

# Key Actions for Meeting the Needs of All K-3 Readers and Writers

According to [KRS 158.791](#) Section 1(1), a primary goal of Kentucky’s *Read to Succeed Act* is to ensure "all children learn to read well before exiting grade three (3)." **The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) has identified four key teacher actions to move from ineffective literacy practices to evidence-based structured literacy practices.** This resource dedicates a section to each key action, pointing out misconceptions associated with ineffective practices and explanations for what we now know about evidence-based practices in early literacy that are critical to meeting the needs of all K-3 readers and writers.

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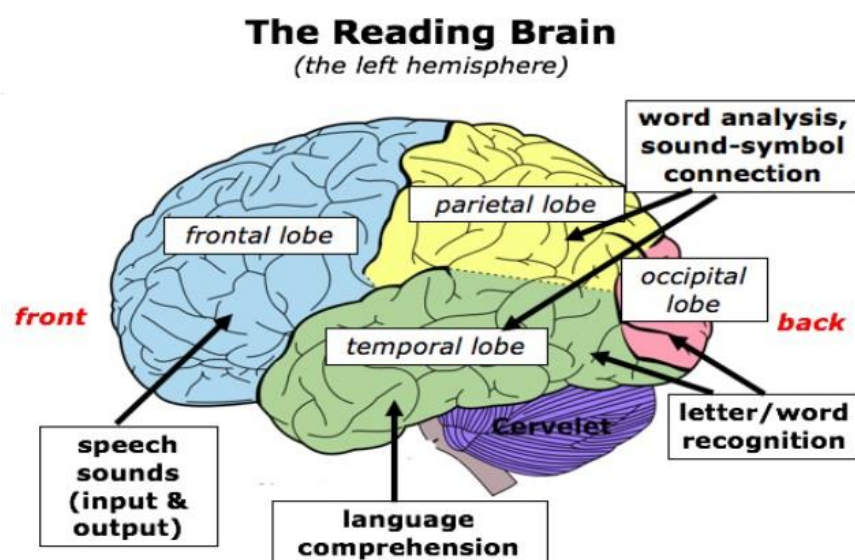


## Key Action #1: Provide explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills to every child (Foorman et al., 2016).

→ **Common misconception: Reading develops naturally by exposing children to texts and language.**

**What we know:** Learning to read requires a rewiring of the brain. Reading is not an innate ability and does not develop “naturally” even when children appear to “teach themselves to read” (Moats, 2020; Moats & Tolman, 2009). In fact, those children have developed phonological awareness and learned some sound-symbol correspondences that they are able to use to figure out more words. Reading requires the brain to use and integrate several of its regions at one time, primarily in the left hemisphere including:

- The **parietal-temporal** region (towards the back) which does the job of breaking a written word into its sounds (i.e., word analysis, sounding out words).
- The **occipital-temporal region** (at the back) where the brain stores the appearance and meaning of words (i.e., letter-word recognition, automaticity, and language comprehension). This is critical for automatic, fluent reading so that a reader can quickly identify words without having to sound each one out.
- The **frontal region** (at the front) which allows a person to speak (i.e., processing speech sounds as we listen and speak) (Moats & Tolman, 2009).



(Sedita, 2020)

→ ***Common misconception: Only some students need phonics.***

**What we know:** For young children, systematic phonics instruction (teaching letter-sound correspondences according to a purposeful **scope and sequence**) is well-established as more effective than implicit phonics (teaching letters and/or sounds as they happen to come up) or no phonics instruction at all (Foorman et al., 2016). Because phonics instruction is brief, engaging, and active, it does no harm even to students who appear to be more advanced (International Dyslexia Association [IDA], 2019). In fact, advanced students whose reading development may show little to no benefit from systematic phonics instruction at the time, can be challenged to apply the instruction to encoding (spelling) rather than decoding (reading). Explicit and systematic phonics instruction is often called “essential for some, helpful for all, harmful for none” (IDA, 2019).

→ ***Common misconception: Good beginning readers use meaning, semantic and visual cues (3- cueing) to figure out unknown words.***

**What we know:** Good readers use the letters in a word to decode it (Moats & Brady, 2020). Having readers guess or infer unknown words based on meaning and semantic cues is an ineffective practice (Castles et al., 2018). Strong beginning readers primarily rely on the visual cues and proficiently use the decoding skills they have been taught to “get the *entire* word off the page” and then may use context to infer the word's *meaning* or to confirm accurate decoding; however, these readers do not rely on meaning and semantics alone to figure out the word (Castles et al., 2018; Foorman et al., 2016).

