

English Language Arts Strategies

Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding

Grades K–3rd

RECOMMENDATION 1

Teach students academic language skills, including the use of inferential and narrative language, and vocabulary knowledge.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Develop awareness of the segments of sound in speech and how they link to letters.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Ensure that each student reads connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

This document provides a summary of recommendations from the WWC Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade Practice Guide (Foorman et al., 2016).

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Minimal	   

RECOMMENDATION 1

Teach students academic language skills, including the use of inferential and narrative language, and vocabulary knowledge.

Academic language skills include three skills: (1) use of inferential language communicating about ideas across contexts; (2) use of narrative language (clearly describing a series of events); and (3) understanding a range of academic vocabulary and grammatical structures. These skills help students better comprehend academic texts both across subjects and within individual subjects. Unlike social language skills that develop naturally in communication with family and friends, academic language skills more often need to be taught.

Strategies

1. Engage students in conversations that support the use and comprehension of inferential language.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Ask open-ended questions about texts, including making predictions, making hypotheses, and comparing and contrasting.
- Ask questions before, during, and after reading.
- Model how to answer questions.

Multiple strategies can be used during conversations about the texts students are reading to support the development of students' inferential language. These include asking students to make predictions, engage in problem-solving, make hypotheses, and compare and contrast concepts. Teachers can use open-ended questions to encourage students to reflect on how the texts apply to their lives and their world.

These questions can be asked before, during, or after read-aloud activities to encourage higher-level thinking. Teachers should model how to answer such questions by providing their own complete and well-reasoned answers. Teachers can also use follow-up questions such as "Why do you think that?" to prompt students to provide additional detail to their own answers.

2. Explicitly engage students in developing narrative language skills.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Model complex grammatical structures.
- Teach elements of narrative language.
- Scaffold student responses.

Narrative language is the ability to understand or create a fictional or real interpretation of an experience. Skills needed for narrative language include logically organizing information and using grammatical structures to connect the information. Teachers should teach students about complex grammatical structures and elements of narrative language, such as compound sentences, subordinate clauses, adverbial clauses, prepositional phrases, connectives, noun phrases, verb phrases, and pronoun references. These can be taught during whole-class or small-group lessons. Teachers can model grammatical structures, prompt students to use these structures (e.g., while summarizing a story or predicting what will happen next), and scaffold student responses.

Teachers should also provide instruction on components of story grammar, including characters, setting, and plot. Students can engage with these components when summarizing stories. Teachers can prompt students to include all of the components of story grammar in their own summaries of stories.

3. Teach academic vocabulary in the context of other reading activities.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Develop a common set of academic vocabulary.
- Use activities that ask students to use or talk about academic vocabulary.
- Review new words regularly and expose students to the words in new contexts.

Academic vocabulary are words commonly used in written text across subject areas, such as assignment instructions. Academic vocabulary can also include grammatical rules that are less common in speech.

Ideally, schools or grade-level teams develop a common set of academic vocabulary that will appear frequently throughout the school year and across subjects. Teachers could explicitly teach students a few words each week from this common set of academic vocabulary. Instruction should provide clear definitions and meaningful example sentences that include the word. Teachers can help students develop a deeper understanding of the words by constructing activities that allow students to use or talk about the words they have learned. Teachers should also review the new words regularly and provide opportunities for students to encounter the words in different contexts throughout the year.

Potential Roadblocks



Student academic language skills can vary across a spectrum of abilities, and some students may not be ready to engage in this level of skill-development activities.

Suggested Approach. Differentiate instruction to support the language development of each student. For example, small group reading instruction will allow teachers to better meet each student's needs.



It is hard to find adequate time to devote to language instruction.

Suggested Approach. Integrate language instruction into already-planned content areas. For example, use science or social studies texts to foster rich inferential discussion. Language instruction can also be integrated into already scheduled read-aloud time.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Strong	   

RECOMMENDATION 2

Develop awareness of the segments of sound in speech and how they link to letters.

For students to be able to read and comprehend, they must first develop phonological awareness, the ability to recognize and manipulate the segments of sound in words. To develop this ability, students must be able to identify the following: individual sounds (phonemes) in words; print letters of the alphabet; and corresponding sounds for each letter. The following recommendation focuses on actions teachers can take to support students in developing the ability to effectively decode and encode words.

Strategies

1. Teach students to recognize and manipulate segments of sound in speech.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Work with students to break down sentences into individual words.
- Work with students to break down individual words, like compound words, into smaller words.
- Work with students to break down syllables within words.
- Work with students to break down words into smaller parts like onset and rime.
- Use tools like Elkonin boxes to help students break down words into individual phonemes.

