Department of Education
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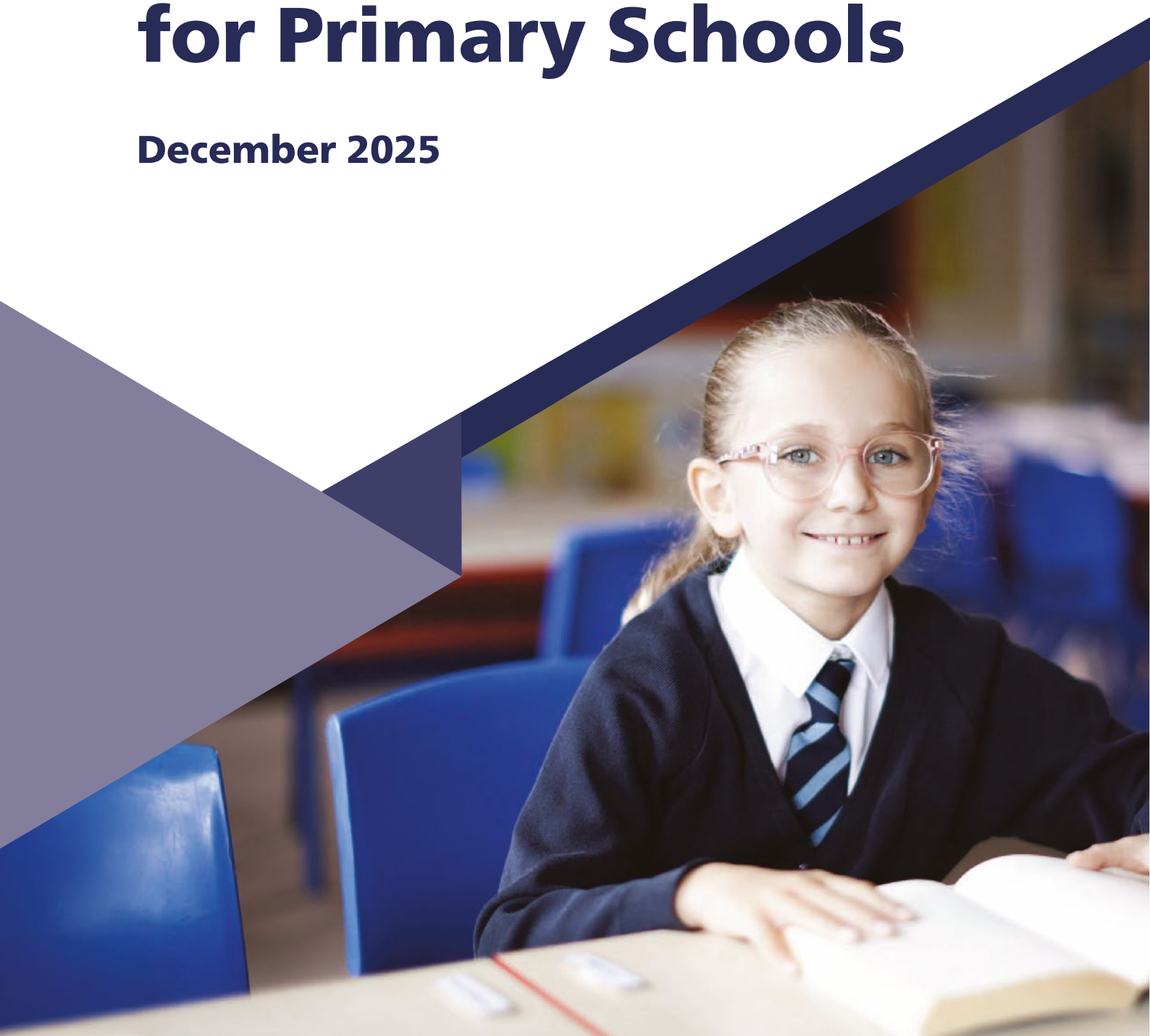
TransformED NI

Strong Foundations: **A Literacy Framework for Primary Schools**

December 2025



Contents

Executive Summary

This document provides a literacy framework for primary schools in Northern Ireland and is designed to strengthen teaching and learning in oracy, reading and writing. It sets out clear principles, practical strategies and evidence-based approaches to ensure all pupils develop strong literacy foundations by the end of primary education. It is designed as a tool for school leaders and teachers to inform curriculum planning and guide classroom practice.

Section 1: Introduction

This section explains the purpose of the framework and its context within a new literacy strategy for Northern Ireland. It highlights the importance of literacy for learning, life and employment. It introduces five core principles: coherence and consistency, inclusion, evidence-informed practice, literacy across the curriculum and self-evaluation for continuous improvement. It also outlines a reflective model - *Looking Inward, Outward, Forward* - to guide schools in reviewing and improving practice. This section also examines Northern Ireland's performance in international studies and identifies persistent attainment gaps linked to socio-economic status and gender.

Section 2: Oracy

This section defines oracy as the ability to communicate effectively through spoken language and explains its role in academic success, equity and well-being. It distinguishes between oracy as curriculum (explicit teaching of speaking skills) and oracy as pedagogy (using talk as a tool for learning). This section provides practical strategies for embedding oracy such as co-constructing ground rules for talk, teaching active listening, using sentence stems and embedding dialogic teaching. It includes progression guidance from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 2 and advice on supporting pupils with speech and language needs.

Section 3: Reading

This section emphasises that reading is a learned skill requiring structured, systematic instruction. It introduces conceptual models such as the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope. The section also compares Whole Language, Balanced Literacy and Structured Literacy approaches, advocating for explicit, cumulative teaching aligned with the Science of Reading. Practical strategies for phonics, decoding, orthographic mapping and comprehension are provided, alongside guidance on promoting reading for pleasure and addressing its decline.

Section 4: Writing

The section explains why writing is cognitively demanding and must be taught explicitly. It introduces the Simple View of Writing and Sedita's Writing Rope, outlining the key components of transcription (handwriting and spelling) and composition. It stresses the importance of fluent handwriting for freeing cognitive resources and provides guidance on systematic spelling instruction, including phonics, morphology and etymology. Practical strategies for teaching sentence construction, grammar, punctuation and the writing process - planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing - are also included, along with adaptations for pupils with specific learning difficulties.

SECTION 1

Introduction

Section Summary

- **Literacy is the foundation for learning,** personal development, employment and life opportunities.
- **This framework provides** principles, an overview of research and evidence, and practical strategies for classroom implementation and improvement.
- Many **schools are already working** in ways that reflect the principles and approaches set out in this guidance.
- The framework **builds on existing good practice** and is underpinned by robust international and local research.
- Schools should ensure pupils leave primary education with **strong foundations** in literacy and complete compulsory education competent in reading, writing and oracy.
- This guidance is underpinned by five **core principles** that shape effective, literacy practice: coherence and consistency, inclusion, evidence-informed practice, literacy across the curriculum, and self-evaluation and continuous improvement.
- A **new literacy strategy for Northern Ireland** is in development to improve consistency, equity and outcomes across all schools.
- **Northern Ireland performs strongly** in international reading assessments, particularly at primary level. **Nonetheless, persistent gaps remain,** especially those linked to socio-economic status and gender, with too many pupils not meeting the standard needed for academic success.
- **Improvements to national monitoring** are underway including the introduction of sample-based system-level assessments for pupils in Years 4, 7 and 10.
- **System-level data will provide** reliable annual insights without placing undue burden on schools or pupils.
- High quality **professional development** and **clearly defined standards** are essential to support teachers and improve pupil outcomes.
- Using **system-level insights** to inform classroom practice is an important element of driving improvement.

Background

The Department of Education is committed to ensuring that all pupils in Northern Ireland develop strong literacy skills as a foundation for learning, personal development and success in school, work and life.

Literacy is a core component of the current Northern Ireland Curriculum covering talking and listening, reading and writing. It is also embedded in the Cross-Curricular Skill of Communication. However, the current curriculum lacks clear statutory guidance on literacy development, leaving schools to interpret broad statutory requirements.

Following the withdrawal of the Department's previous literacy strategy, Count Read, Succeed, this new literacy framework is intended to support primary schools to review and enhance their practice. It builds on CCEA's Language and Literacy Progression Framework, which aims to illustrate how knowledge, skills and understanding are supported and developed at each key stage.[1] It will be complemented by the Curriculum Taskforce's work on a revised Northern Ireland curriculum.

This framework draws on research, international evidence and examples of best practice. It is a key action within the Department's TransformED NI strategy, which sets out a system-wide vision for educational excellence through evidence-informed teaching and learning.

The framework aims to promote greater consistency, set clear expectations and strengthen knowledge and understanding of literacy teaching across the education system. While some elements of the framework may be new, many schools and practitioners will already be working in ways that reflect its principles and approaches.

Its purpose is to support professional reflection and encourage more consistent, high-impact practice.

Over the coming months, the Department will work collaboratively with practitioners and academics to shape a new literacy strategy and implementation plan for Northern Ireland. It will include key actions around resource production, professional learning, literacy programmes and support for parents and carers. We will also aim to showcase case studies of effective practice. This literacy framework is the first step in our plans to strengthen literacy education and will evolve over time based on research and feedback. It will be accompanied by a series of short guides and podcasts.

[1] Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), Language and Literacy Progression Framework (Belfast: CCEA, 2015).

Purpose of this Framework

- A summary of literacy outcomes in Northern Ireland.
- Principles for effective literacy teaching.
- An overview of research and evidence across the areas of oracy, reading and writing.
- Practical strategies for classroom implementation and improvement.
- Support for self-evaluation and improvement planning.
- Advice on promoting a whole-school approach to literacy.

What is literacy?

Literacy is more than reading and writing, it is the set of skills that help learners understand, communicate and create in today's world. It includes traditional abilities such as decoding text and writing clearly, as well as modern skills such as using digital tools and information responsibly. **UNESCO (2025) defines literacy as:**

> ***A continuum of skills, extending beyond traditional reading, writing and counting to include digital, media and information literacy. It is the ability to identify, understand, evaluate, create, communicate and compute using both print and digital materials.[2]***

Literacy should be understood as a broad, integrated set of capacities that enable learners to thrive across educational, social and civic contexts. These capacities span a number of dimensions:

- **Oracy skills** that support spoken expression, reasoning, listening and participation in structured dialogue.
- **Decoding and transcription skills** that support fluent, accurate reading and secure written expression.
- **Language comprehension and vocabulary knowledge** that enable understanding of spoken and written texts across the curriculum.
- **Text-level capabilities** such as inference, summarising and structural awareness for critical reading.
- **Composition skills for planning,** drafting and refining written and multimodal texts with clarity, coherence and purpose.
- **Digital, media and information literacies** that enable learners to search, evaluate, create and communicate effectively and responsibly across print and digital platforms.

[2] Paraphrased from UNESCO, "Literacy: What You Need to Know," 2025. https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know

Why literacy matters

Literacy is a foundational skill that enables individuals to acquire knowledge, express ideas and participate in society. Literacy forms the essential foundation of all education. Proficiency in reading, writing and spoken language is vital for success in education. As pupils progress through school, they move from a focus on learning to read towards increasingly using reading to learn. Pupils who struggle with reading often face challenges across all subjects because reading is essential for accessing curriculum content.

Strong literacy skills expand life chances. They enable individuals to access public services, understand health and legal information, make informed choices and engage effectively in the workplace.

Children who read proficiently by age seven are significantly more likely to complete their education. They are also more likely to secure employment and earn higher incomes.[3] Good literacy reduces stress and social isolation, increases civic participation and even extends life expectancy.[4] At a societal level, stronger reading scores are consistently linked to better health, lower inequality and faster economic growth.[5]

Literacy continues to evolve in response to technological and social change. In the 21st century, pupils must be equipped to apply core capabilities across both print and digital formats, to interpret diverse text types and communicate responsibly online. Schools should also prepare learners for emerging modes of communication such as AI literacy and critical evaluation of digital content. These competencies are increasingly vital for civic participation, employment and lifelong learning.

It is, therefore, a central responsibility of schools, supported by parents, to ensure that pupils develop effective literacy skills. By the end of primary education, children should have a strong foundation in these skills and by the end of compulsory education, young people should leave school competent in oracy, reading and writing.

[3] Emily Mulcahy, Bart Bernardes, and Sam Baars, The Relationship Between Reading Age, Education and Life Outcomes (London: The Centre for Education and Youth, 2019).
[4] M. D. Bavishi, B. R. Slade & A. Levy. 'A chapter a day: Association of book reading with longevity'. Social Science & Medicine. 2016 Vol. 164: pp. 44-48.
[5] E. A. Hanushek & L. Woessmann. 'Do better schools lead to more growth? Cognitive skills, economic outcomes, and causation'. Journal of Economic Growth (2012) 17:267–321.

Self-evaluation of literacy practice

This guidance encourages schools to adopt a reflective approach to self-evaluation of literacy practice that looks inward, outward and forward:

- **Looking Inward:** analyse data on staff knowledge and perceptions of reading, writing and oracy, as well as pupils' current skills in these areas.
- **Looking Outward:** compare current practice with research and best practice.
- **Looking Forward:** use insights to plan for continuous improvement.

The framework below offers a practical structure for evaluating literacy practice. This reflective process should feed directly into school development planning, professional development priorities and resource allocation.

Dimension	Key Questions	Sources of Evidence	Key Steps
Looking Inward	What do staff know and believe about literacy? What are pupils' current skills?	Staff surveys, pupil assessment data, classroom observations.	Identify strengths and gaps.
Looking Outward	How does our practice compare with research and best practice?	Department of Education Literacy Framework, Research publications, ETI reports, peer benchmarking with other schools.	Summarise findings into actionable insights that inform improvement planning.
Looking Forward	What actions will improve literacy practice and outcomes? How do we adapt or refine teaching approaches?	School development plans, professional development records and plans.	Identify key actions, set targets and monitor progress.

This framework aims to support this self-evaluation process by summarising system level performance and offering guidance across the areas of oracy, reading and writing.

Core principles of literacy instruction

This framework is underpinned by five core principles that shape effective literacy practice:

i. **Coherence and consistency:** Literacy teaching should be a whole school priority, aligned across year groups, with consistent routines, clear language and planned progression.

ii. **Inclusion:** All pupils should have access to high-quality literacy teaching, regardless of background, starting point or home language. This means recognising cultural and linguistic diversity, supporting multilingual learners and using texts that reflect varied experiences.

iii. **Evidence-informed practice:** Teaching should be guided by robust research and proven methods. Approaches with limited evidence should be replaced with structured, explicit instruction.

iv. **Literacy across the curriculum:** Literacy should be embedded within all Areas of Learning across the curriculum recognising that literacy skills are both general and subject specific. It is important to develop disciplinary literacy, supporting pupils to read, write and communicate using the conventions and reasoning of each subject, such as scientific explanation, historical argument or mathematical precision.

v. **Self-evaluation and continuous improvement:** Schools should regularly reflect on and review current practice using the Looking Inward, Outward, Forward model to identify strengths and weaknesses, compare with best practice and plan next steps.

The aim of these principles is to promote system-wide consistency. We want to create a shared literacy framework that supports high standards and reduces variation across schools.

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Guidance

The EEF has produced four guidance reports[6] on the theme of language and literacy, which have supported the development of this framework and which practitioners may find useful.

The EEF guidance sets out key recommendations for the development of literacy which have been expanded and adapted for Northern Ireland and are set out in the *Guidelines to support a Coherent Approach to Literacy Development*, which accompanies this framework. **The guidelines are also summarised in the table below:**

Guideline	Key Elements
Develop pupils' speaking and listening skills and wider understanding of language.	Prioritise oral language; use high-quality interactions; explicitly teach vocabulary during shared reading and play.
Use engaging approaches to develop reading, teaching both decoding and comprehension skills.	Teach decoding and comprehension; make reading meaningful.
Effectively implement a systematic phonics programme.	Implement a structured phonics programme with fidelity; train staff; monitor progress and adapt support.
Develop reading comprehension and teach pupils to use strategies for developing and monitoring their reading.	Model reading strategies (predict, question, clarify, summarise); scaffold learning; gradually reduce support.
Teach pupils to use strategies for planning and monitoring their writing.	Teach pupils to plan, draft, and review writing; model and guide before independent work.
Promote fluent written transcription skills by encouraging extensive and purposeful practice and explicitly teaching spelling.	Regular handwriting and spelling practice; teach spelling patterns and handwriting explicitly.
Use high-quality information about pupils' current capabilities to select the best next steps for teaching.	Gather accurate information on skills; use data to plan next steps and tailor teaching.
Use high-quality structured interventions to help pupils who are struggling.	Select evidence-based interventions delivered by trained staff; monitor impact regularly.

[6] *Education Endowment Foundation, Guidance Reports on Language and Literacy (London: EEF, 2017–2022).*

Literacy outcomes in Northern Ireland

Understanding system-level literacy outcomes is essential for shaping effective policy and practice. This section explores pupils' performance using national and international data; outlines recent developments in assessment, highlights key trends and challenges and sets out strategic priorities for improving literacy outcomes across the education system.

Global data

Global trends in literacy present challenges for all education systems and underscore the importance of sustained, evidence-informed literacy development. The OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (2023) found that adult literacy and numeracy skills have declined or stagnated in most OECD countries over the past decade.

The decline has been most pronounced among adults with lower levels of education, with one in five now considered low performers in literacy, numeracy and problem solving. These findings reinforce the need for early intervention, inclusive instruction and continuous literacy development throughout schooling.

National data

Due to Action Short of Strike and the suspension of Key Stage assessments during COVID-19, national data on literacy in Northern Ireland has been limited.

The resumption of monitoring provides an opportunity to strengthen our understanding of pupil outcomes. In 2024–25, end-of-Key Stage assessments resumed, based on teacher judgement against the Levels of Progression in Communication and Using Mathematics. Whilst this approach has limitations, particularly the absence of moderation, it still provides valuable insights. Notably, teacher assessments indicated that almost three in ten pupils were not at the expected level in Communication by the end of primary school.

Key Stage outcomes 2024-25[7]

Key Stage 1 (Year 4)	• 82.1% achieved Level 2 or above in Communication. • 83.8% achieved Level 2 or above in Using Mathematics.
Key Stage 2 (Year 7)	• 72% achieved Level 4 or above in Communication. • 72% achieved Level 4 or above in Using Mathematics.
Key Stage 3 (Year 10)	• 73.9% achieved Level 5 or above in Communication. • 75.4% achieved Level 5 or above in Using Mathematics.

[7] *For more information see CCEA. Interim end of key stage statutory assessment outcomes 2024/25. Belfast: CCEA, 2025. Interim End of Key Stage Statutory Assessment Outcomes 202425.pdf*

These results suggest that while most pupils are meeting expected standards, a significant minority are not. The drop in attainment between Key Stage 1 and 2 is a key area for focus, highlighting the need for sustained intervention, development and targeted support throughout primary school.

Notably, Communication outcomes for girls were consistently higher than for boys at all Key Stages. At Key Stage 2, the gap was 5.6 percentage points, with 74.9% of girls and 69.3% of boys assessed to be at or above Level 4. At Key Stage 3, the gap widened to 10.7 percentage points, with 79.3% of girls and 68.6% of boys assessed to be at or above Level 5.

Communication outcomes for pupils entitled to Free School Meals were lower than for non-Free School Meals pupils at all Key Stages and there is a significant and persistent gap in attainment. At Key Stage 2, the gap was 25.7 percentage points, with 52.9% of pupils entitled to Free School Meals and 78.6% of non-Free School Meals pupils assessed to be at or above Level 4. At Key Stage 3, the gap was largest at 26 percentage points, with 54.4% of Free School Meals pupils and 80.4% of non-Free School Meal pupils assessed to be at or above Level 5.

System-level sample assessments

From 2025-26, the Department has introduced new system-level sample assessments in literacy and numeracy, administered by CCEA. These assessments aim to provide robust, reliable annual data on pupils' literacy and numeracy outcomes at the end of each Key Stage.

System-level sample assessments are large-scale evaluations of pupil performance conducted at the national level. They measure the effectiveness of education systems without publicly evaluating individual pupils or schools. Data is gathered from a representative sample of pupils to draw conclusions about overall performance and policy impact. This approach is widely used across high-performing education systems such as Canada, USA, Japan and Singapore.

In Northern Ireland, these assessments will be conducted among a representative sample of pupils in their final year of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 ensuring reliable data on attainment. Pupils will sit the first assessments in early March 2026. Results will not be published at pupil or school level and will not be used for performance measurement. This approach is designed to promote system-level improvement without placing pressure on individual schools or pupils.

This new approach aims to provide a clear, evidence-based understanding of how well pupils are developing essential skills in reading, writing and mathematics. It will support robust measurement of standards over time and help establish a more authoritative picture of overall educational performance. The insights gained will inform policies and interventions that promote high-quality teaching and learning for all children in Northern Ireland. In particular, the data will help identify gaps in attainment and support equity-focused strategies. Insights from these assessments will inform curriculum refinement, professional development priorities and targeted interventions ensuring that system-level data delivers classroom impact.

