

Synthetic Phonics: What it is and what it is not

Stephen Parker explains the difference between synthetic, analytic, analogy and onset-rime phonics, arguing that synthetic phonics is best.

Background

During the quarter century, from 1975 to 2000, the dominant method for teaching reading in the English-speaking world was whole language. Its main characteristics were:

- Immersion in so-called “real” books. This was in opposition to the artificial *Dick and Jane* readers of the 40s, 50s, and 60s in the US (*Janet and John* in the UK, *John and Betty* in Australia). This immersion was supposed to lead, easily and naturally, to reading, just as earlier in the child’s life, immersion in conversation led to speaking.
- Little to no phonics. Phonics instruction, if it did occur, was unsystematic, and was taught only as a last resort.
- Rote-memorization of sight words.
- Word-guessing based on pictures, or context, or the word’s first letter.
- Early writing using “invented” spelling. This resulted in spelling by letter names rather than letter sounds (e.g. EZ for “easy”; RM for “arm”; LFN for “elephant”).
- Learning by personal “discovery” rather than by direct instruction from a well-trained teacher.

The National Reading Report and Balanced Literacy

In 2000 the US National Reading Panel (NRP) condemned whole language by name, and in its place called for *systematic* phonics. The educational establishment, including professors in Teacher Colleges, the International Literacy Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English, responded with balanced literacy.

Balanced Literacy

There is no universally agreed-upon definition for what constitutes balanced literacy. See, for example, Pamela’s Snow’s comment on balanced literacy at <https://pamelasnow.blogspot.com/2017/05/balanced-literacy-instructional.html> for further discussion of the many problems this creates. It seems clear to me, however, that *balanced literacy was (and is) an attempt to rescue whole language by “balancing” it with some type of phonics* – presumably *systematic* phonics in light of the critical NRP report. So, what types of phonics can reasonably coexist with whole language? There are only three candidates: analytic phonics, analogy phonics, and onset-rime phonics.

Analytic Phonics

Analytic phonics requires that the child first build up a large cache of sight words. These words can then be analyzed, allowing the child to “discover” the letter/sound relationships in our alphabetic code. Here are two examples. Once BOAT, BOY, and BED are sight words, the child can be led to discover that B symbolizes the sound /b/. Once BOAT, LOAF, and SOAP are memorized, the child can be led to discover that OA symbolizes /O/ (long O). To systematically cover the alphabetic code in this manner takes 5 to 6 years, due to the required sight word memorization and to the “discovery” mode of teaching. See, for example,

the popular balanced literacy book, *Words Their Way*, by Donald Bear.

Analogy Phonics

Analogy phonics also requires a large cache of sight words to get started. My favorite example of this type of phonics, because it seems so implausible to me, is taken from a book by balanced literacy author Jennifer Serravallo. In the *Reading Strategies Book* (p 82), she suggests this strategy: Suppose a child had GREEN and SLOW memorized as sight words. Suppose, too, that the child knows (via analytic phonics) that N symbolizes the sound /n/.

Now the child is faced with reading the unknown (for her) word GROWN. So, she “word-solves” by analogy. She takes the GR sound from her sight word GREEN, the OW sound from her sight word SLOW, plus the sound of N, and blends these 3 sounds together: /gr+/ow+/n/ = GROWN. Having thus pieced together a pronunciation, she checks if the word makes sense in the context of the sentence.

Whether such a strategy is realistic for beginners, and whether analogy phonics could, even in a dozen years, systematically cover the alphabetic code, I leave it to the reader to judge.

Onset-Rime Phonics

Onset-rime phonics is really a subset of analogy phonics. Here’s how it works. Suppose TEACH is a sight word for Johnny. EACH is called the rime, T the onset. Now Johnny runs into the unknown (for him) word BEACH. To identify it he needs to recall TEACH, not by sound (he doesn’t know that yet), but by the fact that, visually, both TEACH and BEACH have the same 4 letters (E, A, C, and H) in the same configuration. Now he simply(?) subtracts the T sound from TEACH and, in its place,



substitutes a B sound (buh?) and he's got it: BEACH. The hope is that he will "read" PEACH, BREACH, LEACH, BLEACH, PREACH, and REACH in the same manner.

