

# The Five Pillars of Reading] Breaking Down the Elements of Successful Literacy Instruction

Wednesday, February 21, 2018

All the best things in life start with a strong foundation. A good garden needs good soil, a good party needs a good playlist, and a good introduction to literacy needs the five pillars of reading. The building blocks of reading, as defined by the [National Reading Panel](#), include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Together, these five pillars make up the components of successful reading instruction by shaping learners' brains one step at a time, to learn to read and understand the written English language.

Structuring an effective and research-based literacy and language arts block is the first step to laying a good foundation for your student's literacy skills. It's no easy task, but with the [FREE Reading & Literacy Workbook](#) from Edmentum, you'll learn how to select the best approach for your classroom and explore the different components of a successful literacy teaching strategy. The workbook includes several pages dedicated to helping you plan on incorporate these five components of literacy into daily reading instruction. But, before you dig into that resource, let's take a closer look at what these five pillars are and how they work to build the foundation of an effective literacy instruction strategy.

## 1. Phonemic Awareness

**What it is:** *The ability to hear, identify, manipulate, and substitute phonemes—the smallest units of sound that can differentiate meaning—in spoken words*

**What it means:** Teaching phonemic awareness means instructing students to identify and manipulate the approximately 44 phonemes in the English language. It doesn't require students to be able to read or even see printed letters to grasp this concept; it's all about the sounds that word parts make. Essentially, students begin by learning individual phonemes, then joining phonemes, and finally, building words.

**Why it matters:** Phonemic awareness is a strong predictor of long-term reading and spelling success. By using effective teaching strategies, phonemic awareness can be successfully taught during your literacy block. As you're planning instruction, it's also important to recognize that phonemic awareness development must be quickly followed by the introduction of phonics. Research shows that teaching sounds along with letters

of the alphabet helps students better understand how phonemic awareness relates to their reading and writing.

## 2. Phonics

**What it is:** *The ability to understand that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (the letters that represent those sounds in written language) in order to associate written letters with the sounds of spoken language*

**What it means:** This is where students begin to “crack the code” on reading. Phonics instruction teaches students how to build relationships between sounds and letters or letter combinations and how to use those relationships to build words.

**Why it matters:** While the English language is full of irregular spellings and exceptions to phonetic rules, phonics teaches students a system for remembering how to read words so that they are able to read, spell, and recognize words instantly.

## 3. Fluency

**What it is:** *The ability to read text accurately, quickly, and expressively, either to oneself or aloud; the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) fluency scale helps represent the learning progression of this skill*

**What it means:** Fluency is the ability to read as well as one speaks and to make sense of what is being read without having to stop or pause to decode words. Fluency is different from memorization, which can occur when students interact with the same text so frequently that they can repeat it without reading. Actual fluency is developed with the repeated, accurate sounding out of words.

**Why it matters:** Developing fluency is critical to a student’s motivation to read. When students struggle to sound out letters and words, reading can become a laborious and exhausting task, and students may begin to perceive reading as a negative activity. As students begin to acquire words more easily, they should also practice dividing text into meaningful chunks, knowing when to pause and change intonation and tone. With regular guidance and feedback, students begin to recognize these cues during reading and develop deeper comprehension.

#### 4. Vocabulary

**What it is:** *The growing, stored compilation of words that students understand and use in their conversation (oral vocabulary) and recognize in print (reading vocabulary)*

**What it means:** Vocabulary is very closely tied to reading comprehension, and it can be absorbed or learned both orally and through print. Most vocabulary is learned through everyday listening in conversations, reading aloud, or independent reading. In fact, studies show that there are direct links between how many words children hear spoken at home and how well they excel in 3rd grade. This is because children are unconsciously building their oral vocabularies all the time.

**Why it matters:** In order to comprehend reading, a student must know what the words mean that he or she is reading. Beginning readers use their oral vocabulary to make sense of words they see in print. If a student encounters an unfamiliar word while reading, his or her reading is momentarily interrupted until the new word is added to his or her mental vocabulary. Direct instruction of explicitly taught vocabulary, as well as word-learning strategies, can help build a flourishing vocabulary and improve reading fluency and comprehension.

#### 5. Comprehension

**What it is:** *The ability to understand, remember, and make meaning of what has been read—this is the purpose for reading*

**What it means:** Students with developed reading comprehension abilities can predict, infer, make connections, and analyze what is being read. If you want to think of reading like a watering can, then the four preceding pillars are the different parts that make up the watering can, like the handle, spout, and body of the can itself. Comprehension is the water. Without it, you still have a watering can, but an empty watering can won't help your flowers grow. Comprehension allows the flowers of literacy to bloom as it gives meaning and purpose to what is being read.

**Why it matters:** Even before children become independent readers, they can begin practicing and developing comprehension skills when books are read aloud to them. Students who comprehend what they read are both purposeful and active readers. They use metacognitive strategies to think about the purpose of what they're reading and monitor their own understanding as they read. This allows these students to isolate and verbalize where they have a lack of understanding, which, in turn, opens doors for them to apply specific strategies to attain that understanding.

The five pillars of reading are vital to literacy instruction, but they are still only one component of your larger reading instruction strategy. For an in-depth guide on how to evaluate the many facets of structuring an effective, research-based reading and language arts block, and for help selecting the appropriate technology tools to support your approach, download our FREE Reading & Literacy Workbook.

Reading & Literacy



McKenna Wierman

McKenna Wierman studied Journalism at the University of Mississippi, and has worked with Edmentum since June 2016. She currently serves as a Marketing Associate, and believes that empowered teachers are the key to successful students.

*Craig  
Miss  
Florida*  
*revised  
me 2012*

*Where it started - JBC - grants  
SRB*  
*Mark Stakeholder driven through Villa*  
*We found Packets of real success*  
*Craig - CDE Traini - Grant + SRD*  
*Some with testifier*  
*Many different Perspectives - all Cont'd*  
*Basis of Bill - ELC Proven*  
*Five Pillars - Research Based, evidence based*  
*Natural Recor*  
*Teacher Pups - Train/Process outcomes*  
*Outside Evaluat*  
*Current outword - include Part 2 Con*  
*CDE resources - Build in Success*  
*Co can be a National leader*