→ ***Common misconception: Students learn to read during independent reading time.***

**What we know:** “Independent reading” usually refers to a period of time during which students select and read books of their choice, often within a designated “level” of difficulty. These books are often referred to as “leveled texts” and do not give students intentional practice with the sound-spelling patterns they have learned (Shanahan, 2018). Until students have secured basic decoding skills and are fluent in oral reading, independent reading should happen with decodable readers - controlled texts that include sound-spelling patterns they have been explicitly taught. Once a child has secured basic decoding skills, they can rapidly gain reading fluency through independently and accurately reading text (Shanahan, 2018). This gain in fluency may then support growth in comprehension. However, independent reading does not enhance fluency or comprehension before the child has secured basic decoding-- in other words, before they can get the words off the page. Knowing this, independent

reading should be implemented with students whose oral reading fluency reflects Ehri's Consolidated Phase (Ehri, 1995, 2014; Ehri & McCormick, 1998).

Teachers may decide to provide independent reading time to students regardless of reading phase because of the benefits to engagement and motivation. However, it should be planned with caution and intentionality knowing that decoding texts with high accuracy is what will spur reading fluency.


→ ***Common misconception: Decodable texts harm reading motivation or comprehension.***

**What we know:** **Decodable texts** are very useful because they are restricted to the spelling patterns that students have been taught to recognize and read. Decodable texts present children primarily with words they can successfully decode, allowing them to practice with increased accuracy and comprehension. As reading ability advances beyond the full alphabetic phase, students may no longer need decodable texts and can move into less-controlled texts for reading practice. Still, these should be texts that the student can read with high accuracy.

→ ***Common misconception: Some common words can't be decoded and must be memorized.***

**What we know:** With all types of words, attending to the sounds and spelling patterns is necessary to develop automatic word recognition. **Sight words** refer to words that the reader so accurately and automatically decodes and understands that they are instantly recognized during reading, taking less than a fraction of a second to retrieve. They appear to be known by sight, but the brain is actually instantly retrieving their permanently unitized sound, spelling and meaning. Sight words may be common or uncommon; regular or irregular. **Irregular words**, sometimes called *heart* or *tricky* words, have parts that do not follow typical spelling patterns. Most words do have at least some typically spelled sounds. Irregular words should still be taught based upon their sound-spelling correspondences, with the regular and irregular parts explicitly shown to students.

**High-frequency words** are words that show up frequently in texts, making automatic recognition of them important for fluent reading. Most high-frequency words are regular or have just one irregular spelling pattern. High-frequency words should be taught using their sound-spelling correspondences, not memorized as whole words.

Example	Sight Word	Irregular Word	High-frequency Word	Explanation
Child's name	x			Young learners can most often see their name and know it is their name in an instant.
said	x	x	x	<p>/s/ and /d/ are regular, "ai" is not.</p>  <p>May be written like this to denote the irregular middle sound and to remind readers they have to "know it by heart."</p>
like	x		x	VCe (silent e) is a regular spelling pattern in English.

→ **Common misconception: Spelling words should be thematically related.**

**What we know:** The common alternative to generic weekly spelling lists, often based on a theme or topic, misses the opportunity to accelerate phonics learning and promotes rote memorization. Spelling (encoding) instruction and decoding instruction should be integrated and aligned to a shared scope and sequence because decoding and **encoding** derive from a similar set of phonological and phonics skills. However, it is important to note that the ability to decode some letter patterns happens sooner than the ability to encode the same pattern. Observing students' encoding can reveal both phonological awareness needs and unmastered phonics skills related to spelling, giving teachers useful and specific information about how to support students. Practicing phonetic spelling also supports development of sight vocabulary through **orthographic mapping** or matching of letters and letter sequences to sounds of the spoken word.

Example: Themed spelling lists are typically words related to a subject or theme and do not follow sound/spelling patterns. Phonological spelling lists allow students to focus on a certain sound/spelling pattern and then apply that practice to words that have the particular pattern.