To begin teaching students this skill, work with students to break down sentences into individual words. Then help them break down certain individual words, like compound words, into smaller words. Next, work with students to break down words further into syllables and encourage them to practice identifying syllables within familiar words. Finally, teach students to break syllables into even smaller units, such as onsets and rimes. Onsets are the initial consonant in a syllable (i.e., the /f/ in food), while the rime is the remaining sound in that syllable (i.e., the /ood/ in food).

Once students can break syllables into onsets and rimes, encourage students to begin manipulating them to build phonemic awareness. A wide variety of activities can help students manipulate individual phonemes, including using Elkonin sound boxes, sorting pictures, and using the example activities described below.

Example Activities for Learning Onset and Rime

Assembling Words

Teacher: What word do you get when you put these two sounds together: /f/ and /ood/?

Students: *Food*.

Teacher: Exactly!

Rhyming

Explain what rhyming means to students before beginning the dialogue.

Teacher: What word rhymes with *bat*?

Students: *Cat*.

Teacher: Yes! Does *hat* rhyme with *bat*?

Students: Yes!

Teacher: Does *bar* rhyme with *bat*?

Students: No.

Teacher: Very good.

Matching Onsets

Teacher: These are pictures of animals. What type of animal is this? (Show picture of cat.)

Students: A cat.

Teacher: Correct. What sound does *cat* start with?

Students: /c/

Teacher: Correct. What type of animal is this? (Show picture of cow.)

Students: A cow.

Teacher: Correct. Does this type of animal start with the same sound as cat?

Students: Yes.

Teacher: Correct. What is this animal called? (Show picture of dog.)

Students: Dog.

Teacher: Correct. Does *dog* start with the same sound as *cat*?

Students: No.

Teacher: Correct. What sound does *dog* start with?

Students: /d/

Teacher: Very good. What about this animal? (Show picture of crab.)

Students: Crab.

Teacher: Exactly. Does it start with the same letter as *cat*?

Students: Yes.

Teacher: Great work! *Cat*, *cow*, and *crab* all begin with the /c/ sound.

Dog does not begin with the /c/ sound.

2. Teach students letter-sound relations.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Teach familiar consonant and short vowel sounds.
- Continue with familiar consonant blends, moving to long vowels, common two-letter vowel pairs, and combinations that may correspond to multiple sounds.
- Share a picture with the upper and lower case of a letter and share a short story that corresponds to and incorporates the letter throughout.
- Have students repeat the sound.
- Provide opportunities for the student to write the letter.

Once students begin to manipulate phonemes, start working with students on the letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds. Begin by teaching familiar consonant and short vowel sounds that are more common, such as /m/, /p/, /s/, and /a/. After consonants and short vowels, consider teaching students familiar consonant blends. As students progress in their understanding, teach long vowels with a silent /e/, common two-letter vowel pairs (e.g., /ea/ and /ou/), and letters and letter combinations that may correspond to multiple sounds. Introduce each letter or letter combination one at a time. For each letter-sound, try sharing a picture with both the upper and lower case of the letter and share a short story that corresponds to and incorporates the letter-sound throughout to help students remember the sound when they see the letter. Encourage students to repeat the sound after it's shared, and provide meaningful opportunities for students to write the letters (e.g., writing their names or common words with the letter).

Example Picture and Alphabet Letter



3. Use word-building and other activities to link students' knowledge of letter-sound relationships with phonemic awareness.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Use activities like word building with letter tiles to build an awareness of how each letter contributes to the spelling and pronunciation of a word.
- Model the activity and work on some examples with students.
- Challenge students with more difficult words as they progress.

Activities, like word-building, help students build their awareness of how each letter contributes to the spelling and pronunciation of a word. By building this skill, students can begin spelling and decoding words. For example, provide students with a set of letter tiles and have them manipulate the tiles to create or change words. Model the activity to begin, and work through examples with students. Then encourage the students to work independently. As they progress in their understanding, challenge students with more difficult words, such as words with a silent /e/ or words with two consonants at the beginning or end.

Example Word-Building

Provide students with the letter tiles *a*, *p*, *t*, *c*, and *n*.

Teacher: Take the *p*, *a*, and *t* tiles and put them together in that order: *p*, *a*, then *t*.
Can anyone read this word?

Student: *Pat*.

Teacher: Correct. Now change one letter to make it say *pan*.

Teacher: Now, change a letter to make it say *can*.

