



**DROPPIN'  
KNOWLEDGE  
ON**

# **Foundational Skills**

**Phonological and Phonemic Awareness  
Exercises Aligned to the Science of Reading**

**Heidi and Adam Martin**

**JOSSEY-BASS™**  
A Wiley Brand



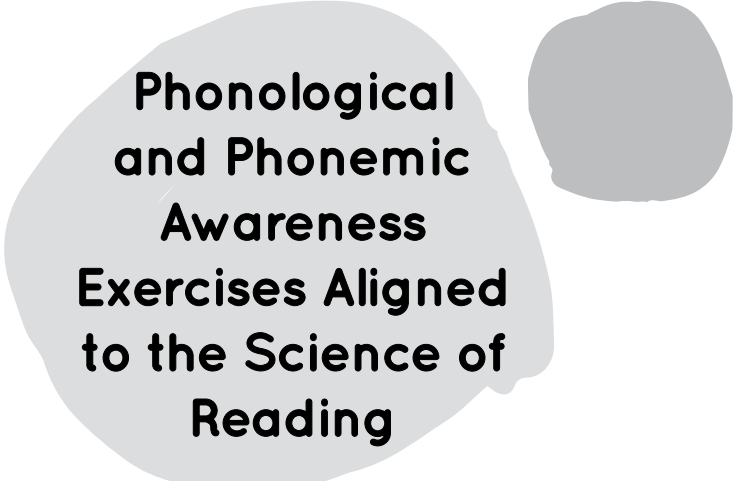
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Heidi Martin

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# About the Authors

**Heidi Martin** is trained in LETRS for Early Childhood, IMSE Orton-Gillingham, and Top 10 Tools. She is a National Facilitator for LETRS EC. She has presented at national conferences as well as provided training at the district level. Heidi is the author of *P is for Paint*, which is the one and only alphabet book with embedded mnemonics. She has authored and self-published the *Decodable Adventure Series* books. She taught first grade for over 10 years and most recently taught Kindergarten and 4K.

**Adam Martin** is a National LETRS Facilitator certified for Units 1–8 and presents to teachers and districts on a weekly basis. He has his Masters in Educational Literacy and his Reading Specialist License. He is the co-author and editor for the *Decodable Adventure Series* books. He taught first grade for seven years and has tutored children of all ages.

## How to Contact the Authors

We appreciate your input and questions about this book! Email us at [hello@droppinknowledge.com](mailto:hello@droppinknowledge.com) or visit our website at [www.droppinknowledge.com](http://www.droppinknowledge.com).

## Other Books in the *Droppin' Knowledge Series*

*Droppin' Knowledge on Sight Words and Word Mapping: High-Frequency Word Activities Aligned to the Science of Reading*

*Droppin' Knowledge on Phonics: Spelling and Phonics Activities Aligned to the Science of Reading*



# Hey, Parents and Teachers!

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We are so excited to help you teach reading! We are Heidi and Adam Martin—both former first-grade teachers (and parents) who now spend our time sharing the Science of Reading with as many people as we can! But before this, we **had no idea there was a science to how we learn to read**. We taught first grade for a combined 15+ years using what most people call “balanced literacy” methods until we found that there is actual science to how we learn to read.

We also learned that according to the 2022 Nation's Report Card, less than 40% of kids are reading proficiently.<sup>1</sup> To us, this was a big wake-up call. If over 60% of our kids are not reading proficiently, we must be doing something wrong!

Once we learned there was decades of evidence and research on how we learn to read, we set out on a mission to unlearn and learn it all. We want to let you know that this has been a journey, not a sprint. There was a lot for us to unlearn (and still is). Throughout this journey of unlearning, we definitely had to work through some ups and downs, as well as emotions of frustration, anger, and regret. The fact that we were not taught this earlier, especially since this science has been around for over 20 years, can really weigh on you. We often think back to the kids we could have helped if we only knew what we know now. However, you don't know better until you do, so we just have to move forward and make sure this doesn't happen again. If some of this is new to you as well, please remember to give yourself grace!

