

Two Essential Ingredients: Phonics and Fluency Getting to Know Each Other

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Phonics and fluency are two main ingredients in the teaching of reading and in children's reading development (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). They can be thought of as essential spices in reading: Alone neither adds much to the process of reading, but together they blend into a fine and enjoyable outcome—reading for pleasure and learning at a level commensurate to a reader's background knowledge. Just as leaving out essential ingredients in a recipe can result in a less than desirable culinary product, readers who have difficulties in word decoding and fluency will experience problems in reading comprehension and overall reading achievement (Duke, Pressley, & Hilden, 2004). Both phonics and fluency need to be taught, practiced, and nurtured in the earliest stages of reading instruction. The crucial question is not, Are phonics and fluency of great consequence in learning to read? but, rather, How should they be taught in ways that are natural, authentic, synergistic, effective, and engaging?

In most reading curricula, phonics and fluency are thought of as distinct instructional elements—that they should be taught separately. Indeed, Chall's (1996) own model of reading development proposes that they be developed sequentially—first, mastery in decoding, then fluency. However, as with our earlier comparison to spices in a recipe, sometimes it is the mixing of the spices that results in a special ingredient that adds more to a culinary delight than what each could contribute individually. One such special ingredient able to promote and develop the meaningful integration of word recognition, accuracy, fluency, and expressiveness is rhyming poetry.

How Does Rhyming Poetry Become the Special Ingredient?

Certain and relatively common spelling patterns have consistent pronunciations. Perhaps the most useful

spelling patterns for beginning readers are rimes, also known as word families or common phonograms. A rime is simply the part of a syllable that begins with the sounded vowel and contains any consonants that follow the vowel. For example, the *-at* in *hat* and *cat* is a rime or a word family, as is the *-ight* in *light* or *sight*. Readers who can perceive a rime in one word they decode can then apply that knowledge to other words with the identical spelling pattern.

The idea, then, is to teach beginning readers word families so that they can use their knowledge of these spelling patterns in other words they encounter in their reading. This approach to phonics instruction has been recognized and supported by many of the foremost scholars in reading (Adams, 1990; Cunningham, 2005; Ehri, 2005; Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara, & Donnelly, 1996/1997; Gunning, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

There are several hundred word families that readers should know, and students who can recognize these word families in one-syllable and multisyllabic words have the ability to process such words accurately and efficiently. Edward Fry (1998) demonstrated the utility of word families in his "most common phonograms."

According to Fry, knowledge of the word families listed in Table 1 gives a reader the ability to decode and spell over 600 one-syllable words simply by adding a consonant, consonant blend, or consonant digraph to the beginning of the word family. In addition to one-syllable words, knowledge of these word families can help readers partially decode thousands of words in which these word families regularly appear. For example, the rime *-am* can help a reader with words like *ham*, *Sam*, *slam*, and *jam*. The same word family can also help a reader with more challenging words such as *Abraham*, *Amsterdam*, *bedlam*, *camera*, *hamster*, *grammar*, *telegram*, and many more.

For some students, simply seeing and practicing word families, on a word wall for example, may be

Table 1
Fry's Most Common Phonograms

-ab	-ew	-ock
-ack	-ed	-ore
-ag	-eed	-ot
-ail	-ick	-out
-ain	-ing	-ow (<i>how, chow</i>)
-am	-ink	-ow (<i>low, throw</i>)
-an	-ip	-op
-ank	-ight	-uck
-ap	-ill	-ug
-at	-im	-um
-ay	-in	-unk
-ell	-ine	-y
-est	-ob	

enough for them to generalize other identical spelling patterns and grow in their ability to decode words. For others, however, more teacher-guided and supervised practice is needed. These students especially need the opportunity to read words with these spelling patterns in meaningful texts. What kinds of texts feature such words with sufficient frequency to draw attention to the targeted word family? Rhyming poetry fills that bill.

The following rhymes, for example, work well for teaching, practicing, and enjoying the *-ot* and *-old* word families.

Peas porridge hot
Peas porridge cold
Peas porridge in the pot
Five days old.

In the same way that Trachtenburg (1990) advocated the use of children's literature for teaching phonics, we feel that rhyming poetry is ideal for teaching phonics through word families.

Why Rhyming Poetry for Fluency?

