A Message to the Teacher from the Authors

WHAT IS READING?

At first glance, it would hardly seem worth the trouble to answer this question because, in a sense, everybody knows perfectly well what reading is. But definitions underlie all intellectual enterprises, and since definitions are also assumptions, they control the activities that are based on them. Until modern times, medical knowledge was controlled by the assumption that there were four "humours" (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile), which determined a person's health and temperament. With these assumptions, it was impossible for a doctor to "see" many facts that remained invisible because the theory of humours did not permit them to exist.

To define reading, we must try to get at the element that sets it apart from other similar activities. It will not do, for example, to define reading as a thought-getting process because we get thoughts just as surely from a lecture or a conversation. There is, to put it another way, no difference between "reading" a page of difficult philosophy and trying to understand it—and simply hearing the same page "read" to us by another. The problem of understanding is virtually identical for both reader and listener.

Nobody would deny that the purpose of reading is to get information of some sort from the printed page. But since we get information in the same way from spoken language, this purpose does not define reading in a way that distinguishes it from talking. As soon as we grasp this point, however, the problem resolves itself immediately. If we see that meaning resides in language, then we can ask how writing (which we read) is related to language (which we hear). If language, which is sound, carries the meanings, what is writing? It seems obvious that writing is a device, a code, for representing the sounds of language in visual form. The written words are in fact artificial symbols of the spoken words, which are sounds.

So reading must be the process of turning these printed symbols into sounds. The moment we say this, however, someone is sure to ask (and probably in a tone of the greatest anxiety), "But what about *meaning*? Do you propose to define reading as mere word-calling, without regard for meaning?"

Yes, we do. Reading is first of all, and essentially, the mechanical skill of decoding, of turning the printed symbols into the sounds, which are language. Of course the reason we turn the print into sound (that is, read) is to get at the meaning. We decode the printed symbols in order to *hear* what they *say*.

Now, what is the value of our definition as regards the teaching of reading? We believe its value is that it enables us to put *first things first* and approach the task of learning to read, with our children, in an orderly and effective manner. We are intensely concerned that our children understand what they read, but the mechanical "decoding" skill must come first if we are to get them started properly. In the earliest stages of learning to read, the child needs constant practice in mastering a decoding skill—a skill that gives access to language and unlocks the doors to meaning, thinking, and reasoning.

For the fact is that the language, the imagination, the experience, and the conversation of a typical six-year-old child are enormously far beyond anything he is going to be able to read for some time. It will be quite a few months before anything he can read will even approach the vocabulary and thought of what he has heard or even spoken himself. We

believe this is more true today than it was in the past. What the child hears on radio or television is often very advanced linguistically compared to what he will read in his first books.

So the faster we teach him the skill, the faster will his ability to read catch up with his language, which, of course, has had a six-year headstart. Once he has mastered the skill, this relation changes radically: reading becomes the prime source of growth in vocabulary, in language, and in intellect. Within a very few years the child who has learned to read properly will be reading and understanding hundreds and hundreds of words that he may never use or hear until he is attending lectures in college!

In view of these facts, we do not hesitate to say that the rewards of the first steps in reading are not impressive growth in experience or vocabulary. There are rewards, however, of two sorts. First, there is the great satisfaction of mastering a skill in orderly fashion. If an analogy will help here, we might say that first steps in reading are like first steps in learning to drive an automobile. Both skills have enormous attractions to the young learner, for they are gateways to many joys. The learning car-driver has these rewards in mind, but at the start he is totally engrossed simply in the activity of learning to drive. At this stage he has no thought of going anywhere; learning to operate the automobile is reward and interest enough in itself. And so with reading. The reward of emulating the grownups, for whom reading is obviously very important, is the long-range goal; but the skill itself is reward and delight for the beginner.

On top of this delight in learning for itself, we seek to reward the young learner with amusing or exciting stories as fast as we have the words for them; and in fact, we accumulate vocabulary very much more rapidly than has been done with the standard basal readers in recent years. Yet, even though this program accumulates a vocabulary well in excess of 2,000 words (as contrasted with as few as 325 words in standard basal readers) in the first; grade and proceeds in a similar fashion in subsequent grades, the teacher will be surprised to discover how very elementary it is and how very far beneath the actual speaking and hearing vocabularies of her pupils it is.

The pleasure and confidence of the child are reinforced by the outstanding feature of this program: With the exception of a handful of special words, every story contains only the letter-sounds that have been taught at any point. No letter or spelling appears until after the lesson in which it is presented.

WHY PHONICS?

