



TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

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The Power of *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-cian*: The Hidden Building Blocks of Academic Vocabulary

By Samara McDonald and Abby Roy

As students transition into the upper elementary grades, they begin to encounter a richer, more sophisticated vocabulary across all subject areas. Words like *eruption*, *conclusion*, and *politician* are no longer rare. They are central to understanding all academic content, including but not limited to science, social studies, math, literature, and the arts. These words contain the Latin-derived suffixes *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-cian*. These word endings are more than just spelling patterns; they are meaningful building blocks that signal specific parts of speech and help convey abstract concepts and roles. Teaching students how to recognize and spell these suffixes gives them the tools to decode unfamiliar words, enhance comprehension, and expand their vocabulary with confidence.

This article will explore:

- What are *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-cian*?
- Why teach *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-cian*?
- How do these suffixes or Latin syllables improve decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension?
- What concepts should be taught prior to teaching *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-cian*?
- When and how should these be taught?

1. What are *-tion*, *-sion*, and *-cian*?

These word endings are often introduced as suffixes or Latin endings, but their structure and origins are a bit more complex. All three suffixes are derived from Latin and are commonly found in academic, scientific, and Tier 2 vocabulary words (Beck et al., 2013). Tier 2 vocabulary words can be used in a variety of contexts and serve to make our speaking and writing more sophisticated. Examples of Tier 2 words include *splendid*, *formulate*, and *intrusion*. They are the kind of words that, once students know them, boost both their academic understanding and ability to communicate complex ideas clearly when writing and speaking.

Have you watched The Reading League Vermont Aug. 2025 Adolescent Literacy Leadership Webinar Series?

Last month TRL-VT hosted the second annual literacy leadership webinar, featuring four inspiring, evidence-aligned presentations by a wide range of professionals: WRVSU Superintendent **Jamie Kinnarney**, psychologist **Abby Roy**, literacy facilitator **Dr. Julie Brown**, and speech-pathologists **Cara Arduengo**, **Emily Detzer** & **Jennifer Conforti**. Your colleagues and you can watch these as well as the 2024 series free online at the [TRL-VT website](#).

Curious Question

While some words have been clipped, like *advertisement* to *ad* and *submarine* to *sub*, what are some words we have long forgotten were once clipped from larger words?

Latin Suffix	Spelling & Pronunciation Breakdown	Examples	Explanation
-tion	ti + on /sh/ + /ən/*	<i>action,</i> <i>motion</i>	In Latin-derived words, ti before a vowel often says /sh/. The on ending says /ən/ in unstressed syllables.
-sion	si + on /zh/ or /sh/** + /ən/	<i>vision,</i> <i>tension</i>	In Latin-derived words, si can say /zh/ (like in vision) or /sh/ (like in tension). Again, on says /ən/.
-cian	ci + an /sh/ + /ən/	<i>musician,</i> <i>politician</i>	In Latin-derived words, ci before a vowel says /sh/, and in unstressed endings sounds like /ən/. This ending is common for people's professions.

*See Section 4 for our discussion on the schwa phoneme /ə/.

The phonemes /sh/ and /zh/ are a consonant pair, meaning that the mouth is in the same position, but /sh/ is unvoiced (reduction** and **auction**) and /zh/ is voiced (you use your vocal cords) as in the words **fusion** and **measure**.

Here is a simple chart of example words ending in **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian** categorized by 2-, 3-, 4- and 5-syllable words.

two-syllable words		
-tion	-sion	-cian
action	fusion	<i>Not found in English.</i>
caution	mansion	
motion	mission	
nation	tension	
station	vision	

three-syllable words		
-tion	-sion	-cian
attraction	aggression	magician
construction	conclusion	musician
eruption	exclusion	optician
prediction	inclusion	technician
subscription	intrusion	beautician

four-syllable words		
-tion	-sion	-cian
education	apprehension	electrician
fascination	comprehension	dietician
information	indecision	politician
situation	supervision	statistician

five-syllable words		
-tion	-sion	-cian
communication	<i>Five-syllable words ending in -sion are extremely rare in standard English, unlike words with -tion.</i>	mathematician
determination		pediatrician
organization		diagnostician

Many teachers introduce **-tion** and **-sion** as Latin suffixes that change verbs into nouns, following the guidance of programs such as *The Gillingham Manual* (Gillingham & Stillman, 1997, p. 203) and the *Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing® (LiPS) Program for Reading, Spelling, and Speech, 4th Edition* (Lindamood & Lindamood, 2011, pp. 153–158). This aligns with the definition of **-tion** in [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) as “a suffix occurring in words of Latin origin, used to form abstract nouns from verbs.” However, some literacy experts offer a different perspective. For example, Van Cleave (2020) argued that it is more accurate to teach students that the true suffix is **-ion**, and that the **t** or **s** belongs to the base word (e.g., **migrate** → **migration**, where **t** is part of **migrate** and the silent **e** is dropped following a standard spelling rule. Other examples include **revise** → **revision** and **electric** → **electrician**).

