

# Q&A: Millions of US children have mediocre reading skills. Engaged parents and a committed school curriculum can help

October 5 2023, by Shayne Piasta

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Reading ability among U.S. students [remained low in 2022](#), with 37% of fourth graders and 30% of eighth graders scoring below the basic

proficiency levels for reading set by the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#).

Although the COVID-19 school shutdowns are responsible for [some of the learning loss](#), the numbers weren't particular good [prior to the pandemic](#), either—[reading scores](#) for U.S. students have been low for decades.

SciLine interviewed [Dr. Shayne Piasta](#), a professor of reading and literacy at The Ohio State University and a faculty associate at the [Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy](#). Piasta discussed the various methods of reading instruction and how to get kids to love it.

Below are some highlights from the discussion. Answers have been edited for brevity and clarity.

## **What is meant by the 'science of reading'? And what are the misconceptions?**

The [science of reading](#) refers to the accumulated [knowledge base](#) we have from [scientific research](#) about the reading process, its components, how reading skills develop and how we can best support those who are learning to read.

One of the misconceptions I see is that the science of reading is equated with [phonics instruction](#).

But the science of reading is a knowledge base, not a specific approach. Phonics instruction is a specific approach, whereby one is explicitly and intentionally teaching children all of those important links between letters and sounds, both at an individual letter level—like learning the alphabet—and at higher skill levels, such as learning about some

complex spelling conventions that we have in the English language.

Although phonics instruction is a necessary component in learning to read, phonics instruction alone, without attending to other key reading components, such as language, comprehension, and concept and background knowledge, is insufficient.

## **What critical components are needed for a reading curriculum to be successful?**

First and foremost, I would expect a reading program [to have a scope and sequence](#), meaning there is predetermined content of what's going to be covered. And then that it's in a particular order, often building from more simple skills or concepts to more complex ones.

This might apply to phonics instruction, where we're going from simple letter sound correspondences and building up to more complex associations between letters, spelling patterns and how words are pronounced.

Any successful reading program [should have a scope and sequence](#). It should definitely have it for the phonics component, but it should have it for other components as well.

## **What role does background knowledge play in learning to read?**

We're learning more and more about how critical concept knowledge and background knowledge are for successful reading.

To understand the meaning being conveyed by text, which is the ultimate goal, children use the information they already know to make sense of text. A famous example involves a study in which children read a [written](#)

[passage about baseball](#). Children who knew a lot about baseball best understood the passage, regardless of reading ability.

This highlights the role of concept and background knowledge as foundations for understanding text meaning, and thus, reading comprehension.

Any reading curriculum should have opportunities for children to build those skills—to learn about our world, to make connections with the world, to make connections across different sources and types of information. This is particularly important given the diversity of classrooms. Educators cannot assume that children share certain knowledge or backgrounds.

Teachers need to provide opportunities to discuss and learn about concepts that children will read about. This includes topics like baseball as well as academic concepts like photosynthesis. And then they bring that conceptual and [background knowledge](#) with them when they're going to read a new piece about a certain topic so they can actually make sense of it.

Again, it's not phonics only. It's phonics and these opportunities to support knowledge building as well as language skills.

## **Are any approaches especially effective for children from marginalized backgrounds?**

There are many evidence-based practices for building language for both children who speak English only and those who are English learners. This includes exposing children to [more complex grammar during conversations](#) and [using routines](#) to improve awareness of new vocabulary words.

The science of reading applies to all learners. Most practices that we would recommend are going to be helpful for students from a range of different backgrounds. That being said, it's important to be able to identify the strengths and the [learning needs of individual children](#).

## **How can parents support kids who are learning to read?**

For parents, I would recommend focusing on [creating positive literacy environments at home](#). That is, having children see you reading, having children see you writing, and being clear about how literacy plays a role in your [everyday life](#)—not just having storybook time together or reading together, but doing activities like making grocery lists together.

Or maybe you could point out, "Hey, I'm reading these instructions so I can put together this piece of Ikea furniture." So you're really highlighting all of the important roles that literacy plays in daily life. In doing so, you can help [children](#) build [positive connections with those reading opportunities](#) so that it's fun, engaging and something they want to do.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Q&A: Millions of US children have mediocre reading skills. Engaged parents and a committed school curriculum can help (2023, October 5) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-qa-millions-children-mediocre-skills.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is

provided for information purposes only.