

Thought Leadership

Essential Literacy Practices: Structured Literacy

What is Structured Literacy?

Structured literacy is an evidence-based approach to teaching reading and writing that is explicit, systematic, and comprehensive. It emphasizes the teaching of foundational literacy skills in a deliberate and methodical way, making it particularly effective for students who struggle with reading, such as those with dyslexia.

Orton Gillingham define structured literacy as highly explicit and systematic instruction based on the Science of Reading. This ensures that all five pillars of a research-based literacy program are included during instructions: Phonological Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension.

Structured literacy provides the tools and methods to explicitly teach the skills represented in Scarborough's Reading Rope:

- **Word Recognition Strand:** Structured literacy explicitly teaches phonological awareness, phonics, and decoding. It ensures students practice reading words until they become automatic (sight recognition).

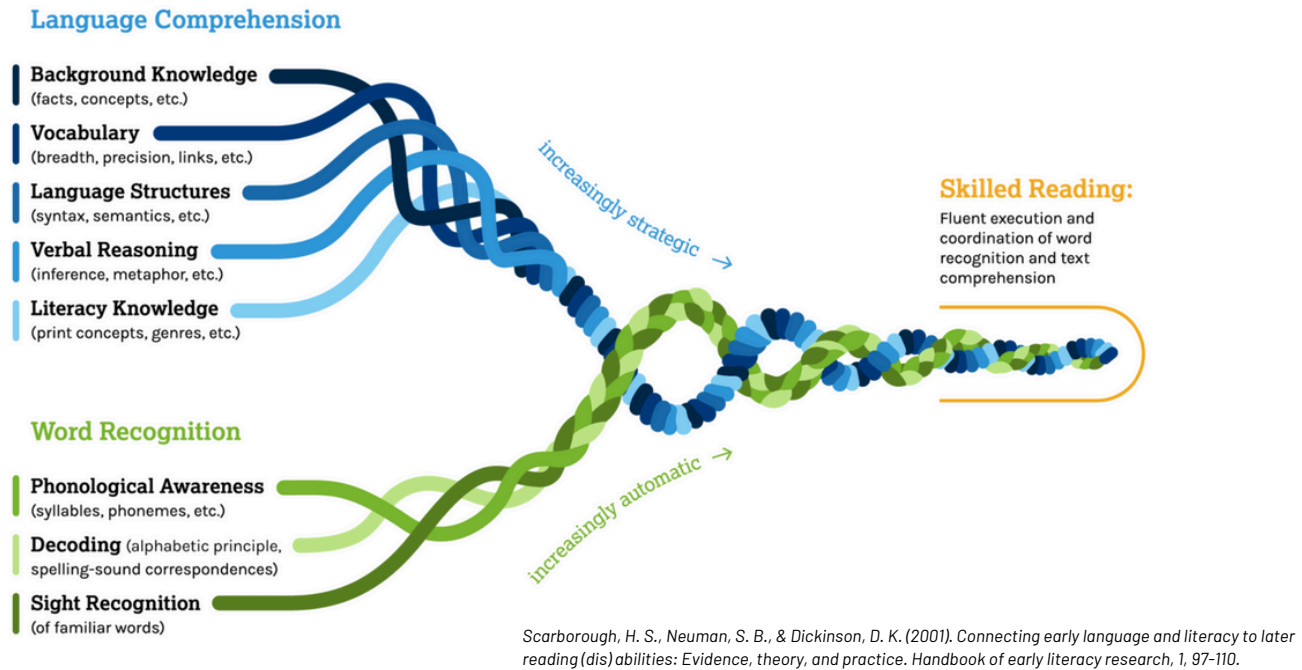
- **Language Comprehension Strand:** Structured literacy includes instruction in vocabulary, grammar, and text comprehension. It emphasizes building background knowledge and teaching students to think critically about what they read.
- **Systematic Approach:** Like the rope, structured literacy ensures all skills are taught step-by-step and in an integrated way. Both approaches recognize that strong reading depends on mastering and connecting multiple skills.