Both repeated oral reading of texts (rehearsal) and teachers modeling fluent reading—and supporting students while reading orally by reading with them—have been identified as key methods for teaching reading fluency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; NICHD, 2000; Rasinski, 2003; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). In

repeated oral readings, students read text several times until they can read with a degree of automaticity and expression. An abundance of evidence has shown that students engaged in repeated readings are more accurate in their word recognition, read more rapidly with expression and comprehension, and are more confident as readers (Dowhower, 1987, 1994; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Samuels, 1979).

What kinds of activities are best suited for engaging students in purposeful reasons to participate eagerly in repeated readings or rehearsal? One answer is to perform for an audience. If oral performance is a natural outcome or goal of repeated reading, then what sorts of texts or genre are meant to be performed for an audience?

Speeches, songs, scripts, and especially poetry exist for performance. Poetry is a natural text choice for performance and practice: Most poems for young children are relatively short, making them easy to read more than once and helping students gain a sense of accomplishment by reading the poems fluently.

Using Rhyming Poetry to Teach Phonics and Fluency

So how might a teacher use rhyming poetry to spice up both phonics and reading fluency instruction? We'd like to suggest a simple three-step sequence of instruction.

Step 1: Identifying the Word Family

A teacher identifies a target word family, demonstrates its spelling and sound, and then brainstorms with students words that belong to that word family. For example, if the word family being taught is *-ay*, the teacher and students brainstorm words such as *day, say, may, jay, pay, play, stay, and pray*, as well as some multisyllabic words such as *daylight* and *playmate*. Then, over the course of the next few days, the teacher and the students revisit the list of words (perhaps written on a phonogram word wall) that they brainstormed, talk about the words, and add other words that belong to that word family.

Step 2: Working With the Word Family

Step 2 moves word family instruction from words in isolation to words in the context of rhyming poetry. For example, after reading the *-ay* word list from a phonogram word wall, the teacher can put the following rhyme on chart paper and read it with students several times throughout the day and encourage students to read it on their own as well.

Rain, rain go away
Come again another day
Little Johnny wants to play

The teacher points to the words as they are read, drawing the children's visual attention to the words themselves. When the rhyme is essentially memorized, the teacher takes individual words from the poem (this includes *-ay* words as well as other interesting words such as *little* and *again*). If an appropriate poem to share with students cannot be found for a particular rhyme, then one can be easily written. Here is one that Tim (first author) wrote when working with students on the *-est* word family.

My best friend Chester is a real pest
He pesters his sister and his sister's guest
He thinks he's a jester, never gives them any rest
Oh my friend Chester is a real pest

This brief text contains nine instances of the *-est* word family—four in multisyllabic words. The students loved to read that rhyme throughout the day and requested their own copy to take home and share with their parents.

Step 3: Follow-Up Activities for Word Mastery

After having read and reread the poem in a variety of ways (e.g., whole-group choral, antiphonal choral, echo reading, with a partner together, with a partner alternating lines, reading into a recorder, solo oral reading, solo silent reading, etc.), the teacher guides students in selecting interesting words from the poem. This of course includes any of the word family words but should also include other words of interest from the poem. The words are written on a sheet of chart paper, put on display in the classroom, read, and reread.

Then various follow-up activities such as word sorting (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston,

2008) can draw students' attention to the words and structural features within the words. For example, students can sort the words by the presence or absence of a rime, by words that do and do not rhyme, words that have one or more than one syllable, words that contain the *s* sound and words that don't, words that represent things and words that do not, words that contain a word within them and words that do not, and so on. Each time students sort the words, they are practicing the words again, but with each sort, they are examining the words from a different perspective that requires a deep analysis of the words and leads to developing mastery over the words

Blending Spices in the Classroom

Elementary teachers have always found a place for rhyming poetry in their classrooms—mainly to allow children to experience the sheer delight that comes from reading rhythmical and rhyming words aloud. We have found that the use of rhyming poetry in this three-step sequence serves other important literacy purposes. It allows students to develop mastery of the word families both in and out of context, and it promotes fluency through repeated and assisted readings. Moreover, research has begun to show that the use of rhyming poetry on a regular basis, whether in school or at home, can have a significant and positive impact on students' word recognition and reading fluency (Padak & Rasinski, 2004; Rasinski, Padak, Linek, & Sturtevant, 1994; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005; Wilfong, 2008). Just as two or more spices when blended together often result in a taste much more enjoyable than either spice could produce by itself, such is the synergy that comes from this blending of phonics and fluency. Phonics and fluency can blend together authentically and delightfully in the reading of rhyming poetry to help students develop mastery of each—two key goals of the elementary reading program.

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