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Maryann Manning on
**CELEBRATIONS IN
 Reading
 & Writing**



Six Phonics Myths Dispelled

Let's plunge into the whens, hows and whys of this touchy subject

No issue in the field of reading conjures more emotion than the teaching of phonics. So often I'm asked, "Do you believe in teaching phonics?" The question always surprises me; of course children must have knowledge about phonics in order to read.

However, no other aspect of reading instruction is more misunderstood by the public. It seems to me that six common misconceptions about phonics instruction appear over and over again in the popular press. They are:

1 Memorizing letter-sound correspondences is how children learn to read. Many people think reading is simply the process of memorizing sounds, but readers use syntax (word order), semantics (meaning) and phonics (letter-sound relationships). We've all seen children who are "word callers" rather than readers because they construct no meaning. We have no difficulty spotting these children because they can't retell the meaning of the text that was read.

2 It's never too early to begin teaching phonics.

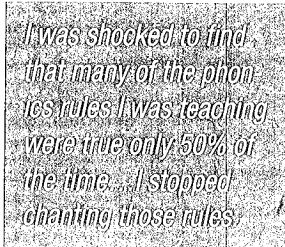
I recently read a report that compared the reading achievement of citizens in

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more than 20 industrialized nations. Scandinavian countries were at or near the top of the list of those with high literacy rates. Many of those countries don't begin the formal teaching of reading until about age seven. In the United States, many schools begin teaching reading at five or six years of age.

In my own research over the years,

I've found that children who begin formal phonics instruction before it makes sense to them become confused. The instruction is therefore useless and counterproductive. Years ago in my coursework, I was told



that formal phonics instruction shouldn't begin before age six and a half. Maybe it's time for us to revisit some of those old notions about the early teaching of phonics.

3 Children come to school knowing nothing about phonics.

Children are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge about letters and their sounds. Many very young children scream "McDonalds!" when the fast-food establishment is still a long distance away from them. Environmental print is a powerful teacher and this information can be built upon in the classroom when children learn letter-sound relationships. These children discover that "McDonalds," "mother" and other words begin with the "m" sound.

4 Children need to know lots of phonics rules.

In my early years of teaching, I tried hard to teach phonics rules but I never understood why my favorite rule, "When two vowels go a-walking, the first one does the talking," didn't seem to help my students read better. In a graduate course I was presented with research about phonics rules and was shocked to find that many of the rules I was teaching were only true 50% of the time. It was at that point that I stopped chanting those rules.

Phonics rules that are taught as part of a spelling program to older children can often help them as spellers. Another revelation I had as a teacher was that after a student can read independently, there is no more need for the study of letter-

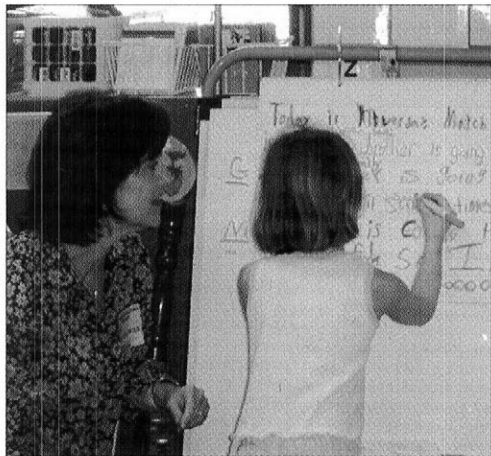
sound correspondences. Reading authorities have written that children don't need phonics instruction after second grade. Each year, I test more than 100 students who are experiencing difficulty as readers and I've found that many of these students have had so much phonics instruction that they believe reading is merely sounding out words. These students need to learn to use semantics and syntax rather than just phonics.

5 Phonics information is best learned through one exercise after another.

At a national meeting, Gayle Morrison, an incredible primary teacher, was asked, "When do you teach phonics?" I waited for Gayle to give a long answer but she simply said, "I teach phonics whenever my students have a pencil in their hands." The more I study children's invented spellings, the more convinced I become that having chil-

dren write a lot is the best way to practice phonics.

When my friend Lynn Kirkland was teaching kindergarten, her colleagues were in disbelief about how well her students learned to read before the end of the school year. The secret to Lynn's success was the teaching of phonics through writing demonstrations commonly known to many teachers as, "The Daily News." Lynn embedded phonics instruction whenever she was



The "Daily News" activity that so many of us (like Lynn Kirkland, above) use every morning is a great way to teach phonics.

writing for her students. I see many teachers using the strategy of interactive writing to help students practice and extend their phonics knowledge.

6 Phonics assessed through saying written words.

This is a commonly-held belief, but asking

children to read words aloud doesn't yield the quantity or quality of information that can be gleaned from observing children's writing.

I think the most brilliant phonics test ever developed can be found in a short, powerful book by Marie Clay: *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Heinemann, 1993). The dictation exercises take only a few minutes, yet they yield much information about a child's development and his or her understanding of letter-sound relationships. You can also observe a student's invented spelling development over time in a journal or the child's other writing projects.

Throughout my career, I've changed many of my views about the teaching of reading – especially the teaching of phonics. Forming those new views takes a lot of time and thought, but if they help me to help a child be a better reader and writer, it's worth it. ↓

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