International surveys

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

We have strong evidence from international studies showing that pupils from Northern Ireland perform well in reading. In PIRLS 2021, Northern Ireland significantly outperformed 52 of the 56 participating countries. Only Singapore and the Republic of Ireland achieved higher results.[8] Almost a quarter (23%) of pupils in Northern Ireland reached the Advanced International Benchmark in reading, the third highest internationally.[9] This figure has risen steadily over the past decade, providing a strong foundation for further improvement.

International surveys consistently show a strong link between home socio-economic background and pupil attainment. In Northern Ireland, as in many countries, pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to achieve more highly than those from middle and lower categories. Pupils entitled to Free School Meals continue to score significantly below their peers, underscoring the persistent impact of socio-economic disparities on educational outcomes.

Gender differences are also notable. In PIRLS 2021, girls in Northern Ireland significantly outperformed boys, with one of the largest gender gaps among participating countries. While boys' performance has remained relatively stable, a steady rise in girls' attainment over the past decade has widened the gap. These findings highlight the importance of inclusive, responsive teaching approaches that support all learners and address differential patterns of engagement and achievement.

PIRLS assessments typically take place at the end of Year 6 or exceptionally in 2021 at the beginning of Year 7. In Northern Ireland, this coincides with widespread private tuition and intensive transfer test preparation. By the time pupils in Northern Ireland undertake these assessments, many will have received six months or more of additional literacy tuition, both within and beyond school hours. It would be surprising if frequent one-to-one or small group tuition by qualified teachers, an established and effective educational intervention, did not contribute positively to overall performance.

Jennifer Buckingham highlights the impact of intensive literacy preparation prior to transfer tests, noting that *"Teachers confirmed that transfer tests are preceded by a period of at least a year of focused preparation in literacy and numeracy in schools and often start as early as Year 5. They also noted that many students receive private tutoring as well".*[10]

These contextual factors should be considered when interpreting PIRLS outcomes. While the results highlight strong performance, they may also in part, reflect the effects of intensive test preparation.

[8] R. Classick, K. Aston, M. J. Guevara Duque, L. Flemons, H. Faulkner-Ellis, J. Liht, S. Boyd, J. Sizmur & L. Twist. PIRLS 2021 in Northern Ireland: Reading Attainment. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2023. PIRLS 2021 in Northern Ireland Full Report | Department of Education.

[9] The Advanced International Benchmark represents a high level of reading proficiency, indicating that pupils can integrate information across texts and make complex inferences.

[10] Jennifer Buckingham, An Investigation of Literacy Instruction and Policy in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Sydney: Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2024).

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

Northern Ireland also continues to perform strongly in reading in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which assesses 15-year-olds across OECD countries. In PISA 2022, Northern Ireland's reading score was above the OECD average, although lower than in 2018, a trend seen across most countries following the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the 78 participating education systems, Northern Ireland outperformed 56, performed similarly to 10 and was outperformed by 12. However, Northern Ireland's scores were lower than those of England and the Republic of Ireland across all assessed domains, including reading. This comparative insight highlights opportunities to learn from other jurisdictions and further strengthen outcomes.

As in PIRLS, gender differences remain a consistent feature of PISA results. Girls have outperformed boys in every cycle since 2012. In 2022, this gap remained stable compared to previous years and mirrored patterns observed across OECD countries.Socio-economic background continues to influence reading attainment. The most advantaged pupils in Northern Ireland (Quartile 1) scored significantly above the OECD average for that group, while pupils in the other three quartiles performed broadly in line with OECD averages. The gap between the highest and lowest socio-economic quartiles in Northern Ireland was 77 points, comparable to the OECD average and still substantial.[11] This again highlights the ongoing need to address educational inequality and ensure that all pupils can access high-quality literacy instruction.

Implementation priorities

It is important that teachers are aware of national trends, strengths and weaknesses.

International evidence confirms Northern Ireland's comparative strength in reading, especially at primary level. However, persistent challenges remain, including a strong link between socio economic background and pupil outcomes, as well as a notable gender gap in reading performance. These findings are mirrored in the 2024-25 Key Stage outcomes, which underline the need for a renewed focus across the education system to address equity issues. Addressing these challenges requires a focus on high-quality teaching that builds foundational skills and sustains engagement across diverse learner profiles.

To address these challenges, the Department will prioritise:

- Developing a new literacy strategy in NI grounded in research and inclusive pedagogy.
- Establishing a coherent and consistent approach to literacy teaching across all classrooms, informed by evidence.
- Setting high, common attainment standards with clearly defined learning outcomes at each Key Stage.
- Implementing robust assessment tools to support teachers in monitoring progress and identifying areas for improvement.
- Supporting parental engagement through clear expectations and progress data.

A sustained programme of professional learning will be central to the new literacy strategy. It will equip teachers with up-to-date knowledge, practical tools and evidence-based approaches to meet the diverse needs of pupils. This ongoing support will help ensure the strategy is implemented with confidence, consistency and impact across all classrooms.

[11] J. Ingram, J. Stiff, S. Cadwallader, G. Lee & H. Kayton. PISA 2022: National Report for Northern Ireland. Belfast: Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA), 2023. NI Pupils perform well in mathematics, reading and science in International Survey | The Northern Ireland Executive

SECTION 2

Oracy

Section Summary

- **Oracy encompasses** both verbal and non-verbal communication, **while oral language** refers to the mechanics of speech and expression. Both are essential in literacy development
- **Oracy is a foundational element of all literacy and learning,** enhancing vocabulary, reasoning and critical thinking across the curriculum.
- **Speaking and listening skills are most effective when explicitly taught** and embedded across subjects and year groups, with attention to **both learning to speak and speaking to learn.**
- Research shows that structured oracy instruction **positively influences academic outcomes,** particularly in English and mathematics.
- Strengthening oracy can help **close attainment gaps** for disadvantaged pupils and those learning English as an Additional Language (EAL).
- Strong oracy skills **support pupils' social and emotional well-being,** fostering confidence, empathy and belonging.
- Oracy equips pupils with communication skills **essential for employment and civic life** beyond school.
- **A whole-school approach,** led by school leadership and supported by consistent classroom practice, is key to sustainable impact and ensuring all pupils can develop their speaking and listening skills in a structured, inclusive and purposeful way.
- **Practical frameworks** such as the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool and dialogic teaching strategies provide guidance for embedding oracy across the curriculum.
- **All pupils benefit** from structured oracy instruction, with further specialist support needed for those with persistent speech and language difficulties.

An Introduction to Oracy

Defining oracy and oral language

This framework uses the terms oracy and oral language.

i. **Oracy** encompasses the full range of spoken communication skills, including verbal and non-verbal expression, active listening, critical thinking, and social and emotional awareness.

ii. **Oral language** refers to the ability to express thoughts and ideas verbally, drawing on vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation and fluency. Oral language plays a foundational role in literacy development, underpinning pupils' ability to read, write and communicate effectively.

While distinct, oracy and oral language are deeply interconnected. Effective spoken communication depends on a secure foundation in oral language skills.

The importance and impact of oracy and oral language

Oracy and oral language are critical to academic success, equity, well-being and life readiness.

Academic success

Oral language is the bedrock upon which literacy skills are built. Evidence indicates that success in literacy relies on the secure development of language and that oral language skills are among the best predictors of educational success.

Before children can learn to read and write, they need to develop the ability to listen, understand and express ideas verbally. A secure foundation in oral language underpins both reading and writing development. Without a solid oral foundation, decoding and reading comprehension become significantly harder, limiting overall literacy progress.[12]

Oracy also strengthens academic achievement by building vocabulary, reasoning and critical thinking skills. The EEF, in a review of 188 research studies, found that strategies to develop oral language have a high impact on primary pupils' outcomes, equating to around six months of additional progress.

These benefits extend beyond primary education and are likely to play a key role in success at GCSE, particularly in subjects such as Mathematics, English Language and English Literature.[13]

[12] *Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Oral Language Interventions: Evidence Review (London: EEF, 2017)*
[13] *Voice 21, The Impact of Oracy on Academic Outcomes (London: Voice 21, 2022).*

Amplifies equity

Hart and Risley highlighted wide disparities in early language exposure between children from different socio-economic backgrounds, suggesting a "30-million-word gap" by age three. While later research has questioned the exact figure, evidence consistently underscores the importance of early language enrichment and deliberate oral instruction.[14]

Research by the Bell Foundation also demonstrates that an oracy-focused education can enhance language development in pupils who speak English as an Additional Language.[15]

Develops social and emotional well-being

Oracy can foster well-being and self-confidence when children see that their voices are genuinely valued. This is particularly important since Speech and Language UK highlights strong links between low oracy and social and emotional distress which often leads to poor mental health.[16]

Law, Charlton and Asmussen claim that a child's level of language acquisition is an indicator of their social and emotional well-being which can have consequences for later life.[17]

Prepares pupils for life beyond school

Employers consistently rank communication among the most critical skills for prospective employees. Despite a 2021 LinkedIn report listing it among the most sought-after soft skills, many graduates lack confidence in speaking.[18]

Research shows that low vocabulary levels in early childhood can contribute to lower qualifications and limited employment opportunities later in life.[19] In classrooms, structured or 'accountable talk' such as debates or group discussions, help children learn to negotiate, persuade and listen actively, mirroring the collaborative skills valued in the workplace.

Clarifying curriculum and pedagogy

In the classroom, oral language serves two distinct but entirely complementary purposes: **learning to speak** and **speaking to learn**. Teachers will wish to explicitly consider both purposes.

Learning to speak focuses on developing pupils' ability to communicate effectively. This includes building vocabulary, mastering pronunciation and using correct grammar and sentence structures. It is the foundation of early language development and is essential for helping children express themselves clearly and confidently.

Speaking to learn emphasises the role of talk as a tool for developing thinking and understanding across the curriculum. When children engage in purposeful discussion,

[14] *Betty Hart and Todd Risley, Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, 1995).*
[15] *The Bell Foundation, Oracy and EAL Learners (Cambridge: The Bell Foundation, 2024).*
[16] *Speech and Language UK, Oracy and Mental Health Report (London: SLUK, 2025).*
[17] *James Law, Tony Charlton, and Helen Asmussen, Language as a Predictor of Social and Emotional Well Being (London: Early Intervention Foundation, 2017).*
[18] *LinkedIn, Global Skills Report (Sunnyvale: LinkedIn, 2021).*
[19] *Leon Feinstein and Kathryn Duckworth, Development in the Early Years and Adult Outcomes (London: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, 2006).*

explaining ideas, asking questions and reasoning aloud, they deepen their comprehension and make connections between concepts. By creating opportunities for exploratory talk, teachers enable pupils to use language not just as a means of communication, but to process and extend their learning.

Related to these concepts, it may be useful to think about:

- **Oracy as Curriculum** - refers to the deliberate teaching of spoken language skills across subjects and year groups.
- **Oracy as Pedagogy** - refers to the use of talk as a tool for learning through dialogue, questioning and exploratory talk.

While these aspects are closely linked and often overlap in practice, distinguishing and considering both in planning helps ensure oracy is both taught explicitly and used effectively to deepen learning.

Developing talk

A language-rich environment is one in which adults talk with children throughout the day. The more children take part in conversations and discussion, the more they will understand once they can read, and the more vocabulary and ideas they will have to draw on when they can write.

The Better Communication Research Programme was a major UK government initative designed to strengthen the evidence base and improve outcomes for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs. A review of the evidence from the programme led to the identification of key elements and processes involved in classroom environments which enhance language development.[20]

These features are presented in the *Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool*.[21] The observation tool is designed to profile the oral language environment of the classroom and can be used in an observation of a classroom or a learning space by someone other than the adult working with the children.

The Observation Tool is divided into three dimensions which provide a useful framework for schools in considering the development of language in the classroom:

- **Language learning environment:** Items related to the physical environment and learning context that provide important infrastructure for language learning, for example, resources, space and noise at transition times.
- **Language learning opportunities:** Items related to the explicit structured opportunities that are present in the setting to support children's language development, for example, pre-teaching key vocabulary, interactive book reading, language intervention groups or talk partners.
- **Language learning interactions:** Items related to the ways in which adults in the setting talk with children, for example, adult responsiveness and modelling of language.

[20] *Julie Dockrell et al., Better Communication Research Programme: Improving Outcomes for Children and Young People with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (London: Department for Education, 2012).*
[21] *Speech & Language UK. Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool (CSCOT). London: Speech & Language UK, (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool (CSCOT) - Speech and Language UK: Changing young lives*

High-quality dialogue

High-quality dialogue is central to effective learning. Dialogic teaching uses purposeful, structured dialogue between teacher and pupils, and among pupils themselves, to deepen understanding, encourage reasoning and build knowledge collaboratively.[22]

Conversations provide the ideal context for developing children's language and thinking, and both the quantity and quality of these interactions in a language-rich environment is crucial. Critical to this are children's back-and-forth interactions with adults, which form the foundations for language growth and cognitive development.

These back-and-forth interactions involve the adult in:

- thinking out loud
- modelling new language for children
- paying close attention to what the children say
- rephrasing and extending what the children say
- validating attempts at using new vocabulary and grammar by rephrasing what children say if necessary
- asking closed and open questions
- answering the children's questions
- explaining why things happen
- providing models of accurate grammar
- extending children's vocabulary and explaining new words
- connecting one idea or action to another
- helping children to articulate ideas in well-formed sentences.

The EEF diagram on page 24 summarises the techniques that school staff can adopt to implicitly reinforce or enhance children's language and communication development during high-quality adult-child interactions.[23]

[22] *Robin Alexander, Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk (York: Dialogos, 2017).*
[23] *Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Improving Literacy: Guidance Report (London: EEF).*

Listening

Children need to be taught explicitly when and how to listen, what good listening looks like and should receive regular praise for demonstrating these skills. Teachers should develop listening skills over time, deliberately building up the time that the children listen with attention and concentration. It is essential to model active listening, including taking turns, responding thoughtfully to others' ideas and suggestions, and showing respect in discussions. These behaviours should be taught explicitly and reinforced consistently. If pupils struggle to listen and retain what they have heard, teachers should assess why this is and build in appropriate interventions if necessary

Recognising and supporting speech and language difficulties

All pupils benefit from structured oracy instruction, but some may face persistent speech or language challenges requiring specialist support. Teachers should correct speech errors sensitively, modelling language accurately without drawing undue attention. Where concerns persist, teachers should follow local referral protocols and involve the SENCO. Conditions such as speech sound disorders or Developmental Language Disorder may not be immediately obvious but can significantly impact learning. Collaboration with SENCOs and speech and language therapists helps ensure appropriate assessment and intervention.

Embedding Oracy in the Curriculum

Schools are encouraged to review their curriculum to ensure an oracy-rich approach that bridges school, home and community language. It is recognised that implementing oracy-rich approaches can be challenging. There are several barriers which teachers have identified to implementing of such an approach, including limited curriculum time (which can restrict opportunities for oracy instruction); pupil anxiety about speaking (which can deter participation); large class sizes, diverse pupil needs and behaviour challenges.[24]

To address these, schools should establish clear expectations for classroom talk. Ideally, these 'ground rules' should be co-constructed with pupils and regularly reviewed. Low-stakes activities (e.g. exploratory talk) can help build confidence among more anxious pupils. Oracy progression should also be mapped across phases. **For example:**

- **Foundation Stage:** turn-taking, expressive vocabulary, storytelling.
- **Key Stage 1:** sentence stems, exploratory talk, paired discussion.
- **Key Stage 2:** structured debate, oral presentations, critical questioning.

Key principles for embedding oracy

A coherent, whole-school approach is essential for building an oracy-rich curriculum. The principles below offer practical guidance for school leaders and teachers, helping to overcome common barriers and ensure oracy is explicitly taught, valued and sustained across all phases and all Areas of Learning.

For leaders

- The development of oracy skills should not be seen as a 'stand-alone' activity, or otherwise 'left to chance'. It is imperative that schools value the explicit teaching of oracy across the formal curriculum and beyond.
- The development of oracy skills is most effective when it is integrated into a whole-school approach, endorsed and prioritised by school leadership teams.
- Consider appointing a senior leader with responsibility to develop and champion oracy across the curriculum.
- Recognise the role of oracy as both curriculum and pedagogy.

[24] *W. Millard & L. Menzies. Oracy: The state of speaking out in our schools. United Kingdom: Voice 21, (2016).*

- Work with teachers and pupils to develop a common language around the teaching of oracy that can be used across phases and areas of learning.
- Use the three dimensions of the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool as a framework for considering the development of language in the classroom.
- Develop whole-school oracy scaffolds[25] that can be used across the curriculum, thus reducing workload for classroom teachers.
- Integrate oracy across all Areas of Learning within the curriculum, adapting strategies to suit each discipline. Understand the importance of and integrate the use of subject-specific technical language across literacy, science, maths, the arts and humanities.
- Consider adopting a 'tight but loose' approach to implementing an oracy-rich curriculum. Whilst establishing clear whole-school expectations and practices is important, consider allowing flexibility depending on year group or phase to encourage teachers to take ownership over how they will develop speaking and listening skills in their context.

For teachers

- Align classroom talk routines with whole-school expectations and behaviour policies.
- Model effective speaking and listening, scaffold pupil responses and give timely feedback.
- Use a variety of talk-based activities in lessons that address different purposes and audiences. Informal, exploratory discussion can be as valuable for learning as structured tasks like debates and presentations.
- Teach active listening as part of daily practice.
- Introduce and use technical terms with precision to support disciplinary literacy.
- Share and reflect on practice through peer observation.
- Create opportunities for rich classroom talk by:
    - cultivating a safe, inclusive environment.
    - asking pupils to respond to questions in full, grammatically correct sentences.
    - asking open questions that invite reasoning.
    - using follow-up questions to deepen thinking.
    - encouraging pupils to ask and explore their own questions.

[25] *A whole school oracy scaffold is a structured, school-wide approach to developing pupils' speaking and listening skills across all year groups and subjects. It provides a shared framework and common language for teaching oracy, ensuring consistency and progression from early years through to secondary school. It typically outlines key oracy skills, a progression framework with clear expectations for each year group, talk structures and sentence stems, classroom strategies, assessment tools and cross-curricular integration (Millard, Elaine, and Lianne Menzies. Oracy: The State of Speaking in Our Schools. London: Voice 21, 2016.)*

Practical strategies for embedding oracy

Integrating oracy requires intentional planning, teacher support, and a culture that values talk as a learning tool and embeds oracy in daily routines.

The previous section highlighted the three dimensions of considering the development of language in the classroom and the techniques that should be adopted by staff to enhance children's language development during high-quality adult-child interactions.

Further practical strategies for embedding oracy across the curriculum are set out below. Schools will note that CCEA has provided advice on creating an appropriate environment, as well as strategies and approaches for developing oral language skills in the Foundation Stage. [26]

Ground rules for talking and listening

- Establish, and where appropriate, co-construct a set of 'ground rules' to create a safe and supportive environment, where everyone feels heard, respected and able to contribute.

The importance of listening

- Use a signal to alert children to listen.
- Show children what good listening looks like through the teacher's own behaviour: "Wait a minute, I need to listen carefully.", or "Let's be quiet so I can concentrate on what you're saying."
- Reinforce and praise good listening, with examples: "I could tell you were going to say something interesting." or "I could see you were listening carefully and concentrating."

Vocabulary development

- Explicitly teach, model and apply rich, varied vocabulary across all subjects.
- Encourage pupils to use subject-specific language and to explore new words through structured talk activities involving morphological and etymological strategies.

Dialogic teaching

- Encourage a dialogic approach where pupils are required to think critically, articulate their thoughts and build on the ideas of others.
- It is helpful to provide accountable talk protocols or other scaffolds such as sentence stems like "I think… because…", "I agree with… but…" or "Another idea might be...." to model structured talk, especially for younger or less confident speakers.
- The Burkins and Yates dialogic protocol - Engage, Repeat, Expand - is a simple strategy to support children's oral language development.[27] Teachers first engage the child in conversation, then repeat their response to model accurate language and finally expand on it by adding vocabulary or complexity.

[26] *CCEA. Language & literacy in the foundation stage: Talking & listening. Belfast: CCEA, (2007). (PDF) Foundation Stage: Language and Literacy: Talking and Listening*
[27] *J. Burkins & K. Yates, Shifting the balance: 6 ways to bring the science of reading into the balanced literacy classroom. New York: Routledge (2021).*

Exploratory talk

- Structure group work and collaborative learning activities that promote exploratory talk, where pupils engage in constructive dialogue, ask questions and offer explanations.
- Assign roles in group work - speaker, listener, note-taker - rotating weekly.

Oral presentations

- Depending on the age of the pupils, incorporate regular opportunities for pupils to present their ideas formally, whether through speeches, debates or group presentations. This helps to build confidence and fluency in public speaking.
- Consider the use of speaking frames to help pupils organise their spoken language.[28]
- Recording or filming pupils for self-reflection can be helpful.

Paired work

- Using supports, pair pupils with a partner to discuss their ideas and articulate their thoughts.
- Pupils can learn from each other's language use, sentence structures and vocabulary, thus underscoring the centrality of explicit and intentional oracy teaching.
- Pairing children with their partners allows for negotiation, oral rehearsal and joint presentation, increasing confidence when delivering in front of others.
- Varied grouping strategies help pupils build confidence and adapt to different communication styles. Examples are provided in the table below.