With this focus on the elements of effective reading instruction, students engage regularly in all components to become fluent and skilled readers.

*by Julie Mullan
Content Director, Literacy*



Essential Literacy Practices: Structured Literacy



Word Recognition Strand

Scarborough’s Word Recognition Strand is broken into three different components: Phonological Awareness, Decoding and Sight Recognition. These three aspects are the foundation to all literacy skills.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological Awareness is the ability to recognize that spoken words are made up of individual sound parts (National Center on Improving Literacy, 2024). These skills live under an umbrella of different skills that make up one’s ability to hear sounds and segment words.

This umbrella of skills consists of the following components:

- Word Rhyming
- Alliteration
- Sentence Segmentation
- Syllable Identification
- Onset and Rime
- Phonemic Awareness

Essential Literacy Practices: Structured Literacy

Components of Phonological Awareness:

Word Rhyming is when students use different words with different initial sounds and match the ending.

Example:
Cat/Hat

Alliteration helps students to use similar beginning sounds to make a sentence or phrase.

Example:
Brian bakes brownies for breakfast.

Sentence Segmentation allows students to listen to a sentence and breakdown the number of words they hear.

Example:
We / are / at / school= 4 words

As students master the above skills, they are able to look more granularly at the words themselves. When students look directly at the word to, we draw attention to the consonant or consonant cluster (**onset**) and the part of the syllable that contains the vowel (**rime**).

Example:
Onset=cap
Rime=cap

Finally, the most advanced skill of phonological awareness is the **Phonemic Level Awareness**. This aspect of phonological awareness supports students in identifying the phonemes associated with a word.

Example:
Book
/b/ /oo/ /k/ book=3 phonemes

Phonological awareness is key for skilled readers as they encounter unfamiliar words and must negotiate how to read them successfully.

Decoding

Decoding is the ability to apply knowledge of letter-sound relationships (phonics) and spelling patterns to correctly read written words. It is a critical component of the Word Recognition strand in Scarborough's Reading Rope, as it enables readers to translate print into speech. Decoding relies on strong phonological awareness and a clear understanding of how sounds map onto letters or groups of letters. Mastering decoding is foundational for developing automatic word recognition, which in turn supports fluent and efficient reading (Scarborough, 2001).

Decoding assists students to apply knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, in order to correctly pronounce written words. As students start to make connections from phonics and phonological awareness, students will decode familiar words quickly. This leads to a higher level of accuracy while reading.

Essential Literacy Practices: Structured Literacy

Sight Recognition

Sight Recognition is any word a student reads instantly. Sight word recognition is a critical component of early literacy development, as it enables young readers to identify frequently used words without decoding them phonetically. This skill enhances reading fluency, allowing children to focus on comprehension rather than word recognition. Research shows that mastering sight words builds confidence and provides a foundation for tackling more complex texts (Ehri, 2020). Importantly, automaticity in recognizing sight words reduces cognitive load, freeing mental resources for understanding meaning and context (National Reading Panel, 2000).

In this part of Scarborough's Rope students move from sounding out words to storing words in one's memory permanently. This process is called orthographic mapping (Ehri, 2014, Kilpatrick, 2015).

Language Comprehension Strand

By mastering the skill for word recognition, students do not become fluent readers. Students still need to comprehend what they are reading to become skilled readers.

Background Knowledge

Background knowledge can be thought of as a bank of information that students draw upon while reading a text. Background knowledge supports a reader in making meaning of the word they are reading. For instance, if a reader is reading words with multiple meaning or idioms, they are able create an understanding of the text by drawing on their bank of information. Background knowledge also supports readers in using prior learning and apply to new texts, which works to supports a clearer understanding, allowing for inferences, and understanding of literary elements.

Vocabulary

This part of Scarborough's Rope refers to the quality and quantity of words students know. For students to comprehend challenging texts, it is necessary to have a wealth of vocabulary knowledge. The more words a student knows, the more likely they are to comprehend what they are reading.