The argument against beginning with sounds and letters is too complex for us to take it up in full. We should, rather, prefer to dispose of it as simply as possible. Let us just touch on what may seem to be the strongest point—that much English spelling is so irregular so “un-phonic,” that it defies a phonics approach. But we begin with the most regular spellings, the short vowels and the sounded consonants, and with these alone we accumulate vocabulary very quickly.

We believe, in short, that these results dispose of the problem. It is true that a great many of the simplest English words have the most irregular spellings (*eye, knee, one, wrist, sugar*), but we have found it possible to write stories or the Pre-Primer and Primer that do not use these words.

This brings us to what may at first glance seem a startling contradiction: We contend that the “un-phonic” spelling of so many common words constitutes the strongest argument for beginning with the regular phonics of English spelling! Why? Simply because if our spelling system is 85 to 90 per cent regular, it would seem proper to begin with the regular system before taking up the exceptions; and this is the whole key to our approach. We find that when the child learns, at the beginning, one consistent thing after another, he rapidly gains understanding and confidence. There are no mysterious configurations that he must memorize without clues, so that he may confuse words like *offer* and *alter*, or even little words like *then* and *good*. Rather, he learns why and how the letters represent the sound of the word. With this clue, his learning is vastly simplified and accelerated. Our aim is to make him recognize words instantly, and we find that he does this with the least drill when he knows why the letters that make up a certain word are there. If we give him a dozen words as pure configurations, he may confuse *then* and *good*; but when he knows the letters first, he understands why these letters spell the word, and his recognition of the whole word at a glance is easier for him than it would have been if he had learned the same word only as a total shape, without benefit of the previous training in letters.

At this point we should like to refine our definition of reading a bit further. If learning language is learning the meanings of sounds (i.e., words), learning to read is *learning letter meanings*, for the entire system of alphabetic writing is based on the use of letters to indicate individual sounds. English spelling seems very imperfect when we look at the strange words like *might, cough, should, colonel, sleigh*, and *machine*; and indeed it is needlessly bad, for we use 26 letters to spell 44 basic sounds in more than 250 different ways. That is one side of the matter; but if we look at all the words that are spelled regularly, and then set about organizing the irregular spellings into groups and patterns, we find that it is not so bad after all. And if we begin with the regular system, it is not at all difficult to master the exceptions when they are taken one at a time.

SOUND AND SENSE

Many teachers wonder whether the mechanical process of “sounding out” a strange word will not interfere with a child’s ability to attend to its meaning. They know that a child may have trouble putting two isolated sounds together, and they fear that the struggle may drive all thought of meaning out of his mind. This is a real problem. We have solved it by virtually eliminating the laborious sounding out of isolated sounds.

Impossible?

Not at all. Indeed, very simple. It is merely a question of method.

As you will see in the detailed instructions for the teacher, we first *demonstrate* to the child how the two letter-sounds of *a* and *m* are brought together to make the word *am*. Thereafter, with every letter taught we make new words; but instead of asking the child to gasp the letters together into a word, we consistently show him how the letter-sounds appear in the new words. Having taught *a*, *n,* and then *r*, we demonstrate *r-a-n* . . . *ran* by showing how the sounds appear in the word. To put it another way, we teach the words as wholes while we lead the child to see how the sounds that he knows appear in each word and are systematically represented by the letters in it.

You will see, as you work with the system, that the steady accumulation of new words, first in lists and then in stories, which, let us emphasize again, use only the letter-sounds that have been taught up to any point, comes as the child learns to recognize letter-sounds *in words*. He gets the word *as a whole* while he recognizes the letter elements that spell it on the page.

This procedure not only avoids the dangers inherent in labored sounding out, but also from the very beginning, teaches the children to see words as wholes. The whole phonic-pattern and the whole meaning-pattern are joined into a single unit of perception. This is another way of saying that we want every word the child learns to become a "sight" word for him, in the sense that he recognizes it instantly as a whole. This goal is tremendously simplified and expedited if the child, while seeing the word as a whole, also knows the letters that make it and knows why those particular letters make it. He need not pronounce the word either aloud or to himself, but he recognizes the printed word as a systematic representation of the spoken word—because he knows the system.

In short, following this program the child learns from the beginning to see words exactly as the most skillful adult readers see them: not as configurations or silhouettes, but as whole images of complete words with all their letters. We have these images —of thousands and thousands of words—already in our minds, and it is these perfect images of the whole words that we see as we read rapidly. So remarkable is the trigger-mechanism of the brain that a good reader, going at top speed, will actually see *answer* when the word on the page is misprinted as *ansmer*. What clues the human perceptive apparatus uses in perceiving words so rapidly is still a mystery.