Teacher: Now, make it say *cat*.

Teacher: Finally, make it say *pat* again.

Potential Roadblocks



Students often confuse letters and their sounds.

Suggested Approach. A common problem in early grades is students confusing the shapes and sounds of one letter for another (e.g., b and d), known as a letter reversal. To help students overcome this challenge, teach students one letter at a time, starting with the letter's shape (e.g., b). Once a student is able to instantly identify the letter, introduce another letter (e.g., d) and continue to reinforce the first letter learned. Then, shift your teaching focus entirely to the second letter.

Finally, introduce the two letters in individual words to ensure students can recognize each letter independently. If issues with letter reversals continue, try using a handwriting program, which can help students focus their hand-eye coordination on the letter shapes. Particularly for older students, continued problems with letter reversals may indicate other reading challenges or disabilities.



Even after focused instruction, students continue to struggle with phonemic awareness.

Suggested Approach. One potential opportunity to overcome this roadblock is to work with a student one-on-one or in small groups. Early intervention can help overcome this persistent challenge and prevent further reading problems.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Strong	   

RECOMMENDATION 3

Teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words.

For students to be able to read with greater fluency and comprehension, they must first develop their understanding of morphology, the knowledge of meaningful word parts in the language. To develop this understanding, students must learn the following: letter patterns and word parts, the relation of sounds to letters, and high-frequency word recognition. The following recommendation focuses on actions teachers can take to support students in developing their understanding of morphology to increase fluency and comprehension.

Strategies

1. Teach students to blend letter-sounds and sound-spelling patterns from left to right within a word to produce a recognizable pronunciation.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Have students practice chunking letter-sounds.
- Have student practice sounding out words.
- Use manipulatives to demonstrate chunking and sounding out.

Blending is a systematic process for reading words. Students read from left to right, successively adding more letters to produce the sound of the word. Chunking and sounding out are two approaches to use when teaching students to blend.

- **Chunking:** When students chunk, they combine the first two letter-sounds, then practice that combination before adding the next letter-sound. This process of adding a sound and then practicing is repeated until all the sounds are added and the whole word is pronounced.
 - Have students identify the first and second sounds and put these two sounds together. Then, encourage students to add the next sound to the chunk of the first and second sounds until they have pronounced the word in its entirety. Have students ask themselves if the word they produced is familiar as a way to check their pronunciation.

- **Sounding out:** When students sound out words, they say all the letter-sounds from left to right, connecting them as much as possible as they go.
 - Have students pronounce each letter-sound individually. Then ask students to put the letter-sounds together. Finally, ask students what the word is after combining all letter-sounds. Have students ask themselves if the word they produced is familiar as a way to check their pronunciation.

Teachers can also use manipulatives such as a pocket chart with letter tiles, magnetic letters, or an Elkonin sound box to demonstrate chunking and sounding out.

2. Instruct students in common sound-spelling patterns.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Demonstrate how letters appear in multiple words.
- Use word cards to demonstrate spelling patterns.
- Use spelling patterns to practice spelling words

Demonstrate to students how letters, when combined, often appear in multiple words. To begin, use common vowel and syllable patterns like *th*, *oo*, or *ee*. To continue, teachers can use syllable-construction patterns like *gen-tle* and *Tues-day*.

Activities to introduce and practice sound-spelling patterns:

1. Use word cards. Word cards should include words that have the identified pattern and those that do not. Students can sort the word cards into these two groups: word cards that have the identified pattern and word cards that do not.
2. Provide students with a spelling pattern. Prompt students to practice writing words that include the spelling pattern.
3. Provide students with a spelling pattern. Have students use Elkonin sound boxes to build words with the provided spelling pattern.

3. Teach students to recognize common word parts.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Develop a common set of academic vocabulary.
- Use activities that ask students to use or talk about academic vocabulary.
- Review new words regularly and expose students to the words in new contexts.

After students have learned some common spelling patterns, show them how to break words down into smaller, meaningful parts. For example, teaching students suffixes, contractions, prefixes, and root words will help students have a strong foundational understanding of how to build and create new words. Activities to support students in learning to manipulate word parts would be most helpful in supporting student understanding of spelling.

Teachers can further students’ understanding by helping students decode more complex words by, for example, identifying words parts and vowels and repeating words in context. Encourage students to adjust vowel sounds, as necessary, when reading words until they pronounce a recognizable word.

Word Part Worksheet

Using previously taught suffixes, prefixes, and roots, provide students with a worksheet that students would be able to add prefixes and suffixes to create words.

small	er		happ	y
small	est	un	happ	y

4. Have students read decodable words in isolation and in text.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Encourage students to identify spelling patterns in word lists and texts.

