

The Elements of Reading

The elements of reading are defined by Armbruster, Lehr and Osborn (2001) in their work, *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*. These elements should be emphasized in childrens' reading instruction throughout their early school years.

- *Phonemic Awareness* is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate the individual sounds – phonemes – in spoken words.
- *Phonics* is the understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes (the sounds of the spoken language) and graphemes (the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language).
- *Vocabulary* refers to the words we must know to communicate effectively. In general, vocabulary can be described as oral vocabulary and reading vocabulary. Oral vocabulary refers to words we use in speaking or recognize in listening. Reading vocabulary refers to words we recognize or use in print.
- *Fluency* is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly. When fluent readers read silently, they recognize words automatically. They group words quickly to help them gain meaning from what they read. Fluent readers read aloud effortlessly and with expression. Their reading sounds natural, as if they are speaking.
- *Comprehension* is the reason for reading. If readers can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are not really reading.

The Reading Process

Understanding the reading process helps us understand how each of these elements works to help children become proficient readers.

Children love to hear stories and, because of their oral language, they understand and comprehend the characters and events of the story when it is read out loud. However, for children to recognize their spoken language in print (reading) and be able to produce printed language to convey a meaning (writing), they must learn to recognize that the printed words are the same as the words they hear being read. For children to complete this task independently, they must learn to decode printed words into spoken language.

When children see unfamiliar words, they first recognize the shape, direction and orientation of the letters. Even larger chunks of words, including spelling patterns or letter pairs may be familiar to them. Next children associate the printed letters and the letter patterns with the sounds represented by those letters. Children search their

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memories for sounds and manipulate the sounds in their minds or out loud, based on what they have learned about letters and letter patterns.

They combine this information to produce words (from their prior knowledge and background) that may fit in the context of what they are reading. Children immediately filter the meaning of these words against their comprehension of the material, searching for a match. Both word meaning (vocabulary) and content meaning (comprehension) work together as children read and understand their reading.

For strong readers, this process may take only milliseconds. For beginning readers the process may be slower, yet rewarding, and over time will become automatic. For readers who are challenged, this process can be tiresome and frustrating. These children benefit from systematic and explicit instruction in each of the important elements of reading defined by scientific reading research.