We should like to take this occasion to clear up a myth about reading that recurs with surprising frequency. It is that people who believe in phonics teach what is termed "word calling" and do not care about "reading for meaning." If we stress phonics, it is precisely because we are deeply concerned to cut the most direct and reliable path *to* meaning. As we have said earlier, printing is a visual means of representing the *sounds,* which are language. Meaning is in these sounds. We want to equip the child to turn the written word into a spoken word (whether he actually utters it or not) so he will *hear what it says*, that is, get its meaning: If a child looks at a picture or thinks about the context—and then says "dish" when the printed word is "bowl," he is *not* reading for meaning: he is *guessing*. And guessing is not good enough.

Furthermore, in all our experience we have never found anybody who did not think that the purpose of reading was to get the meaning. The only possible defense of skipping sound and going directly from print to meaning would be that printed words are directly meaningful—that the printed word "green" *means* the color, but this is not so. It is the spoken word "green" that designates the color, while the printed word designates the sound of the spoken word. Various linguistics specialists have recently been stressing this fact.

SOME SPECIAL ASPECTS OF THE PROGRAM

In the first-grade program, the readiness skills are developed *at the same time* that the child is learning the first letters. Thus the first steps of reading are taken on the first day, and the "accompanying readiness" exercises may be dropped as soon as they are no longer needed.

Words presented before their phonic elements have all been taught (to make story writing easier) were called *Special* words in Grade One. There were five in the Pre-Primer, eight in the Primer, eleven in Reader 1-1, and none in Reader 1-2, for by that book, we did not include any words whose elements had not been taught already. This program has been particularly designed to meet the needs of a wide range of learning abilities. The advanced child will read all the words in the stories and word lists; but the slower child will not have to master every word in a lesson before going on to the next lesson, because he will have learned the letter or spelling presented in that lesson—and that is all he needs in order to go on.

THE SECOND-GRADE PROGRAM

In Reader 2-1 (first level of second reader) we review the phonic presentation of Grade One in exactly the same order, but instead of more than a hundred elements, taught in more than ninety lessons and stories, we have condensed the same materials into twelve Phonic Units. Thus the stories rapidly become longer and more rewarding, as they should in a second-grade reader. If a class has mastered the system in Grade One, it can go through this reader rapidly; but wherever review or reteaching is necessary, you will find full treatment in this Manual of any spelling—and many further exercises in the workbook. Phonics Unit 12 introduces some new spellings, such as *gui*de, moun*tain*, and whis*tle*.

In Reader 2-2, we may assume that the elements of English phonics have been successfully presented, and so we proceed with an enriched vocabulary. For review or reference, however, we have included in the back a *Phonics Guide*, which lists the phonic elements of the twelve units of Reader 2-1 with exemplary words for each letter and spelling. The teacher will find this *Phonics Guide* useful when she needs an illustrative word beyond what is given in this Manual with the various lessons.

The stories and poems in Reader 2-2 are grouped into six sections, which reflect a certain unity of tone, style, or subject. The Manual suggests a considerable variety of activities and projects that can make use of these groupings; but no teacher need be controlled by them if she wishes at any point in the term to relate her reading activities to some other aspect of the curriculum.

THE THIRD-GRADE PROGRAM

The stories and poems in the Third-Grade Readers are presented in sections, the titles of which indicate the themes that unify them. As before, each Part in the Teacher's Manual opens with a general discussion of its contents; from this, the teacher can plan the extended activities toward which she will work. Suggestions for Correlated Activities come at the end of each section. The groupings need not prevent the teacher from taking stories up in an order that fits in with other studies in the curriculum.

The third-grade materials are particularly rich in literary value. We have drawn upon classics to provide rewarding literary experiences; however, a balance between contemporary selections and stories by famous authors has been maintained.

For those teachers who desire to integrate the appreciation of literary values with language arts, activities involving composition, grammar, phonics, punctuation, and sentence structure are included in the Manual.

As in the Reader 2-2, a *Phonics Guide* has been included at the back of each student's book. The teacher will find this guide useful in reinforcing important phonic generalizations, when necessary.

FOURTH, FIFTH, AND SIXTH GRADE PROGRAM

These volumes turn a corner in the BASIC READING series. The books for the first three grades were designed primarily to help you teach children to read as effectually as possible. The system involved a carefully graded sequence of sound-spellings, beginning with short vowels, proceeding to the regularly-sounded consonants and digraphs, and finally dealing with the oddities and irregularities of English spelling. (Even the irregularities progressed from simple to difficult and were presented in such an order. The long vowels of *mate* and *need* follow a simpler "rule" than the long vowels of *night* and *height*, which were presented much later in the program.) The sound-spellings, furthermore, were presented always *in words* after a preliminary five pages in which the short vowels were presented along with reading readiness exercises—so that the learning child did not have to cope with meaningless sounds or syllables *or* with irregular spellings until he had mastered the basic patterns of regular English sound-spellings.