Word lists, decodable sentences, and short decodable texts can provide opportunities for students to practice recently learned spelling patterns. Teachers should encourage students to identify spelling patterns in word lists and texts.

Example Word List

how cow below slowly show crow know row

Connected Text Passage

The crow flew across the sky and saw below a cow in a field. The crow swooped down to look closer and landed behind a row of corn. The cow did not know the crow had landed close by. The crow moved closer and closer to see the cow.

The cow slowly turned toward the row of corn and said, “Who is watching me from behind the row of corn? Show yourself!” The crow came out from behind the corn. “How did you get here?” asked the cow to the crow. “Aren’t you supposed to live up in the sky?” The crow replied, “I saw you from the sky and wanted to take a closer look.”

5. Teach irregular and regular high-frequency words so that students can recognize them efficiently.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Use numerous approaches to help students learn both irregular and regular high-frequency words, such as flashcards or word walls.

Teaching students high-frequency word recognition can help speed up the reading process so students can focus on the meaning of the text. For example, high-frequency words can include *the, there, was, in, and, and with*. However, some high-frequency words can be irregular, with exceptions to the typical sound-spelling patterns. These irregular words are hard for students to decode and should be taught holistically. When teaching high-frequency words, teachers can use numerous approaches to help students learn both irregular and regular high-frequency words, like using flashcards, having students practice writing words, or creating a high-frequency word wall for students in the classroom.

6. Introduce non-decodable words that are essential to the meaning of the text as whole words.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Review books to determine the presence of non-decodable words.
- Teach these words prior to introducing the book.
- Limit the number of non-decodable words that are introduced at any one time.

Non-decodable words have irregular sound-spelling patterns (e.g., pigeon and villain). Books may include complex, non-decodable words that are essential to understanding the story. Prior to introducing a new book, review it, and determine if it includes any non-decodable words.

If it does, determine which non-decodable words may be essential to students' understanding, and teach them the non-decodable words prior to introducing the new book.

For example, a book about dinosaurs may include words such as *tyrannosaurus rex* or *brachiosaurus*. Learning these words in advance will help students better understand the context of the book. Teachers should limit the number of non-decodable words that are introduced at one time to reduce demands on students' memory.

Potential Roadblocks



Students sometimes use invented spellings for words.

Suggested Approach. When students are working independently, encourage them to try spelling words on their own. Doing so provides an opportunity for them to practice what they have learned about letter-sound relations. Encourage students to use their knowledge of sound-spelling patterns as they write.

Students should review their work to identify words that do not look right and make additional attempts at spelling those words. If students are consistently misspelling high-frequency words, particularly words with irregular spellings, post the words on the wall or add them to a student's writing journal to support student learning.



Students may struggle with correct pronunciation for a word, even when they are able to identify letter-sounds.

Suggested Approach. Encourage students to blend sounds smoothly, connecting all the sounds without stopping. Sometimes students encounter difficulty with this when they emphasize the schwa sound (e.g., they pronounce *b* as *buh*). This interferes with the smooth blending of sounds. Work with students to minimize the schwa sound. When teaching students to blend and sound out, encourage students to be flexible with their vowel pronunciation; this may help students improve their ability to pronounce words they can recognize.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Strong	   

RECOMMENDATION 4

Ensure that each student reads connected text every day to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

Reading connected text—that is, multiple sentences related to each other—requires greater skill than reading isolated words. To read and understand connected text, students must quickly recognize words, integrate what they are reading with their background knowledge, and monitor their comprehension. Daily practice with reading connected text helps students increase their accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

Strategies

1. As students read orally, model strategies, scaffold, and provide feedback to support accurate and efficient word identification.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Have students partner with a more fluent reader to provide feedback, support, and modeling.
- Remind students to apply decoding skills.
- Scaffold and provide prompts to support students in developing reading skills.

Plan activities for students to work with a more proficient reader, such as a teacher, parent, or another student. These partners provide feedback and support and model effective word-reading strategies. Activities can be done one-on-one or in small groups, using instructional-level text, which includes sound-spelling patterns that students have recently learned. Help students when they encounter difficult words by reminding them to apply their decoding and word recognition skills (e.g., looking for parts of words they know, such as familiar sound-spelling patterns or common suffixes or prefixes, sounding out words, checking their pronunciation). Providing riddles (e.g., asking “Where do you sleep?” for a student who is struggling with reading the word bed) or encouraging students to guess words or sound-spelling patterns is not advised; rather, scaffolding students and providing prompts will better support students in building reading skills.