Let's talk about some of the terms we have been using and clarify where we came from and where we are now.

## What Is Balanced Literacy?

Balanced literacy sounds good, doesn't it? I mean who doesn't love being balanced? Heidi was sold on this, especially being a type B teacher. She was not a fan of words like "systematic" and "structured." Then, she found out that balanced literacy is not truly balanced after all. Adam was starting his teaching career while being taught about the Science of Reading through his licensure program. However, in our school district, we were using balanced literacy curriculums. Going through hours of professional development on this curriculum, this became the norm. Since this was all the buzz, it had to be the most beneficial thing for our

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>.

students, right? Adam said, “I had my skepticisms on balanced literacy, especially since I was seeing minimal progress from my students. I think this is the case for a lot of teachers.”

To be clear, when we say balanced literacy, we are talking about programs and strategies that were most often used in schools and called “balanced” within those schools and programs. In reality, these programs skip many of the foundational reading skills kids need in order to become successful readers.

Balanced literacy was supposed to be the answer to the reading wars—a compromise. However, in our experience, there is much more of the whole language approach in balanced literacy programs. We feel that these “balanced literacy” programs are not truly balanced after all. Some examples of the remnants of whole language are:

- Skipping a word if you don’t know it
- Using meaning or context to solve or read a word
- Believing that reading is natural (aka reading more will help kids become good readers)
- Memorizing “sight words” or spelling words

If our kids cannot decode and read the words on a page (or if they are skipping words), how will they “naturally” become skilled readers? We have learned from the research on how we learn to read that the continuum, or progression of learning to read, is NEVER truly balanced. We spend more time on specific skills when students are developing foundational reading skills than we do later on once those skills and abilities to decode are mastered. The time spent on specific skills will vary based on where our kids are in their reading development. So, although it sounds good, there is never really a “balance” to literacy.

## What Is the Science of Reading?

You have probably heard the term “Science of Reading” more times than you can count, but the definition can get a little muddy. So let’s talk about what the Science of Reading is **not**.

The Science of Reading is not a curriculum.

The Science of Reading is not just phonics.

The Science of Reading is not a strategy or activity.

Here is how The Reading League defines the Science of Reading<sup>2</sup>:

The Science of Reading is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. This research has been conducted over the last five decades across the world.

It is derived from thousands of studies conducted in multiple languages. The Science of Reading has culminated in a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop, why some have difficulty, and how we can most effectively assess and teach and, therefore, improve student outcomes through prevention of and intervention for reading difficulties.

The Science of Reading is derived from researchers from multiple fields:

Cognitive psychology

Communication sciences

Developmental psychology

Education

Implementation science

Linguistics

Neuroscience

School psychology

To break that down, we like to say that **the Science of Reading is the research and the evidence on how our brains learn to read**. This means that not just one study is referenced when discussing the skills kids need to read. Again, this is

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.thereadingleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Science-of-Reading-eBook-2022.pdf>.

research that has been conducted for almost 50 years and includes research of the research (meta-analysis)!

We hope that helps explain some of the terms you may have been hearing about and why we decided to write these books. We are so excited for you to use these activities with your students and/or your own children. The activities in this book will help you ensure your students have the foundational skills they need to become successful readers. These skills are often what is missing for older students who are struggling to read.

To this day, we think of all of our kids who were struggling to read that we probably could have helped if we had only known about these skills. Their names, their faces, and their struggles replay in our heads on a regular basis. We often have to remind ourselves that **we don't know better until we do**. Although the guilt still creeps up from time to time, we try to focus on what we can control. Now that we know how important these skills are, we can help others teaching kids to read by sharing what we have learned.

By giving kids these **oh-so-important foundational skills**, we are setting them up for reading success!

Our main goal with this book is to give teachers and parents an introduction to the skills that are necessary for reading success. These methods are based on over 40 years of research on the Science of Reading (SoR) and have been shown to be the greatest predictors of future reading success.

Unfortunately, as we discussed earlier, many of us were not aware of the science that exists. We have spent countless hours researching what the science says and internalizing it to be able to share it in a way that makes sense for everyone. We want to make this as easy as possible for you!

