the word we are interested in.	
schwa*	<p>The name of a vowel sound that is found only in <a href="#">unstressed</a> positions in English. It is the most common vowel sound in English.</p> <p>It is written as /ə/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet. In the English writing system, it can be written in many different ways.</p>	<p>/əlbɔŋ/ [<u>a</u>long]</p> <p>/bʌtə/ [but<u>t</u>er]</p> <p>(with accents where the /r/ is not pronounced)</p>
second tier words	Words that children are unlikely to hear in everyday conversation but are likely to come across in stories.	
semantic	Related to meaning.	
split digraph*	See digraph.	
stress*	A syllable is stressed if it is pronounced more forcefully than the syllables next to it. The other syllables are <a href="#">unstressed</a> .	<p><u>a</u>bout</p> <p>vi<u>s</u>it</p>
suffix*	<p>A suffix is an 'ending', used at the end of one word to turn it into another word. Unlike root words, suffixes cannot stand on their own as a complete word.</p> <p>Contrast <a href="#">prefix</a>.</p>	<p>call – call<u>e</u>d</p> <p>teach – teach<u>e</u>r [turns a verb into a noun]</p> <p>terror – terror<u>i</u>se [turns a noun into a verb]</p>

Term	Guidance	Example
		green – green <u>ish</u> [leaves word class unchanged]
syllable*	A syllable sounds like a beat in a word. Syllables consist of at least one vowel, and possibly one or more consonants.	Cat has one syllable.  Fairy has two syllables.  Hippopotamus has five syllables.
synonym*	Two words are synonyms if they have the same meaning, or similar meanings. Contrast <a href="#">antonym</a> .	talk – speak  old – elderly
trigraph*	A type of grapheme where three letters represent one phoneme.	<u>High</u> , <u>pure</u> , <u>patch</u> , <u>hedge</u>
unstressed*	See <a href="#">stress</a> .	
vowel*	A vowel is a speech sound which is produced without any closure or obstruction of the vocal tract.  Vowels can form syllables by themselves, or they may combine with consonants.	

Term	Guidance	Example
	<p>In the English writing system, the letters a, e, i, o, u and y can represent vowels.</p>	
word*	<p>A word is a unit of grammar: it can be selected and moved around relatively independently, but cannot easily be split. In punctuation, words are normally separated by word spaces.</p> <p>Sometimes, a sequence that appears grammatically to be two words is collapsed into a single written word, indicated with a hyphen or apostrophe (e.g. well-built, he's).</p>	<p><u>headteacher</u> or <u>head teacher</u> [can be written with or without a space]</p> <p><u>I'm</u> going out.</p> <p><u>9.30 am</u></p>
word class*	<p>Every word belongs to a word class which summarises the ways in which it can be used in grammar. The major word classes for English are: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, determiner, pronoun, conjunction. Word classes are sometimes called 'parts of speech'.</p>	
word family*	<p>The words in a word family are normally related to each other by a combination of morphology, grammar and meaning.</p>	<p>teach – teacher          extend – extent – extensive          grammar – grammatical -          grammarian</p>

## Appendix 13. Research underpinning this Framework

### Comprehension and background knowledge

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