CHAPTER 7: EMERGENT LITERACY - CONCEPTS OF PRINT AND PHONEMIC AWARENESS

This is an excerpt from my book, Johnson, A. (2016). *10 essential instructional elements for students with reading difficulties: A brain-friendly approach*. Corwin

Helping humans learn to read and write should look much different from teaching chickens to dance.

The first part of this chapter provides a sense of what effective literacy instruction might look like at the preschool and kindergarten (emergent) levels. The second part of this chapter describes strategies for developing phonemic awareness.

APPROACHES TO EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION

There are two general approaches to early literacy instruction (ages 3, 4, and 5): a skills-based approach and a child-centered approach (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011).

A Skills-Based Approach

The skills-based approach, sometimes called the *reading readiness approach,* assumes that children require a great deal of explicit instruction in order to be made ready to read. Direct instruction is used to teach a prescribed set of reading sub-skills (such as alphabetics, phonics, and phonemic awareness) in a predetermined order (scope and sequence). The focus here is on structure, standardization, and drill and practice. Lessons tend to be scripted, and sequential with clearly defined objectives for learning along with expected outcomes. Progress is measured using standardized tests. If students seem not to be making adequate progress, they are provided more direct instruction followed by more drill and practice.

There are some effective elements to take from this instructional model; however, the research to support the efficacy of skills-only, phonics-first programs at the emergent level is inconclusive at best (Cole, 2003; Pearson & Hiebert, 2013; Smith, 2003). While instruction that focuses solely on reading sub-skills may demonstrate increases in measures of these types of reading sub-skills initially (as we would expect); at the emergent level these interventions have not been shown to demonstrate positive effects on oral reading, comprehension, word recognition, or spelling (Casbergue & McGee, 2011; Cain, 2009; Paciga, Hoffman, & Teale, 2011; Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000), or on higher level literacy skills and later literacy achievement (Teale, Hoffman, & Paciga, 2010). As well, these types of interventions do not reflect what we know about human learning and how the brain creates meaning. Also, eliminated from this approach to early literacy instruction is focus on children's social, emotional, cognitive, or physical development.

A Child-Centered Approach

With the child-centered approach, sometimes called an *emergent literacy approach,* literacy is seen to emerge as a series of naturally developing skills and behaviors as children are

ready for them and as they are exposed to certain conditions. This emergence occurs in much the same way that oral language emerges. This approach is based on observations of how real children actually learn within natural settings (Cambourne, 1993; Clay, 1982; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1981), and not on behavioristic studies of how rats and mice learn to press a bar to get a pellet. As well, emergent literacy approaches have been shown to out-perform skills-based approaches in measures of reading comprehension, writing, and metacognitive knowledge (Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000).

According to Noam Chomsky (1965), humans are naturally hard-wired to learn language. The same language acquisition device the brain uses to learn to speak and listen is involved in learning to read and write. And how do young children learn to speak? Well for starters, there is very little (if any) direct instruction. Children aren't asked to work in ability groups. They don't have to do hours of drill and practice. They aren't asked to practice making meaningless sounds before they're allowed to talk. They're not asked to talk about things that aren't important to them or that are not a part of their lives or experiences. And they're not asked to experience failure. Instead, children learn to speak because:

- they're immersed in actual, real-life speaking experiences.
- they're provided small bits on instruction in authentic contexts.
- they're encouraged to talk about things that make sense and are of interest to them.
- they use language for real life purposes.
- we allow them to learn differently and at different rates.
- we respond to them instead of correct them.
- we encourage their early attempts and successful approximations.
- we incorporate creativity and humor.
- language is used in play and social interactions.

In effective child-centered classrooms, these same conditions are applied to learning to read and write. Thus, we don't teach children to read and write as much as we create the conditions whereby all students can develop their full literacy capacities. This occurs when children are engaged in authentic literacy experiences, with explicit modeling, scaffolded instruction, and lots of time to practice reading and writing. (By the way, these same conditions should be applied to literacy learning at all levels.) Figure 7.1 contains elements that Morrow and Dougherty (2011) have identified as being essential for effective literacy instruction in pre-school and kindergarten classrooms.