Language Structures

Language Structures refers to the complex sets of rules and conventions used in language. By utilizing these functions correctly, we are able to communicate verbally and through writing. These skills are essential for recognizing how words and phrases interact to create meaning within sentences and across texts. Research highlights that mastering language structures allows readers to grasp both explicit and implicit meanings, facilitating deeper comprehension of complex texts (Scarborough, 2001).

Essential Literacy Practices: Structured Literacy

A strong knowledge of syntax and grammar is linked to improved fluency and the ability to infer relationships between ideas, both of which are crucial for advanced literacy skills (Seidenberg, 2017). Strengthening this strand helps integrate decoding and linguistic comprehension, forming the foundation for skilled reading.

In order for students to become skilled readers, they must have a understanding of the structures in the English Language.

These structures consist of the following:

- Grammar
- Phonemes
- Morphemes
- Words
- Semantics
- Syntax

<p>Grammar is a system of a languages. Students must understand how different words are used in both speaking and writing. <u>Grammar</u> helps students understand how words and groups of sentences are used together and how they should arranged together.</p>	<p>A phoneme represents a common sound within the English language. <u>Phonemes</u> exists in different distributions throughout the English language. This sometimes causes the phonemes to act differently within the word.</p>	<p>Morphology is the study of word formation. Speakers utilize root words, prefixes and suffixes to create a word. <u>Morphology</u> allows for multiple meanings root words all related to one another.</p>
<p>Semantics is the study of meaning. Readers utilize <u>semantics</u> to support understanding of a word and what images the word evokes. When a skilled reader use semantics, they can make meaning of words or phrases, helping with their comprehension.</p>	<p>Syntax refers to the specific order of words in the English language. If you change the arrangement of words, it is possible to change the meaning of a sentence. <u>Syntax</u> is a process to leads to effective communication. It encompasses the other aspects of the language structures, such as: grammar and semantics.</p>	

Verbal Reasoning

Verbal Reasoning strand refers to the reader's ability to think about the text and infer meaning based on what is explicitly and implicitly stated. In order to do this, readers must be able make logical inferences, integrate ideas within and across texts, and interpret abstract language.

Literacy Knowledge

Literacy knowledge encompasses all the ideas we have around language, books and with texts. Skilled readers understand the elements around all aspects of literacy to put these elements together and make meaning.

Essential Literacy Practices: Structured Literacy

Summary

To become skilled readers, students need multiple components of reading to work together seamlessly, supporting both decoding and comprehension. Foundational strands, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and automaticity, are essential for decoding words efficiently and accurately. However, decoding alone is not enough—students also require strong language comprehension skills, including vocabulary, syntax, background knowledge, and inferencing, to fully understand what they read and apply their learning effectively.

Reading programs must integrate all components of Scarborough’s Reading Rope, which intertwines word recognition and language comprehension, to develop proficient and confident readers. This comprehensive approach ensures that students are not only able to decode text but also derive meaning from it, preparing them to engage with a wide variety of texts and meet the demands of academic and real-world reading. By addressing both the mechanical and cognitive aspects of reading, these programs equip students with the skills needed for lifelong literacy.



References:

- Ehri, L. C. (2014). Orthographic mapping in the acquisition of sight word reading, spelling memory, and vocabulary learning. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 18(1), 5–21.
- Ehri, L. C. (2020). The role of orthographic mapping in learning to read words: What does it mean for instruction? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55(S1), S95–S115.
- Kilpatrick, D. A. (2015). *Essentials of assessing, preventing, and overcoming reading difficulties*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- National Center on Improving Literacy. (2024) Phonological awareness: What is it and how does it relate to phonemic awareness? Retrieved from <https://improvingliteracy.org/brief/phonological-awareness-what-it-and-how-does-it-relate-phonemic-awareness/index.html>
- National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
- Scarborough, H. S., Neuman, S. B., & Dickinson, D. K. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. *Handbook of early literacy research*, 1, 97-110.
- Seidenberg, M. S. (2017). *Language at the speed of sight: How we read, why so many can't, and what can be done about it*. Basic Books.