



THE  
READING  
LEAGUE Vermont

Sharing knowledge, inspiring change.

# TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

## IMPLEMENTING ACT 139

[vt.thereadingleague.org](http://vt.thereadingleague.org)

It is a great pleasure to announce that The Reading League Vermont is now publishing “Teaching Reading in Brief.” The purpose of the twice-monthly Brief is to give educators in the field practical skills and knowledge to implement Act 139. This law’s passage in May 2024 creates an unprecedented opportunity to teach every student the five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. We hope to reach every Vermont educator in both public and independent schools, especially those involved with preschool and elementary education, special education, English Language Arts, and literacy coaching, curriculum and assessment.

Throughout the 2024-25 school year, we will share a new article written by a Vermont educator twice a month. Every article will include:

- Targeting specific skills students need
- Implementing instructional and/or assessment methods and measuring progress
- Sharing a brief overview of the scientific research underpinning the methods
- Taking next steps if a student fails to make progress
- Offering resources to learn more on this and related topics

Each series will be curated by a Vermont expert on the subject, with editing support from Dorinne Dorfman, Ed. S., Ed. D., and The Reading League Vermont. If you are interested in writing an article, please contact Dr. Dorfman at [dorinnedorfman@gmail.com](mailto:dorinnedorfman@gmail.com).

The three-part series features:

1. **Phonemic awareness** in September - November 2024, with lead editor Cara Arduengo, MS, CCC-SLP, M. Ed.
2. **Phoneme-grapheme mapping** in December 2024 - March 2025, with lead editor Kathryn Grace, M. Ed, CAGS
3. **Orthography and morphology** in April - June 2025, with lead editor Peggy Price, M. Ed., Fellow/OGA

During the 2025-26 school year, we will continue with the themes of **fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension**.

We look forward to sharing the teaching expertise of your colleagues across Vermont and moving toward the goal of reading equity!

### ACT 139

*An act relating to supporting Vermont’s young readers through evidence-based literacy instruction.*

## A Note from the Editors on the First Series

In this first series of Teaching Reading in Brief, we share teaching practices in the foundation of reading. The first component of reading instruction in [Act 139](#) and the [National Reading Panel](#) is phonemic awareness. As we discuss phonemes (or speech sounds), you will see slash marks around a letter or symbol (such as /k/) to distinguish phonemes from letters.

Underlying written language is spoken language, and teaching speech sounds in depth can unlock students' understanding of the English alphabet. In this series of six articles, Vermont practitioners address the following topics: phonological/phonemic awareness, consonants, vowels, manipulating sounds, and multisyllabic words.

The article sequence begins with prekindergarten-level skills and continues through third grade, in alignment with Act 139. Before teaching phonemes, we address teaching phonology (syllables, rhymes) more generally. This first article explores how to teach phonological awareness with our youngest learners.

- Cara Arduengo and Dorinne Dorfman, Editors

### Curious Question:

What syllable type especially loans itself to onomatopoeia? (Check the last page for the answer!)

## Building Blocks of Literacy: The Essential Role of Phonological Awareness in Foundational Skill Development

by Kaitlynn Donahue and Dzana Karabegovic

In this article, we answer the following questions:

- What is the difference between phonological awareness and phonemic awareness (PA)?
- How does PA set the foundation for reading success?
- What does effective PA instruction look like?
- How do you know when a student is making sufficient PA progress?
- When do you call in the speech-language pathologist?

### What is the difference between phonological awareness and phonemic awareness?

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate the smaller units within spoken language.

**Phonological awareness** skills start at a broader level in grades PreK to early kindergarten with an awareness at the word level that includes the following elements: rhymes, syllables, and onsets and rimes (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

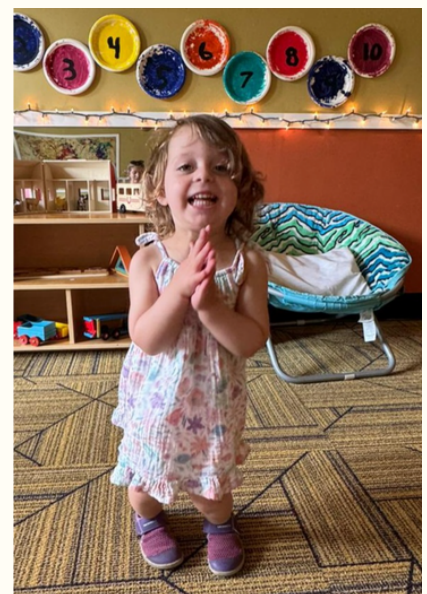


Photo courtesy of Dzana Karabegovic

**Phonemic awareness** is a subcategory of phonological awareness: the ability to recognize and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) within words (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2009).

