



## GUIDE

4 simple ways to apply the science of reading to your classroom

The “science of reading” has become one of those ubiquitous buzzword phrases in education. But whether teachers know what it means or can at least take an educated guess, they may still find themselves wondering: What are the implications of the science of reading for me, my students, and my whole approach to literacy instruction? And assuming I’m clear on what the science of reading is, how do I go about implementing practices aligned with this science in my classroom?

Let’s start with a good working definition. Simply put, the science of reading refers to the large body of evidence we have on how kids learn to read and how best to teach them. Like any field of research, the science of reading is based on the aggregated findings of many (think thousands or even tens of thousands) individual studies. As we begin to dip into this vast body of knowledge, a good place to start is the simple view of reading.

As Cindy Jiban explains in her article “[The science of reading explained](#),” the simple view of reading can be expressed as the equation  $RC = D \times LC$ , where **RC** is reading comprehension, **D** is decoding, and **LC** is language comprehension.

“Learning to read for understanding requires sounding out and recognizing words—decoding—but it also requires making meaning of the words and sentences we hear—language comprehension,” Jiban wrote.

Now that we’ve touched upon the theoretical framework of the simple view of reading, let’s discuss how to apply it in the real world. Elementary teachers can begin implementing the simple view of reading in their classrooms right away by integrating four activities: distributed practice, spelling shifts, sight word shifts, and a focus on content knowledge.



## 1. Distributed practice

**What is it?** A learning methodology in which practice takes place in numerous short sessions over a long, sustained period of time.

**Why does it matter?** Whether you are teaching letter-sound relationships or new vocabulary words, research shows that this strategy helps students retain the information, making it easily accessible when they need to apply it.

**How do I use it?** Build in short reviews throughout the day, week, and month. Here are some activities to try every day:

- Go through a deck of index cards with graphemes or vocabulary words at the beginning of each phonics or reading lesson, shuffling and working with 15–30 cards daily.
- Place index cards on doorways to serve as passcodes for students to “touch and say” as they walk by. Change these out daily to review previously taught graphemes or vocab words. Model how to touch and say quietly, and clarify what you expect students to say or do (for example, say the sound /ch/ while touching the letters *tch*, or do an agreed-upon motion to represent the word *erupt*).
- Point out these new graphemes and vocabulary words in materials used throughout the day, and ask students to be on the lookout for them, too.

On a weekly basis, you can try activities such as:

- Playing charades with the previously learned vocabulary words.
- Playing a game of bingo in which students match sounds to graphemes and vocabulary words to sentences or stories.
- Using shaving cream to write the graphemes or vocabulary words, matching the sounds or meanings you call out.

## 2. Spelling shifts

**What is it?** A lever to increase students' phonemic awareness and decoding skills.

**Why does it matter?** When students have the opportunity to break up and spell many different words, they are able to focus on the sounds of the words and the process of spelling them. This can be a deeper way of learning than what rote memorization provides.

**How do I use it?** Instead of leading students in activities that focus on how a word “looks”—rainbow writing, for example, or copying a list of words five times—have them focus on a specific grapheme or spelling pattern. Use various words throughout the week to help students practice breaking words up and writing them down. Assess their understanding by taking time to consider whether they've learned the target skill in unpracticed words.

## 3. Sight word shifts

**What is it?** A way to move from rote memorization of “sight words” to helping students use phonics skills to retain all words, even ones with irregular parts.

**Why does it matter?** Students will build the understanding that they can figure out how to read any word they come across by using sound-symbol correspondences they already know instead of guessing based on the first letter or a picture.

**How do I use it?** Instead of asking students to memorize lists of “sight words” (such as Dolch or Fry words), teach them to decode consonant/vowel/consonant (CVC) words first. When that's done, you can introduce irregular words as needed in students' weekly lessons. Research shows that when instructors point out the parts of words that students can decode with their own phonics skills, they will more easily learn to read, spell, and retain their knowledge of the new words.



## 4. Focus on content knowledge

**What is it?** A shift in the focus of read-aloud instruction from a focus on learning a new strategy to using the new strategy in order to build background knowledge and a true understanding of the text.

**Why does it matter?** As students' knowledge of words and the world around them grows, they'll be better able to comprehend future texts—the ultimate goal of reading!

**How do I use it?** During your literacy blocks, consider using fiction and nonfiction texts that align with your science and social studies curriculum as read-alouds. This will help students simultaneously build content knowledge, grow their vocabularies, and improve their reading comprehension strategies.

With the tips described in this article, you now have a handful of simple, straightforward ways to put the science of reading into practice in your classroom. As you find success with these tips—along with others you either learn about or develop on your own—you'll gain the confidence to continue your own professional development in this area. In time, simple strategies will lead to more complex applications, putting you in the best possible position to give your students the literacy instruction they need to thrive at school and beyond.



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