The National Reading Panel may have condemned whole language, but it literally paved the way for balanced literacy to flourish

Okay, so that's the EACH rime family. But what about the ACK, OOP, and UNK families? You might find yourself wondering, at this point, just how many rime families are out there? Most teachers who use onset-rime don't realize that there are over 300 rime families in English. One sight word, acting as the pronunciation key, must be memorized *for each rime family*. It gets worse. This covers only single-syllable words. Many more rimes exist only in multi-syllable words (e.g. ULT in ADULT, RESULT, and CONSULT; ECT in DEFECT, RESPECT, and SELECT). Rote-memorization of rimes and onsets, including the sounds of all the beginning blends (BL, SP, TR, and so on), quickly tops 400 items.

Phonics and Whole Language

These three types of phonics are not only compatible with whole language, they satisfy the NRP's weak and nebulous definition of *systematic phonics* as "a planned, sequential set of phonic elements taught explicitly." The NRP, in fact, *explicitly endorsed* the above 3 types of phonics:

"In teaching phonics explicitly and systematically, several different instructional approaches have been used. These include synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, analogy phonics, and onset-rime phonics. Although these explicit and systematic phonics approaches all use a planned, sequential introduction of a set of phonic elements with teaching and practice of those elements, they differ across a number of other features." (page 2-99)

The NRP may have condemned whole language, but it literally paved the way for balanced literacy to flourish. It can hardly be surprising that the NRP has failed to reform reading instruction in any significant way. See the

Nation's Report Card, at <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>, if you believe that balanced literacy has improved the reading ability of our children in the past two decades.

Balanced literacy is whole language, but now with an added ingredient: some analytic, analogy, and/or onset-rime phonics. It has become the dominant method for teaching reading and spelling throughout the English-speaking world – except in England.

Phonics and Whole Language in England

How did England escape this madness? Simple. There, in 2006, the Rose Report was published. The Rose Report, unlike the reports of both the National Reading Panel (US, 2000) and Australia's National Inquiry (2005), did not simply issue an innocuous call for *systematic* phonics. The Rose Report went a crucial step further. It called explicitly for synthetic phonics.

Synthetic phonics can't be balanced with Whole Language. It stands in utter opposition to both whole language and balanced literacy. It is not a strategy for "word-solving" (as are analogy phonics and onset-rime phonics). It is a logical and powerful method for teaching reading and spelling, and it contradicts balanced literacy in every way. It sets up a stark choice for anyone wishing to teach a child to read through balanced literacy or synthetic phonics.

So What is Synthetic Phonics?

With the above as background, I would now like to specify, as precisely as possible, what synthetic phonics is, and what it is not.

The English alphabet is a set of 26 arbitrary characters, each of which symbolizes one (or more) basic speech sounds. The alphabetic code is the full set of letter/sound correspondences that determine how written English is spoken and how spoken English is written. To transform sound into print is to encode; to transform print back into sound is to decode.

Out of the 200+ letter/sound correspondences in the code, roughly 105 to 135 need to be explicitly taught in order for the child to become an independent reader. If you are curious as to which letter/sound correspondences I think are necessary, look in appendices P and Q in any of my free books. You can also take a look at my blog at [https://](https://www.parkerphonics.com/post/the-alphabetic-code-made-easy)

www.parkerphonics.com/post/the-alphabetic-code-made-easy.

Knowledge of letter names should be in place in order to start a synthetic phonics program. However it is not necessary for all 52 upper-case and lower-case letters to be nameable by the child before beginning. Students can be taught the names of just 4 to 8 letters (a mix of consonants and vowels) in order to get started, and then be taught additional letter names as the program progresses. This enables children to get to genuine reading *as soon as possible* – an important motivational consideration.

In what follows, items 2, 3, 4, and 5 are paraphrases of the four items in the *Rose Report* (p.20) that are referred to as "high quality phonic work". Item 8 is also strongly emphasized in Appendix 1 of the *Rose Report*.

The characteristics of a synthetic phonics program are as follows:

- 1 Synthetic phonics is a bottom-up approach to reading and spelling. "Bottom-up" because instruction starts, not with whole words, but with the most basic sound unit there is: the phoneme. The word SHOP, for instance, has 3 sounds or phonemes: /sh/, /o/, and /p/, represented by the letters SH, O, and P respectively. To use synthetic phonics is to teach phonemic awareness, with letters, throughout the entire program. This is the type of phonemic awareness training that the NRP called "most effective."
- 2 From Day 1, the major grapheme/phoneme (letter/sound) correspondences of the alphabetic code are taught in an explicit and systematic manner, using a clearly-defined sequence, with each new topic building on what has already been learned.
- 3 As soon as "some" letter/sound correspondences are mastered (say 4 to 8), children can start reading words, that is, they blend (sound-out, synthesize) phonemes, left to right, all through a written word in order to pronounce it. This is the "primitive" form of decoding, not to be confused with the expert, at-a-glance, automatic decoding that begins to develop, slowly at first, then more rapidly, as a synthetic program progresses.
- 4 Children are taught to listen carefully, and to segment a spoken word into its constituent phonemes in order to spell it. Initially, best practice is to do this only with words the children

have just sounded-out by decoding, thereby making the segmenting and spelling task easier for them.