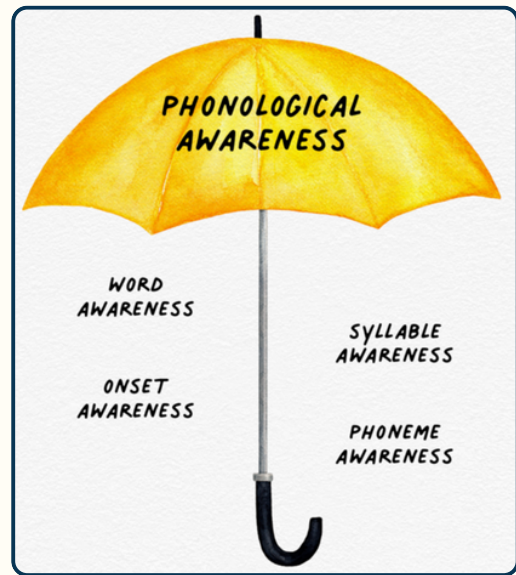
Phonemic awareness is the most advanced phonological awareness skill and is typically introduced to students in kindergarten.

Phonological awareness activities help our youngest learners begin to pay attention to the sounds and structures in English (or another language) and can be introduced as early as age three. The beautiful thing about phonological awareness? It doesn't take long, nor does it take away from other classroom fun and excitement.

To be clear, early phonological awareness activities, while fun and engaging, are not sufficient to prepare students for reading instruction. Nevertheless, this instruction can set the stage for phonemic awareness activities that every student needs, most importantly:

- (1) segmenting (**dish** = /d/ - /ɪ/ - /sh/)
- and
- (2) blending (/d/ - /ɪ/ - /sh/ = **dish**)

Written English (orthography) is complex. Our spelling system is considered “deep because of its inconsistencies: words that are similarly spelled often have different pronunciations” (Seidenberg, 2017, p. 123). Thus teachers instruct phoneme-grapheme correspondence as part of phonemic awareness.



*Image: Kuster, 2023*

***Phonological awareness is the umbrella term that describes several different levels of awareness about language, but phoneme (or phonemic) awareness is the most directly related to reading proficiency and needs to be prioritized for instruction.***

How does phonological awareness set the foundation for reading success?

By explicitly teaching phonological awareness skills and phoneme articulation, students develop a stronger understanding of English sounds, which can be connected to corresponding letters right from the start. It's important to note that students who struggle with these phonological tasks can still receive direct, explicit reading instruction and become strong readers.

In our practice, we find this instructional schedule works well for preschool and kindergarten classrooms until the majority of students have mastered blending and segmenting phonemes (see next page):



10 minutes



4-5 times a week



Whole class instruction

When planning instruction, lessons should be:

- **As direct and explicit as possible.** Unless it is taught, it cannot be assumed that students already know or can do something.
- **Multimodal.** To reinforce the skill(s) being taught, lessons should include auditory, visual, and kinesthetic elements.
- **Focus on mastery.** Students should rely on their learning and not guess. The skill or rule students are working on should be taught and re-taught until they show mastery.

What should my students be able to do? Are they making sufficient progress?

Students typically master word-level skills by age three and rhyme and syllable blending skills by age four. To get started in the fall, teachers conduct screening measures to evaluate their students' current skills (Justice, 2006). This information is used to set instructional goals and create lessons. In winter, students who were below proficient should be retested with the same assessment to measure their progress. These are examples of screeners and assessment tools that evaluate phonological awareness skills in 3-4 year olds: the [Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening](#) (PALS) and the [Get Ready to Read! Revised Screening Tool](#).

In kindergarten, teachers use progress-monitoring tools, also called curriculum-based measures, to monitor all students' progress. This is administered at least once a month and allows teachers to adapt lessons and home in on instructional goals. Progress monitoring tools also allow teachers to identify students who may need layer 2 instruction (in-class or pull-out intervention), in addition to classroom instruction.