2. Teach students to self-monitor their understanding of the text and to self-correct word-reading errors.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Demonstrate how letters appear in multiple words.
- Use word cards to demonstrate spelling patterns.
- Use spelling patterns to practice spelling words.

Competent readers are able to recognize when text does not make sense, if a word is misread, or if a mistake has been made. To build this skill, model self-monitoring and self-correction strategies and help students use them. The “Fix It” game can be used to teach these strategies. When students misread words, prompt them to consider if what they read makes sense rather than just providing the correct word.

The “Fix It” Game

Steps:

The teacher introduces the task by explaining that sometimes we make mistakes when we read, and the mistakes make the sentences sound silly because the words don’t make sense.

When a sentence or passage makes sense, it sounds right; it doesn’t sound silly or mixed-up.

The teacher reads a list of sentences; some contain a word that does not make sense, while other sentences do make sense.

Students must say whether or not each sentence makes sense or sounds right. If it doesn’t, students must explain why not.

If a sentence does not make sense, students must “fix it.”

Example:

Teacher: “The bus stepped at the corner.” Does that make sense?

Student(s): No.

Teacher: Why not?

Student(s): A bus can’t step.

Teacher: Fix it!

Student(s): “The bus stopped at the corner.”

Teacher: Right! That makes sense! Remember that when you read, it has to make sense.

If it doesn’t, you have to go back and fix it!

3. Provide opportunities for oral reading practice with feedback to develop fluent and accurate reading with expression.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Model fluent reading at a natural pace.
- Teach students how to read punctuation marks.
- Provide feedback on reading with expression.
- Use activities that ask students to use or talk about academic vocabulary.
- Practice challenging new words prior to reading text.
- Ask comprehension questions after reading text.

Modeling reading fluency helps students understand how to read text. Be sure to model reading with expression at a natural pace and teach students about punctuation marks and how to read them to support reading fluency. Provide feedback to students, as they practice reading, on how to read with expression. To get started, consider using familiar texts to model reading with expression fluently. Begin reading at a slower pace for students and then encourage students to read along. Help students succeed during practice by practicing challenging new words with them before they read the text and asking them comprehension questions after they have read the text.

Reading fluency activities:

- **Individual oral reading:** This activity can happen with a teacher, parent, or another student who can provide feedback. Students can also record themselves reading so a teacher can provide feedback later.
- **Partner reading:** This activity should be between two students.
- **Choral reading:** This activity should be done in small groups, with a teacher ensuring that all students are participating.
- **Echo reading:** In this activity, a teacher reads a text aloud and then a student reads the same section aloud.
- **Alternated reading:** This activity should include at least two readers (beginner and more advanced) taking turns reading through a text.
- **Simultaneous reading:** This activity will have a teacher and student read a text aloud at the same time.
- **Individual oral reading with a computerized reading device:** This activity has students read along with computerized reading devices.
- **Repeated reading:** This activity encourages students to read the same text multiple times for mastery and builds word recognition.
- **Wide reading:** This activity encourages students to read many different texts to support a more diverse vocabulary and knowledge of the world.

Potential Roadblocks



It is a challenge to identify texts that are accessible for all students.

Suggested Approach. Monitor student progress with available assigned texts to determine students' reading ability. Then assign students appropriate texts based on their reading ability; this may mean students are using different texts than other students for a given activity. Use different levels of text for different purposes. For example, easier texts can be used for independent fluency practice, while more challenging texts can be used with one-on-one teacher support for practicing word decoding skills.



Beginning readers may rely on illustrations to identify words instead of practicing their word-identification strategies.

Suggested Approach. Encourage students to blend sounds smoothly, connecting all the sounds without stopping. Sometimes students encounter difficulty with this when they emphasize the schwa sound (e.g., they pronounce *b* as *buh*). This interferes with the smooth blending of sounds. Work with students to minimize the schwa sound. When teaching students to blend and sound out, encourage students to be flexible with their vowel pronunciation; this may help students improve their ability to pronounce words they can recognize. To avoid this challenge, provide beginning readers with decodable text that uses high-frequency words. When encouraging students to read more difficult text, model sounding out words, which will demonstrate a strategy that students can use in the future.



With limited time, it is difficult for teachers to provide each student with individualized feedback.

Suggested Approach. Teachers can consider establishing routines for small-group and independent reading activities. Once students have learned the routines, teachers can provide individualized instruction and feedback to each student during these times.

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