Themed Spelling List	Phonological Spelling List /ee/
ball	feet
football	green
basketball	keep

Themed Spelling List	Phonological Spelling List /ee/
soccer	need
hockey	see
puck	seem
net	sleep
score	three
tennis	tree

→ **Common misconception: Fluency should be taught in isolation.**

**What we know:** Several factors contribute to the development of fluency, so it cannot be “taught” as one distinct skill. First and foremost, students must have well-developed word decoding skills in order to achieve reading fluency. As students increase their decoding skills, they begin to store and automatically recognize many words through the orthographic mapping process, which allows for fluent reading (Hindin & Steiner, 2022). Research suggests that opportunities to practice reading a wide variety of text, as well as repeated oral readings of a text with feedback, are effective strategies for developing accurate, fluent reading at an appropriate rate (Hindin & Steiner, 2022). Students also benefit from hearing models of fluent reading so they know what prosody (smoothness) and expression should sound like when they read; although not exclusively, this can be achieved through read-alouds.

## Key Action #2: Build comprehension by engaging all students in discussion of complex, knowledge-rich text sets (Foorman et al., 2016).

→ ***Common misconception: Comprehension instruction is about the strategy we're practicing, not the content of the particular text we're reading.***

### What we know:

Spending weeks at a time on learning about and practicing a comprehension strategy, such as "asking questions" or "making inferences," was once considered the most effective approach to teaching students how to make sense of text. Currently, the understanding is that dedicating extended periods of time to building knowledge about a particular topic is more beneficial for increasing reading comprehension (Catts & Kamhi, 2017; Fordham Institute, 2016; Lesaux & Harris, 2015; Wexler, 2019). When students engage with complex texts through reading and discussion, comprehension abilities grow (Fordham Institute, 2016). Comprehension abilities grow when students engage with reading, discussing and *understanding* complex texts. Students must have opportunities to build knowledge and language comprehension by interacting with complex text (Wexler, 2019). Using **text sets** that build knowledge about a shared topic can build students' surface and conceptual knowledge. In Kentucky, text sets include a range of types of complex text as Interdisciplinary Literacy Practice 1 states, "Text is anything that communicates a message (KDE, 2019)." Text sets contain print such as articles, stories, poems, letters, lyrics, speeches or billboards and may also include non-print text such as artwork, graphics or sculptures. Importantly, text sets put *texts* - and the rich world of ideas within them - at the center of instruction (Catts & Kamhi, 2017; Fordham Institute, 2016; Lesaux & Harris, 2015; Wexler, 2019). The focus is not for students to demonstrate mastery of isolated comprehension strategies, but for students to understand the text and build their knowledge (Wexler, 2019).

One way this is achieved is when teachers model reading for meaning (through intentional thinking aloud) in a variety of texts and in a variety of ways, equipping students to use comprehension strategies flexibly and as a means to understand what they read, thus building their knowledge (Catts & Kamhi, 2017; Fordham Institute, 2016; Lesaux & Harris, 2015). This approach abandons spending weeks at a time learning about and practicing "asking questions" or "making inferences" and focuses on spending weeks at a time learning about topics such as fairy tales and tall tales or civil

rights and equality, for example. Instead, reading skills and strategies are taught and practiced in tandem with each other to make meaning and deepen students' understanding (Catts & Kamhi, 2017; Fordham Institute, 2016; Lesaux & Harris, 2015; Wexler, 2019).

### What is the difference between a knowledge-building and strategy-based approach?

Characteristics of Knowledge-Building Instruction	Characteristics of Strategy-Based Instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students spend a series of lessons or time with texts focused on different aspects of the <i>same or similar topic</i>. This is because it's easier to learn new material and vocabulary when you are familiar with a topic.</li> <li>● Lessons deliberately build on each other, giving students a chance to see new vocabulary used in multiple ways and become familiar with new topics as they return to them in slightly different ways. For example, a unit on weather would include multiple readings and lessons in which students would encounter hurricanes, rain, and sleet-along with such repeating ideas and vocabulary as atmosphere, climate, meteorology, and air currents. Both academic vocabulary (perceive, excessive, frightening) and domain-specific vocabulary (hypertrophy in the example) are taught.</li> <li>● The lessons are aimed at understanding different aspects of weather. Questions and assignments (and indeed reading skills!) are aimed at building that knowledge and understanding. For example, students would be asked to compare and contrast how different weather systems get started or to describe the sequence of events that leads to a hurricane.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The curriculum uses a variety of topics, with one day's text on hurricanes, another on ants, and a third on families. Instead, the common thread is a comprehension skill being learned and practiced such as identifying the main idea or inferring the theme.</li> <li>● Texts are used to practice comprehension skills globally, versus build knowledge about a particular topic specifically. For example, after students read a text about hurricanes, they are asked to point to the captions and explain what a caption is. Or, after reading a text about some different uses of plants, they are asked to practice using context clues to figure out what different words in the text might mean.</li> <li>● The texts are typically about topics students already know. For example, a basal reader might include many stories about the community or families, where most of the content is familiar and redundant. For exercises, students might be asked to describe the sequence of activities that a character followed to make his dinner.</li> </ul>