- 5 Children are explicitly shown how blending and segmenting are reversible processes.
- 6 Children are asked to read for themselves only words and sentences for which they already have the skills to succeed. Such text is called decodable for them.
- 7 A synthetic phonics program is easily completed within two years for the vast majority of students, meaning that, by the end of two years, children are able, within reason, to read independently. Leveled books are neither necessary nor helpful.
- 8 Reading comprehension (RC) during these two years is understood strictly in terms of the Simple View of Reading. Roughly half of every Language Arts period is spent with the teacher reading children's literature to the class and then conducting a group discussion about that reading. In this manner, both decoding skills (D) and language comprehension skills (LC) improve daily. The Simple View makes the claim: $RC = D \times LC$. Further discussion of the Simple View can be found in a different blog on my web site at <https://www.parkerphonics.com/post/the-simple-view-of-reading-still-conclusive-after-33-years>.
- 9 Perhaps the main characteristic of a synthetic phonics program is that it presents reading to the child as a logical skill right from the start. Children, like adults, need to understand what they are being asked to do, especially if the task requires significant daily effort extending over a period of many months. Without such an understanding, many children will give up.

It is also important to note that a synthetic phonics program does not:

- 1 have children rote-memorize words (typically called "sight words") without regard to the sound value of all the word's letters or letter groups. Exceptions to this include about 5 to 10 high-frequency words whose spellings are so bizarre, when compared to their actual pronunciations, that rote-memorization may be necessary, for example one, two, though, eye, and once).

- 2 use top-down teaching methods that start with whole words (sight words) rather than with phonemes and letters. Any program that uses analytic phonics, analogy phonics, or onset-rime phonics must, by its very nature, be top-down.
- 3 expect that children will discover the letter/sound correspondences of the alphabetic code. There is neither time nor reason to have students "construct their own knowledge" when it comes to learning the skill of reading. All other academic skills depend on the ability to read. For a critique of "constructivism" as it is misapplied to the teaching of reading, see the Australian National Inquiry report *Teaching Reading*, especially pages 29 to 30.
- 4 expect, encourage, or allow children to guess the identity of an unknown word based on pictures, context, or the word's first letter. Although context may be used to decide how to pronounce homographs like 'wind' and 'bow'.
- 5 use "predictable" text, thereby giving everyone involved the illusion that the child is reading. The reality is that the child is merely reciting memorized sight words, and guessing, leading to what has often been called the 'fourth grade slump', when these strategies are no longer successful.
- 6 ask children to write, using words that they have not yet been taught to spell, thereby assuring "invented" spelling and letter-name spelling. These repeated spelling errors prove difficult for children to correct later on. Phonetic spelling is the goal. Phonetically plausible mistakes (e.g. 'bote' instead of 'boat') show significant skill. A child making this mistake should be congratulated, then corrected. The child should also be told that, had the word been 'note', the o-t-e spelling would have been correct, and 'noat' would have been wrong.
- 7 use leveled books. Independent readers will, with a little help, find books appropriate to their skill level. No child need be stigmatized or embarrassed by being at level B when all his or her friends are at levels D and E.
- 8 need teachers who can function only as a 'guide on the side', or worse, a 'peer at the rear'. The teacher in a synthetic phonics program must be

a 'sage on the stage'. That's why he or she is there, being paid a salary. Synthetic phonics teachers need to be comfortable with far more whole-class, direct instruction than is currently the norm in most of today's reading classes where 'mini-lessons' of 5 to 10 minutes each often prevail. They also need to have a reasonable understanding of the science behind reading instruction. See for example Pamela Snow's blog at <https://pamelasnow.blogspot.com/2016/04/reading-is-verb-literacy-is-not.html> for a useful discussion on this.

Note that the above list of what a synthetic phonics program does not do could serve equally well as a list of what a balanced literacy program does do in the initial two years.

Which teacher would you choose?