Strategy	Description	Example
Talk partners	Rotate partners regularly to expose pupils to different speaking styles.	Weekly partner swaps during literacy lessons.
Think-pair-share	Pupils think individually, discuss with a partner, then share with the class.	Used in science to explain a hypothesis.
Role play/ drama	Pairs act out scenarios to practise expressive language.	Doctor and patient on a health topic.
Debate pairs	Pupils take opposing views and argue their case.	"Is graffiti a criminal offence?"
Storytelling pairs	One child begins/tells a story then the other retells/ embellishes it.	Practise sequencing and descriptive language to precede story-writing.

[28] *Sue Palmer, Speaking Frames: How to Develop Talk for Writing Across the Curriculum (London: David Fulton Publishers, 2005).*

Limitations of the "hands up" approach and inclusive alternatives

Traditional "hands up" methods can unintentionally limit pupil voice and restrict oracy development. These approaches often favour confident or high-achieving pupils, while quieter, anxious or less fluent speakers may disengage. To foster inclusive, talk-rich classrooms, teachers should consider alternative strategies that promote equitable participation and purposeful dialogue.

Limitations	The Problem	Alternative
Limits participation	Same pupils answer repeatedly; quieter or anxious pupils disengage.	Incorporate total participation techniques such as 'snowballing' where small groups of pupils (e.g., 2-3) discuss an answer, then merge to create larger groups (e.g., 4-6) with the aim of reaching a consensus or developing arguments.
Reinforces inequality	High achievers dominate; others feel discouraged.	Use think-pair-share or talk partners so every pupil processes and shares ideas before whole-class discussion. Group composition can be changed regularly based on gender, ability, friendships etc.
Discourages risk-taking	Fear of mistakes reduces curiosity.	Encourage a 'have a go' culture using mini whiteboards, quick writes, or true/false statements that pupils are asked to read aloud to the teacher or partner/peers.
Misses opportunities for oracy development	Pupils do not practise reasoning or debate.	Use Socratic seminars or Philosophy for Children.[29]

These alternatives shift classroom culture to value every pupil's voice. Teachers should model and scaffold these approaches, gradually building pupil confidence and fluency. Over time, inclusive talk routines help close gaps in participation and support development in reasoning, vocabulary and collaborative learning.

[29] *Some articles about these techniques listed - R. Miles. 'Socratic seminar: Bringing ancient wisdom to modern elementary classrooms through engaging discussion'. Edu.com, (2025). Socratic Seminar: Bringing Ancient Wisdom to Modern Elementary Classrooms Through Engaging Discussion Midwest Teachers' Institute. Teaching students to think, not just answer: Socratic seminars in action. (2025).Teaching Students to Think, Not Just Answer: Socratic Seminars in Action - MTI: Professional Development Courses & Graduate CE for Teachers K. J. Topping, S., Trickey, & P. Cleghorn. A teacher's guide to philosophy for children. London: Routledge, (2019). A Teacher's Guide to Philosophy for Children.*

Teachers can monitor pupil voice through:

- **Oracy journals:** pupils reflect on speaking experiences.
- **Observation checklists:** track participation and confidence.
- **Self/peer assessment:** using speaking rubrics or feedback frames.

Establishing and maintaining collaborative learning

Collaborative learning involves pupils working together in small groups on tasks designed to ensure active participation from all members. Collaborative learning activities can provide opportunities for pupils to engage in high quality classroom talk, thereby developing their language capabilities.

The impact of collaborative approaches on learning is consistently positive, with EEF finding that pupils making an additional five months' progress, on average, over the course of an academic year. However, impact depends on careful planning and implementation.[30] Effective collaboration does not happen automatically. Pupils need explicit support, modelling and practice. Structured approaches with well-designed tasks and deliberate teacher modelling, thinking aloud and interaction are likely to result in the greatest learning gains.

Key considerations for successful collaborative learning:

- Tasks need to be designed carefully so that working together is effective and efficient otherwise some pupils will struggle to participate or withdraw.
- Ensure preparation time is proportionate to and does not exceed the intended learning outcomes.
- Provide scaffolds to ensure that all pupils, particularly pupils with low prior attainment, are supported to fully participate and articulate their thinking in collaborative tasks.
- Use small groups of three to five pupils, as these tend to be most effective.
- Competition between groups can be used to support pupils in working together more effectively, though overuse of competition can focus learners on the competition rather than succeeding in their learning, so it must be used sparingly.

[30] *Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Collaborative Learning: Teaching and Learning Toolkit (London: EEF, 2018).*

SECTION 3

Reading

Section Summary

- Reading is a learned skill that requires **explicit, systematic instruction** rather than developing naturally like speech.
- Introduces **key conceptual models:** the Simple View of Reading (decoding x language comprehension = reading comprehension) and Scarborough's Reading Rope, which illustrates how multiple strands combine to produce skilled reading.
- Compares Whole Language, Balanced Literacy and Structured Literacy approaches, highlighting **strong evidence for Structured Literacy** as the most effective method.
- Emphasises the **foundational role of oral language, vocabulary and background knowledge** in supporting reading comprehension and overall literacy development.
- **Recommends systematic phonics instruction,** with synthetic phonics identified as particularly effective; stresses the need for phonics to continue until fluency is secure.
- Provides guidance on explicitly teaching **phonemic awareness** as a critical foundation for reading, recommending a progression from simple to complex tasks (e.g., isolating sounds, blending, segmenting, adding, deleting and substituting phonemes) and integrating these activities into systematic phonics instruction to strengthen decoding and spelling.
- Explains **orthographic mapping** as the process by which words are stored in long-term memory for automatic recognition, supporting fluent reading and spelling.
- Provides guidance on teaching **high-frequency words** through systematic, phonics-integrated instruction, grouping words by patterns (Flash Words and Heart Words) and embedding them in meaningful reading and writing contexts rather than relying on rote memorisation.
- Highlights **the importance of developing vocabulary** through both implicit exposure and explicit instruction, prioritising high-utility Tier 2 words, and using strategies such as child-friendly definitions, repeated practice and morphology/etymology to deepen word knowledge and support comprehension.
- Highlights **fluency as a bridge between decoding and comprehension,** noting the importance of accuracy, rate and prosody, and the need for structured practice and monitoring.
- Provides **guidance on teaching comprehension strategies** such as prediction, questioning, clarifying, summarising and activating prior knowledge, with modelling and scaffolding to promote independence.
- Stresses that **comprehension strategies** are learned relatively quickly and should be embedded into wider knowledge building rather than taught in isolation.
- Highlights the **importance of fostering reading for pleasure** as a driver of motivation and lifelong engagement, offering practical strategies such as daily read-alouds, creating reading-rich environments and family involvement.

The importance of reading, key conceptual models and approaches to literacy

The importance of reading

Reading as the foundation of learning

Reading is the cornerstone of education because it unlocks access to every subject. When children learn to read fluently, they can engage with texts across the curriculum, from science to history. Those who struggle with reading often face barriers in all areas of learning, which can lead to long-term gaps in achievement.

In contrast, confident readers tend to read more, build richer vocabularies and develop stronger comprehension skills. Reading is not just an academic requirement; rather it is also a life skill that opens doors to knowledge, creativity and opportunity.

Language and comprehension matter

Reading is more than recognising words; it is about understanding meaning. Strong comprehension grows from rich language experiences, listening to stories, engaging in conversations and exploring new vocabulary. As highlighted in the previous section, in the early years, children benefit from environments where talk and storytelling are central. Exposure to rhymes, poems and high-quality texts helps them develop the linguistic foundations needed to make sense of increasingly complex ideas as they progress through school.

Building fluency through practice

Learning to read begins with decoding, but fluency, which is the ability to read accurately and smoothly, is essential for comprehension and enjoyment. Regular practice helps build confidence and automaticity. As fluency improves, reading becomes less effortful and more pleasurable, encouraging children to read widely and often. This cycle of practice and enjoyment is key to sustaining progress.

Fostering a love of reading

Beyond technical skills, children need to experience reading as something enjoyable and rewarding. Daily story times, inviting book corners and opportunities to share and discuss books help create a culture where reading is valued (see Reading for Pleasure Section). When pupils see reading as a source of pleasure and discovery, they are more likely to become lifelong readers. Teachers play a vital role in modelling enthusiasm and ensuring access to a diverse range of high-quality texts that reflect pupils' interests and broaden their horizons.

Reading as a driver of equity and success

Reading can transform life chances. Children who read widely and deeply are better prepared for future education and employment. Regular engagement with books can help close gaps caused by disadvantage. Teaching reading well is one of the most powerful ways to promote equity and success for all learners.

Reading readiness: developmental and instructional foundations

Reading readiness depends on two key areas: developmental foundations and instructional readiness. Developmental foundations include hearing, vision, brain maturation, physical coordination, auditory discrimination and visual tracking. Instructional readiness refers to exposure to language, print and structured routines that support early literacy behaviours.

Activities like physical play, music and dance help children respond to a steady beat, an important pre-reading skill. Multisensory experiences support rhythm, coordination and phonological sensitivity, especially in the early years. Auditory memory supports early comprehension. Listening to and joining in rhymes and refrains helps children anticipate language patterns and make predictions.

As highlighted in the previous section, oral language development underpins reading. Talking and listening activities, combined with rich language exposure, develop phonological awareness, a key precursor to reading. Practical strategies include listening walks, clapping syllables and listening stations to highlight attention to sounds in words. These oral foundations should be planned for explicitly and linked to structured phonics instruction.

Children also need to understand that print conveys meaning. Teachers can build print awareness through class libraries, labelled resources, helper boards and word walls. They can also use wordless picture books and sequencing activities (reordering pictures, retelling) to strengthen prediction, narrative skills and early comprehension as decoding begins.

Understand how the brain learns to read

Reading is a complex cognitive process that is not innate to human beings and does not develop naturally like speech. It is a learned skill that requires explicit, structured teaching. While the human brain is not biologically wired for reading, it can adapt through carefully designed instruction. With high-quality, evidence-based teaching, almost all children, including those with learning difficulties, can become successful readers.

Neuroscience shows that reading involves forming new neural connections between areas of the brain responsible for spoken language and visual processing. Children with dyslexia may require more time and support to establish these pathways, but they rely on the same underlying systems.

Understanding how the brain learns to read has important implications for curriculum design and pedagogy. Effective reading instruction is explicit, systematic, cumulative and intensive where needed. These principles reduce reading failure and support all learners in developing fluency and comprehension.

Instructional approaches to teaching reading

Three main approaches to teaching reading have emerged internationally:

- **Whole Language:** Focuses on immersion in rich texts, assuming children will learn to read naturally through exposure and incidental guidance and explanation.
- **Balanced Literacy:** A group of varied but related approaches which combine whole language approaches with some phonics, but often lack the structure needed for all learners to succeed.
- **Structured Literacy:** A systematic, explicit and cumulative approach, which is strongly supported by research, especially for pupils with reading difficulties. It aligns with the Science of Reading, a body of interdisciplinary research explaining how reading develops and how best to teach it.[31]

The table below summarises the key features and limitations of each model:

Approach	Key features	Limitations	Evidence base	Implications for practice
Whole Language	Immersion in texts; incidental guidance and exposure.	Weak decoding; over-reliance on guessing.	Limited empirical support.	Not recommended particularly for early readers or those with difficulties.
Balanced Literacy	Mix of whole language and phonics.	Inconsistent phonics; insufficient for all pupils.	Mixed results; lacks consistency.	Requires careful supplementation with structured phonics.
Structured Literacy	Systematic, explicit, cumulative; phonics-based.	Requires trained teachers; most effective overall.	Strong support from cognitive science and meta-analyses.	Should be core approach in all initial reading instruction.

[31] Philip Gough and William Tunmer, "The Simple View of Reading," Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal 2, no. 4 (1989): 323–336; Hollis Scarborough, "Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (The Reading Rope)," in Handbook of Early Literacy Research, eds. Susan Neuman and David Dickinson (New York: Guilford Press, 2001); National Reading Panel, Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

The three-cueing system

Both whole language and balanced literacy support the use of the three-cueing system to identify unfamiliar words using semantic (meaning, using context or pictures), syntactic (sentence structure or grammar) and graphophonic (letter sounds or visual letter patterns) cues.

Originating from psycholinguistic theories developed in the 1960s by Ken Goodman and Frank Smith, this method posits that skilled reading involves minimal reliance on decoding every letter, instead prioritising context clues and illustrations to 'guess' words.

While this may appear intuitive, research suggests that relying on contextual guessing can hinder the development of secure decoding skills. This strategy has high error rates and leads pupils to accept a low standard of accuracy and comprehension. This is especially relevant for pupils who experience reading difficulties, as they benefit most from consistent, explicit instruction in sound–letter correspondence.

Teaching pupils to use pictures, sentence structures or meaning clues as the initial and/or predominant way to 'guess' words can be particularly detrimental to struggling readers, leaving them with limited code knowledge to decode and encode increasingly complex texts with fewer visual supports. Such habits found in poor readers are difficult to unlearn, especially by Key Stage 2.

Structured Literacy: The Science of Reading

Structured Literacy has received increasing attention in recent years, particularly through the growing influence of the Science of Reading. This term refers to the comprehensive body of research, based on studies that meet scientific evidence standards, explaining how humans learn to read and the most effective ways to teach reading. It draws from decades of studies across cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics and education to identify the most effective, reliable ways to develop reading proficiency.[32] Buckingham reminds us that "how well children learn to read is a direct function of how well they are taught".[33]

At its core, structured literacy reflects a systematic, explicit and cumulative approach to teaching reading and writing. It involves a clear focus on decoding: breaking down each word into individual sounds before blending those sounds to form the word. This helps children hear, identify and use different sounds that distinguish words.

Structured Literacy typically includes teacher-led instruction, regular opportunities for practice and responsive feedback. It is designed to support all learners, including those who may experience reading difficulties such as dyslexia.[34] Successful implementation depends on high-quality professional development and thoughtful curriculum alignment.

[32] L. C. Moats, 2020). 'Teaching reading is rocketing science, 2020. What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do'. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers, (2020).
[33] Jennifer Buckingham, An Investigation of Literacy Instruction and Policy in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Sydney: Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2024).
[34] L. Spear-Swerling. 'Structured literacy and typical literacy practices: Understanding differences to create instructional opportunities'. Teaching Exceptional Children, Vol. 51(3), pp.201-211 (2018).

Hattie's meta-analyses show that explicit phonics instruction, when combined with strategies for reading comprehension, vocabulary and fluency, can significantly improve pupil outcomes.[35] This highlights the potential of structured literacy to support reading development effectively.

Structured literacy encompasses more than phonics; it includes instruction in phonology, syllables, morphology, syntax and semantics, all of which are addressed in later sections of this framework. This broader scope ensures that pupils develop the full range of skills needed for fluent and meaningful reading.

Recent research highlights the importance of integrating the following into reading instruction:

- phonemic knowledge: sound-level awareness;
- orthographic knowledge: letter sequences, spelling patterns;
- morphemic knowledge: roots, prefixes, suffixes.[36]

While systematic phonics provides a strong foundation, integration of these strands ensures broader literacy development.

The Department recommends that all schools should adopt a structured literacy approach.

The Simple View of Reading

In 1986, Philip Gough and William Tunmer introduced a simplified conceptualisation of reading known as the Simple View of Reading.[37] It is based on research showing that reading comprehension has two key components, decoding and language comprehension.

Decoding × Language Comprehension = Reading Comprehension

Decoding refers to the ability to translate written words into spoken language using knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences.

Language comprehension involves understanding spoken language, including vocabulary, grammar and meaning.

Both components are interdependent; when either is underdeveloped, overall reading comprehension may be limited. While The Simple View of Reading provides a useful foundation for assessing and supporting reading development, it is important to note that reading development is a more complex process influenced by other factors such as attention, memory and motivation.

[35] *John Hattie, Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta Analyses Relating to Achievement (London: Routledge, 2009; updated 2023).*
[36] *S. McMurray. 'Learning to spell for children 5-8 years of age: The importance of an integrated approach to ensure the development of phonic, orthographic and morphemic knowledge at compatible levels'. Dyslexia: An International Journal of Research and Practice, Vol. 26(4), pp.442-458. (2020).*
[37] *Philip Gough and William Tunmer, "The Simple View of Reading," Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal 2, no. 4 (1989): 323–336.*

Scarborough's Reading Rope

Scarborough's Reading Rope builds on the Simple View of Reading by showing how fluent reading and deep comprehension develop through the integration of two strands: word recognition and language comprehension.[38] Each strand contains multiple sub-skills that work together to support skilled reading. The model emphasises that these skills need to be taught explicitly and systematically.

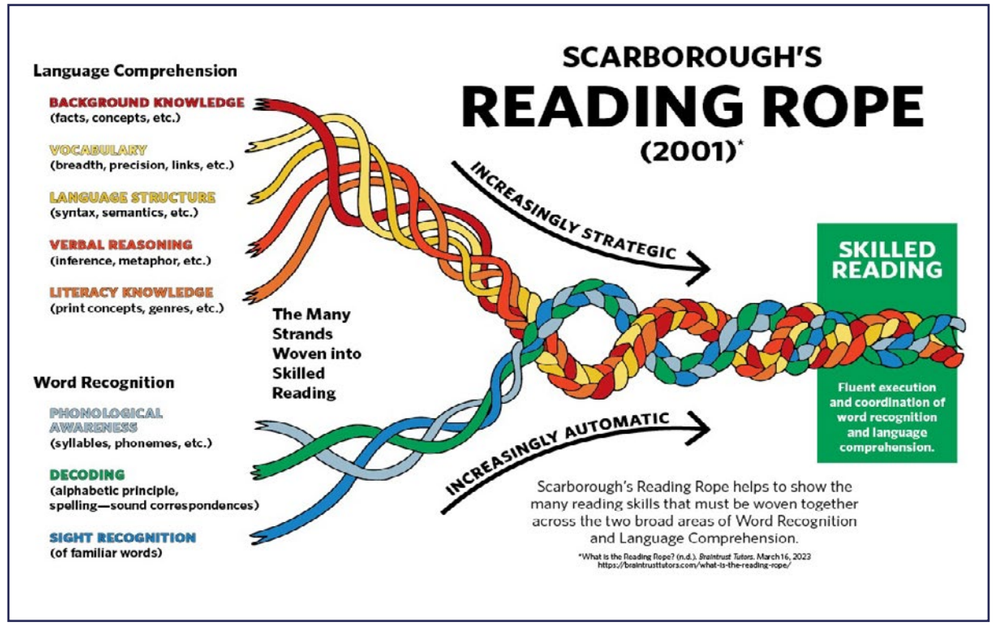
Scarborough expanded the decoding component of the Simple View by renaming it word recognition to **highlight three critical elements:**

- Phonological awareness
- Decoding
- Sight recognition

The upper strand, language comprehension, includes:

- Background knowledge
- Vocabulary
- Language structures
- Verbal reasoning
- Literacy knowledge

Together, these elements support readers to make meaning from text.



[38] *Hollis Scarborough, "Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (The Reading Rope)," in Handbook of Early Literacy Research, eds. Susan Neuman and David Dickinson (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).*

Language comprehension typically develops before reading comprehension. Most pupils begin school with receptive vocabulary and an implicit grasp of grammar. As they learn to decode, they begin mapping printed words onto known meanings. Comprehension improves when decoding is connected to familiar, meaningful contexts, helping pupils link print to understanding and apply it in real situations.[39]

Reading comprehension relies on multiple interacting components and gaps in any strand can affect overall understanding. For early readers, decoding often requires more instructional time, but comprehension can be strengthened through practical strategies such as read alouds, shared reading, scaffolded writing and oral reading to practise fluency. Approaches like chunking text, using visual scaffolds and guided practice help manage cognitive load and support integration of skills.

Oral reading fluency allows teachers to observe how well pupils are applying both strands of the rope.[40] Although the strands begin separately, they quickly intertwine across the domains of word recognition and language comprehension. Skilled reading emerges when these strands are tightly woven, enabling automaticity and deep understanding.

The next two sections of this framework focus on the teaching of word recognition and the building of comprehension to develop skilled reading.

[39] J. Burkins, & K. Yates. Shifting the balance: 6 ways to bring the science of reading into the balanced literacy classroom. Grades K-2. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Stenhouse Publishers, (2021).
[40] J. J. Pikulski & D. J. Chard. 'Fluency: Bridge between decoding and reading comprehension'. The Reading Teacher, Vol 58(6), pp.510-519, (2005).

Word Recognition

Word recognition is a foundational strand in Scarborough's Reading Rope, representing the ability to quickly and accurately identify written words. It encompasses phonological awareness, decoding, and sight word knowledge. Strong word recognition is essential because it frees up cognitive resources for comprehension. When pupils can effortlessly recognise words, they can focus on making meaning from text. Without this automaticity, reading becomes laborious, limiting fluency and understanding. Building robust word recognition skills early is therefore critical for developing proficient, confident readers.

Phonics

Phonics refers to teaching the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and their written representations (graphemes), enabling children to read, write and spell.