We started phonological awareness with our son when he was 3 (almost 4). He went to preschool, able to read books. Our goal was not to get him to read faster. We just wanted to make sure we gave him the foundation he needed to be successful. The magical (or should we say, scientific) thing is that now reading seems to come easy for him since he has phonological and phonemic awareness. Every child is different and while this may not be your experience, we can tell you that these skills are essential and do not always come naturally to many students. Taking the time to explicitly teach these skills is important for all learners!

# Oral Language Development

One of the first foundational “bedrock” skills we want to discuss is oral language. From the vast amount of research on how our brains learn to read, we have been taught that reading does NOT come naturally to us as humans. The process of being able to read first comes from the development of speech. We are naturally programmed to learn speech, or oral language, and this in turn gives us a foundation to begin to learn how to read. We like to say in the literacy world that we go from *speech* to *print*.

So what does that mean for us as teachers and parents of young children?

We want to really help set the stage for our kids by talking to them and reading aloud to them from birth and well into their schooling. When we say “talk” to them, we want to make them a part of our world and include them in as many and all conversations we are having as possible. What this is doing is helping expose them to our language, syntax, or the order in which words work to form sentences, vocabulary (semantics), background knowledge, and pragmatics (how we use words in a professional or a personal manner). We should be talking to our kids!

More importantly when we are talking to our kids, we should have breaks and allow them to join in on the conversation. The term for this is called conversational turns. A conversational turn is the back-and-forth dialogue between an adult and a child. This can be a smile, acknowledgment, gesture, coo from a baby, or any verbal input from the child within five seconds of the adult’s speech. This works the other way as well, if a child says something, or if a baby coos, and the adult responds back to the child in under five seconds, you are creating a conversational turn.

LENA (Language Environment Analysis) is a nonprofit that conducted many studies, with tens of thousands of hours of recorded conversations, and provided evidence that **conversational turns are one of the biggest predictive measures of children’s reading success**, more than just having them listen to adult speech alone.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>LENA. 2020. Inside Early Talk: Our point of greatest leverage for improving children’s futures. Retrieved from <https://www.lena.org/inside-early-talk-improving-childrens-futures/>.



So we want to make sure we are speaking to our kids, and having them participate within those conversations. It is recommended to have about 40 conversational turns within an hour. This may seem like a lot, but you can easily get 10 conversational turns in under a minute if you are just discussing something while a child is playing.

When we are talking and conversing with our kids, we want to include higher-level vocabulary and multisyllabic words. We know and have done it ourselves, that when we speak to our kids we sometimes lower our vocabulary. However, we should use higher-level language. This is to help expose our kids to the expansiveness of our language. We are not expecting our kids to be able to read or spell those words right away, but through this exposure, we are adding these words to their oral language vocabulary.

We want our kids to hear those words and also use them, so again, we should help them understand and talk with them about those words. This will enable them to begin to use those words as well. To help them understand bigger, multisyllabic words, we can compare them to words that they might know that mean the same thing (synonyms). We can also talk about opposite-meaning words (antonyms), and add new/interesting words to everyday routines.

For example, instead of saying “Can you clean up your mess?”, you can say, “Could you organize and sanitize your messy area?” Also, when we use a specific word, we can categorize that word. We can discuss with our kids if it is a word from nature, a word that has to do with transportation, a word that has to do with weather, etc. A benefit of this, especially if you start this from an early age with your child, is when they get to school and are reading and they come across a word they have not decoded yet, they will have a higher rate of success decoding and/or spelling that word if they know the meaning and/or have heard that word before. This benefits vocabulary development as well, because if a child has a high number of words they know the meanings to, when they enter school, it is easier for their brain to learn and categorize a higher amount of new words because of that background knowledge.

Another way to help build our kids’ oral language development is through read-alouds. Reading books to our kids is a fun and engaging way to help them to learn about our world through stories. This is also a way to build their vocabulary through the rich and expansive words that authors use in text. When we read to our kids, we can even include them in the fun and get in those conversational