[It's Time for a Reading Reset!](#) from the Knowledge Matters Campaign



→ ***Common misconception: When the Kentucky Academic Standards (KAS) reference grade-level appropriate texts, it is referring to a certain Lexile level or the student’s “instructional level.”***

Lexile level refers to the quantitative complexity of a text, but it does not indicate a text’s full complexity nor grade-level appropriateness. A student’s “instructional level” may or may not reflect grade-level appropriate complexity.

Grade-level appropriateness is determined using a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures and requires reader and task considerations. Implementing a high quality reading and writing instructional resource grounded in structured literacy and aligned to the *KAS for Reading and Writing* is recommended as these resources include texts that have been measured for quantitative and qualitative complexity appropriate for the grade level. These resources also include accompanying tasks designed to scaffold instruction, providing ample opportunities for all students to engage in comprehension and analysis of grade-level appropriate, complex text. Restricting students to reading and interacting with texts only on their “instructional level” may prohibit progress of overall reading development.

Regardless of a student’s “instructional reading level,” the use of complex grade-appropriate texts and purposeful building of academic vocabulary is non-negotiable. Scaffolding reading instruction is key to preparing students to read independently and proficiently by the end of the school year and, ultimately, by the end of grade three.

When a student is unable to read grade-level appropriate texts independently and proficiently, grade level comprehension is still the goal. Students unable to decode grade-level appropriate text independently and proficiently must still engage in comprehension and analysis of grade-level texts, and, therefore, may require a scaffolded approach. Read-alouds, assistive technology or other means may be necessary while the student receives targeted instruction to strengthen decoding skills, which may include the use of decodable text to practice those skills and develop fluency.

Whatever the case, foundational reading skills must be taught while also offering equitable access to grade-level appropriate, complex texts, which high-quality instructional resources (HQIRs) provide. The [Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis](#) module is available for those seeking more information about text complexity.

## Key Action #3: Use small-group reading time to target foundational skills or to develop comprehension using complex text (Foorman et al., 2016).

→ ***Common misconception: Leveled texts are the best texts for increasing reading comprehension and should be used during small groups.***

**What we know:** The instructional activities for small group instruction and the materials and texts used should match students' learning goals as determined by diagnostic and curriculum-based assessments. When small group instruction is focused on foundational skills, decodable or connected text aligned to skills that have already been taught is required (Foorman et al., 2016). When the focus is on development of language comprehension, grade level complex text is the optimal choice. High quality reading and writing instructional resources grounded in structured literacy and aligned to the *Kentucky Academic Standards (KAS) for Reading and Writing* are recommended as these resources are designed to ensure all students have access to grade-level appropriate, complex text as well as explicit and systematic foundational skills instruction (KDE, 2019).

Leveled texts do not offer opportunities for applied practice with foundational skills such as decoding (Moats, 2020; Moats & Tolman, 2009). Non-decodable, “predictable” leveled texts encourage guessing based on context or the beginning letters of a word or illustrations rather than phonetically decoding the entire word (Moats & Tolman, 2009; Seidenberg, 2017). This impedes reading development. Additionally, neither leveled nor decodable text are optimal for comprehension growth. Generally, neither are sources of academic language or knowledge building. Thus, the simplistic structure and word choice do not necessitate a natural use of comprehension strategies, nor do they include strong examples of elements such as theme, character development, reasons and evidence to support a claim, etc.

Leveled text, however, may be an effective choice when the purpose is to build students' knowledge about a topic. Once students have reached Ehri's consolidated phase, which happens typically sometime in grade two, leveled text could be a choice

for independent reading practice as long as students are not limited to selecting texts within a specific level.