The purpose of phonics is to quickly develop pupils' word recognition and spelling. This involves developing a child's phonemic awareness, which is their ability to hear, identify, and manipulate phonemes (the smallest unit of sound in spoken language), and to teach them the relationship between phonemes and the graphemes (a letter or combination of letters used to represent a phoneme).

There is extensive evidence to support the use of a systematic phonics programme with pupils in the Foundation Stage.[41] Research suggests that providing explicit instruction in both phonics and phonemic awareness from the early years can help narrow gaps in phonological skills, reading and spelling, between children from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers.

Approaches to teaching phonics

There are several approaches to phonics instruction, each with distinct features and implications for pupil outcomes:

- **Synthetic phonics:** pupils are taught to pronounce the sounds (phonemes) associated with letters in isolation. Pupils are then taught to combine or synthesise these sounds to form words.
- **Analytic phonics:** focuses on deconstructing words to identify phonemes. It starts with familiar words and breaks them down into their parts. Children learn to recognise whole words first and then analyse them to identify common phonemes and spelling patterns. For example, a teacher might present the word cat and guide pupils to notice that c, a and t appear in other words like cap, can, and tap, helping them infer sound-letter relationships.
- **Analogy phonics:** focuses on using groups of analogous (similar) words to build a child's reading vocabulary. It is in fact a branch of analytic phonics that relies on using groups of analogous word families and has an emphasis on rhyme for example, 'n**ight**', 'fl**ight**' and 'br**ight**'.

[41] Jim Rose, Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (London: Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

Understanding these approaches is important, as the choice of method can influence literacy development. **The table below summarises key differences.**

	Synthetic phonics	Analytic phonics	Analogy phonics
Definition	Teaches blending of individual phonemes to decode unfamiliar words.	Starts with whole words and breaks them down to identify phonemes and patterns.	Teaches new words by comparing them to known word families or rhyming patterns.
Starting point	Individual sounds and letters.	Known words and texts.	Familiar words and spelling patterns (e.g., -ight, -ake).
Instruction style	Explicit and systematic.	More implicit and discovery based.	Pattern-based and comparative.
Strengths	Strong evidence base. Provides a very structured introduction to reading. Ensures no phonemes or graphemes are missed and pupils get thorough instruction. Very effective for early readers. A focus on blending and building words using phonemes helps children when they come across (or need to write) unfamiliar words.	Teaches sounds in context: Sounds are learned as parts of words, rather than in isolation and decontextualised. Starts with the familiar: teachers can start with words children are familiar with and use them as a springboard for further teaching.	Builds on existing knowledge. The repetition and clustering of words help children learn patterns in the English language.
Weaknesses	May lack context if not paired with rich texts, as phonemes and graphemes are learned out of context and disconnected to words.	Less effective and structured for beginners. Can encourage guessing. They will know either the onset or rime and guess the rest of the word rather than focusing fully on all phonemes in the word. As instruction is not as structured and direct as in the synthetic approach, some struggling pupils can slip behind.	Limited for unfamiliar or irregular words. May not support full decoding skills.
Evidence base	Strong support from UK Rose Report and international research.	Limited support in large-scale studies.	Some support as a supplementary strategy; not recommended as a sole approach.
Best use context	Core approach for early reading instruction.	Supplementary strategy.	Useful for reinforcing patterns and fluency once basic decoding is secure.

Research evidence supporting synthetic phonics

The EEF notes that synthetic phonics has a stronger evidence base than analytic phonics, with higher average impact.[42] The Clackmannanshire Study compared the impact of synthetic and analytic phonics among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. After just 16 weeks, pupils taught using synthetic phonics showed significantly stronger performance in both reading and spelling.[43]

By the end of primary school, pupils who had received early synthetic phonics were:

- 3 years and 6 months ahead of their chronological age in word reading.
- 1 year and 9 months ahead in spelling.
- 3.5 months ahead in reading comprehension.

Importantly, this advantage persisted even after all groups later received synthetic phonics, showing that early instruction provided a lasting impact. The study also found that synthetic phonics helped reduce attainment gaps for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although some gaps re-emerged by Year 7, pupils who received early synthetic phonics continued to perform at or above age expectations.

Using phonics

The Department of Education recommends that all schools adopt a systematic phonics programme in the Foundation Stage.

Key features of effective systematic phonics instruction include:

- a carefully planned sequence that builds from simple to more complex skills;
- direct teaching, modelling and guided practice; and
- integration with rich language experience and comprehension development.

Structured phonics programmes have long been shown to be beneficial in teaching children the basic or foundational skills needed to begin learning to read. As such they are an important component of literacy in the early years and throughout primary education. Schools will also wish to be aware of the evidence supporting the synthetic phonics approach. The Department is not, however, prescribing a specific phonics programme.

Sustaining phonics instruction

Phonics instruction should continue for as long as pupils require it and should not be phased out prematurely, particularly in Key Stage 1 and beyond. International evidence suggests that phonics is often discontinued too early before all pupils have achieved fluency in decoding.

As pupils progress, phonics should evolve into explicit word work, including morphology (e.g. prefixes, suffixes, root words) and etymology (word origins and patterns). This extended instruction supports spelling, vocabulary development and reading comprehension.

[42] *Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Phonics: Teaching and Learning Toolkit (London: EEF, 2018).*
[43] *Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson, The Effects of Synthetic Phonics Teaching on Reading and Spelling Attainment: A Seven Year Longitudinal Study (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Education Department, 2005).*

Phonological and phonemic awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to reflect upon and consciously manipulate the sound structures of language at each level: word, syllable, and phoneme. This means phonological awareness is an umbrella term for a broad set of skills that vary in difficulty by the size of the unit manipulated (for example, syllable or phoneme) and by the judgement that is needed (for example, "Do these two words rhyme?" or "What else rhymes with...?").

A key subset of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness. This refers to the ability to hear, identify and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. This skill helps pupils understand that words are made up of sequences of sounds, forming the foundation for learning to read. Evidence suggests weaker readers, as well as children with dyslexia, perform less well on phonemic awareness tasks. Teaching activities focused on phoneme awareness can improve word recognition.

Teaching phonemic awareness typically progresses from simpler to more complex tasks, allowing pupils to build mastery over time. The table below developed by the EEF provides a range of tasks ordered by difficulty, which can be used to assess children's phonemic awareness and understand their next steps.[44]

[44] *Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1 (London: EEF, 2020).*

Phonemic awareness tasks ordered by difficulty

Task	Pupils can...	Example
Phoneme isolation	Recognise alliteration.	Correctly identifies that *'cat'* and *'cot'* start with the same phoneme when also given the word *'dig'*.
	Recognise when words have the same final phoneme.	Correctly identifies that *'top'* and *'cap'* end with the same phoneme when also given the word *'pig'*.
	Isolate the first phoneme in words.	Gives the picture of a *'sun'* in answer to the question, "which picture begins with *S*?".
Blending	Orally blend isolated phonemes together to hear words.	Says *'dad'* when given *'d-a-d'*. Phonemes that make a longer sound may sound easier to blend at first, e.g. *'mmmooonnn'*, than those with short sound e.g. *'bat'*.
	Orally blend longer words with consonant clusters.	Says 'clip', 'sift', 'splat', 'sprint' when presented with their isolated phonemes. Words with consonant clusters at the beginning may be initially easier to blend than those with clusters at the end.
Segmentation	Orally segment words into their component phonemes.	When given *'sit'* can head and isolate each of the word's phonemes *'s-i-t'*.
	Orally segment longer words with consonant cluster.	When given *'slop'* can hear and isolate each of the word's phonemes *'s-l-o-p'*. Words with consonant clusters at the beginning may be initially easier to segment than those at the end.
Phoneme addition	Manipulate words by adding phonemes in different locations.	Adding *'c'* to the word 'am' to create *'cam'* or adding *'t'* to the word *'bel'* to create *'belt'*.
Phoneme deletion	Manipulate phonemes by deleting them from the beginning or end of words.	Removing *'c'* from *'cup'* to get *'up'*.
	Manipulate phonemes by deleting phonemes within consontant clusters.	Removing *'n'* from *'long'* to get *'log'*.
Phoneme substitution	Substitute initial phoneme with another, this would make a rhyming string.	Deleting *'s'* from *'sit'* and adding *'p'* instead to get *'pit'*.
	Substitute a phoneme within a word.	Deleting the short *'a'* in *'fad'* with the long *'a-e'* to get *'fade'*.

The alphabet and letter names

Letters are a code, a way of writing down the sounds of speech. Phonemes are the basis of the code. English has a complex alphabetic code: 26 alphabet letters must represent around 44 sounds (phonemes), often inconsistently. In languages such as Spanish, German and Welsh, for example, one grapheme almost always represents the same phoneme. English, however, has more than 70 common correspondences between phonemes and graphemes and hundreds of rare ones.

To support decoding and spelling, pupils need to understand the alphabetic principle: that letters represent sounds. For example, 'd' represents /d/ or 'ph' represents /f/. They also need to be clear that sounds may be represented by one to four letters (e.g., /a/ in apple, /igh/ in high, /eigh/ in weigh).

Research by Roberts, drawing on four randomised control trials, found that teaching letter names and sounds together from the early years, using visual-verbal associations, is highly effective. This approach supports early reading and spelling and benefits pupils with phonological difficulties. Most children learn letter names easily and Year 1 pupils should be taught them explicitly.[45]

Evidence remains inconclusive regarding whether upper- or lower-case letters should be introduced first. Additionally, the literature advises against a rigid 'one letter per week' approach. Instead, instruction should be responsive and informed by ongoing assessment of the letter-sound knowledge children already possess.

Differentiation should reflect the varying complexity involved in learning specific letters. For example, *w* is more complex and may require greater instructional attention than *t*.[46]

High-frequency words

Pupils must also develop automatic word recognition to become fluent readers. It is important that teachers understand the role of high-frequency and sight words. The terms are often used interchangeably but they refer to **distinct concepts:**

- **High-frequency words** are those words that occur most often in print and should be recognised early to help children access texts quickly, accurately and confidently.[47]
- A **sight word** is any word that can be retrieved from memory instantly because it has been orthographically mapped.[48]

[45] *Timothy A. Roberts, "Letter Names, Sounds, and Early Reading: Evidence from Randomised Control Trials," Journal of Educational Psychology 113, no. 4 (2021)*
[46] *Shayne Piasta, "Complexity in Letter Learning: Instructional Implications," Reading Research Quarterly 60, no. 1 (2025)*
[47] *M. Loftus & L. Sappington, L. The literacy 50 Q&A handbook for teachers: Real-world answers to questions about reading that keep you up at night. New York: Scholastic Inc. (2024).*
[48] *L. Kemeny, L. 7 mighty moves: Research-backed, classroom-tested strategies to ensure K-to-3 reading success. New York: Scholastic Inc. (2023).*

High-frequency words (like, the, and, said, you) make up a large portion of early reading texts. For example, the 100 most frequent words account for nearly 50% of all words in print. It is important for children to know high-frequency words, as mastering them early helps children read more fluently and confidently when they encounter these words repeatedly in texts.[49] It is advisable to teach high-frequency words in a pre-determined sequence so that children can begin to read connected text. Decodable book series often have a suggested scope and sequence.

Traditionally, high-frequency words are memorised but this can be ineffective particularly for struggling readers. It is, therefore, important for schools to consider how they organise and teach high-frequency words. Many high-frequency words are regular consonant-vowel or consonant-vowel-consonant words which are decodable and can be integrated into phonics instruction with particular attention to them (can, has, had etc).

Grouping words by phonics patterns rather than by frequency helps children understand spelling relationships (e.g., be, he, we, she). Incorporating high-frequency words into phonics lessons further reinforces these patterns, making them easier to learn and apply. Children should apply as much of their phoneme-grapheme knowledge as possible when encountering new words. This reduces reliance on whole-word memorisation, which can be inefficient. To do this, schools might consider categorising high-frequency words according to whether they are spelled entirely regularly or not. Restructuring the way high-frequency words are taught makes reading and spelling the words more accessible to all pupils.

One optional strategy for the teaching of high-frequency words is to group them into two categories: those that are phonetically decodable and those with irregular spellings.

- **Flash Words** are phonetically decodable using known phonics patterns (e.g., 'am', 'had', 'got', 'can'). Although their spelling patterns are easily decoded, Flash Words are used so frequently in reading and writing that pupils need to be able to read and spell them 'in a flash'.
- **Heart Words** contain irregular spellings not yet taught in the phonics scope and sequence (e.g., 'said', 'know'). Heart Words are also used so frequently that they need to be read and spelled automatically.

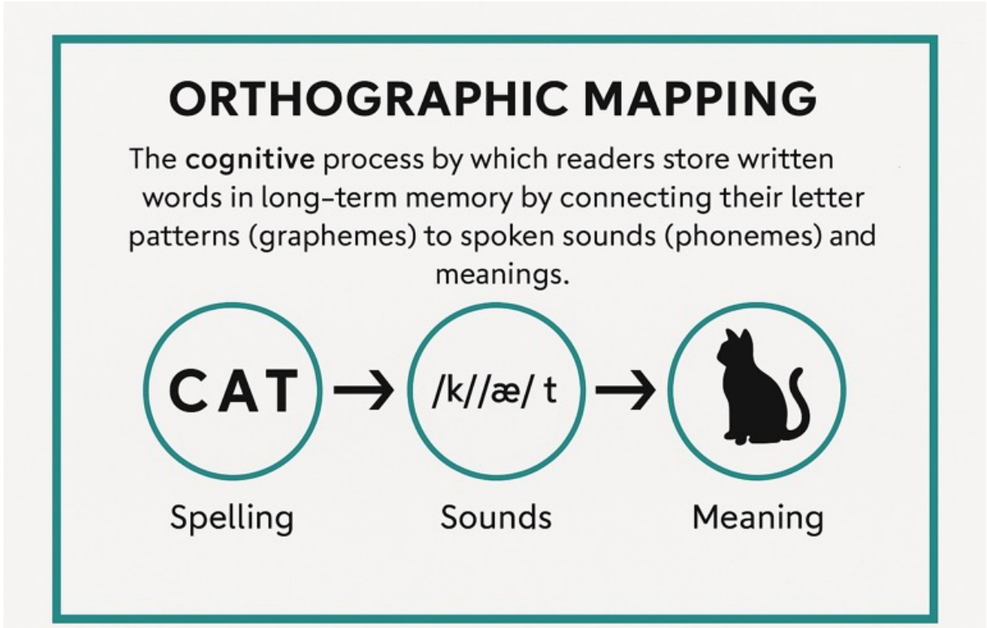
A word may change category as phonics knowledge grows. For example, early in phonics scope and sequence, 'see' may be a Heart Word because the long e spelling patterns have not been taught. When pupils learn that ee spells long /e/, see becomes a Flash Word. Further, many of the Heart Words can be categorised into words with similar spellings.

[49] *Edward Fry, Fry's 1000 Instant Words (Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Resources, 2000).*

Whole-word learning vs orthographic mapping

Competent readers need to store between 30,000 and 70,000 words in long-term memory.[50] However, the brain can only retain around 2,000–2,500 words through whole-word memorisation alone highlighting the limitations of relying solely on memorisation.[51]

Orthographic mapping is the cognitive process by which readers store written words permanently in long-term memory by connecting their letter patterns (graphemes) to spoken sounds (phonemes) and meanings allowing instant word recognition. This enables rapid, automatic word recognition because the word's spelling, pronunciation and meaning become permanently linked in the brain. Fluent readers permanently store the connected sounds and letters of words (along with their meaning) as instantly recognisable words, described as 'sight words'.[52]



[50] *D. A. Kilpatrick. Equipped for reading success: A comprehensive, step-by-step program for developing phoneme awareness and fluent word recognition. Syracuse, NY: Casey & Kirsch, (2016).*
[51] *Diane McGuinness, Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tells Us about How to Teach Reading (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).*
[52] *Linnea Ehri, "Orthographic Mapping in the Acquisition of Sight Word Reading, Spelling Memory, and Vocabulary Learning," Scientific Studies of Reading 18, no. 1 (2014)*

Unlike whole-word memorisation, which depends on visual recognition without linking sounds or meaning, orthographic mapping integrates phonological processing and semantic understanding. This process explains how children learn to read words by sight, spell from memory and understand vocabulary.

Importantly orthographic mapping is not a discrete skill but a developmental process. Once a word is mapped, it becomes instantly recognisable and can be retrieved automatically, hence the term sight word. For this reason, accurate pronunciation, spelling and meaning should be taught from the outset, as errors can become embedded and difficult to correct later.

Orthographic mapping builds durable sound letter connections that support long term retention and the ability to read unfamiliar words.[53] Regular practice is essential to consolidate sound-letter knowledge and support fluent word recognition and word building. In the early years, or for pupils still mastering the basic code, it is important that they practise using decodable texts aligned with the phonics patterns they are currently learning or have already learned, before progressing to uncontrolled texts.

The frequency and intensity of instruction required for orthographic mapping will vary depending on individual pupil needs, including those experiencing difficulties with phonological processing, decoding or retrieval.[54]

Understanding the process of orthographic mapping highlights the significant limitations of whole word memorisation. Over-reliance on flashcards for whole-word memorisation can lead to shallow learning and reduced transfer. However, when used as part of structured phonics teaching, flashcards can support decoding and blending.[55] For example:

Stage 1: Teachers introduce a word by pointing to each grapheme–phoneme correspondence, sounding out and blending, before asking pupils to read the word aloud.

Stage 2: Pupils silently sound the word out if they need to and then say the whole word.

Stage 3: Pupils to immediately read the whole word as orthographic mapping is secured.

Weak orthographic processing

Reading words via orthographic representations makes access to individual words nearly automatic. For most children, these spelling representations develop through reading and spelling practice, and interacting with letters and words. However, some pupils with word-reading difficulties do not develop orthographic mapping. Pupils who experience difficulties in orthographic processing often experience difficulties in reading fluency as they cannot rapidly and automatically recognise words. They have greater difficulty developing the sight word vocabulary needed for fluent reading and will likely stay disfluent and hesitant readers unless they receive intervention.[56]

[53] *Y. N. Yoncheva, J. Wise & B. McCandliss, B. 'Hemispheric specialization for visual words is shaped by attention to sublexical units during initial learning'. Brain & Language, Vol. 145-146, (June-July 2015), pp. 23-33.*
[54] *N. Young & J. Hasbrouck, (eds). Climbing the ladder of reading and writing: Meeting the needs of all learners. USA: PD Essentials. (2024).*
[55] *Diane McGuinness, Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tells Us About How to Teach Reading (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).*
[56] *Mark Seidenberg, Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It (New York: Basic Books, 2017).*

Pupils with weak orthographic processing rely very heavily on sounding out common words that should be stored in long term memory, leading to a choppy and laborious style of decoding. These pupils are also more likely to have difficulty applying knowledge of root words to decode a variation of a word and confuse simple words like 'on' and 'to' when reading.

Poor orthographic processing frequently results in both a high rate of spelling errors and poor written expression. Pupils find it difficult to remember the correct spelling pattern for a particular word. Rather, they demonstrate the tendency to over-rely on phonological information, writing words like 'rough' as 'ruff' and 'night' as 'nite'.

Remediation for orthographic awareness difficulties include:

- A structured approach to spelling with an emphasis on conventional spelling rules, common letter sequences and orthographic rules (see spelling section).
- Explicitly teaching syllable division patterns and rules for contractions, possessives, plurals and abbreviations.
- Extra practice and explicit teaching of reading/spelling high-frequency irregular words (e.g. once, said) emphasising (highlighting in some way) the irregular elements.
- Word sort activities that target contrasting and related spelling rules and patterns.
- Word family exploration (e.g. light, night, fight)
- Spelling lists linked by patterns to highlight regular spelling pattern and reinforce the consistent spelling of graphemic patterns
- Word sorts focusing on specific orthographic patterns. Practice using these patterns at the word level, phrase level and building to the sentence level
- Repeated reading of connected text which focuses on the specific graphemic pattern
- Word study with an emphasis on morphological awareness (base words, roots, prefixes and suffixes).
- Teaching derivative rules for spelling when adding a suffix or spelling words with a common root or base words.
- Building awareness of word meaning and differences for homophones.

Approaches to reading instruction

Effective reading instruction involves a range of approaches that support fluency, comprehension and engagement. The following methods are commonly used in classrooms:

Modelled reading – the teacher demonstrates how to read a text aloud fluently typically using a text slightly above children's independent reading level. This provides direct instruction in prosody, phrasing and expression (see section on fluency).

Shared reading – the teacher introduces a text and reads it aloud while the pupils follow along and join in. The teacher models strategies such as context clues, decoding, syntax, punctuation and re-reading. The story is discussed and re-read to reinforce learning.

Guided reading – pupils are taught in small ability-based groups for short, focused sessions. The teacher supports and prompts as pupils read independently.

Small group guided reading has long been a feature of instruction in Northern Ireland and many teachers manage it very effectively. It is, however, resource intensive and can lack impact. It may also lower expectations for some pupils. It is important that schools reflect on how it is used. Guided reading may be interpreted differently by teachers, leading to variation in grouping, text selection and instructional focus. Without clear structure, sessions can become more about 'hearing children read' than targeted teaching. It is important to ensure guided reading is purposeful, has clear focus is and data-driven, guided by clear and accurate data on each child's foundational skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge, segmenting, blending and word reading ability) and on-going formative assessment.

