



Department  
for Education

# **The reading framework**

**Teaching the foundations of literacy**

**July 2021**

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# Foreword by Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards

Over the last two decades, there has been a deepening recognition of the fundamental importance of improving reading standards on a child's future academic achievement, wellbeing and success in life. The reading and writing of Standard English, alongside proficient language development, is the key to unlocking the rest of the academic curriculum. Pupils who struggle to read struggle in all subjects and the wonders of a knowledge-rich curriculum passes them by unread. Fluency of reading is also a key indicator for future success in further education, higher education and employment.



Even more significantly, being a highly engaged reader has the potential to allow a child to overcome their background. In 2000, results from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that:

“while the degree of engagement in reading varies considerably from country to country, 15-year-olds whose parents have the lowest occupational status but who are highly engaged in reading obtain higher average reading scores in PISA than students whose parents have high or medium occupational status but who report to be poorly engaged in reading. This suggests that finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change.”<sup>1</sup>

This finding remains pertinent, with a 2021 OECD report stating 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>2</sup> Research by the Institute of Education has also found that the benefits of reading continue as children get older, with the combined effect on children's progress at 16 of regularly reading books and newspapers and visiting the library “four times greater than the advantage children gained from having a parent with a degree”.<sup>3</sup> In short, reading

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<sup>1</sup> OECD (2002). [‘Reading for change. Performance and engagement across countries. Results from PISA 2000’](#) Paris: OECD

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2021). [‘21st-century readers: Developing literacy skills in a digital world’](#) Paris: OECD Publishing

<sup>3</sup> UCL IoE Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2015). [‘Reading for Pleasure Impact Case Study’](#)

can achieve something teachers and policymakers have been attempting for decades: to lessen or even eliminate the impact of early life disadvantage.

Children do not just 'become' readers, however, and reading engagement is not possible if children struggle with the basic mechanics of reading. Fluency and enjoyment are the result of careful teaching and frequent practice. Ensuring children become fluent and engaged readers at the very earliest stages also helps avoid the vicious circle of reading difficulty and demotivation that makes later intervention more challenging.

That is why my focus since I became the Shadow Minister for Schools in 2005 has always been on reading. I welcomed the Rose Review in 2006 which recommended that all schools use systematic phonics to teach reading. The evidence for phonics is indisputable, with the EEF considering it the most secure area of pedagogy. In the 15 years since the Rose Review, we have moved on from the 'reading wars' that used to dominate discussion. All schools now use systematic phonics to teach reading and thousands of teachers are ensuring more children are learning to read because of their daily teaching of systematic phonics in schools across England.

We introduced two fundamental changes to make this happen: the National Curriculum published in 2013 required schools to teach reading using systematic phonics, and the Phonics Screening Check introduced in 2012 shows how many children are on track. These efforts have begun to pay off. In 2019, 82% of pupils in year 1 met the expected standard in the Phonics Screening Check, compared to just 58% in 2012. For disadvantaged pupils, this figure rose from 45% to 71%. England's scores in international assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) have also improved notably, particularly for the boys and the lowest performing pupils. England's progress through championing the teaching of phonics to improve early literacy has attracted attention from across the world, and we have shared our experiences with nations such as Australia, Fiji, Nigeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan.

There is more to do, however. The very best schools in our country are achieving near to 100% in the Phonics Screening Check, despite high levels of disadvantage. The effective teaching of reading, as evidenced in these schools, requires not just a systematic synthetic phonics programme but its consistent implementation in every class. These schools also recognise the importance of talk, of accurate assessment, and of building a love of stories and reading. Most importantly, head teachers need to prioritise reading and make it their mission to make sure every child in their school becomes a fluent reader.

This Reading Framework, formed through the contributions of literacy experts and school leaders, many of whom are part of our English Hubs programme, builds on

existing progress and shows how schools can introduce these changes with long-term effect. It sets out the core principles of teaching reading for children in Reception and year 1, and for older pupils who have not yet mastered the foundations. It provides support and guidance for school leaders, classroom teachers and Initial Teacher Training partnerships about how to create a school environment where every child is not only able to read proficiently, but also develops a genuine love of reading.

I would like to thank all involved in producing and commenting on this document, including reading and language experts, educational organisations, English Hubs Council members, and the 34 English Hubs and partner schools whose expertise has been vital in building an evidence base of what works in teaching early reading. I encourage all primary schools to use this guidance to ensure their children have the strongest possible foundations in reading.

Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP

Minister of State for School Standards

# 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

This guidance is for primary schools, initial teacher training (ITT) partnerships, specialist provision and others in England. It focuses on the early stages of teaching reading. Its key objective is to help schools meet their expectations around early reading as set out in the national curriculum and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. It also aligns with Ofsted's Education Inspection Framework.

The guidance aims to:

- set out some of the research underpinning the importance of talk, stories and systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in the teaching of reading
- provide practical support for high-quality teaching, including assessment and the importance of 'fidelity to the programme'<sup>4</sup>
- support schools to evaluate their teaching of early reading, especially in Reception and year 1, and identify how to improve provision if weaknesses are found
- 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 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 audit their current practice.

The document is based on teachers' experiences, classroom observations, assessments and research, as well as advice from and the contributions of experts from the early literacy sector. It also reflects the experiences of many primary schools that excel in the teaching of reading, including those in the English Hubs

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<sup>4</sup> Rose J (2006). ['Independent review of the teaching of early reading: Final Report'](#) Department for Education and Skills, page 21

programme, which is administered by the Department for Education (DfE).<sup>5</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.

ITT partnerships may wish to consider using the guidance with trainees to develop their understanding of early reading, especially SSP, and to give them informed and practical support.

## 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 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 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 and so also for wider learning and progress.

The guidance also considers the role of poetry, rhymes and songs in attuning children to the sounds of language.

### Teaching word reading and spelling

The national curriculum is designed to make sure that all children are able to read and write fluently 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.

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<sup>5</sup> The UK government's Department for Education is responsible for education in England.

Understanding that the letters on the page represent the sounds in spoken words underpins successful word reading. Children's 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 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 also shows a significant improvement in the reading performance of boys in England (reducing the gap between boys and girls by 11 points since 2011)<sup>6</sup>, a finding that could be attributed to the roll out of systematic phonics programmes in England since 2010.

## 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 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>

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<sup>6</sup> McGrane J and others (2017). ['Progress in International Reading Literacy Study \(PIRLS\): National Report for England'](#) London: Department for Education

<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.

## Leadership and management

Since the national curriculum is statutory in state-maintained primary 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. The guidance on leadership and management highlights the roles of school leaders in successfully implementing a programme, and training and supporting their staff to teach reading as effectively as possible.

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

Schools that need to improve their teaching of phonics may find the section on word reading and spelling particularly useful.

## 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 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.

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.

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 schools to improve their teaching of early language, phonics and reading in Reception and year 1. The [English Hubs website](#) can help you find your local English Hub, which can provide support and information.

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