Despite these differences of opinion about whether it is best to classify **-tion** or **-sion** as suffixes or not, teaching **-tion** and **-sion** as units with a unique pronunciation of /shən/ or /zhən/ is instructionally useful for students, especially if the students are learning **-tion** or **-sion** before learning Latin roots.

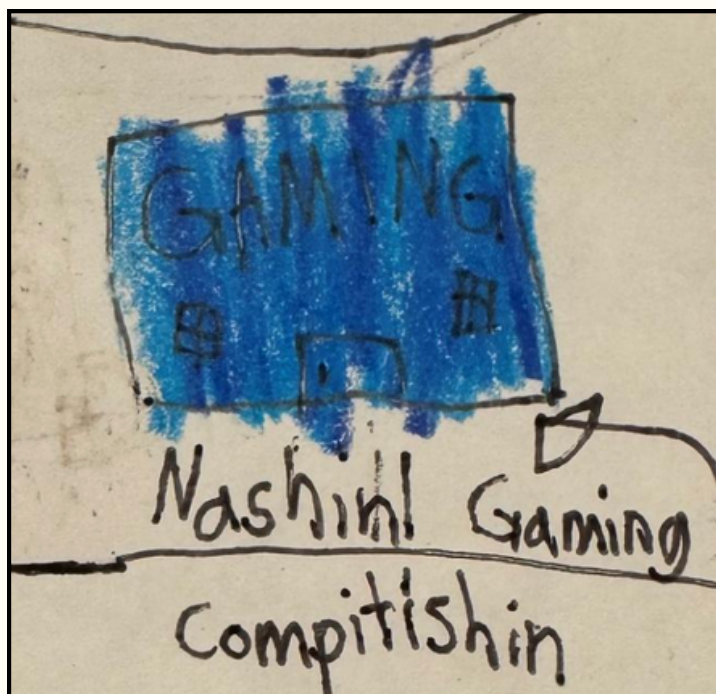
While **-cian** is less common, the meaning is more straightforward: it clearly functions as a suffix meaning “a person who practices or is skilled in” a particular area or describes one’s occupation (e.g., **musician**, **technician**, **physician**). Given that **-tion** and **-sion** are more common, the bulk of our article will focus on them. Similar to **-ion** in **-tion** and **-sion**, **-ian** is also a Latin suffix, meaning “one who,” as seen in **comedian**, **historian**, and **librarian**, though the letter **i** is pronounced as /ē/, which is common in Latin derivations.

2. Why teach **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian**?

If students only rely on the sounds they hear in a word, they may spell words ending in **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian** as “shun” or “shin,” like this fifth grader did when he wrote **national gaming competition**.

In addition to spelling accuracy, these suffixes reveal how language is structured and how words are transformed:

- **-tion** and **-sion**: turn verbs into nouns (e.g., **migrate** → **migration**, **fuse** → **fusion**)
- **-cian**: indicates a person skilled in a specific field (e.g., **music** → **musician**)



By fourth and fifth grade, students are increasingly expected to read and comprehend texts filled with multisyllabic, academic vocabulary. Many of these words contain **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian**, which frequently appear in content-specific words across the curriculum:

- In science, students encounter words ending in **-tion** and **-sion** that describe processes or phenomena, such as **absorption**, **circulation**, and **expansion**.
- In social studies, **-tion** words are used to explain historical or societal developments and concepts such as **civilization**, **migration**, and **exploration**.
- In the arts and other professions, **-cian** words describe people with specialized roles or expertise, such as **musician**, **technician**, and **politician**.