Schools will wish to consider that recent research by Timothy Shanahan has strongly critiqued the traditional guided reading approach, particularly its reliance on instructional-level theory.[57] He argues that teaching pupils with texts matched to their 'instructional level' does not deliver the promised learning gains and is based on weak research foundations. Keeping pupils solely on easier texts can hold them back because they are not exposed to the vocabulary and sentence structures they need to grow. Shanahan recommends introducing more challenging texts for all learners with strong teacher support and scaffolding.

It is important to carefully balance guided reading with other approaches and consider carefully whether it is required on a daily basis. Whole class and small group teaching should complement each other.

In the early years, foundational reading skills, notably phonemic awareness, phonics and vocabulary, should be taught in whole class settings to ensure all pupils receive direct, explicit and systematic instruction. Small group work should then provide targeted support for pupils who are at risk of falling behind. Recent research highlights that instead of potentially lowering expectations by focusing struggling pupils on simpler texts, teachers should use adaptive teaching to help them access complex texts alongside their peers.[58] Adaptive teaching emphasises responsive support rather than creating separate tasks for different groups which may limit progress and widen gaps.

It involves:

- Whole-class teaching to introduce challenging concepts and texts.
- Small-group or individual scaffolding to reinforce and deepen understanding for pupils who need extra help.
- Using scaffolds, prompts and flexible grouping so every pupil can engage with the same ambitious content.

The goal is that all pupils experience rich language and ideas, with support tailored to their needs.

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[57] *T Shanahan. Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives: How Students' Reading Achievement Has Been Held Back and What We Can Do About It (Harvard, 2025)*

[58] *A. Quigley. Adaptive Teaching: Scaffolds, Scale, Structure and Style (2024). See also Adaptive Teaching: Scaffolds, Scale, Structure and Style*

Building Comprehension

Language comprehension is the second major strand in Scarborough's Reading Rope, focusing on the ability to understand language. It includes skills such as vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, syntax and understanding of text structures. These elements work together to help readers make sense of what they read.

Language comprehension is crucial because even if pupils can decode words accurately, they cannot become proficient readers without understanding the meaning behind those words. Strong comprehension skills enable readers to connect ideas, infer meaning and engage deeply with text, which is essential for academic success and lifelong learning.

A broad vocabulary and wide background knowledge have profound effects on comprehension and developing both should be key aspects of the wider primary school curriculum across all Areas of Learning.[59]

Background knowledge

Background knowledge enables pupils to:

- interpret meaning
- make inferences
- connect ideas across texts.

Research by Hirsch, Cervetti, Wheldall and others demonstrates that topic-specific, disciplinary, cultural and general world knowledge all contribute significantly to comprehension.[60] Some studies suggest that background knowledge can be a stronger predictor of comprehension success than structural language knowledge, especially in early years.[61] Background knowledge supports the interpretation of complex language features, such as idioms and polysemous words and helps pupils make connections across texts.

Systematic approaches to building knowledge, through activities such as dialogic read alouds, conceptually connected texts and word maps, have been shown to enhance vocabulary, inference and overall understanding.[62]

A review of the research literature found that pupils with higher levels of background knowledge consistently demonstrated stronger reading comprehension. However, knowledge alone did not fully compensate for weak reading skills. The extent of this compensatory effect varied depending on the type of comprehension task, the cohesion of text and the genre or text type.[63]

[59] Hollis Scarborough, "Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (The Reading Rope)," in Handbook of Early Literacy Research, eds. Susan Neuman and David Dickinson (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).
[60] E.D. Hirsch, Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Gina Cervetti and P. David Pearson, "Reading Comprehension and Content Knowledge: A Complex Relationship," Educational Psychologist 47, no. 2 (2012); Kevin Wheldall and Robyn Beaman, Effective Teaching of Reading: From Research to Practice (Sydney: MultiLit Press, 2004).
[61] E. D. Hirsch Jr. 'The case for bringing content into the language arts block and for a knowledge-rich curriculum core for all children'. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teacher, (2006). https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2006/hirsch
[62] Reading Rockets. "Background Knowledge." Reading 101: A Guide to Teaching Reading. Accessed December 1, 2025. https://www.readingrockets.org/reading-101/background-knowledge.
[63] R. Smith, P. Snow, T. Serry & L. Hammond. 'The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension: A critical review'. Reading Psychology, Vol. 42(3), pp.214-240, (2021). Full article: The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension: A Critical Review

Vocabulary

Vocabulary development is essential for reading comprehension, oral language proficiency and academic success. Children acquire vocabulary both indirectly -through everyday experiences with oral and written language, such as conversations, being read to, and independent reading -and directly, through explicit instruction.

Approaches to developing vocabulary can be grouped into two categories:

i. **Implicit teaching** - exposure to a rich language environment with opportunities to hear and confidently experiment with new words.

ii. **Explicit teaching** - focussed instruction to help pupils learn complex or unfamiliar words that are not part of their everyday experiences.

Both approaches should be used to expose, expand and deepen vocabulary knowledge across the curriculum. Effective vocabulary learning requires breadth, depth, meaningful connections between words and repeated practice across oral, reading and writing tasks.

Choosing words to teach

Pupils, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, need explicit, intentional teaching of word meanings.[64] Pupils with richer vocabularies understand texts better.

An important component of vocabulary instruction is choosing appropriate words to teach using three tiers:

Tier 1	**Everyday words** that are not conceptually difficult (e.g., cat, happy, baby). Most children know these before school, but some may need explicit teaching, particularly for those children entering school with limited vocabulary or for those learning English as an additional language.
Tier 2	**High-utility words** are more complex but used regularly and across a variety of contexts (e.g., coincidence, admire, portable). These should be a priority for direct instruction.
Tier 3:	**Subject-specific words** (e.g., peninsula, isosceles) which are limited to certain contexts such as science, maths or music. These words should be taught when a specific lesson requires knowledge of the word and underlying concept.

[64] I. L. Beck, M. G. McKeown & L. Kucan. Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction. New York: Guilford Press, (2013).

Such recommends focusing most instructional time on Tier 2 words, given their broad applicability across life and learning.[65] While Tier 2 words are a priority for instruction, schools may wish to reflect on how Tier 1 vocabulary is supported, particularly for pupils with limited language exposure.

Daniel Willingham notes that readers need to know approximately 98% of the words in a text for 'comfortable comprehension' to occur.[66] This highlights the importance of systematic vocabulary instruction as part of reading development.

Steps for explicit vocabulary instruction

Such outlines four key steps to support effective vocabulary teaching once a word has been selected:

1. Provide a child-friendly definition.
2. Contextualise the word in sentences, including non-examples where necessary.
3. Expose pupils to the word multiple times, verbally and in writing.
4. Give pupils the opportunity to actively use the word, either in speech or writing.

Rich vocabulary instruction should extend over several days for pupils to remember and use new words.[67] Regular practice and retrieval can be supported through a range of strategies and resources set out in the table below.

Strategies to support vocabulary instruction

Strategy	How it helps	Examples
Language games	Builds word knowledge through playful interaction.	Memory games, describing objects, giving directions, expressing likes/dislikes.
Role play	Encourages use of topic-specific vocabulary in context.	Acting as a florist, shopkeeper in WWII, doctor-patient scenarios.
Read-aloud activities	Exposes pupils to rich language and varied text types.	Interactive read-alouds with fiction, informational texts, biographies, news apps.
Oral reading fluency	Reinforces pronunciation and meaning through repetition.	Echo reading, repeated reading, choral reading, performance reading.
Graphic organisers	Helps pupils visually connect and organise word meanings.	Semantic maps, word ladders, Frayer models, word gradients.

[65] *Such, David. Teaching Vocabulary in the Primary Classroom. London: Routledge, 2021.*
[66] *Daniel T. Willingham, The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2017).*
[67] *Fivefromfive. Evidence-based instruction. NSW: The Academy for the Science of Instruction, (2025). https://fivefromfive.com.au/vocabulary/teaching-vocabulary/*

Morphology and etymology

Morphology and etymology are powerful tools for vocabulary instruction, especially given English's complex orthography shaped by historical borrowings.

Morphology refers to the structure of words and their parts. **Morphemes** are the smallest units of meaning (e.g., 'un', 'dis', 'er', 'ed'). The main word parts in question are base/root words and affixes (i.e., prefixes and suffixes).

i. **Base/root word** – this is the fundamental part of a word that imbues it with meaning (e.g., 'port': to carry - import, portable, transport).
ii. **Prefix** – a word part inserted at the start of a base/root word to change its meaning (e.g., 'mis': wrongly or badly - mislead, misunderstand, mistake).
iii. **Suffix** – a word part added to the end of a base/root word to alter its meaning or grammatical function (e.g., 'en' forms verbs - soften, lighten, sweeten).

Some words consist of only one morpheme (e.g. help), while many others are composed of two or more morphemes (e.g. help-ful, un-help-ful). A useful way to represent the morphological structure of a word is to use word sums, for example: help (base) + less (suffix) = helpless. Word matrices are also useful graphic organisers for this purpose.

Timing the explicit teaching of morphology is very important. Reserving it to middle/later primary where pupils will meet more complex words with greater numbers of morphemes, will enable them to 'operate' on various words more readily.

Etymology explores word origins, particularly Latin and Greek roots, which underpin a large portion of mathematical and scientific vocabulary. However, many high frequency words have Germanic (Old English and Old Norse) origins. Awareness of etymology helps explain some sound/spelling anomalies (e.g. 'machine' and 'chandelier' that have the French pronunciation of /sh/ for the digraph 'ch').

Understanding these elements helps pupils decode unfamiliar words, interpret spelling patterns and deepen comprehension. Structured approaches such as the **RESCUE method** support this learning by guiding pupils to analyse, contextualise and apply new vocabulary.[68] The RESCUE acronym stands for:

Root and affixes

Etymological story

Synonyms and antonyms

Contextualise

Understand and use

Explain and expand

[68] *Wilkinson, Louise. Teaching Vocabulary through Morphology and Etymology: Applying the RESCUE Method in Primary Classrooms. London: Routledge, 2017.*

Language structure: Syntax and Semantics

Syntax is the set of rules that govern how words and phrases are arranged to create meaningful sentences in a language. It determines the structure of sentences: how subjects, verbs, objects and modifiers are organised and combined. Lessons should include interpretation and formulation of simple, compound and complex sentences. Strategies include:

- **Sentence combining** – merging two ideas into one sentence.
- **Sentence shrinking** – reducing sentence length while retaining meaning.
- **Sentence expanding** – adding detail to simple sentences.
- **Sentence signposting** – using connectives and transitions.

Semantic relates to understanding meaning in language. Pupils with strong semantic skills interpret word relationships within sentences and passages more effectively. Strategies include exploring synonyms, comparatives, homophones, categorisation, semantic maps, prepositions and pronouns.

Verbal reasoning

Verbal reasoning involves the use of sophisticated language tools that enhance comprehension. It includes:

  - o Inferencing: using background knowledge and implicit text clues to draw logical conclusions.
  - o Figurative language: includes metaphors, idioms, personification and other non-literal expressions.

Strategies to teach verbal reasoning include:

- **Word games**: synonyms, antonyms, alphabet games, odd one out.
- **Word ladders:** changing one letter at a time based on clues to form new words.
- **Forward inferencing:** predicting based on a conclusion already drawn.
- **Backward inferencing:** linking back to earlier information in the text.

Literacy knowledge

In Scarborough's Reading Rope, literacy knowledge refers to pupils' understanding of how written language works, including print concepts and genre knowledge.

Print concepts involve recognising the mechanics of text, such as:

- Distinguishing letters from words
- Understanding letter sequencing
- Recognising spacing and directionality
- Applying one-to-one correspondence between spoken and written words

Genre knowledge involves:

- Recognising the characteristics and functions of different text types (e.g. narrative, informational, biography).
- Understanding how texts are structured and how language is used differently across genres.

Modelling and thinking aloud during shared and interactive reading and writing lessons are ideal opportunities to teach these concepts explicitly.

Fluency

Oral reading fluency may be defined as, "reasonably accurate reading at an appropriate rate, with suitable prosody (expression) that leads to accurate and deep comprehension and motivation to read".[69] Researchers generally define and measure fluency in terms of the number of words within a passage read correctly per minute. As well as speed, accuracy also influences fluency.

Oral reading fluency has three dimensions.

i. **Accuracy** – the ability of the reader to read words with minimal errors.

ii. **Rate** – reading should be at a pace that is similar to natural speech.

iii. **Prosody** – using appropriate expression, emphasis and pauses while reading.

Fluent readers decode words quickly and accurately, allowing them to focus on meaning. Weak automaticity or poor prosody can impair comprehension, even when decoding is technically correct.

Teachers should assess fluency regularly, noting accuracy, pace/rate and prosody. Hasbrouck likens oral reading fluency measures to a 'thermometer', providing reliable, valid data that signals when further diagnostic assessment is needed.[70] Accuracy and rate can be assessed by measuring a pupil's reading rate and words correct per minute. Prosody can be evaluated by listening to pupils read age-appropriate passages and rating their expression, inflection, volume and pace using a checklist.[71]

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[69] *J. Hasbrouck & D. R. Glaser. Reading fluency: Teaching and understanding this complex skill. Austin, TX: Gibson Hasbrouck & Associates, (2012).*
[70] *Jan Hasbrouck and Gerald Tindal, "Oral Reading Fluency Norms: A Valuable Assessment Tool for Reading Teachers," The Reading Teacher 73, no. 5 (2020)*
[71] *T. V. Rasinski & M. Cheesman Smith. The megabook of fluency: Strategies & texts that engage all readers. 2nd edition. New York: Scholastic, (2025).*

Passage reading fluency does not always develop spontaneously from automaticity in word decoding. Fluency is a bridge between decoding and reading comprehension, and schools should plan systematically to develop it through structured teaching, practice and monitoring. It should be explicitly taught using evidence-based strategies such as repeated reading.[72] Research shows that modelled, repeated oral reading with feedback improves reading proficiency and comprehension for both able and struggling readers.[73] Pupils who struggle need targeted interventions, such as additional practice with familiar texts and guided oral reading.

Fluency instruction remains important throughout primary school, not just in the early years and even in post-primary since low fluency can be an obstacle to comprehension.[74] Pupils do not pass through a 'magic barrier' and suddenly become fluent. It might be helpful to consider the idea of progressive rather than absolute fluency. The teacher helps pupils to gain reading fluency at each stage in the same way that a piano teacher helps a pupil to gain musical fluency at each grade.

Fluency develops progressively as pupils are introduced to and re-read books that include new vocabulary and language structures that they might not otherwise have read for themselves, as well as challenging ideas. Their familiarity with a text is critical to building fluency. The teacher has a vital role in choosing and reading aloud books that will motivate pupils to read gradually more demanding texts.

Evidence-based strategies for practising fluency

Strategy	Description
Repeated reading	Pupils read the same short text several times until accurate and smooth. Builds automatic word recognition and confidence.
Echo reading	Teacher reads aloud with expression; pupils repeat, copying phrasing and intonation. This models fluent reading and helps pupils practise prosody.
Choral reading	Whole class or group reads aloud together, reducing pressure and promoting rhythm.
Readers theatre	Pupils rehearse and perform scripts with expression, motivating reluctant readers.
Paired/partner reading	Pupils alternate roles as reader and listener, encouraging peer feedback.
Modelled fluent reading	Teacher demonstrates pace, phrasing, and expression; pupils imitate. This helps them understand what fluent reading sounds like.
Timed repeated reading	Pupils track words read correctly per minute across repeated readings. This builds fluency and stamina.
Phrase-cued reading	Text marked into meaningful phrases to support natural phrasing and comprehension.
Use of decodable texts	Ensures practice aligns with phonics knowledge, preventing guessing.

[72] *Five from Five. "Evidence Based Fluency Instruction." Five from Five Literacy Project. Accessed December 1, 2025. https://fivefromfive.com.au/fluency/evidence-based-fluency-instruction/.*
[73] *T. V. Rasinski. The fluent reader: Oral & silent reading strategies for building fluency, word recognition & comprehension. 2nd edition revised and expanded. New York: Scholastic, (2020).*
[74] *T. V. Rasinski. 'Why reading fluency should be hot!' The Reading Teacher, Vol. 65(8), pp.516-522, (2012).*

Strategies for developing and monitoring reading comprehension

Reading comprehension can be improved by teaching pupils' specific strategies to support them with inferencing, self-monitoring and overcoming barriers to their understanding.

Schools should note that explicit reading strategies are valuable, but acquiring a broad vocabulary and a rich base of background knowledge will yield more substantial and longer-term benefits.[75] This knowledge is the product of years of systematic teaching as well as exposure to high-quality books, films, conversations, and so on, which provide pupils with incidental exposure to a great deal of new vocabulary and knowledge.

A number of reading strategies exist and some overlap. They support children to interact in the moment with a text, to identify key points and make inferences from what they are reading.

Teachers should introduce these strategies using modelling and structured support, which should be strategically reduced as a child progresses until they can complete the activity independently.

Key strategies include:

- **Prediction:** pupils predict what might happen as a text is read. This causes them to pay close attention to the text, which means they can closely monitor their own comprehension.
- **Questioning:** pupils generate their own questions about a text to check their comprehension.
- **Clarifying:** pupils identify areas of uncertainty, which may be individual words or phrases and seek information to clarify meaning.

[75] *Daniel T. Willingham, The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2017).*

- **Summarising:** pupils succinctly describe the meaning of sections of the text. This causes pupils to focus on the key content, which in turn supports comprehension monitoring.

- **Activating prior knowledge:** pupils think about what they already know about a topic, from reading or other experiences and try to make links. This helps pupils to infer and elaborate, ask questions to fill in missing or incomplete information and use existing mental structures to support recall.

The strategies should be modelled and some practise is necessary to ensure that they become embedded and fluent. Rather than teaching strategies in isolation, teachers should model and guide pupils in when and how to use them. This cultivates meta-cognitive awareness and self-regulated learning.

Evidence suggests that comprehension strategies are learned relatively quickly and that continued instruction offers diminishing returns.[76] The aim is for pupils themselves to take responsibility for automatically using these strategies to monitor and improve their reading comprehension.

Daniel Willingham cautions against giving reading strategy instruction greater weight than it is due, according to the research base. In his 2017 book, 'The Reading Mind', he writes "teaching reading strategies is a low-cost way to give developing readers a boost, but it should be a small part of a teacher's job. Acquiring a broad vocabulary and a rich base of background knowledge will yield more substantial and longer-term benefits".[77]

This type of instruction is a more effective technique in later year groups (Key Stage 2 and beyond) when children have well-established decoding.[78] The evidence for the effectiveness of such reading strategies is weaker for pupils in lower year groups in primary. Reading strategies require attention and space in working memory. Pupils who are still learning to decode fluently do not have enough working memory space available to implement strategies.

[76] *A. Castles, K. Rastle & K. Nation. 'Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert.' Psychological Science in the Public Interest, Vol. 19(1), pp.5-51, (2018).*
[77] *Daniel T. Willingham, The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2017.*
[78] *Pedagogy non grata. 'A review of: A meta-analysis of the effects of reading comprehension interventions on the reading comprehension outcomes of struggling readers in third through 12th grades'. (2021) Comprehension Instruction A Meta Review | Pedagogy Non Grata*

Reading for Pleasure

What is reading for pleasure and why is it important?

Reading for pleasure refers to independent, self-selected reading for personal or social enjoyment. It includes a wide range of formats: fiction, non-fiction, e-books, magazines, comics and graphic novels. Cremin highlights the link between the 'will and the skill' to read, noting that explicit instruction must be paired with efforts to foster enjoyment.[79]

Research shows reading for pleasure has a strong correlation with confidence, academic performance, social-emotional outcomes and reduced inequalities. Studies demonstrate positive associations between children and young people's recreational reading and cognitive development, academic attainment, comprehension, general knowledge and vocabulary.[80] A causal link with high attainment is less clear, with recent research highlighting that fluency tends to drive enjoyment rather than the reverse.

As David Didau and others have highlighted, it is important to remember that pleasure generally follows competence, not the other way around. Pupils are more likely to read when they feel competent, have access to engaging texts and see reading modelled by adults.. Until children read independently, read-alouds, shared reading and guided reading support access to texts and build motivation.[81]

A decline in reading for pleasure

The National Literacy Trust (2025) reports a significant decline in reading enjoyment among children and young people:

- Only 18.7% of 8–18-year-olds read daily, down nearly 20 percentage points since 2005.
- Just 32.7% say they enjoy reading, a 36% drop since 2005.
- Primary-aged boys and pupils eligible for free school meals show the steepest declines.

Reading enjoyment levels in Northern Ireland were notably low, particularly among boys, young people aged 11 to 16 and those entitled to free school meals. Fewer than 3 in 10 (28.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed reading in their free time, meaning 7 in 10 (71.1%) did not enjoy reading. Only 1 in 6 (16.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland said they read daily or almost daily in their free time in 2025, while 1 in 3 (28.7%) said that they rarely or never read. These are very concerning figures.