Figure 7.1. Elements necessary for effective emergent literacy instruction.

- explicit modeling and scaffolding of lesson to be learned.
- guided practice
- independent practice
- time on task
- structure and routines
- differentiation of instruction to meet individual needs.
- feedback for children
- time to explore
- time to experiment
- time to collaborate in social settings
- time for problem solving.

Skills Instruction in a Child-Centered Approach

Child-centered approaches to literacy instruction use direct and explicit instruction to teach alphabetics, phonics, and phonemic awareness and other sub-skills. However, these sub-skills are taught in ways that are developmentally appropriate and in the context of authentic reading and writing. While a skills-based approach starts with direct instruction of sub-skills and moves on to real reading and writing later; a child-centered approach immerses students in authentic reading and writing experiences first; then teaches essential skills within that context. This is actually results in more-direct instruction than a skills-based approach. Here the necessary skills are taught directly in the context in which they are used. Also, students are not asked to make a link between abstract skills taught in one context and real-life literacy in another context.

Most would agree that learning sub-skills involved with reading is important. Where I differ from those who advocate a skills-based approach is that I believe that these sub-skills are necessary but far from sufficient. Learning to read and write cannot be reduced to simply mastering a predefined set of sub-skills. Instead, early literacy learning is more like systems theory in that there is an interrelationship among multiple elements: linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social systems (Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006), as well as knowledge and experience (Neuman, 2006). Each element reinforces as well as draws upon the other. Thus, an effective child-centered approach focuses on nurturing and developing each of these elements in developmentally appropriate ways.

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction

There is a reason why effective kindergarten instruction does not look like instruction in first grade: Kindergarten is not first grade. There are certain types of instruction and experiences that are very effective for older students, but are simply not developmentally appropriate for young children (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). Thus, you want to avoid what is called the *push-down curriculum*. This is where a first grade curriculum gets pushed down into kindergarten or pre-school.

Keep in mind that children's brains are not adult brains in miniature. Children think in

qualitatively different ways than adults. They also think in qualitatively different ways at different stages of development. Thus, instruction for young children must be developmentally appropriate. Sooner does not mean faster. More of something does not mean better. From a developmental standpoint, educational experiences must fit students' social, emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental levels. This does not mean that you can't address alphabetics, phonics, and phonemic awareness in pre-school and kindergarten classrooms. It does mean that the form that this instruction takes should be developmentally appropriate. It's not the 'what' as much as the 'how'. Worksheets and time spent drilling and practicing are not developmentally appropriate practices at the emergent levels. Most instruction here should be incidental or involve play. This is how young children learn.

Whole-to-Part-to-Whole Instruction

Learning complex skills (such as reading and writing) is most efficient when addressed whole-to-part-to-whole (Donnelly & Davidoff, 1999; Helmut, 2005; Julia, 2006; Lim, Reiser, & Olina, 2009; Tanaka & Gauthier 1997). When learners can get a sense of the whole, they are better able to see where the smaller parts (such as reading sub-skills) fit within this context. Using this model, we would immerse children in authentic reading and writing experiences in pre-school and kindergarten. We want them to read real books. Their reading at this level may rely more on picture cues than letter cues, but they are creating meaning with print. Activities include picture reading, pretend reading, echo reading, and choral reading. As well, we want children to write real things. Again, their writing may rely more on drawing than writing, but they are using pictures and symbols to communicate in developmentally appropriate ways.

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EARLY LITERACY LEARNING

So what does effective literacy instruction look like in a pre-school or kindergarten setting? Below are described some of the developmentally appropriate practices you might see. This is by no means an exhaustive or complete list, but it should provide you with a sense of the types of activities that are appropriate for literacy learners at this level.

1. Lots of talk. Teachers should be having conversations with children, directing their conceptual learning, as well as introducing new words into their vocabulary. Oral language ability, vocabulary and general knowledge are strong predictors of reading achievement and comprehension in the later grades (Biemiller, 2006; Neuman, 2006). Thus, there should be individual and large group teacher-directed conversations as well as structured and unstructured opportunities for children to interact with other children. Also, small bits of teaching, both planned and incidental provide rich opportunities to build students' knowledge based and vocabulary.

