



# University of Florida Literacy Institute

## How Children Learn to Read Words: Ehri's Phases

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Through decades of research on beginning readers, Linnea Ehri (1995) developed a theory about how word reading skills develop. Her theory helps us understand the phases children move through on their way to proficient reading. Understanding this theory also helps us understand how to promote progress through these phases in both typically developing and struggling readers.

### Pre-Alphabetic Phase

The first of Ehri's phases is the **pre-alphabetic phase**. A child in this phase has little or no alphabetic knowledge and, instead, uses other cues to figure out words. Most often, the cues are visual cues, such as a picture on the page. A visual cue could also be the shape of a word or an accompanying logo. When a young child sees a familiar logo and says the name of the brand or product, his parents may think that he can read, but what he's really doing is recognizing a logo and attaching it to a word he knows. He would not recognize the word without the logo.

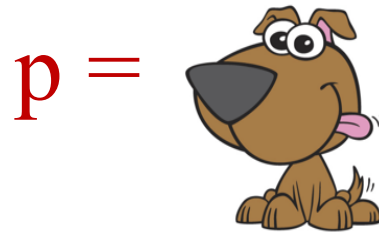


Children in this phase recognize some words as pictures and read words as wholes. They use context clues, pictures, and guessing strategies to identify words. They also match voice to print in memorized texts. Children in the pre-alphabetic phase notice semantic rather than phonological relationships and they make arbitrary rather than systematic connections.

The pre-alphabetic phase is a perfectly normal part of reading development, but by sometime early in kindergarten, once phonics instruction has begun, typically developing readers have moved through this phase and into the next. Instruction for children in this phase should focus on phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and grapheme-phoneme correspondences.

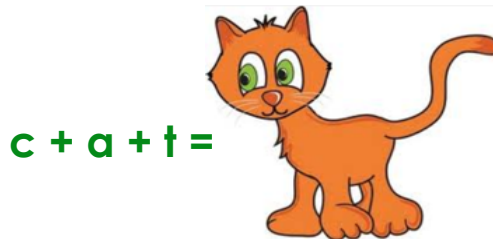
## Partial Alphabetic Phase

Children in the **partial alphabetic phase** demonstrate emerging use of grapheme-phoneme, or letter-sound connections. This is known as phonetic cue reading, but usually, the connections are incomplete or unreliable. Children in this phase often use the first letter sound, along with the context, to guess unfamiliar words. For example, because in one instance they encountered the word “puppy,” which begins with the letter P, they may guess that each subsequent word that begins with P is “puppy.” They may also occasionally use the last letter sound or other letters to figure out a word. The partial alphabetic phase is more reliable than visual cue reading, but it provides no way to read novel words in print. Instruction in this phase should reinforce letter-sound knowledge and phonemic awareness, with an emphasis on using all of the letters in each word.



## Full Alphabetic Phase

In the **full alphabetic phase**, the reader attends to every letter in every word. Words are accessed through phonological recoding, or converting graphemes into phonological representations, or put more simply, converting letters into sounds and words. This phase is dramatically more reliable than phonetic cue reading. A child in this phase has a working knowledge of most letter-sound correspondences, has phonemic awareness, decodes sequentially and often slowly, and uses decoding skills to read unfamiliar words.



Typically developing readers begin the full alphabetic phase by late kindergarten or early first grade, as their phonics instruction progresses and as their phonemic awareness develops. Instruction in this phase should focus on segmenting and blending phonemes and on getting children to attend to every grapheme individually. Repeated exposures to words with taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences is necessary for growth through this phase. This exposure promotes **orthographic mapping**, or the strengthening of associations between graphemes and phonemes “to bond the spellings, pronunciations, and meanings of specific words in memory” (Ehri, 2014, pg. 5).

## Consolidated Alphabetic Phase

When readers reach the **consolidated alphabetic phase**, they begin to use chunks to decode, rather than individual phonemes. Phonograms, or multi-letter patterns, such as consonant blends, digraphs, and vowel teams, are consolidated in memory and recognized instantly, as are common word families, affixes, and other common letter patterns. Syllables and morphemes are also recognized as chunks. In fact, Ehri (2014) has referred to this phase as the consolidated grapho-syllabic and grapho-morphemic phase. Orthographic mapping continues to develop as these chunks become more instantly recognizable, and readers more readily teach themselves new connections (Share, 1995).



This is considered the most mature form of reading. Typically, this phase begins sometime in second grade and continues to develop as readers become more automatic in their word reading skills. Instruction in this phase should focus on the recognition of the various chunks within words. To promote orthographic mapping, students should pronounce each new word aloud as they read silently to form spelling-sound connections and phonological memory for the word.

## Automatic Phase

The automatic phase is considered the final phase in word reading development (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). Word reading is quick and effortless, and most words encountered have become sight words. Unfamiliar words are decoded with highly developed automaticity, and with particularly technical words, readers have a variety of strategies at their disposal. At this phase, the reader is able to focus entirely on the meaning of text. Most proficient adolescent and adult readers have reached the automatic phase.

## References

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