In small-group sessions, students receive additional instruction aimed at addressing specific skill deficits. For all of the activities above, an educator can note student responses to assess accuracy and automaticity.

When should I consult a speech-language pathologist? Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are trained to address the needs of children who display difficulties with their phonological awareness skills.

SLPs can help build students' skills in phonological awareness, connect phonemes, letters, words, and sentences, and move between skills using a systematic approach (Justice, 2006). Here is how a SLP can support your students in different layers of instruction:

Layer 1: Bring the SLP into your classroom. The SLP can collaborate with classroom teachers to deliver early literacy lessons to all children. SLPs can co-teach with classroom teachers, providing direct and explicit reading instruction to all students (continued on p. 5)



Based on our years of training and experience, we use this sequence of activities, from simple to complex, for teaching phonological awareness, and move at a pace to maximize reading instruction.

## Phonological Level

## Activity Ideas

**Word:** the understanding that spoken language is made up of individual words.

*Lisa • finds • the • way • back.*

*Word Stepping (can be adapted to games such as hopscotch):* Students move across designated circles or mats and count the number of words said aloud by the teacher.

*Use blocks (or other objects) to represent words in a sentence, having the student place a block for each word.*

**Syllable:** the understanding that words are composed of 1 or more syllables, which is segment of pronunciation around a vowel sound, such as:

*fry a • corn ad • vance • ment.*

Teach syllables as a push of breath, and that each syllable must have a vowel sound. Ask students to hold their hand in front of their mouth as they say sounds like /n/ versus syllables like **not** or **nose**, and describe the difference.

### Onset and Rime

Onset: the initial consonant in a syllable

Rime: the vowel and any consonants that follow

*/b/ - /unch/ = bunch*

This skill helps children learn new words by recognizing familiar patterns.

*Word Families:* Group pictures of words that share the same rime but have different onsets, such as:

*/b/ at = bat, /p/ at = pat, /h/ at = hat, /m/ at = mat.*

Place the words as leaves on branches of a word family tree.

*Classroom and/or outdoor scavenger hunt:* Students find objects that start with the same onset or rhyme.

**Phonemic Awareness:** “the ability to be aware of and consciously think about these individual speech sounds” (International Dyslexia Association, 2022)

Start with simple syllables (no consonant blends): *feet = /f/ /ē/ /t/, rug = /r/ /ŭ/ /g/*

Once simple syllable segmentation is mastered, continue onto complex syllables (includes consonant blends):

*pinch = /p/ /ĩ/ /n/ /ch/, blast = /b/ /l/ /ă/ /s/ /t/*

Teach students to identify the first and last phonemes in 2-letter consonant blends, such as **frost**: /f/, /t/ and **blink**: /b/, /k/ and 3-letter consonant blends: **spring**: /s/, /ng/ and **splash** /s/, /sh/.

Starting in kindergarten, teach phoneme-grapheme correspondence and letter-writing skills as part of phonemic awareness instruction for students to:

- Connect each phoneme to its corresponding letter or digraph (e.g., **ch**, **sh**, **th**) using letter tiles.
- Practice proper writing posture, pencil grip, and letter formation (Spear-Swerling, 2024).
- Write the letter(s) corresponding to spoken phonemes and words (International Dyslexia Association, 2022).

offering modeling examples, scaffolding to support student success, and addressing student errors to enhance learning.

Layer 2: Provide small-group instruction. Students who are not progressing as expected and score below benchmark may receive small-group instruction. Students are grouped together based on similar skill levels. The goal of layer 2 instruction is to accelerate reading development for students to catch up to grade level.

Continue to monitor student progress throughout the year. It's good to remember that SLPs can help support students' phonological awareness development in addition to other language skills. If concerned that a student is demonstrating delays in phonological/phonemic awareness skills after intervention, you may consider a referral for an evaluation by an SLP.

Layer 3: Provide individualized intervention. This is the most intensive and individualized level for students who have not responded adequately to layers 1 or 2. SLPs will work with students one-on-one, addressing specific skill deficits in phonemic awareness, decoding, and/or spoken or written language comprehension. Lessons are tailored to address the specific needs of the student, often with specialized instructional materials that bridge speech to print.

Professional Development: SLPs can offer professional development to teachers and improve their understanding and skills in phonological and phonemic awareness.