2. Lots of reading. This reading should take a variety of forms. Foremost are teachers reading books with children. These provide opportunities for incidental learning about words and concepts found in the book. This is also the place for the incidental teaching of phonemic awareness and phonics skills. Example: "*Boys and girls, this story is called, 'Big Bunny'. See the 'B'? It makes the 'buh' sound like ball and boy*."

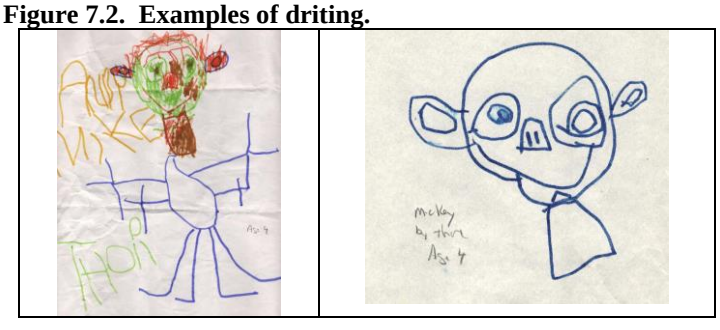
There should be narrative texts (stories) as well as expository text (informational books). The classroom should be filled with lots of good books on a variety of subjects. Big books are used as well, with the teacher pointing to individual words as they are read. Sometimes children read along with the teacher (choral reading), other times the teacher reads a line of text and then children read it back (echo reading). The teacher should also model the reading of lists, signs, and environmental print. There is picture reading where children read or re-tell a story using the pictures in the book. Children are provided lots of opportunities to talk about and explore books. Finally, there should be recorded books on CD or on the Internet in which students can listen. There should be headphone available. With Internet texts, look for books that highlight the words as they are read to the student.

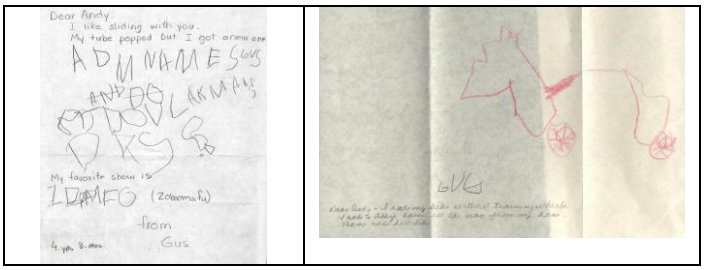
3. Lots of writing. Large group writing should involve language experience activities where students are asked for ideas and the teacher records their ideas on a poster or board (see Chapter 9). Example: *"Boys and girls, yesterday we went to the zoo. What should we say about that in our morning letter? Who has an idea?"* The teacher then writes down what the student says, saying each word as she or he writes so students can see the letter-sound connection. You want students to read short, grammatically correct sentences. Thus, it is acceptable to paraphrase and edit. Choral reading or echo reading are used to practice fluency and word identification skills. As will be shown in other places in the book, language experience activities an excellent place for short, phonics mini-lessons.

Knowing that writing develops in stages, there should be lots of paper, pencils, white boards, and or other writing utensils laying around for children to mess around with and explore. Allowing time and opportunity for children to explore enhances the development of their literacy skills.

Early writing takes the form of '*driting*'. This is a combination of drawing and writing. In writing a letter or story, the child starts with a drawing. The teacher asks the child, "*Tell me about your story."* The teacher writes what the child says on the picture. When the child proudly takes the letter or story home, it is used to practice reading. Below are some early examples of 'driting' letters sent to me by my nephews.