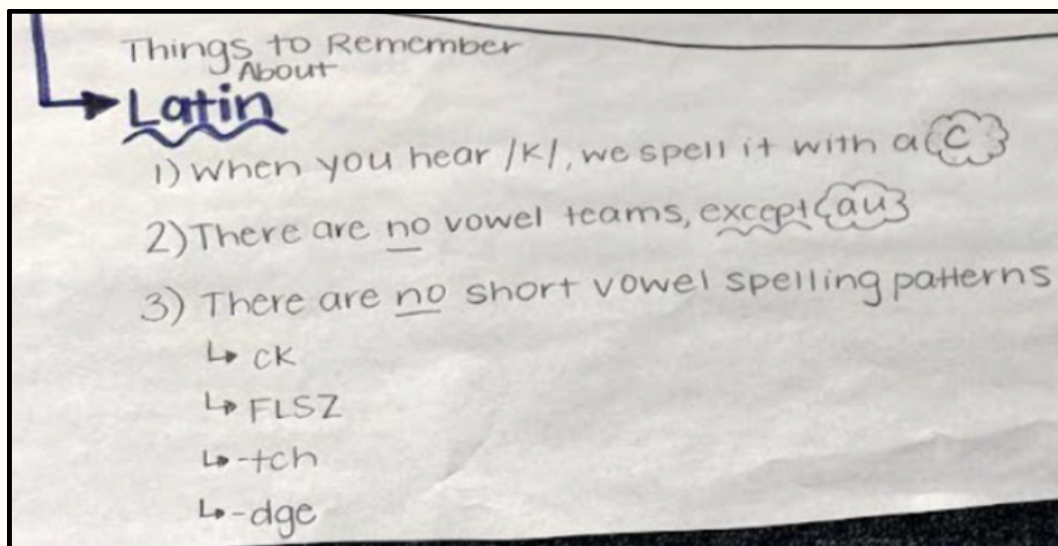
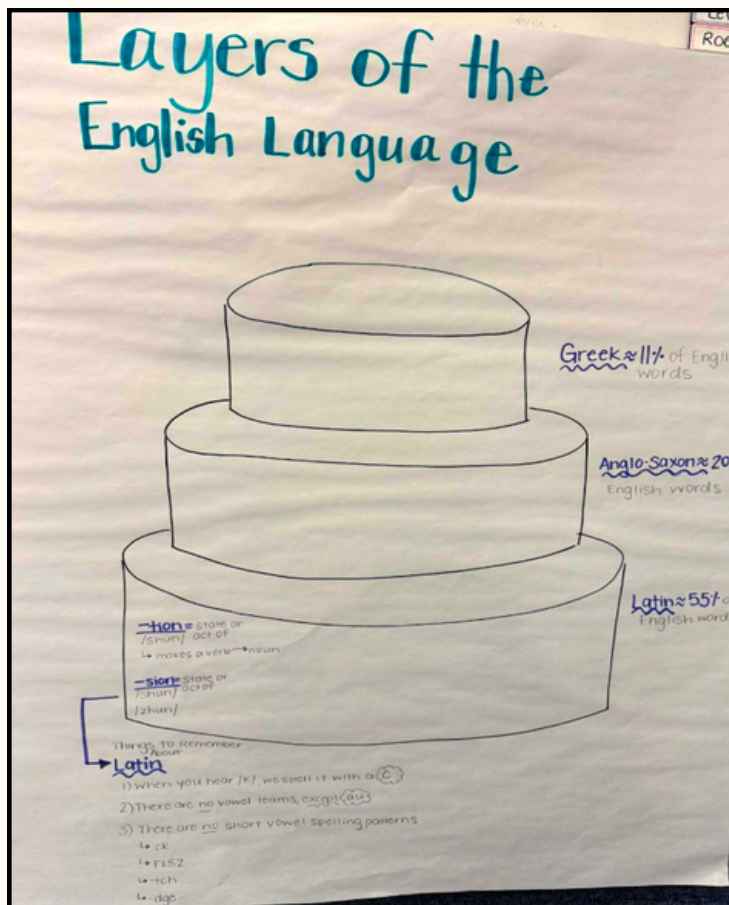
See the chart below for more examples:

Base Word	Verb/Noun	Suffix	Resulting Word	Meaning
migrate	verb	-tion	migration (noun)	The act of moving from one place to another
operate	verb	-tion	operation (noun)	The act or process of working, performing or functioning
decide	verb	-sion	decision (noun)	The act of making a choice
revise	verb	-sion	revision (noun)	The act of correcting or changing
music	noun	-cian	musician	A person skilled in music
magic	noun	-cian	magician	A person skilled at magic

Teaching Latin-derived suffixes **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian** is a great introduction to more complex Latin endings. To learn more about Latin-derived endings such as **-ion**, (**champion**), **-ia** (**media**), **-ian** (**comedian**), and **-iate** (**appreciate**), you can reference *Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing® (LiPS) Program for Reading, Spelling, and Speech, 4th edition*. Many other robust OG or Structured Literacy programs, such as the University of Florida Literacy Institute *Foundations Manual* and *Phonics and Spelling Through Grapheme Mapping* (Grace, 2022), include these Latin endings.