[79] *Teresa Cremin, Reading Communities: Nurturing the Will and the Skill to Read. London: Routledge, 2024*
[80] *Reading for pleasure: scrutinising the evidence base – benefits, tensions and recommendations*
[81] *OECD, Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement across Countries. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2002.*

The OECD's PISA 2022 report records the steepest drop in reading enjoyment since international surveys began, with the decline most pronounced in systems where print reading has been crowded out by short-form digital media.

Heavy engagement with short-form video correlates with reduced attention stability and weaker enjoyment of continuous tasks such as reading. Neuroscientific work on rapid-switching environments reports that repeated exposure to fast, fragmentary content raises the threshold at which slower cognitive activities feel engaging. In effect, reading loses its enjoyment because the mind has been conditioned to expect constant stimulation. Rapid, novelty-driven browsing appears to make the act of reading feel slow and effortful by comparison.[82]

The UK Government has designated 2026 as the National Year of Reading and Northern Ireland will actively take part in the campaign to promote reading across society.

Reading attitudes

Reading attitudes are shaped more by emotion than cognition, influenced by past experiences and feelings about reading. Guthrie and Wigfield define reading motivation as personal goals, values and beliefs about reading topics and outcomes.[83]

Motivation is shaped by two factors: the value we place on an outcome and our belief that we can achieve it. This is known as the expectancy-value theory. For example, buying a lottery ticket offers a desirable outcome but a very low chance of success. When it comes to reading, motivation depends on both the perceived value of reading and the expectation that success is possible - often called reading self-efficacy. A child must believe that reading is worthwhile and that they can do it. In self-determination theory, competence is one of the three basic conditions that enable intrinsic motivation and pleasure; when competence is low, enjoyment is unstable or absent. Stronger readers tend to enjoy reading more.

Developing a strong reading self-concept is equally important. When children see themselves as readers, they are more likely to adopt positive attitudes toward reading and view it as an enjoyable, achievable activity.

To change reading attitudes, motivation, or self-concept, children must read. This may sound difficult but there are ways to get children to read through changes in the environment. It is important to make books readily available but also for parents to understand the importance of restricting access to other leisure choices within the home - notably screens such as phones, video games and TV - at certain times, to encourage primary age children to read.

[82] *The myth of teaching children to 'read for pleasure'*
[83] *Guthrie, John T., and Allan Wigfield. "Engagement and Motivation in Reading." In Handbook of Reading Research, Vol. 3, eds. Michael Kamil, Peter Mosenthal, P. David Pearson, and Rebecca Barr. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.*

Children are choosing among competing activities not simply whether to read or not. If a free choice is always given, most children will choose screens over a book, even if books are readily available.

Strategies to promote reading for pleasure

Given the importance of developing motivation and enjoyment of reading, schools should aim to think carefully about developing a robust whole-school reading for pleasure approach and pedagogy. To nurture the reading habit, schools need a strategic approach rather than simply an eclectic mix of reading for pleasure activities. Focus should be on regular, sustained engagement with high-quality reading materials. Evaluation should take place regularly.

Drawing on the Open University framework of five strands: Reading Aloud, Informal Book Talk and Recommendations, Social Reading Environments, Independent Reading, and Texts that Tempt, the following table sets out practical strategies that schools can adapt to promote a strong culture of reading for pleasure.[84]

[84] *The Open University. Reading for Pleasure: Research and Resources. Milton Keynes: OU, 2020*

Practical strategies to promote reading for pleasure

1. Daily story time

- Read aloud to pupils every day, even in upper primary.
- Prioritise whole-class reading of ambitious texts.
- This approach builds community, shared enjoyment and engagement, models fluent reading and introduces new genres and authors.
- Allow the class to choose their class story from five to six high-quality texts.
- Encourage children to listen to audio books. Whilst they are not developing decoding or fluency skills by doing so, they are acquiring vocabulary, applying comprehension strategies and enjoying stories or accruing information.
- Choose high-quality, diverse texts that spark curiosity and discussion.
- Extra small-group story times should be scheduled for children with speech, language and communication needs.

2. Create a reading-rich environment

- Make books visible, accessible and attractive.
- Rotate selections to maintain interest.
- Ensure access to good quality children's fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, but also a range of graphic novels, audiobooks, and digital texts.
- Try to ensure access to a well-stocked class book area and school library.
- Use displays, book corners and reading areas to invite exploration.
- Discuss with the children how the reading environment, both physical and social, can be enhanced in the classroom.
- Develop role play areas based on fictional texts. Whatever the age of your class, role play areas can inspire children to engage more deeply with stories and characters.
- Story boxes and bags are an excellent way of developing children's understanding and enjoyment of texts.

3. Model reading

- Teachers should talk about their own reading habits.
- Share enthusiasm for books and authors.
- Promote reciprocal conversations about books.
- Foster amongst all staff a wide and up to date knowledge of children's literature and other texts.
- Teachers' knowledge of children's literature and other texts is not commonly regarded as part of the subject knowledge required of teachers, yet Cremin et al. (2014) underscore how imperative it is that teachers are demonstrably readers themselves with a wide and deep knowledge base of the extensive canon of children's literature.
- When teachers recognise their professional responsibility to expand their repertoires of children's literature and other texts, they are enabled to talk about such texts, make tailored reader to reader recommendations and foster reading for pleasure.
- Without secure subject knowledge and thoughtful appreciation of reading and being a reader, teachers are not effectively able to employ a reading for pleasure pedagogy.

4. Encourage choice and independence

- Allow pupils to choose their own reading material from a range of high-quality texts.
- Offer a wide range of genres and, formarts.formats and levels.
- Understand the importance of quality rather than just sheer quantity. Strong readers progress because they engage with complex, continuous texts that stretch vocabulary and comprehension, not just by reading more pages. Free choice can widen gaps unless pupils already have secure skills; weaker readers often select easy, familiar material, which limits growth. It is important to support pupils to choose materials with appropriate challenge.
- Schedule and protect dedicated time for independent reading during the school day ensuring time to talk for example in pairs about the reading is built in.
- Be aware that without teacher knowledge of texts and readers and the accompanying reading aloud and book talk strands of Reading for Pleasure, independent reading can easily become a routine procedure, void of authentic reader engagement and interaction.
- When using silent reading there is a need to consider specifically the percentage of children who cannot read independently. Therefore, their time is not well spent in this activity, and they are always reminded that a portion of their day is given over to reinforcing that they cannot read.
- Make one to one reader recommendations tailored to specific children.

5. Build reading communities

- Reading should be visible, valued and woven into the fabric of school life.
- Promote informal Book Talk and Recommendations to encourage peer-to-peer and teacher-pupil sharing of reading experiences.
- Encourage pupil-led book clubs, paired reading, buddy systems and shared reading experiences.
- Check what pupils are enjoying, so they can recommend books to each other as peer influencers.
- Celebrate reading through events like World Book Day, reading weeks, reading challenges and author visits - making sure the focus is on reading.
- Before the end of the school year, discuss with the children the reading you are looking forward to over the summer and what they might like to read.
- Some schools have 10 or 50 books you should read and then check the progress children are making.

6. Use incentives thoughtfully

- Rewards should not be the first strategy to get reluctant pupils to read, as they have the potential to depress reading attitudes once the rewards stop.
- If using rewards, offer literacy-targeted rewards (e.g. book vouchers) rather than unrelated prizes.
- Recognise reading achievements through certificates, displays, or reading passports.
- Be aware that the points and rewards systems associated with some reading schemes can shift focus from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation, where pupils read for prizes rather than enjoyment. They may also inadvertently lead some pupils to choose shorter or easier books just to earn rewards quickly.
- Rewarding pupils in this way may offer a short-term boost, but the motivational effect quickly wears off. It says, in essence, "This task is useful but undesirable, so here is a reward for doing it."

7. Engage families and the home environment

- Encourage parents to read with their children and discuss books at home.
- Provide book lists and reading tips with families.
- Make books available for parents to share with their children at home.
- Promote book ownership through book fairs or donation schemes.
- Use social media or school platforms to share book reviews and recommendations.
- Make sure that the benefits of reading for pleasure are a topic of conversation at parent teacher interviews.
- Encourage parents to think actively about restricting other leisure choices at certain times. Children may enjoy reading but prefer other activities. Making the option of reading the most readily available is sensible.
- Encourage parents to also think about reading utility and situations where reading is useful to the child. Young children can help parents in a way that calls for reading: signs to find a shop or restaurant, recipes. When an older child wants something or to go somewhere (a pet, to try a new sport, a new toy), parents can ask them to learn something about it by reading first.
- Learn more about children's reading practices and experiences beyond school.
- Teachers might consider making a film for parents to illustrate the benefits of sharing and talking about stories aloud and how teachers read stories aloud to their own class.

SECTION 4
Writing

Section Summary

The Importance of Writing and its key elements

- **Writing is a vital skill** for learning, communication, creativity and participation in society, requiring explicit teaching because it is not biologically innate.
- **Strong oral language and reading foundations** support writing development, but writing demands additional skills such as grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- **Reading and writing reinforce each other**, but writing must be taught separately and systematically to build fluency and confidence.
- **The Not-So Simple View of Writing** explains that proficient writing depends on two components: transcription (handwriting and spelling) and composition (ideas, grammar, vocabulary), supported by planning and executive functions.
- **Writing is cognitively demanding**, highlighting the need for secure transcription skills before pupils can focus on composition.
- **Sequenced teaching and structured models** help pupils manage the complexity of planning, composing and revising text effectively.

Handwriting

- **Handwriting is a vital literacy skill** that supports cognitive development, memory and learning, yet has been undervalued in recent years due to the rise of digital communication.
- **Fluent handwriting enables pupils to write with speed and ease**, freeing up working memory for higher-level writing tasks such as spelling, vocabulary and composition.
- **Regular, explicit handwriting instruction is essential** across all year groups and should follow a clear, whole-school progression to build automaticity and confidence.
- **Early intervention is key**. Teachers should observe both the product and process of handwriting to identify and correct poor habits before they become embedded.
- **Practical strategies**, including multisensory activities, fine motor development and structured practice, are especially important in the Foundation Stage and should continue into Key Stage 2

Spelling

- Spelling must be explicitly taught through **regular, systematic instruction**. It is not a skill that children acquire incidentally and informal approaches are far less effective than structured teaching.
- **Spelling strengthens reading fluency** by helping pupils build orthographic memory allowing them to recognise words instantly and decode unfamiliar ones more efficiently.
- **Weak spelling impacts writing quality.** Pupils often avoid using rich vocabulary if they are unsure how to spell certain words, which can limit expression and reduce confidence in writing tasks.
- Children progress through **predictable stages of spelling development**, as outlined by J. Richard Gentry. Understanding these stages helps teachers tailor support to each pupil's current level.
- Spelling errors offer **valuable diagnostic insight** into a pupil's phonological, morphological and orthographic understanding, helping teachers identify gaps and plan targeted interventions.
- **Effective spelling instruction goes beyond phonics**, incorporating morphology, etymology and word study. It should be embedded in meaningful reading and writing contexts not just taught through isolated word lists.

Composition

- **Writing begins with sentences:** pupils need explicit teaching on how to construct clear, well-formed sentences before moving onto longer texts.
- **Grammar and punctuation should be taught in context** as tools for meaning and clarity, not as isolated rules.
- The writing process involves **planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing**, with strategies modelled and practised at each stage.
- **Teachers should use structured approaches** - oral rehearsal, visual prompts, sentence combining and feedback - to build fluency and confidence.
- Teaching approaches should **gradually shift responsibility from teacher to pupil**, including modelled, shared, guided and independent writing.

The importance of writing and its key elements

Learning to write is one of the hardest challenges pupils face at school but it is vitally important and one of the most rewarding skills they will learn. Like reading and unlike speaking, writing is a secondary biological process. In other words, pupils need to be taught explicitly since the human brain is not naturally wired to understand print or to produce it.

The importance of writing

Writing is a cornerstone of literacy and an important tool for learning, communication and self-expression. It is a fundamental skill that plays a vital role in both education and everyday life. It is not only a means of communication but also a powerful tool for thinking, learning and self-expression. From early childhood through adulthood, writing helps individuals organise their thoughts, clarify their understanding and convey ideas effectively.

In education, writing helps pupils to consider information more deeply than when they are simply reading it; it enhances the learning of subject matter and helps cement that learning in long-term memory. Pupils who find it difficult to express their ideas in writing are likely to struggle across the curriculum.

Beyond the classroom, writing is a key life skill. It is essential for everyday tasks such as filling out forms, writing emails and creating CVs. In the workplace, clear and effective writing is often a requirement for communication, collaboration and documentation.

Writing also plays a significant role in personal expression and emotional well-being. Communication is important in developing social relationships. Much of our communication is written, including emails and social media. Writing is therefore key to social experiences, as it enables participation in social communication.

Through journaling, storytelling, or poetry, individuals can explore their thoughts and feelings, process experiences and connect with others. For many, writing is a creative outlet that fosters confidence and a sense of identity. Encouraging pupils to write for pleasure as well as purpose helps build a positive relationship with writing that can last a lifetime.

Finally, writing empowers individuals to participate in society. It enables people to advocate for themselves and others, engage in civic life and contribute to public discourse. In a world increasingly shaped by digital communication, the ability to write clearly and persuasively is more important than ever. By teaching writing well, schools equip pupils not only to succeed academically but also to thrive as informed, articulate and active citizens.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Writing remains essential in a world increasingly shaped by AI. While AI can generate text, summarise information and support communication, it cannot replace the human need to think deeply, reflect and express ideas authentically.[85] Writing is a uniquely human process that clarifies thought, develops arguments, and conveys nuance and emotion.

Despite the availability of AI tools, pupils must still learn to structure ideas, use evidence effectively and write with clarity and purpose. These skills are vital not only for academic achievement but also for navigating the ethical and intellectual challenges posed by AI-generated content. Teaching writing empowers pupils to become critical thinkers and responsible users of technology.

As AI becomes more embedded in media and communication, the ability to write clearly and critically is crucial for discerning truth from misinformation and engaging thoughtfully in public discourse. While AI can assist with routine writing, the capacity to write independently remains a hallmark of intellectual autonomy and professional competence.

The development from spoken to written language

The value of talk in children's mastery of language is highlighted throughout this framework. It is as important for writing as it is for reading. Children's earliest experiences of language are through spoken interaction. Human brains are naturally wired for speech, and children rely on conversations with adults to develop their vocabulary, sentence structure and confidence in using language.

Children learn to write best when they can first say what they want to write. Through stories, rhymes and back-and-forth dialogue, children learn to control spoken language, a vital precursor to mastering written language. Strong oral foundations help pupils generate ideas and structure sentences fluently. Effective writing instruction uses spoken language to explore the thinking and creative processes. Oral storytelling, discussion and drama build vocabulary and confidence.

It is also important to recognise that while talk supports writing, it is not enough on its own. Writing is not simply speech written down. It requires pupils to develop control over language in ways that differ from everyday conversation. Written language is generally more complex, uses a wider vocabulary and demands mastery of spelling and punctuation conventions that do not exist in speech. These features must be taught explicitly.

Writing and reading

Writing and reading support one another as they are acquired and developed, but they are not inverses; writing must be taught separately from reading. Reading, however, enhances pupils' grasp of the craft of writing, meaning that those with a broader reading repertoire can draw on a broader range of approaches to writing.

[85] *Jennifer Buckingham, The Future of Literacy in the Age of AI (Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 2024); OECD, Artificial Intelligence in Education: Policy and Practice (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).*

Research suggests that the quality of narrative and descriptive writing is better for pupils who read more, as they want to write the kinds of texts they enjoy reading and feel competent to do so.[86]

Equally, writing supports reading development. Composing text reinforces understanding of sentence structure, vocabulary and grammar, deepening pupils' grasp of how language works.

The Simple View of Writing

The Simple View of Writing is a conceptual framework that helps educators understand the multiple components involved in writing development.[87] It was developed by Virginia Berninger and is widely referenced in literacy research and guidance documents. It describes writing as the product of transcription skills (spelling and handwriting) and composition (vocabulary, grammar and punctuation – sometimes referred to as text generation).

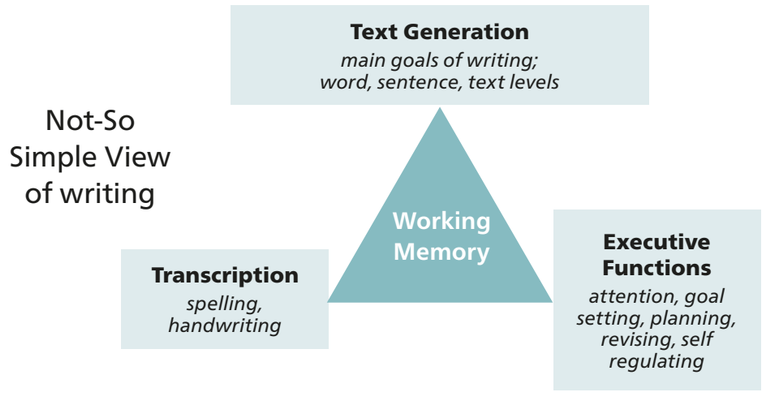
As with the Simple View of Reading, the Simple View of Writing does not imply that writing is simple but, rather, that without developing the two aspects of composition and transcription, proficient writing is not possible.

This model was later refined into the Not So Simple View of Writing reflecting the greater complexity of writing.[88] It identifies three core components to writing:

Text generation: Forming ideas and expressing them in written form.

Transcription: Handwriting, spelling and typing.

Executive functions: Planning, working memory, self-monitoring and attention.



[86] *Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich, "Early Reading Acquisition and Its Relation to Reading Experience and Ability 10 Years Later," Developmental Psychology 33, no. 6 (1997): 934–945, https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.33.6.934.*

[87] *Virginia W. Berninger, Robert D. Abbott, Scott Graham, and William T. Richards, "Teaching Writing to Children with Learning Disabilities: A Research Synthesis," Journal of Learning Disabilities 35, no. 1 (2002)*

[88] *Virginia W. Berninger and William Winn, "Implications of the NotSoSimple View of Writing," Journal of Educational Psychology 98, no. 1 (2006)*

The model places working memory in the centre, emphasising how it plays a key role in enabling each of these skills to operate. Working memory is the cognitive process used when people hold information temporarily and manipulate it. When writing, for example, working memory enables a sentence to be held in mind while each word is recalled and the letters are recorded on the page.

Working memory has a limited capacity, therefore when children are in the early stages of writing development, they cannot apply all the skills effectively. When transcription becomes automatic, pupils can focus more effectively on structure, coherence and expression.

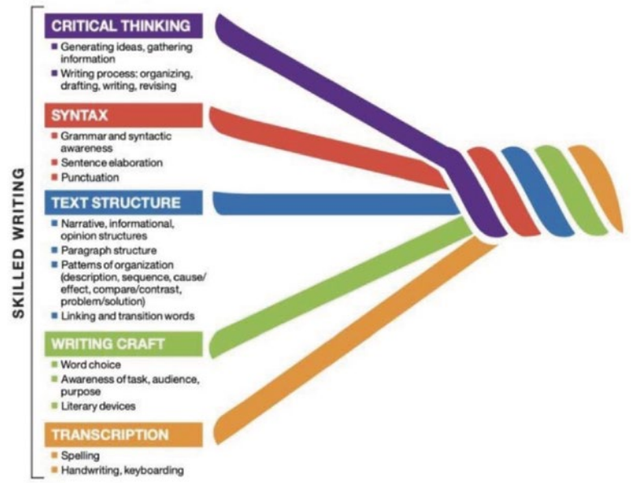
It is also unlikely that children apply approaches like planning, editing and reviewing spontaneously without explicit teaching and encouragement. Novice writers often struggle to manage these elements simultaneously. They need explicit instruction and sustained practice to develop strategies like planning, drafting and editing.

Planning is usually the first composition strategy to emerge followed by 'in the moment' monitoring, which prompts some editing to take place. Approaches like considering the audience/ reader appear much later. However, children may only be able to apply these strategies when spelling and handwriting require less of their working memory capacity.

Cognitive overload can lead to fragmented or underdeveloped writing. Motivation also plays a key role as pupils who lack confidence or interest may disengage from writing tasks.

Sedita's Writing Rope

To unpack the detail within the Not So Simple View, Sedita's Writing Rope offers a complementary framework, similar to Scarborough's Reading Rope.[89] The first four strands relate to text generation, while the fifth strand aligns with transcription.



[89] *Joan Sedita, The Writing Rope: A Framework for EvidenceBased Writing Instruction (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).*

Why writing is challenging

Writing is cognitively demanding. To write effectively, pupils must:

- Generate ideas and structure them coherently.
- Choose appropriate vocabulary and grammar.
- Maintain cohesion across sentences and paragraphs.
- Consider audience and purpose.
- Monitor and revise their work.

Beginner writers must consciously manage every aspect of writing, from holding the pen correctly to forming letters legibly and combining them accurately into words, before they can even begin to express ideas. A pupil who is focused on decoding words in a book will struggle to comprehend the text; likewise, a pupil concentrating on handwriting and spelling will find it difficult to put their thoughts on paper.