By working together with other educators to deliver effective phonological awareness instruction, all students' needs can be addressed, and those who require early intervention can be identified and remediated quickly.

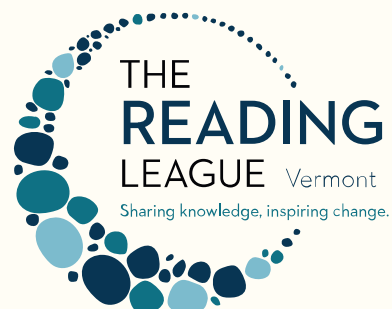
*Special thanks to Dr. Brenda Warren, Chapter President of The Reading League Vermont, for research support in writing this edition of Teaching Reading in Brief, and Sarah Birge for design and technical expertise.*

**Answer to this issue's Curious Question:  
What syllable type especially loans itself to  
onomatopoeia?**

**Many onomatopoeic words contain the consonant-le syllable type.**

Kress and Fry (2016) identify *burple, chortle, cackle, crinkle, fizzle, giggle, gurgle, jangle, jingle, mumble, rumble, rustle, shuffle, sizzle, snuffle, trickle, and waffle*.

Kress, J. E., & Fry, E. B. (2016). *The reading teacher's book of lists*. Jossey-Bass.



## Meet the Writers and Editors

Kaitlynn is a speech-language pathologist at South Burlington High School. She completed her undergraduate work at Nazareth College in Rochester, NY and received her Master's Degree in speech-language pathology at SUNY Plattsburgh. After graduation, Kaitlynn worked as an SLP at Milton High School for eight years. With her extensive experience in diagnosing and treating speech and language disorders, Kaitlynn has a deep understanding of the critical role that foundational reading skills play in a child's overall academic success. Her passion for empowering students through effective communication has driven her to co-found Grow Willows, LLC, with a mission to elevate awareness about the importance of early reading instruction.



Dzana is a special educator at South Burlington High School. She completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Vermont (UVM) in secondary education with a dual endorsement in special education. Upon graduating, she worked at Milton High School as a special educator and English teacher. Later she completed her Master's Degree in special education at UVM. She is currently completing the Orton-Gillingham Associate Level practicum to better serve students who struggle with literacy. Dzana and Kaitlynn opened their own education consulting business, Grow Willows, LLC in January 2024.



Cara loves collaborating with teachers in Vermont public schools. After earning her Bachelor of Arts at Middlebury College, she attended the Upper Valley Educators Institute and New England College and taught 7-12 English Language Arts. She graduated from the Massachusetts General Hospital - Institute of Health Professions where she pursued a certificate of advanced study in reading, recognized by the International Dyslexia Association. Her passion at work is analyzing the components and connections of written language. She is a speech-language pathologist (SLP) at The New School of Montpelier. Previously she worked at Barre Town Middle School and Milton Middle School. Cara also likes to tie in her other experiences as a tutor, violin teacher, and outdoor educator.

Dorinne has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont's schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at BayPath University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-based literacy to struggling readers at Barre Town Middle School.



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<https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/writing/articles/importance-teaching-handwriting>



## Additional Resources

### **Sequential activities in phonological and phonemic awareness:**

Kilpatrick, D. A. (2018) *Equipped for reading success: A comprehensive, step-by-step program for developing phoneme awareness and fluent word recognition*. Casey & Kirsch.

### **Speech and language milestones for ages 3-4 and easy activities to help reach them:**

American Speech and Hearing Association. Communication milestones: Ages 3-4 years. <https://www.asha.org/public/developmental-milestones/communication-milestones-3-to-4-years/>

### **Simple ways to teach syllables in preschool plus links to word lists:**

Reinking, R. (2024). 25 Hands-on ideas for teaching syllabification of words. <https://adventuresinspeechpathology.com/25-hands-on-ideas-for-teaching-syllabification-of-words/>

### **A detailed explanation of onset and rime plus a list of engaging activities to teach:**

Orpi, D. (2024). Making sense of onset and rime. Thrive Literacy Corner. [thriveedservices.com/onset-and-rime/](https://thriveedservices.com/onset-and-rime/)

### **Examples for how to teach all phonological awareness skills, with links to each specific area:**

Victoria State Government. (2003). Literacy teaching toolkit: Phonological awareness games. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/readingviewing/Pages/litfocusphonologicalexample.aspx>