3. How do these suffixes or Latin syllables improve decoding, spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension?

- **Decode unfamiliar words:** Recognizing familiar suffixes helps students break down long words into manageable parts, improving their decoding efficiency and word recognition skills.
- **Spelling complex words:** Understanding how to spell /shən/ and /zhən/ in many Latin words will improve spelling. If the students identify a Latin suffix, this also helps them with spelling as follows: (1) if you hear /k/, use 'c' instead of 'k' as in **accommodation**, (2) if you hear a long vowel sound, assume it is an open syllable instead of a vowel team as in **rotation**, (3) avoid Anglo-Saxon spelling patterns, such as **dge**. See the photos from a fourth-grade classroom.



Photos courtesy of Samara McDonald. Percentages from W.V.C.ED Word Origins Poster.

- Understand complex ideas: Knowing that **-tion** and **-sion** often signal processes, actions, or conditions, and that **-cian** indicates a person with a specific skill or occupation, allows students to make sense of abstract or specialized terms.
- Expand academic vocabulary: Exposure to and practice with these suffixes help students internalize patterns, leading to better reading fluency and writing expression.

4. What concepts should be taught prior to teaching **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian**?

Based on our teaching experience, our students who have been taught using the Orton-Gillingham Approach (or Structured Literacy more generally) gain many valuable skills for decoding and encoding. Once at the upper elementary level, students rapidly expand their vocabulary, as they have acquired many skills throughout their education. There are logical prerequisite skills that will help students before they are taught **-tion** and **-sion** that include the following:

1. Syllable Types: Read and spell words using most syllable types (closed, open, silent-e, and r-controlled syllable types at a minimum), including digraphs and consonant blends. Some examples include closed VC syllables (e.g., **junct** → **junction**) and open V syllables (e.g., **nat** → **nation**).

2. Syllable Division Patterns: Read and spell multisyllabic words using syllable-division strategies to break apart multisyllabic words. Following an established scope and sequence, syllable division should be taught explicitly alongside direct instruction in spelling patterns

and affixes. It is beneficial for students to have a strong grasp of the syllable-division strategies to decode and encode words, especially as their vocabulary becomes more complex. Some examples include sub/ject (VC/CV), pre/tend (V/CV), and con/tract (VC/CCV).

3. Affixes: Read and spell a variety of words with common prefixes, suffixes, and possibly some Latin roots. Having said this, it is not feasible to teach students every Latin root when they are first learning to read and spell words with **-tion** and **-sion**. Knowing the pronunciation of **-tion** and **-sion** will help with reading and spelling accuracy.

4. Base Word vs. Root: Differentiate between a base word and a root. A base word can stand on its own as a meaningful word, but a root needs another morpheme to create a meaningful word.

5. Suffix Spelling Rules: Read and spell words containing suffix spelling rules, particularly e-drop rule (**migrate** - **migration**) and the y-to-i rule (**multiply** - **multiplication**)

6. Schwa: Students need to have a basic understanding of schwa, an unstressed vowel sound in a multisyllabic word. The schwa phoneme is represented as an upside-down e, /ə/ (for example, the word **lemon** is /ləmən/. Schwa or a mumble vowel sound often sounds like /ŭ/ (as in **sofa**) or /ĩ/ (as in **tendon**). Any vowel (**a, e, i, o, u, y**) and some vowel teams can become schwa in a multisyllabic word (as in **mountain**). The Latin endings **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian** all contain the schwa vowel sound.

7. English's Origins: Students will learn that **-tion**, **-sion**, and **-cian** come from Latin; therefore, it is useful to have a general understanding of the origins of English. It supports their background knowledge and gives them the “why”

as to why we are learning about various affixes. Listed below are a couple of videos that support students' understanding of the origins of the English language:

- English Decoded (Reading Horizons, 2017)
- How Did English Evolve? (TED-Ed, 2012)

5. When and how should these be taught?

Below is an abbreviated progression used in one of the author's fourth-grade classroom when introducing **-tion** and **-sion**, using a scope and sequence developed by the Stern Center Orton-Gillingham Institute.