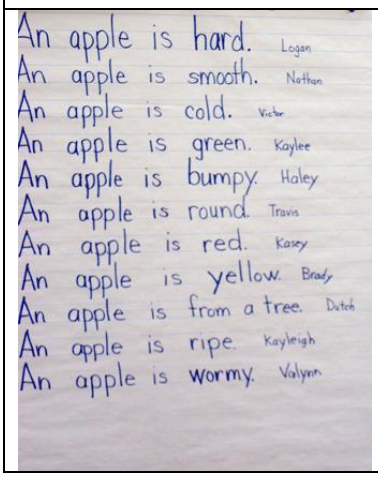
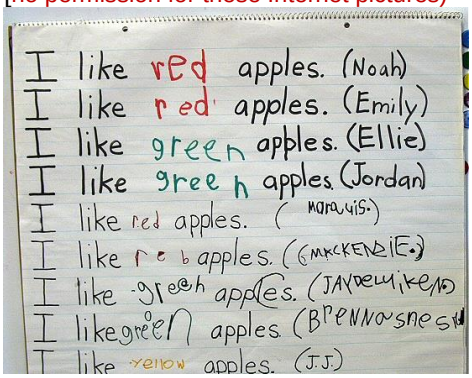
Figure 7.2. Examples of driting.





Writing can also take the form of predictable stories (see Chapter 16). Here an open-ended sentence is written or printed with a space for students' individual responses. Student responses can be dictated, or you can encourage them to write. Notice how the predictable writing in the bottom right corner in Figure 7.3 gives students three choices (red, green, and yellow). These words are printed on top of the chart enabling all students to be successful. At the same time, you are reinforcing colors and letter sounds. This is a form of scaffolding. It provides students the structure necessary to be successful when they read it back.

Figure 7.3. Examples of predictable writing.

I like to eat ___ I like to eat ___ I like to eat ___	My name is ____ My name is ____ My name is____
	[no permission for these Internet pictures) 

The teacher should model writing whenever possible to students. Lists or reminders work well here. Example: "*Boys and girls, I need to remind myself to take my apple to lunch. What should I write?"* As students provide an idea, the teacher writes it on the board, sounding out each word as it is written. You can also model writing posters and signs. The point is, students see you using writing for real purposes. You are able to teach and reinforce words and letter sounds in authentic, meaningful writing contexts.

4. Play. Play is how children come to know the world. It is the best modality for learning at the emergent level. Play should be used to both introduce and reinforce skills and concepts. For example, when teaching the /b/ sound, toys or objects that start with the letter /b/ would be labeled and featured. When teaching a unit on birds, a teacher might have toys or

figures related to birds with which children can play. Games in which children have to match an object and pictures with letter sounds are effective. Play could also involve flashcards and simple IPAD and computer games.

5. Planned, systematic, direct, and explicit instruction. This may seem contradictory to the child-centered approach described above, but remember, it's not the 'what'; it's the 'how' and the 'how much' that is important when considering direct instruction of reading sub-skills. It is effective to systematically work your way through all the letter sounds using short bits of explicit instruction (30 seconds to no more than four or five minutes), followed by play or other creative and developmentally appropriate activities to reinforce the letter-sound. It's systematic because you keep a chart making note of the skills taught and the date. You also keep a chart or checklist to record when you notice students' mastering each sub-skill. Not only are you using direct instruction here; but you are using a very direct form of assessment. This same approach can be taken with sight words, phonograms, and phonemic awareness skills.

CONCEPTS OF PRINT

As described in the last chapter, concepts of print includes things such as what a book is, words have meaning, letters stand for sounds, letters are put together to create words, and print is read from left to right. These concepts are learned in the early years (birth through age three) as children interact naturally with an adult around books and other forms of print in literate environments. Very little, if any, direction instruction should be used here. However, we must make sure parents understand the importance of talking with and reading to their young children because these early literacy experiences have a positive impact on children's cognitive and language development, reading skills, and school achievement (Britto, Fuligni, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). This also points to the importance of programs such as Early Head Start in helping to insure that all children come to school reading and able to learn.

PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Phonemes are the smallest units of sound within spoken words. English has 41-44 phonemes. *Phonemic awareness* is the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words. Phonemic awareness is one part of the whole literacy learning system. But not all children benefit from phonemic awareness activities. The rule of thumb is that phonemic awareness activities should generally be discontinued once children are reading comfortably at the 1st grade level. Some students with severe reading difficulties in later grades benefit from having phonemic awareness activities that are part of their total reading program.