The four readers in the first-grade program accumulated a vocabulary of 2,197 words. These words occurred in both stories and in lists illustrating the new spellings as they appeared. The words in these lists did not have to be completely mastered before a pupil could go on to the next lesson. Experience has shown that there is generally more danger of over-teaching than of going too fast: the most successful teachers spend minimal time on the first five pages of short vowels and go right ahead to page 6, where the first word appears. There is, after all, a short vowel in every word in the Pre-Primer and in every word of the Primer up to page 31.

The first second-grade reader (2-1) recapitulated the same sound-spelling sequence in 12 teaching units, each presenting about ten major new items, with words and stories using them. In 2-2 the vocabulary is limited only by the typical child's understanding of language. Since the latest researches indicate that the six-year-old child will, on the average, know by ear more than 20,000 words, the vocabulary used by the end of the second grade would not seem to be excessive, even though it is several times greater than that appearing in most basic reading series. The third-grade books moved into a combination of established classics and the most interesting contemporary writing available.

In the Manuals for Grades 2 and 3, we stressed comprehension; fluent oral reading; vocabulary building; typical reading skills, such as identifying details, making deductions, synonyms, and antonyms; and the first elements of grammar: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc.

With Grades 4, 5, and 6, we assume that the pupil has learned the basic reading skills and is more than ready to be introduced to a series of substantial pieces of traditional and contemporary literature. Every selection has been chosen for the quality of its writing, rather than for its subject; but of course we have been able to cover a range and variety of

subjects that will complement the areas of study in, for example, social studies and science in these grades.

Our first concern in these Manuals is to help the teacher guide her class into constantly enriching reading experiences. To this end, every selection is presented with an introductory discussion dealing with the values and problems that the selection offers for class discussion. A systematic approach is suggested, with detailed procedures that the teacher may use as class needs require. Questions are listed both to enable the teacher to stimulate attentive and thoughtful reading and to check on the results after the piece has been read.

The questions are generally presented in a Guided Reading section, so that the pupils will be shown what to look for as they read silently. But we are also convinced that provision for oral reading should be included right up through the grades. The Guided Reading questions can always be used for discussions after the selection has been read aloud at sight, and we frequently suggest this procedure. We do so because the standard forms of the English sentence will be most easily learned by ear. Anyone who can read formal eighteenth- or nineteenth-century prose aloud with the proper cadences, so that the form of the sentence is expressed by the voice, will seldom have trouble writing effective and graceful sentences himself. We have found that students who write formless, incoherent sentences very often do not hear the cadences of good English prose because they have never read it aloud or heard it read properly. Reading aloud also provides an easy and reliable test of reading performance. Saying all the words correctly is not necessarily understanding them, but it is the essential preliminary step. Students who skip some of the words while hurrying on to find the word that answers the “question” will never read correctly except by chance. Guessing the meaning is not good reading for meaning.

Beyond the Guided Reading for comprehension, there are questions and exercises dealing with the basic reading skills that are customarily stressed at the level. These include reading for details, finding main ideas, establishing correct sequence of topics, reading maps and charts, reviewing phonics, dramatizing, skimming, and interpreting figures of speech. For Grades 4 and 5, the Language Arts questions deal with punctuation, compound words, usage, root words, and matters of grammar

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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The information here is taken from the 1966 *Basic Reading Grade 8 Teacher's Edition*. It gives us some insight into the earlier portions of the program and how the various levels relate. Basic Reading was a stellar example of the phonic/linguistic approach to teaching reading and high literary levels. I understand that the program became watered down in later editions, perhaps beginning around 1981 or a little later.

I am publishing this as a part of my effort to reverse-engineer the program, discovering the logic behind it so that future editors may take advantage of its great merits by applying them to future basal reading programs.

Somewhere, somehow the basal publishing industry got off track and American students have suffered ever since. I should be well content if a major publishing company would take the phonic/linguistic method to the next level. The will require a visit through the past to the 1963 edition to determine what it was that Walcutt-McCracken did to produce such an strong reading method.

There is an amazing amount of wisdom in this brief "Message to Teachers." Note especially how their definition of reading guides their approach and avoids the pitfalls of inferior, but all too common, definitions.

Other information on the Walcutt/McCracken phonic/linguistic method can be found on my website www.donpotter.net.

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