Imagine for a moment that you, as an adult, were just now beginning the task of learning to read and spell. Which of these two teachers would you prefer?

Synthetic phonics can't be balanced with Whole Language. It stands in utter opposition to both whole language and balanced literacy.

Teacher #1, right at the outset, begins with direct teaching of the alphabetic code. In the first week, for instance, you learn that the letter M symbolizes the nasal sound "mmm," N symbolizes "nnn," and A symbolizes "ahh" (the first sound in APPLE). Once you've mastered these three letter/sound relationships, this teacher places the three letters together on a blackboard, M A N, and helps you to blend the three sounds these letters symbolize into the spoken word MAN.

The teacher does the same with the words AN and AM and has you use these simple words in spoken sentences, helping you if necessary: "I want AN egg." "I AM sleepy." The teacher may even place N A M on the board and help you to blend that as well. The two of you agree that NAM is not a real word, but then the teacher places the words **enamel** and **dynamic** on the board to show you how NAM will certainly appear later on, in more complex words. You discuss the meanings of these two

words even though you can't (yet) fully read them.

Over time, the teacher does the above with many other letters, sounds, and simple words. Often the teacher reverses the process and asks you to spell a spoken word that you have just recently created by blending. Pretty quickly, you become keenly aware of phonemes in speech and you begin to understand the logic of print. It is nothing more than encoded sound! Because you understand what is going on, your brain starts making connections between the spelling of MAN (a new thing) and the sound and meaning of MAN that has been stored in your brain since you began speaking. You become increasingly *enthusiastic* about your reading lessons, and you find yourself wanting to learn more about this amazing alphabetic code.

Teacher #2 has a very different approach. He or she places MAN on a "word wall" so you can see it throughout the day. This teacher also has you read the word in a predictable "little book," pointing as you go ("The MAN is sleeping... The MAN is eating... The MAN is running..."). The hope is that, by constantly seeing the words THE, MAN, and IS, you will eventually memorize them as "sight words." You are expected to guess the meaning of the words "sleeping," "eating," and "running" by looking at the pictures that are ubiquitous in these "little books."

This teacher makes no attempt to explain *why* the letters M, A, and N, in this particular order, represent the spoken word MAN. Though difficult to do, precisely because no explanation has been offered, you study the word carefully, and you memorize it as a symbolic representation of the spoken word MAN, similar to the way that you might memorize a password, or that the symbol \$ means DOLLAR.

So far so good. But day after day, Teacher #2 presents more sight words for you to rote-memorize. There seems to be no end to them! Only later, perhaps much later, will this teacher have you slowly "discover" for yourself (using analytic phonics) the letter/sound relationships of the code that *explain* the spellings.

A final thought

I believe that most adults (including most balanced literacy teachers!) would choose Teacher #1 for themselves, precisely because they'd want someone who would make the skill of reading

understandable *from the beginning*, that is to say, open to the use of reasoning, and to "figuring it out." If forced to study with Teacher #2, most articulate adults would insist upon explanations: *Why* do the letters M, A, and N represent the spoken word MAN rather than, say, DOG, TURNIP, or BATTLESHIP? How can guessing, based on pictures, result in skilled reading? Why are CAT, CITY, and CHAIR listed under C on an alphabetic "word wall" when each word starts with a different sound?

Children, of course, don't have the above choice, and most find themselves facing Teacher #2 in a balanced literacy classroom. These children lack the confidence and the maturity to justifiably insist that their teacher offer some explanations. Children, eager to please, *simply do the best they can*. Some will become skilled readers in spite of the system – perhaps with help from home or from outside tutoring. Others, intent on getting along, will plug away, year after year, but they will never become proficient readers, or read for pleasure. And still others, including some of our brightest kids, will get so frustrated with the sight words, the guessing, and the lack of logic that they will simply give up. They will refuse to pay attention. Their self-esteem will plummet. They will begin to act out. They will start hating school. And in no time at all, they will find themselves categorized as "learning disabled", caught in a system that has utterly failed them.

There is a lot of wasted human potential and needless suffering going on in our schools. Why don't we teach our children to read as we ourselves would want to be taught?

Stephen Parker is a long-time teacher of Mathematics, Computer Science and Reading. He lives in Boston with his wife and their three children – all currently in college. His free books and his blog on reading instruction are available at his web site: www.ParkerPhonics.com. Stephen can also be followed on Twitter where his username is [@ParkerPhonics](https://twitter.com/ParkerPhonics).