I would recommend that phonemic awareness activities be phonogram-based. That is, developed so that they can be used in the context of instruction related to each of the 38 most common phonograms (see Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4. 38 most common phonograms

1. ay	10. ell	19. out	29. ed
2. ill	11. ot	20. ug	30. ab
3. ip	12. ing	21. op	31. ob
4. at	13. ap.	22. in	32. ock
5. am	14. unk	23. an	33. ake
6. ag	15. ail	24. est	34. ine
7. ack	16. ain	25. ink	35. ight
8. ank	17. eed	26. ow	36. im
9. ick	18. y	27. ew	37. uck
		28. ore	38. um

Seven Activities for Developing Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness activities should comprise only a small part of a reading curriculum or intervention plan. Also, keep in mind that phonemic awareness activities are primarily sound activities, not letter-sound activities. The focus should be primarily on hearing and manipulating sounds. Below are described seven phonemic awareness activities.

1. Phonemic segmentation. Here students break words into parts based on phonemes.

Step #1: The student sees the complete word as well as the word broken into parts (see Figure 7.5). Point to and read the target word with the student using Scaffolded Oral Reading. You do not want to make the student struggle to figure out what the word is. Right below the complete word is the word broken into phonemic parts. Point to and say each phoneme with the student: /p/, /ay/. (You should provide initial scaffolding here for the student. Drop out as soon as you the student is able to comfortable do this independently.) The student should point to each phonemic segment and make the sound. This gets them physically interacting their learning and incorporates another learning modality.

Step #2: The student points to the complete word below and says it.

Step #3: The student sees three words that have the same phonogram. The student points to and identifies each one of these.

Figure 7.5. Phonemic segmentation based on the AY phonogram.

Step #1	Step #2	Step #3
pay	pay	pay
p - ay	p - ay	p - ay
	pay	pay
		day bay stay

This type of activity works well when presented on a screen or PPT. You can also create a paper version of this activity. Here students read across the page (see Figure 7.6). I have included two phonograms (although you may want to start with just one). Remember, the goal here is to develop neural pathways and strengthen neural networks in order to develop automaticity in word recognition. Put simply, you want students to recognize words and letter patterns without thinking about them during the act of reading (automaticity). Thus, you should

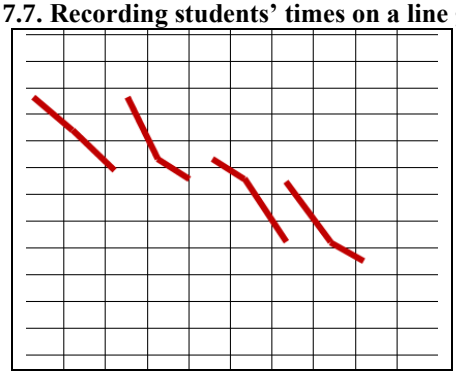
try to push the pace just slightly here (zone of proximal development).

In working individually with a student you can extend this activity by having the student read through the list three times (or twice if the student is struggling). Time and record how long each attempt takes. This enables students to see progress and experience success as their times get faster after each attempt. Let the student mark his or her three times on a table or graph (see Figure 7.7).

Figure 7.6. Fast phonemic segmentation.

may	m - ay	may	pay, ray, say
fill	f - i - ll	fill	bill - still - will
fray	f - r - ay	fray	may - way - stay
mill	m - i - ll	mill	hill - drill - dill
hay	h - a - y	hay	stay - bay - lay
pill	p - i - ll	pill	grill - till - hill
play	p - l - ay	play	way - stay - bay
still	s - t - i - ll	still	fill - sill - bill

Figure 7.7. Recording students' times on a line graph



2. Phoneme categorization activity. Here students are given three words, two of which have similar sounds. They are asked to identify the word in each set that has the "odd" sound. For example: *"bun -- bus -- rug. Which word does not belong with the other two?"* This can be used to reinforce beginning, middle, or ending sounds.

Figure 7.8. Examples of phoneme categorization.