Effective writing requires sufficient working memory to plan, compose and review. This is only possible when transcription skills are secure. Fluency in transcription frees cognitive resources, allowing pupils to focus on composition rather than mechanics. For this reason, a foundational goal of teaching writing is to ensure pupils master these functional skills as early as possible.

Composition itself is also highly demanding. Research suggests that planning, composing and revising a text is twice as mentally challenging as reading a complex passage. Skilled writers must attend to multiple elements simultaneously. Sequenced teaching provides pupils with the best chance to master written language and understand the writing process. It offers structured models and frameworks that support pupils as they learn to craft narratives and arguments.

Transcription: Handwriting, typing and spelling

As noted earlier, writing places significant demands on pupils' working memory so it is vital to teach it in a sequenced way that helps to manage those demands. A foundational part of teaching writing, therefore, is about ensuring pupils master the functional aspects of writing as early as possible. Teaching handwriting and spelling (transcription) in the Foundation Stage is crucial to ensure that these skills become automatic for children. This will free up pupils' working memory for composition.

Strong transcription skills are not an end in themselves rather they are a gateway to effective composition. R.T. Kellogg argued that if pupils do not develop sufficient fluency in handwriting in primary school, this significantly affects the development of the higher-order processes such as planning and generating ideas, writing and reviewing texts.[90] Pupils who write fluently can devote their mental energy to planning ideas, structuring arguments and revising drafts. Without this foundation, writing becomes fragmented and frustrating.

Handwriting and why it is important

Handwriting has in recent years had a relatively low status and profile in literacy education and, therefore, has attracted limited attention from policymakers. In an increasingly digital world where most written communication is via typed text it can be easy to dismiss the importance of handwriting.

Handwriting is not just an important motor skill; it is also a cognitive tool that supports literacy more broadly. Engaging the fine motor system to produce letters by hand has positive effects on both learning and memory.[91]

Notably, handwriting activates brain regions involved in reading and letter recognition. Conversely, lack of handwriting fluency can impact writing quality, vocabulary use and comprehension.

Teaching time devoted to handwriting leads to accurate and automatic letter formation. Handwriting is foundational to overall writing development, especially in early education. It supports automaticity and is, therefore, critical for freeing up the finite working memory for composition and spelling

[90] *Ronald T. Kellogg, The Psychology of Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).*
[91] *Karin James and Laura Engelhardt, "The Effects of Handwriting Experience on Functional Brain Development in PreLiterate Children," Trends in Neuroscience and Education 1, no. 1 (2012)*

Summary: The importance of handwriting

Aspect	Key points
Fine motor skill development	Writing builds fine motor control and hand-eye coordination. Marr et al. (2017) found that children who practiced handwriting showed improved motor control compared to those who relied heavily on digital devices, aiding their physical development in the primary years when these skills are still forming.
Cognitive and memory benefits	The movement involved in handwriting can support pupils in remembering new words. Writing by hand requires children to process information, form letters and connect thoughts, which enhances memory retention and comprehension. The physical act of forming letters strengthens cognitive processing and retention. Studies, such as those by Mueller and Oppenheimer (2014) and the University of Washington (Berninger et al., 2006) show that handwriting engages the brain more actively than typing. It boosts neural activity in areas linked to working memory and language processing, The physical act of writing activates the brain's reticular activating system (i.e. a network that regulates attention and alertness), helping children stay focused and enabling them to encode information more deeply.
Literacy development	Handwriting supports reading and spelling skills. A study by Mangen and Velay (2010) indicates that the sensorimotor process of forming letters helps children recognise them better, strengthening letter-sound connections critical for phonics. Learning the alphabet by interacting with each letter in many different physical ways helps pupils imprint and retain the letters and the letter sounds for easier recall when learning to read. Learning letters on a screen engages at most two physical channels: the eyes and the fingertips. It is not possible to tell one letter from another by the shape of the keys. Research from the University of Indiana (James & Engelhardt, 2012) using fMRI scans showed that when children write letters by hand, their brains show increased activity in reading networks, suggesting handwriting primes literacy skills more effectively than typing.
Idea generation and creativity	Handwriting has been linked to better composition skills. Research by Berninger has demonstrated that children who wrote by hand produced more words and ideas than those who typed.[92] This is particularly valuable in primary school, where creative writing and expressive skills are emerging.
Spelling	Handwriting reinforces spelling through muscle memory. Physical repetition can help internalise word patterns. When pupils write in cursive, words become a unit rather than separate strokes like on a keyboard, which means they are more likely to remember the correct spelling of a word

Teaching handwriting

Schools should adopt a consistent, whole-school approach to handwriting, with a clearly sequenced progression across year groups. Regular, explicit instruction is essential, as fluency requires substantial and sustained practice. Practice should be:

Extensive - a large amount of regular practice is required for pupils to achieve fluency in these skills.

Motivating and engaging - achieving the necessary quantity of practice requires pupils to be motivated and fully engaged in improving their writing.

Supported by effective feedback - teachers should provide corrective feedback to help pupils focus their effort appropriately.

Letter formation

Once the incorrect formation of letters is established, change can be difficult and problems with speed of writing persist. Dealing with handwriting issues early, for example, by ensuring appropriate grip, is likely to be more effective than later intervention. It is important that children are taught from the outset of primary school to form the letters of the alphabet correctly. This means knowing the correct starting point for each letter and following the correct movement pathways.

Errors in letter formation are often the source of handwriting difficulties in children but are not always obvious to a reader once the writing is complete. Observations of the child's process of letter formation need to be undertaken so that incorrect patterns do not become embedded, leading to difficulties with fluency later. Common issues include reversed letters (e.g. b/d, p/q), inconsistent sizing and incorrect starting points.

[92] *V.W. Berninger). Coordinating transcription and text generation in working memory during composing: Automatic and constructive processes. Learning Disability Quarterly, 1999 22(2), 99–112.*

Early identification of motor challenges can prevent poor habits and support long-term fluency. Pupils with coordination difficulties may need pencil grips, sloped surfaces or assistive technology. Teachers should liaise with SENCOs to adapt strategies appropriately.

Cursive writing

There is no requirement to teach cursive writing in the Foundation Stage. Joined handwriting should not be taught until pupils can form unjoined letters (print forms) correctly and consistently. Further, there is no strong evidence supporting the notion that schemes which use 'lead in' strokes and fully cursive writing are in any way superior to those in which letters start at the top and join with an exit stroke. Although 'lead in strokes' are taught widely in other European countries, there is an important age difference for when formal writing is introduced, i.e. at around 7 years of age, as opposed to 4–5 years old in Northern Ireland.

Classroom strategies for Foundation Stage

When teaching handwriting in the Foundation Stage, schools will want to use a phonics-first letter introduction, where pupils learn and practise letters using the phonics sequence, building strong visual–aural–motor connections. This supports direct retrieval of letter–sound correspondences, reinforcing phonemic awareness and decoding.

Once pupils have learned enough letters, teachers can group letters by letter formation patterns, such as long letters, curly letters, bouncing letters, or zigzag letters, to build muscle memory and fluency through repetition. Grouping by motor pattern supports children in mastering handwriting movement reducing reversals and promoting smooth, automatic formation.

It is important that handwriting instruction must be explicit and systematic, not simply embedded in phonics.

Schools may choose any handwriting scheme or develop one bespoke to their setting. A commonly recommended sequence is Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust:

i. Long letters: l, t, i, u, j, y.

ii. Curly letters: c, a, g, q, o, e, f, s.

iii. Bouncing ball letters: r, n, m, p, h, b, d.

iv. Zigzag letters: v, w, x, k, z.

Practical strategies to develop handwriting in the Foundation Stage

Effective handwriting instruction in the Foundation Stage should be developmentally appropriate and multisensory. The strategies below support fine motor development, letter formation, classroom environment and motivation.

Strategy	Key actions
1. Fine motor skill development	Include activities like cutting, threading and using tweezers to strengthen hand muscles. Encourage drawing and colouring to build control and coordination.
2. Multisensory approaches	Use tactile materials like sand trays, playdough or textured surfaces to support early letter formation. Incorporate sensory-rich tools to reinforce motor memory and reduce reversal errors. Use blackboards to provide greater friction and stronger sensory feedback than whiteboards or pencils. Schools will note that air/sky writing is not encouraged as an effective strategy because it does not allow children to receive muscle feedback from the pressure of a pencil on a page.
3. Explicit and direct instruction	Teach letter formation systematically, focusing on one letter at a time. Ensure correct posture, paper position and pencil grip (tripod grip is recommended, with a relaxed hold). Pupils need to be taught explicitly how to hold a pencil. An inefficient pencil grip can cause discomfort, which can affect motivation, fluency, legibility and create difficulty in sustaining speed. Use modelling and guided practice before independent repetition (e.g., model writing on a whiteboard while verbalising letter formation).
4. Use of visual aids and guides	Provide lined paper and letter formation charts. Use highlighted paper for spacing and alignment. Offer triangular pencils or pencil grips for correct hold.
5. Integrate handwriting into daily routines	Schedule frequent, short practice sessions. Encourage daily writing, tracing letters and copying texts. Label drawings and write short sentences across learning areas. Target letters prone to formation errors (e.g., i, j, a, d, g, r, n, m, h, z).

Strategy	Key actions
6. Classroom set-up	Seat pupils at tables for handwriting practice to support correct posture. Teach paper slant: anticlockwise for right-handers, clockwise for left-handers. Ensure left-handed pupils have space and sit to the left of right-handers to avoid arm collisions.
7. Positive reinforcement and goal setting	Set individual handwriting goals and track improvement. Give specific, accurate feedback (e.g., "You joined your letters correctly" rather than "Your handwriting is neater"). Compare current work with previous attempts to highlight improvement.

Left-handed pupils

When a right-handed person writes in English, the hand is being drawn away from the writing as they write, allowing them to see what they have written. However, the left-handed person's hand follows behind the writing.

About 10% of pupils are left-handed and may face problems such as smudging, obscuring their writing with their writing hand and difficulty with spacing between words

Left-handed pupils need specific demonstration and adjustments, including by making sure they:

- have space to write;
- sit to the left of any right-handed pupil to prevent their arms colliding;
- slant their paper to the right;
- use softer pencils that require less pressure;
- grip the pencil at a slightly higher point so they can see around their fingers;
- do not hold the pencil too tightly or press down too hard.

Handwriting in Key Stage 2

Although children are explicitly taught letter formation in Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, many children continue to struggle with letter formation or develop inaccurate letter formation habits in Key Stage 2.

Developing pupils' handwriting fluency and accuracy continues, therefore, to be important for this age group. Teachers need to continue to monitor both the product and the process of children's handwriting. This means both looking at children's written work once it has been completed but also observing them as they write, watching for mistakes in letter formation. When areas of difficulty are identified, teachers should provide high-quality feedback and explicit instruction. Regular practice is essential to build speed and automaticity, allowing pupils to focus on higher-level writing skills such as spelling, vocabulary and composition.

Typing

Handwriting should be taught and practised before introducing typing. Typing is an important digital literacy skill, but it should complement, not replace handwriting. Like handwriting, typing requires explicit, sequential teaching and frequent practice. It takes time to become automatic, so it should not be prioritised over handwriting.

Typing may be introduced in Key Stage 2 through short, focused sessions. Transition to typing should be based on readiness indicators, such as fluent letter formation, handwriting stamina and motor coordination.

A 2023 meta-analysis of studies published between 2000–2022 compared the effects of writing by hand or keyboard on primary pupils' writing. It looked at 22 international studies and showed consistently that primary school pupils produce higher quality texts using paper and pen or pencil than when using a keyboard.[93]

Spelling - Why spelling is important

Spelling is a critical literacy component. It supports reading, writing fluency and vocabulary growth. Even with spell checkers, spelling remains important. It builds the orthographic representations essential for fluent reading and precise writing. These representations also support vocabulary development, enabling pupils to use more sophisticated words confidently.[94]

Poor spelling increases cognitive load during writing. Pupils who struggle must devote extra effort to transcription, leaving fewer resources to generate ideas and organise text. This reduces fluency and can affect confidence and engagement.[95] Pupils may avoid richer vocabulary due to spelling uncertainty, limiting expression and reducing quality.[96]

Spelling must be taught explicitly and systematically. Structured instruction helps pupils recognise and recall words accurately, strengthening overall language skills.

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[93] *A. A. Malpique, D. Valcan, D. Pino-Pasternak, S. Ledger & M. Merga. 'Effect sizes of writing modality on K-6 students' writing and reading performance: A meta-analysis'. The Australian Educational Researcher, (2024) 51:2001–2030, (2024). Effect sizes of writing modality on K-6 students' writing and reading performance: a meta-analysis*

[94] *Hakory, S., Chen, X., & Deacon, S. H. (2021). Learning orthographic and semantic representations simultaneously during shared reading. Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 64(3), 909–921. https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_JSLHR-20-00520*

[95] *Joshi, R. Malatesha, Rebecca Treiman, Suzanne Carreker, and Louisa C. Moats. 2008–2009. "How Words Cast Their Spell: Spelling Is an Integral Part of Learning the Language, not a Matter of Memorization." American Educator 32 (4)*

[96] *Reed, Deborah K., Yaacov Petscher, and Barbara R. Foorman. 2016. "The Contribution of Vocabulary Knowledge and Spelling to the Reading Comprehension of Adolescents Who Are and Are Not English Language Learners." Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal 29 (4)*

A 2014 meta-analysis by Graham and Santangelo showed strong effects for formal instruction, which significantly improves spelling, with larger gains when instruction is frequent, focused and sustained:

- Effect size = 0.54 (vs. no instruction);
- Effect size = 0.43 (vs. informal approaches);
- Effect size = 0.70 (with increased instruction).

Gentry's insights on spelling development

J. Richard Gentry's research highlights the developmental nature of spelling and the importance of explicit, contextual instruction.[97] Key insights from his research are summarised in the table below.

Insight	Explanation
Spelling is developmental	Children learn to spell in predictable stages. Gentry's five-stage model (see below) helps teachers understand where each child is in their spelling journey and how to support them appropriately.
Spelling supports reading fluency	Spelling builds both orthographic memory and phonemic awareness, which are key predictors of reading success.
Explicit instruction is essential	There is a need for systematic, explicit spelling instruction that includes phonics, word patterns and morphology, especially for struggling learners.
Contextual teaching is extremely effective	Embedding the teaching of spelling in context through writing, reading and vocabulary improves retention and transfer rather than isolated word lists.
Spelling reveals linguistic understanding	Spelling reveals how children think about language. Analysing spelling errors reveals phonological, morphological and orthographic knowledge; it also offers insight into pupils' thinking.

[97] *J. Richard Gentry, Breaking the Code: Spelling Instruction for All Students (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).*

The five stages of spelling development

Gentry identified five developmental stages that children typically progress through. Understanding these stages allows teachers to provide targeted support matched to pupils' current capabilities. While progression varies, the stages broadly align with development from pre-school through to the end of Key Stage 2.

STAGE	CHARACTERISTICS	TEACHING TIP
1. Pre-communicative	Scribbles or random letters, with no awareness of letter–sound relationships.	Encourage mark-making and letter exploration through play-based activities.
2. Semi-phonetic	Beginning to connect letters with sounds; may use one or two letters for a word (e.g. 'U' for you).	Use phoneme–grapheme matching games and sound boxes to reinforce sound–letter links.
3. Phonetic	Spelling based on sound (e.g. "sed" for "said"); logical but not conventional.	Celebrate phonetic attempts; model correct spelling through shared writing.
4. Transitional	Awareness of common spelling patterns; mix of phonetic and conventional spelling.	Introduce word families and spelling rules to support pattern recognition.
5. Correct	Mastery of standard spelling; consistent use of rules and exceptions.	Focus on vocabulary expansion and editing skills to refine accuracy.

Teaching spelling

Schools should adopt a systematic, school-wide approach to spelling across all year groups. This should integrate phonics, orthography, etymology and morphology. Phonics provides the foundation, while morpheme-based strategies (e.g. root words, prefixes, suffixes) enhance spelling, vocabulary and decoding.

In the Foundation Stage, spelling should be taught primarily through phonics. Children should be taught to spell words by saying the target word clearly before segmenting it into the correct phonemes.

Pupils should continue to use phonics throughout primary school to help them spell. However, the fact that one phoneme can be spelt with many different graphemes is a significant challenge.

As pupils progress through primary school, teachers might support pupils' spelling by:

- encouraging them to draw on their knowledge of phonics to identify the sounds in more complex words;
- relating spellings to the content being taught (rather than teaching spelling from de-contextualised word lists);
- pre-teaching spellings of challenging words and anticipating common errors;
- ensuring that pupils practise spellings, for example by using new spellings in their writing or writing words from dictation;
- focusing on a word's etymology to show how spelling is related to meaning and drawing attention to shared morphemes in words, even when the sounds in the related words differ (for example, 'vine' and 'vineyard');
- adding morphemes (where possible) to words to spell many related new words (for example, correspond > correspondence, corresponding, correspondingly, correspondent);
- combining vocabulary development with spelling instruction, including explaining the meaning and function of prefixes and suffixes;
- teaching irregular words by grouping these together where there are useful similarities (such as grouping the irregular spelling 'two' with associated regular words such as 'twin', 'twice' and 'twenty').[98]

The teaching of spelling is likely to work best when linked to curriculum content and when teachers encourage pupils to apply new spellings in writing to reinforce learning. For example, embed vocabulary from science or history topics into spelling lists and writing tasks.

It is helpful to use spelling journals, dictation logs or weekly review sheets to track progress over time. These tools support formative assessment, pupil reflection and targeted feedback.

Orthographic mapping: Four-step routine

Ness and Pace Miles propose a structured, research-based approach to help pupils orthographically map words and embed them into long-term memory.[99]

[98] *T Shanahan, 'The national reading panel report. Practical advice for teachers', Learning Point Associates/North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005, page 13.* Research review series: English - GOV.UK

[99] *Ness, Molly, and Pace Miles. Every Child a Super Speller: A Structured Approach to Orthographic Mapping. New York: Routledge, 2022.*

Four-step routine for embedding words into long-term memory

Step	Purpose	Classroom application
1. See and say	Build visual and auditory recognition.	Display the target word on the board or a flashcard. Pupils are asked to look carefully, say it aloud together, to reinforce the connection between the written form and spoken word.
2. Segment and spell	Strengthen phoneme-grapheme correspondence.	Guide pupils to break the word into phonemes and match sounds to letters. It may be helpful to use magnetic letters, phonics tiles or whiteboards.
3. Study and suss out	Encourage deeper analysis of word structure.	Discuss spelling patterns, tricky parts, or morphemes; ask pupils to 'suss out' what makes the word challenging.
4. Search and stick	Promote repeated exposure and usage.	Encourage pupils to find the word in texts, use in writing, or spot it in classroom displays; repetition helps it 'stick' in memory.

While Ness and Pace Miles focus on structure and mapping, understanding word meaning is also essential. Lyn Stone's four-step process - Meaning, Structure, Family, Practice - emphasises semantic grounding.[100]

[100] *Lyn Stone, Spelling for Life: Uncovering the Simplicity and Science of Spelling (London: Routledge, 2019).*

Meaning-centred approach to spelling instruction

Step	Purpose	Classroom application
1. Meaning	Anchor the word in context and semantics.	Discuss what the word means, use it in a sentence, and connect it to pupils' experiences.
2. Structure	Highlight phoneme-grapheme and morphological features.	Break the word into syllables, phonemes, and morphemes; identify tricky parts or patterns.
3. Family	Build connections with related words.	Explore word families, prefixes, suffixes, and derivatives (e.g., sign, signal, signature).
4. Practice	Reinforce through repetition and varied use.	Engage pupils in writing, spelling games, and finding the word in texts to embed learning.

Teachers may wish to integrate both routines for a linguistically rich and meaningful approach.

Strategies used by proficient spellers

Proficient spellers use strategies that can be taught explicitly:

- **Phonic approach:** sounding out and spelling based on phonemes. This method also supports word reading.
- **Analogy:** using known words to spell unfamiliar ones (e.g. 'call' and 'fall').
- **'Tricky' parts of words:** these are identified clearly and learned (such as 'separate' and 'miniature'

Embedding these strategies in classroom routines builds confidence and independence. Model analogy strategies during shared writing or use phoneme boxes during guided practice.

Analysing spelling errors

The EEF highlights a diagnostic approach to analysing spelling errors, which reveals gaps in phonological, morphological and orthographic knowledge.[101] This enables targeted support on specific difficulties.

[101] *Education Endowment Foundation. Improving Literacy in Key Stage 2. London: EEF, 2021.*

Common spelling errors and strategies

Error	Phonological	Orthographical	Morphological
Explanation	Phonological errors are not phonologically plausible, for example, 'virous' for 'various' or 'categroy' for 'category'. These errors suggest a child might have gaps in their knowledge of letter-sound relationships, or in their knowledge of the sound structure of a particular word.	Orthographical errors are phonologically plausible but inaccurate, for example, 'erly' for 'early' or 'sircle' for 'circle'. These errors suggest a child is relying only on letter-sound rules to produce an invented spelling. The gap in their knowledge may be related to knowledge of common letter combinations or the word-specific spelling.	Morphological errors may be phonologically plausible but occur due to a lack of awareness of morphemes, for example, 'trapt' for 'trapped', 'imaginat' for 'imagination' or 'dissappear' for 'disappear'. These errors suggest that pupils have not learned the consistent spelling of the morphemes in the word.