Layers of English: Focus on Latin

Latin Suffix: **-tion** = /shən/

- Forms nouns from verbs or roots ending in **t** or **te**
- Latin **ti** = /sh/, **on** = /ən/ (letter **o** is a schwa, either /ŭ/ or /ĩ/)

1. Begin with two-syllable **-tion** words where the first syllable is closed or open:

- Examples: **station, lotion, action, junction, fiction, friction**
- The Latin root in each word will not usually be known to students, and at this point, that's fine. The initial goal is for students to read and spell words with **-tion**.

2. Three-syllable words – integrate previously taught prefixes

- Examples: **subtraction, prediction, restriction, construction, dejection**

3. Introduce the pattern **-ation** with long /ā/ and verb-noun relationship:

- Examples: **vacate - vacation, rotate - rotation, relate - relation**
reservation, taxation, vexation, vocation

4. Introduce the pattern **-ition** with short /i/:

Examples: **condition, partition, ignition, position, exhibition**

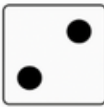
Keeping with the Orton-Gillingham (OG) principles of teaching what is more common to less common, teach **-tion** before **-sion**. One doesn't want to introduce both **-tion** and **-sion** at the same time because this can be confusing for spelling, given that they both can be pronounced as /shən/. When introducing **sion** next, explicitly teach that **-tion** and **-sion** both can say /shən/, but there are some helpful tips on when to use **-sion**:

1. If you hear /zhən/ as in **fusion** and **vision**
2. Words ending in **ss**, as in **discuss** → **discussion**
3. The related word ends in /d/, as in **explode** → **explosion**

Tell students that, when in doubt, use **-tion**, because it is the most common of the three.

Given that **-cian** is much lower in frequency, we recommend teaching this much later in your scope and sequence. After **-tion** and **-sion** have been explicitly taught, students practice their decoding and encoding skills in small groups. Two example decoding activities include *Roll and Read* (UFLI, 2023) and *What's the System?* Both activities can be done independently, with a partner, or led by the teacher in a small group setting.

Roll and Read
Lesson 119: -tion

					
action	imagination	location	equation	intuition	audition
lotion	caution	friction	motion	fraction	operation
imagination	portion	option	addition	nation	fiction
position	question	introduction	reaction	rotation	section
correction	subtraction	eruption	station	solution	digestion


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Roll and Read can be a quick way for students to practice and review decoding skills. Each student has a die. The student rolls the die, finds the column with the corresponding number, and reads a word in that column. When this activity is done in small groups, students will read the words aloud so that the teacher can hear any errors and provide immediate feedback. Based on our teaching experience, if students do not know a word, they may either skip over it or guess. To avoid this, when in a small group, support them by reviewing tools taught in their OG lessons, such as syllable division or boxing off affixes, to better support their reading accuracy. In addition to building accuracy, it also provides a great opportunity to build students' vocabulary. Discussing the word with a student and asking them to give examples is an opportunity for them to expand on their ideas and understanding.

What's the System? is an example of a reading activity that incorporates cumulative review of previously taught skills, also known as mixed practice or interleaving. In the example below, students are reading multisyllabic words ending in **-tion** while also reviewing whether the first syllable is closed, open, or r-controlled. One may conclude the activity with a sentence-writing task: students select a word from the page and write a sentence using it. You may challenge students to use more than one word from the list in their sentence. This motivates them to expand their ideas in addition to providing a valuable opportunity to apply what they've learned about sentence structure in a meaningful context.

What's the System?

	First Syllable VC (closed)	First Syllable V (Open)	First Syllable Vr (R-Controlled)
1. traction	✓		
2. portion			✓
3. nation		✓	
4. fraction	✓		
5. station		✓	
6. graduation	✓		
7. ignition	✓		
8. position	✓		
9. partition			✓
10. hesitation	✓		

When you finish, write a sentence with one of the words above. **CHALLENGE:** Try to write a sentence with two of the words above.

I saw Bob's hesitation to
take only a fraction of
everyone else's portion.

Sentence Dictation:

He can't help that
stably mansion on his
position.
The lesion on his
leg is healing quickly.

In addition to the above reading activities, students are informally assessed on their encoding skills (spelling dictated words and sentences). These data identify which students need more practice and if the class, as a whole, needs more review. When conducting an informal spelling assessment, tell students the words will contain either **-tion** or **-sion** /shən/, but not both within the same spelling list, to avoid spelling confusion (is it **station** or "stasion"?).