→ ***Common misconception: The best data to inform instruction comes from assessments that determine a student’s reading level.***

**What we know:** Assessment is the fuel for instruction. Teachers must use multiple types of assessment to yield a complete picture of students’ strengths and needs (Harlacher et al., 2014). Universal screeners are particularly important as they identify or predict which students are at risk of future reading difficulties (KDE, 2022). They answer the question, “Who?” Students who are at risk of not reaching reading benchmarks should undergo a Diagnostic Assessment to help determine the underlying problem and match intervention to the specific area(s) of need (KDE, 2022). Diagnostics answer the question, “What?” Leveling assessments, on the other hand, do not provide a clear picture of what skills students have and what skills they need (Moats, 2020). Because of their subjective nature, they do not accurately predict or identify risk for reading difficulties. While it is always beneficial for teachers to listen to and observe students’ reading, it is not prudent to restrict this observation to a leveling assessment that ends with an “instructional level.” Doing so may guide a teacher to limit a student to a low level of text and deny access to rich language and ideas. Instead, a diagnostic assessment that pinpoints particular skills such as phonological awareness or phonics patterns will guide a teacher to engage the student in targeted instruction specific to the need (KDE, 2022; Moats, 2020).

## Key Action #4: Provide instructional time to address all five components of reading (Foorman et al., 2016; National Reading Panel, 2000).

→ ***Common misconception: In grades K-3, phonics needs to be the focus.***

**What we know:** To become successful readers, students must develop fluent word recognition *and* language comprehension abilities throughout grades K-3. Thus, students need daily, systematic and explicit instruction in foundational skills, including phonological awareness, phonics and fluency (Moats & Brady, 2020; Moats & Tolman, 2009). Concurrently, they also enhance their comprehension abilities through ongoing and daily engagement in knowledge-building resources with strong vocabulary instruction grounded in rich complex texts, opportunities to develop oral language and explicit instruction in writing (Wexler, 2019).

→ ***Common misconception: Structured literacy refers only to the teaching of phonics.***

**What we know:** Structured literacy is an approach that emphasizes highly explicit and systematic teaching of all essential components of literacy. These components include foundational skills (e.g., decoding, spelling) and higher-level literacy skills (e.g., reading comprehension, written expression) (Scarborough, 2001). Structured literacy also emphasizes oral language abilities essential to literacy development, including phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness instruction emphasizes sensitivity to speech sounds and the ability to manipulate those sounds. Structured literacy prepares students to decode words explicitly and systematically as well as develop vocabulary and background knowledge (IDA, 2019). This approach not only helps students with dyslexia but there is substantial evidence that it is effective for all readers (IDA, 2019).

Retrieved from [Structured Literacy](#), KDE Early Literacy Webpage

## Glossary of Terms

**Decodable texts.** Reading materials designed to prompt beginning readers to apply their increasing knowledge of how the alphabetic system works. Decodable texts are progressively sequenced, primarily incorporating words that consist of previously taught letter–sound patterns (e.g., the letter *p* represents the sound /p/) and spelling–sound (e.g., the pattern *igh* represents the long *i* sound, as in the words *light*, *bright*, *night*) correspondences, along with selected high-frequency irregularly spelled sight words. (*Note:* Some words are temporarily irregular because the spelling–sound correspondences have not yet been taught.) (International Literacy Association [ILA], n.d.).

**Encoding** (spelling). Involves translating speech into print using the knowledge of the logic of the written symbol system (especially letter–sound relationships and patterns in alphabetic orthographies) (ILA, n.d.).

**Equity vs. Equality.** Equity and equality are two strategies used in an effort to produce fairness. Equity is giving everyone what they need to be successful. Equality is treating everyone the same. Equality aims to promote fairness, but it can work only if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same help (ILA, n.d.).

**Orthographic mapping.** The formation of letter–sound connections to bond the spellings, pronunciations and meanings of specific words in memory. It explains how children learn to read words by sight, to spell words from memory and to acquire vocabulary words from print (ILA, n.d.).

**Scope and sequence.** The structure of a curriculum that includes the skills, strategies, content and the order in which it will be taught (ILA, n.d.).

**Systematic instruction.** Systematic instruction in reading is a plan of instruction (e.g., scope and sequence) that takes students through an explicit sequence of learning activities (ILA, n.d.).

**Text sets.** Text sets are a curated collection of texts centered around a specific topic, encompassing diverse genres (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, etc.) and media formats (blogs, maps, photographs, art, primary-source documents, audio recordings, etc.) (Fordham Institute, 2016).

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