Error	Phonological	Orthographical	Morphological
Strategies	Explicit teaching of consonant and vowel phonemes. Practise sounding phonemes all the way through words. Focus on identification of common digraphs in words (pairs of letters used to write a single sound, for example, 'th'). Look at the common digraphs the child is struggling with; focus on lots of examples and exceptions to practise.	Look at patterns of letters and syllables within words. Encourage this when teaching children to learn spellings. When you look at the word, you are looking for patterns and common syllables. Think about what helps you remember these patterns. Encourage automatic recognition of whole words. Teach strategies which support this: *Write the word and write it again over the top. Write the word again. Write the word again with eyes closed.* • Exaggerate the pronunciation or say it 'silly'. • Chunk longer words, for example, 'com-pet-ition'. • Mnemonics: 'Big Elephants Can Always Understand Small Elephants'.	Focus on prefixes, suffixes, and root words and learn common rules. For example, most words ending in 'f' change their plurals to 'ves' (knife to knives). Systematically teach spelling rules with practice consistently over time. Explore the relationship between meaning and spelling by looking at etymology. The history and origins of a word can be a helpful clue to its meaning and spelling. For example, knowing the Greek 'aer' (which means air) will help children to remember and spell aeroplane, aerodynamic, aerosol.

Composition

As the Simple View of Writing shows, writing depends on articulating ideas and structuring them, which may be described as composition. It is critical for schools to teach writing composition strategies through modelling and supported practice

Explicit teaching of sentences

Building strong writers begins with sentences. Sentence-level teaching is the engine that drives progress in composition. Talk is the foundation: pupils need to hear and practise well-formed sentences before they write them. Teachers can model clear sentence structures in speech, rephrase pupils' ideas and use sentence stems to guide oral composition. Reading aloud and discussing stories also exposes pupils to varied sentence patterns, helping them understand how written language differs from speech.

Explicit teaching of sentences is essential. Start with the basics: every sentence needs a subject and a verb. For example, "Jack saw a giant" is a complete sentence; "Jack" or "Saw a giant" are not. Begin with single-clause sentences before introducing multi-clause structures. Once pupils can construct simple sentences confidently, introduce multi-clause sentences using conjunctions. As pupils gain confidence, they can choose when to use short sentences for impact or extend them for detail.

Oral composition should continue even when pupils can write. Saying a sentence aloud before writing reduces cognitive load and helps pupils organise ideas. Visual prompts, such as pictures and sentence frames can support this process.

Practical approaches

- Model sentence building step by step.
- Use oral rehearsal regularly.
- Provide sentence stems and visual prompts.
- Encourage pupils to notice sentence structures in model texts.

Activities for mastery

- Combine fragments to make complete sentences.
- Extend sentences with conjunctions and adverbials.
- Correct incomplete or run-on sentences.
- Practise different sentence types: statements, questions, commands, exclamations.
- Use sentence combining to merge short sentences into longer, accurate ones. This improves grammar, punctuation and cohesion.
- The goal is accuracy and clarity, not length. Pupils should master sentence construction before moving to paragraphs and extended writing.

Grammar and punctuation

A thorough knowledge and understanding of grammar are crucial to success in writing across all subjects in the curriculum. Grammar and punctuation are essential tools for helping pupils write with clarity and precision. They should not be taught as isolated rules or lists to memorise, but as part of meaningful writing tasks. The emphasis in teaching grammar should be on content that supports pupils' ability to read and write effectively, with a focus on using and applying grammar effectively.

When pupils understand how grammar shapes meaning and how punctuation signals boundaries between ideas, they gain control over their writing and can make deliberate choices.

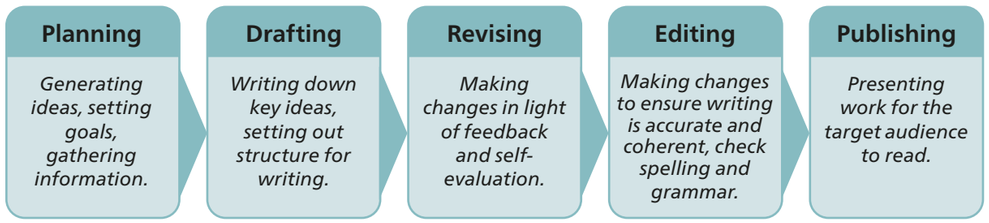
Grammar instruction is most effective when linked to reading and writing. Teachers will wish to use model texts to show how authors build sentences and vary structures for effect. It is important to encourage pupils to notice patterns and apply them in their own writing. There is strong evidence that pupils learn grammar most effectively when they apply it to meaningful writing tasks.

Punctuation should be taught as a tool for clarity, not as an afterthought. Explain how full stops, commas and other marks guide the reader and shape meaning. For example, adding a comma or conjunction can change the flow and emphasis of a sentence.

Grammar teaching should focus on purpose. Help pupils see the effect of their choices: why a short sentence creates drama, or how a relative clause adds detail. This approach moves grammar beyond compliance and turns it into a resource for expressive, accurate writing.

The writing process

Writing is a complex but teachable skill. With structured, evidence-informed teaching, pupils can develop fluency, confidence and enjoyment in writing. Writing can be thought of as a task made up of five stages: planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing.[102]



[102] *Education Endowment Foundation. Improving Literacy in Key Stage 2. London: EEF, 2021. CCEA. Guidance on Effective Literacy Teaching Approaches. Belfast: Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, 2020.*

Pupils should be taught each of these components and underlying strategies. The aim is for them to increase the fluency of these skills and techniques so that they become automatic. The teacher should provide appropriate support, which is gradually reduced over time, so the child is ultimately capable of completing the activity independently.

A writing strategy is a series of actions that writers use to achieve their goals and may support one or more components of the writing process. Over time, pupils should take increasing responsibility for selecting and using strategies. Writing strategies should be explicitly taught. However, pupils will inevitably learn the strategies at different rates, so it is important to recognise that the model is not a linear process.

The following strategies should be carefully modelled and practised:[103]

Writing Strategies

1. Planning

Setting goals and generating ideas before pupils begin writing. Teachers may ask pupils to write down goals to refer to as they write. This stage of the writing process may also involve gathering information, activating prior knowledge (or building new knowledge) and reading exemplar texts to identify key features and consider the writing style used.

Example strategy: using a graphic organiser, such as a Venn diagram, to generate ideas for a balanced argument.

2. Drafting

Noting down key ideas, setting out a logical order for points to be covered and writing out a draft of each section. Although accurate spelling, grammar and handwriting are important, at this stage they are not the focus.

Example strategy: using checklists to support structuring writing and monitoring progress towards goals (for example, 'Does my introduction paragraph explain what topic I'm writing about?'). Over time, pupils can be prompted to develop their own checklists before starting to write, instead of using checklists provided by their teacher.

Schools may wish to use writing frames, which are a structured template that provides sentence starters, connectives, or paragraph prompts to help pupils organise their ideas and develop their writing. These can be used during both the planning and drafting and act as a scaffold, guiding pupils through the structure of a particular text type (e.g., narrative, report, persuasive writing).

3. Revising

Revising involves making changes to the content of writing in light of feedback and self-evaluation. Pupils can be supported to re-read their writing to check whether it makes sense and whether their writing goals have been achieved. Many pupils simply do not read what they have written. It is, therefore, very important to encourage pupils to read and reflect on what they have written. Pupils should build a habit of reading what they have written that goes right into adulthood. Ideas or drafts can also be shared with peers or adults for feedback.

[103] *Department for Education (UK). The Writing Framework. GOV.UK, 2025. PDF link*

Example strategy: using prompt questions to support children when revising their work (for example, 'Are there any places where it would be helpful to add more information?', 'Is any of the phrasing repetitive?', 'Can we make some vocabulary changes using your word bank?').

4. Editing

Making changes to ensure the text is accurate and coherent. At this stage, spelling and grammar assume greater importance and pupils will need to recognise that their work will need to be accurate if readers are to engage with it and extract the intended information from it.

Example strategies: checking capital letters and full stops, writing 'Sp' beside spellings pupils are unsure about and then checking spellings using a dictionary.

5. Publishing

Presenting the work so that others can read it. This may not be the outcome for all pieces of writing but when used appropriately it can provide a strong incentive for pupils to produce high-quality writing and encourage them to carefully revise and edit.

Example strategies: displaying work, presenting to other classes and sending copies to parents and carers.

Teaching approaches

Teaching approaches that allow a slow release of responsibility from the teacher to the pupil have been shown to be effective. Several approaches are set out below. CCEA has provided more detailed information on the key features of each of these approaches.[104]

Modelled writing (I do)

The teacher takes the lead while pupils observe the expert writer. This provides the opportunity for the teacher to show, in small steps, how to apply new knowledge. The teacher should think aloud, focusing pupils' attention on the choices of language and structure, helping them to understand the steps involved in problem solving and critical thinking. Children participate by listening and observing the expert at work, rather than by contributing ideas and pursuing points through discussion. The teacher talks through the process step-by-step to show the learner how things are done. Children see that writing is an interactive process and are reassured that writers make mistakes

[104] *CCEA. Language and literacy in the foundation stage: Writing. Belfast: CCEA, (2007). (PDF) Foundation Stage: Language and Literacy: Writing*

Shared writing (we do)

Shared writing involves pupils constructing texts with the teacher. This provides the opportunity for them to share ideas in a supportive and safe environment while the teacher can control the focus as the expert writer and focus pupils' attention on specific elements. It allows children to participate in the writing process by contributing ideas and knowledge without the pressure of having to write on their own.

It offers pupils the opportunity to move beyond imitating a model text and develops their awareness of possible language choices. The teacher's frequent questions during shared writing can be directed at specific pupils. Shared writing is particularly supportive for struggling writers.

Independent writing (you do)

Pupils write individually and independently after modelled or shared writing, practising what they have observed. The modelled and shared writing should allow pupils to gain confidence when writing independently

Guided writing

Guided writing involves the teacher working with a selected group of pupils, who share a similar need for challenge or support, to help them to draft their writing. This can take place while the rest of the class writes independently. Pupils can share their ideas and work together to edit sentence structures. The teacher has oversight to monitor their focus and misconceptions and to be encouraging, while the pupils have peer support to develop their ideas. This strategy is particularly effective when adjusting and adapting teaching to target those who might fall behind.

Purpose and audience

Consideration of audience and purpose can support effective writing. Like adults, children often write more effectively when they have a clear purpose and an audience. Giving pupils a reason to write and someone to write for can make writing more meaningful. Sometimes, pupils themselves can be the audience, using writing to clarify and organise their own understanding.

There are four main purposes for writing: to describe, narrate, inform and to persuade. Pupils need to learn how to adapt their writing for different audiences, which includes choosing an appropriate form or genre. To do this well, they must understand the features and conventions of a range of genres. Exposure to a rich variety of genres, along with opportunities to identify and discuss key features, helps pupils develop this skill.

Supporting pupils with specific learning difficulties

Pupils with dyslexia, working memory challenges or other specific difficulties may need additional scaffolding. Adaptive strategies reduce cognitive load, support organisation and promote independence. Teachers should work closely with SENCOs to ensure instruction is inclusive and responsive. Effective adaptations include:

- **Chunked planning:** break writing tasks into manageable steps using visual organisers or numbered checklists.
- **Speech-to-text tools:** allow pupils to dictate ideas before transcribing or editing, reducing transcription barriers.
- **Visual prompts and word banks:** provide sentence starters, vocabulary mats, or model texts to support idea generation and structure.
- **Memory supports:** use graphic organisers, colour coding and repetition to reinforce sequencing and structure.
- **Flexible output formats:** allow pupils to demonstrate understanding through diagrams, oral explanations or multimedia where appropriate.

These strategies help pupils focus on content and composition while gradually building transcription fluency.

Glossary of Key Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
Alphabet	English uses 26 letters to represent approximately 44 distinct sounds (phonemes), often combining letters in complex ways to capture the full range of spoken sounds. See also: Grapheme, Phoneme, Orthography.
Analytic Phonics	An approach to phonics instruction that begins with whole words and guides pupils to identify phonemes and spelling patterns within them. See also: Analogy Phonics, Synthetic Phonics.
Analogy Phonics	A branch of analytic phonics that uses word families and rhymes to build reading vocabulary. See also: Onset, Rime.
Automaticity	The ability to perform a skill quickly and accurately without conscious effort. In reading, it refers to fluent word recognition that frees cognitive resources for comprehension. See also: Fluency, Decoding.
Balanced Literacy	An approach combining phonics, whole-language and meaning-based strategies; often critiqued for lacking systematic phonics.
Blending	The process of combining individual sounds (phonemes) to form a whole word (e.g., /s/ /a/ /t/ becomes sat). A key skill in synthetic phonics. See also: Segmenting, Phonemic Awareness.
Composition	The process of planning, drafting and refining extended written text. Encompasses idea development, organisation and coherence. See also: Text Generation, Transcription.
Comprehension	The ability to understand and interpret the meaning of text. See also: Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary.
Conceptual Framework	A structured model that connects key literacy domains and principles to guide curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.
CVC Words	Consonant–Vowel–Consonant words, such as cat or dog, used in early phonics instruction.

TERM	DEFINITION
Decodable Texts	Books or materials that align with phonics instruction, allowing children to practise reading with the graphemes they know. See also: SSP, Grapheme.
Decoding	Translating written words into spoken sounds by recognising letter–sound correspondences (e.g., sounding out c-a-t). See also: Phonics, Grapheme, Phoneme.
Digraph	Two letters that work together to represent a single sound (phoneme), such as ea in seat. See also: Grapheme.
Disciplinary Literacy	An approach that recognises literacy demands vary across subjects. Encourages all teachers to teach reading, writing and communication skills specific to their discipline. See also: Genre, Form.
Dictation	A structured routine where pupils write down spoken sentences. Supports spelling, handwriting and sentence construction. See also: Transcription, Morphology.
Digital Literacy	The ability to use digital tools to find, evaluate, create and communicate information. Includes safe and responsible online behaviour. See also: Multimodal Literacy.
Etymology	The origins of words, including their roots, meanings and changes over time. See also: Morphology.
Executive Functions	Mental processes that enable planning, attention, working memory, self-monitoring and regulation. Essential for managing the writing process. See also: Metacognitive Strategies.
Five Pillars of Reading Instruction	The essential components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.
Fluency	The ability to read text accurately, at an appropriate pace and with expression. See also: Prosody, Comprehension.
Form	Forms of writing are texts within a genre that take account of audience and purpose (e.g., letters, diary entries, posters). See also: Genre.
Genre	Types of writing with specific styles, purposes and structures (e.g., narrative, persuasive, report). See also: Form.

TERM	DEFINITION
Grapheme	A written symbol (letter or group of letters) that represents a phoneme. See also: Phoneme, Digraph.
Guided Reading	A small-group instructional approach where the teacher supports pupils with similar reading levels, focusing on decoding, fluency and comprehension.
High-Frequency Words	Words that occur most often in print and should be recognised early to support fluent reading. See also: Sight Words.
Inference	The ability to draw conclusions from text using background knowledge and textual clues. Critical for reading comprehension. See also: Verbal Reasoning, Comprehension.
Literacy	The ability to read, write and understand written language effectively. Encompasses decoding, comprehension and communication.
Metacognitive Strategies	Techniques used to help individuals plan, monitor and evaluate their understanding and learning processes. See also: Executive Functions.
Morphology	The study of the structure and meaning of words, including roots, prefixes and suffixes. See also: Etymology, Spelling
Multimodal Literacy	The ability to interpret and create texts that combine written, visual, auditory and digital elements. See also: Digital Literacy.
Onset	The initial consonant or consonant cluster of a syllable. See also: Rime
Orthographic Mapping (OM)	The process of linking letters to sounds so that a word's spelling, pronunciation and meaning are stored in long-term memory. See also: Sight Words, Grapheme.
Orthographic Knowledge	Understanding how letters and letter patterns represent sounds in written language. See also: Spelling, Phonics.
Orthography	The spelling system of a language, including rules and conventions. See also: Grapheme, Phonics.
Phoneme	The smallest unit of sound in a language that can change meaning (e.g., /b/ vs. /p/). See also: Grapheme, Phonemic Awareness.

TERM	DEFINITION
Phonemic Awareness	The ability to identify and manipulate individual phonemes. A subset of phonological awareness. See also: Phoneme, Segmenting, Blending.
Phonics	A method of teaching reading and spelling by linking phonemes to graphemes. See also: SSP, Decoding.
Phonological Awareness	The broader ability to reflect on and manipulate sound structures in spoken language. See also: Phonemic Awareness.
Prosody	The patterns of rhythm and sound in reading, including intonation, stress and timing. See also: Fluency.
Reading Comprehension	The ability to understand, interpret and engage with written texts. See also: Comprehension, Vocabulary.
Reading load	The cognitive demand placed on a reader by a text, influenced by vocabulary, syntax, layout and background knowledge. See also: Fluency, Comprehension.
Reading for Pleasure	Voluntary reading for enjoyment, which fosters a lifelong love of reading.
Reading Stamina	The ability to sustain attention and engagement with text over time. Often developed through gradual increases in independent reading time. See also: Reading for Pleasure.
Rime	The part of a syllable that contains the vowel and final consonant(s). See also: Onset.
Scaffolding	Temporary support provided by teachers to help pupils master new skills or concepts.
Scarborough's Reading Rope	A model showing how multiple strands (e.g., vocabulary, decoding, fluency) intertwine to support reading comprehension.
Segmenting	Breaking a word into its individual phonemes (e.g., dog → /d/ /o/ /g/). See also: Blending, Phonemic Awareness.
Semantic Knowledge	Understanding the meaning of words and the relationships between them. See also: Vocabulary.
Set for Variability	The process by which readers adjust their interpretation of a word based on context after decoding it.

TERM	DEFINITION
Sight Words	Words that can be retrieved instantly from memory because they've been orthographically mapped. See also: High-Frequency Words, OM.
Simple View of Reading (SVR)	A framework stating that reading comprehension is the product of decoding and language comprehension.
Spelling	The ability to write words correctly using knowledge of phonics, morphology and orthography. See also: Orthographic Knowledge, Morphology.
Structured Literacy	A systematic, explicit and cumulative approach to teaching reading and writing. See also: SSP, Phonics.
Syntax	The rules that govern sentence structure, including word order and grammar.
Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP)	A structured approach to phonics instruction where pupils learn letter–sound correspondences in a planned sequence. See also: Phonics, Decodable Texts.
Text Generation	The process of forming and expressing ideas in written form. Includes vocabulary selection and sentence construction. See also: Composition, Executive Functions.
Three-Cueing System	An approach that encourages children to interpret unfamiliar words using meaning, grammar and visual cues. Not aligned with structured literacy.
Tiered Vocabulary	A framework for categorising words into three tiers: Tier 1 (basic), Tier 2 (high-utility academic) and Tier 3 (domain-specific). Supports vocabulary instruction. See also: Semantic Knowledge, Vocabulary.
Transcription	The physical act of writing, including spelling, punctuation, handwriting and keyboarding. See also: Dictation, Fluency.
Tricky Words	Words that cannot be fully decoded using phonics rules alone (e.g., the, said).
Verbal Reasoning	The ability to understand and reason using concepts framed in words. See also: Inference, Comprehension.

TERM	DEFINITION
Vocabulary	The set of words a person understands and uses. Includes both oral and reading vocabulary. See also: Semantic Knowledge, Comprehension.
Writing Fluency	The ability to produce written text with ease, accuracy and appropriate speed. Influenced by transcription skills, handwriting and executive function. See also: Transcription, Executive Functions.
Writing for Pleasure	Voluntary, self-directed writing that fosters enjoyment, agency and personal expression.

Recommended Reading and Resources

GENERAL

Research reports | National Literacy Trust

Improving Literacy in Key Stage 1 | EEF

Improving Literacy in Key Stage 2 | EEF

Research review series: English - GOV.UK

Progression Framework - Language and Literacy.pdf

ORACY

Why-Oracy-Matters

Oracy Assessment Toolkit

(PDF) Foundation Stage: Language and Literacy: Talking and Listening

READING

The Reading House | EEF

Phonics | EEF

The Reading Framework

A New Model for Teaching High-Frequency Words | Reading Rockets

How We Learn - Ask the Cognitive Scientist

Building Background Knowledge | Reading Rockets

READING FOR PLEASURE

Reading for Pleasure

10 Ways to Cultivate a Love of Reading in Students | Edutopia

Reading For Pleasure

The Carnegies

Children and young people's reading in Northern Ireland in 2025 | National Literacy Trust

WRITING

The Writing Framework

Writing Approaches in Years 3 to 13: Evidence Review July 2019 (EEF)

SPELLING

Phases of Development in Learning to Read and Spell Words

A 4 Step Process - Lifelong Literacy

HANDWRITING

Teaching Handwriting in Early Childhood Classrooms | Edutopia

The relationship of handwriting ability and literacy in kindergarten: a systematic review | Reading and Writing

SEN AND LITERACY ISSUES

Useful Resources and Links - Literacy | SEND Plan