S. O. S. (Spelling)

- evasion ✓
- evision ✓
- invasion ✓
- evasion ✓
- infusion ✓
- tension ✓
- inversion ✓
- abrasion ✓
- intrusion ✓
- fusion ✓

Photos courtesy of Samara McDonald and her fourth-grade class

Conclusion

Teaching prefixes and suffixes opens a whole new world of language to students. The overlap in vocabulary across subjects such as science, social studies, and math enables students to develop a sophisticated vocabulary. Students become more engaged in lessons when questions such as “What do you think [X word] means?” or “Give me an example of a time when [X word] is used.” These questions lead to great discussions, and students tend to initiate more conversations because they are asking questions and are highly engaged in their learning. Giving students the tools they need to be successful in reading, writing, and building vocabulary allows them to take ownership of their learning, which is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching morphology.

Additional Teaching Resources

Texts for Teachers:

Russo, E., Shapiro, J., Wallace, L., & Hickey Gold, D. (2008). *PS: Prefixes, suffixes, roots. Jeld*. [Resource of Lists, Phrases, Sentences, Poems, and Stories]

Van Cleave, W. (2018). *Everything you want to know and exactly where to find it. W.E.C.ED.*

Van Cleave, W., & Dover, S. C. (2013). *Phrases and sentences for reading & spelling. W.E.C.ED.*

Answer to this issue’s

Curious Question:

bus (omnibus), cab (cabriolet),
pants (pantaloons), pep (pepper),
scram (scramble), stereo (stereophonic),
trump (triumph), varsity (university),
and zoo (zoological garden)

Electronic Resources:

University of Florida Literacy Institute. (2023). Toolbox. *UF Literacy Institute*.
<https://ufli.education.ufl.edu/foundations/toolbox/>

Vocabulary.com. (2019). *Find out how strong your vocabulary is and learn new words at Vocabulary.com*. <https://www.vocabulary.com/>

Phonics & Stuff Teaching Tools. (n.d.). *Phonics & stuff*. <https://phonicsandstuff.com/tools>

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- Kress, J. E. & Fry, E. B. (2016). *The reading teacher's book of lists*. Jossey-Bass.
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- Van Cleave, W. [PaTTAN]. (2020, June 11). *Morphology matters: Using bases & affixes to develop vocabulary in students of all ages* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUjfi3WHU4Q>
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Meet the Writers and Editors



Samara McDonald, B.A.

Samara McDonald is an enthusiastic educator of six years. After completing her Bachelor of Arts at Saint Michael's College, she began teaching as a fourth- and fifth-grade math and literacy interventionist in Essex, and she experienced her first year as a classroom teacher in the midst of COVID. Currently teaching fourth grade at Vergennes Union Elementary School, Samara provides Structured Literacy instruction and has developed many lessons and resources to best support students and other educators. Her journey with Structured Literacy began when she took *Introduction to Orton-Gillingham for Upper Grades* and an accompanying year of coaching with the Stern Center Orton-Gillingham Institute. Her goals as an educator are to best support her students and create an environment where they feel welcome and safe in order to grow and take ownership of their learning. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her basset hound and playing the piano.

Abby Roy is a nationally certified school psychologist with over fifteen years of professional experience working with students of all ages. Abby received her Master of Arts and Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study at Tufts University, and she is presently a Fellow-In-Training at the Stern Center Orton Gillingham Institute. She worked in public schools as a psychologist and autism and behavior consultant prior to joining the evaluation team at the Stern Center for Language and Learning in Williston, Vermont. She has expertise in providing individualized, diagnostic assessments and instructional recommendations based on the science of reading. Abby is particularly interested in uncovering language-based learning disabilities that can present as student disengagement. She is passionate about bringing structured literacy to classrooms everywhere and believes that all individuals have the right to read.



**Abby Roy, M.A., NCSP,
CAGS, FIT/OGA**



Peggy Price, M.Ed., F/OGA is the Director of the Stern Center Orton-Gillingham Institute, the only Orton-Gillingham Academy (OGA) accredited training program in Vermont. She leads a talented team of OGA Fellows and Clinical Supervisors who provide a wide range of courses and workshops, district-wide consulting, and in-depth mentoring for educators seeking OGA certification. Peggy has taught Orton-Gillingham to students ages 5 to 44 and finds joy in watching both students and educators grow as they learn the structure of English. She holds a Master's in Special Education from Georgia State University and a Bachelor's in Psychology from Binghamton University.

Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., OG/A, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont 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 Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.

