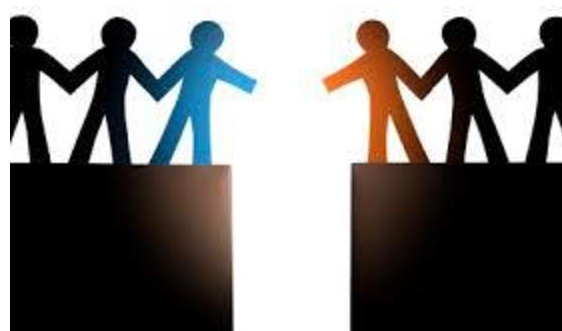


Ending the Reading Wars



Closing Knowledge Gaps to Bridge the Instructional Divide

Why do the "reading wars" persist? For those, like us, who believe that evidence-based literacy instruction is settled science, it's hard to understand any resistance. So we were delighted when our colleague Nadine Gaab shared the [article](#), "Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert" by Castles, Rastle, and Nation.

The authors' aim? To fill the gaps between "the state of research knowledge about learning to read and the state of public understanding." Two questions are explored: First, *why* does phonics instruction work? Second, what is the evidence for reading instruction beyond phonics that addresses fluent word recognition and comprehension?

We recommend reading this comprehensive research review in its entirety, especially the informative "boxes." May this brief overview pique your interest and inform your arguments for ending the reading wars. (Bonus for morphology buffs: *corrigendum*.)



Cracking the Alphabetic Code: The Writing System Matters

Babies are born with brains biologically hardwired for listening and speaking; their oral language skills develop naturally. Learning to read, however, presents a more difficult challenge—assigning sound and meaning to abstract symbols. In *alphabetic* writing systems, such as English, phonemes (sounds) are represented by letters or groups of letters (graphemes). The child who understands this sound-symbol connection—*aka* the alphabetic principle—can then learn to crack the code, translate print to spoken language, and attach meaning.

Few children independently understand that letters represent sounds. Most require explicit instruction. In an alphabetic writing system like English, each step in learning to decode can facilitate future learning.



Becoming A Skilled Word Reader: Experience Matters

Of course, learning to read is about more than phonics. All major theories of skilled reading reflect the fact that word reading involves more than just alphabetic decoding. Models represent two key cognitive processes in word reading—one involves translating spelling to sound to meaning; the other involves accessing meaning directly from spelling, bypassing phonology. These allow for optimal word processing.

As students become more skilled and automatic readers, they rely less on decoding and can access meaning from spelling (orthographic learning). They are able to generalize, drawing on letter-sound relationships when they read and can understand unfamiliar irregular words as efficiently as regular ones.

Experience is essential to becoming a skilled word reader. Repeated exposure to print builds lexical quality, a precise but flexible form of differentiation. Morphological knowledge assists skilled readers in going from spelling to meaning.

Not surprisingly, the desire to read is linked to the ability to do so. Willingham suggests these strategies for motivating readers. Maximize the value of reading by giving them chances to read what they like, what their friends are reading, or what is practical. Then make the choice of reading easy, so students want to do it more than other activities. Make reading materials highly visible everywhere!



Learning to Comprehend Text is Complex and Multifaceted

Text comprehension is far more than understanding individual words. It is the outcome of complex and multifaceted processes.

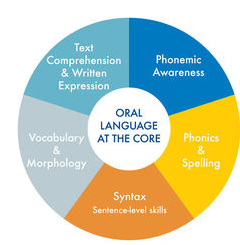
Castles et al. state that "reading comprehension is not a single entity that can be explained by a unified cognitive model. Instead, it is the orchestrated product of a set of linguistic and cognitive processes operating on text and interacting with background knowledge, features of the text, and the purpose and goals of the reading situation."

They cite Perfetti and Stafura's (2014) three types of knowledge as key to comprehension: orthographic (discussed above under word reading skills), linguistic, and general knowledge. Essential linguistic knowledge includes vocabulary as well as syntactic comprehension (sentence-level skills). Both tend to be more complex in written language than in speech where all important language learning originates. In fact, studies show that a child's oral language proficiency upon entering school predicts his/her later reading comprehension.

Higher reading comprehension is also associated with higher levels of relevant background knowledge. Like vocabulary, it contributes to meaning activation and inference generation. Executive functions, such as working memory, can also impact comprehension.

The article concludes by stating that teachers who understand both the *whats* and the *whys* of reading research are in the best position to translate this knowledge into effective classroom instruction. By providing professional development and coaching, Literacy How Mentors help teachers make these informed judgments.

Adapted from: [Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. \(2018\). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19, 5-51. doi:10.1177/1529100618772271](#)



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