Beginning Sounds	Middle Sounds	Ending Sounds
1. pay, pill, cram	1. cat, ham, hill	1. drip, mop, mat
2. cat, clam, hill	2. pay, pail, mat	2. cat, nut, bag
3. day, dill, rip	3. bill, tip, jet	3. grip, rap, set
4. sat, say, rip	4. snip, rip, cut	4. tug, big, sat
5. ray, ram, mat	5. day, sat, men	5. fill, pull, sat
6. play, pill, spat	6. lip, fill, light,	6. tin, ran, sat
7. whip, will, hat	7. fray, mail, cub	7. hop, drip, mat
8. fill, fat, sip	8. cram, man, rate	8. sad, bed, rip
9. may, mat, bam	9. cat, jam, fill	9. lap, rip, exam
10. drill, drip, drop	10. dip, , grill, dine	10. bunk, rink, cram

3. Phoneme blending activity. Here, students listen to a sequence of separately spoken

phonemes and then combine them to form a word. Example: *"What would you get if you put these sounds together /b/ - /i/ - /g/?* It is sometimes helpful to use actual physical letters (such as bingo letters) with this. Here you would lay down the letter as you make the sound. In this way you are also teaching/reinforcing letter sounds. When the student identifies the word, push the letters together. Again, I would recommend focusing on two or three phonograms at a time and creating phonemic blending activities based on the target phonograms.

4. Phoneme identification activity. Here students learn to recognize the same sounds in different words. Say three words with similar beginning, middle, or ending sounds (see Figure 7.9). Once students have identified the similar sound, then show the three words and ask the students to point to the similar letter or cluster.

Figure 7.9. Phoneme identification.

Beginning Sounds	Middle Sounds	Ending Sounds
1. drill, drip, drop	1. hot, crop, sob	1. tank, bunk, rink
2. bay, bill, bat	2. sock, top, rob	2. bead, bed, had
3. day, dip, dam	3. hat, man, track	3. hip, mop, rap
4. tray, trip trail	4. sip, hill, him	4. rain, man, pen
5. hay, hill, hip	5. stay, mail, pain	5. sob, blab, stub
6. Jill, jay, jam	6. bay, tail, stain	6. fill, hall, tell
7. tip, tag, tank	7. bill, stick, tin	7. mat, jet, hot
8. way, will, wag	8. bat, cram, tag	8. ram, dim, hum
9. fill, fat, fell	9. bell, head, nest	9. stag, rug, beg
10. spill, spat, spam	10. duck, cut, hum	10. track, stick, tuck

5. Phoneme addition activity. Here students make a new word by adding a phoneme to a phonogram. Example: *"What word do you have if you add /s/ to the beginning of /ip/?"* This is similar to onset-rime or word building activities described in Chapter 10. The difference here is that you want to focus on sound or phonemes first. Make the sounds before you show the letter patterns. Again, I would recommend that you systematically work your way through the 38 most common phonograms as well as consonants and consonant blends.

6. Phoneme isolation activity. Here students learn to recognize and identify individual sounds in a word. Example: *"What is the first sound you hear in the work /sip/?"* Here the student is not identifying a letter; rather a sound. *"That's correct, the /s/ sound. The letter /s/ makes this sound."* Do this for beginning, middle, and end sounds. Show the complete word only after students have identified the sound.

7. Phoneme substitution activity. Here students substitute one phoneme for another to make a new word. Example: Show and say the word /tip/. *"What word would we get if changed the /t/ sound in tip to a /r/ sound?"* Make the /t/ and /r/ sounds for the student here. Show the new word after students have identified the word. Do this for beginning, middle, and end sounds.

FINAL WORD

This chapter examined two approaches to early literacy instruction. Most would agree

that learning the sub-skills involved with reading is important. Where I differ from those who advocate a skills-based approach is that I believe that these sub-skills are necessary but far from sufficient. Learning to read and write cannot be reduced to simply mastering a predefined set of sub-skills. Instead, early literacy learning is more like systems theory in that there is an interrelationship among multiple elements: linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social systems (Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006), as well as knowledge and experience (Neuman, 2006). Each element reinforces as well as draws upon the other. A child-centered approach focuses on nurturing and developing each of these elements in developmentally appropriate ways.

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PHONICS CHECKLIST

Check off (or date) when you observe students using and mastering the phonics skills and sight words below

CONSONANTS				
___ **B**	___ **H**	___ **M**	___ **R**	___ **W**
___ **C**	___ **J**	___ **N**	___ **S**	___ **X**
___ **F**	___ **K**	___ **P**	___ **T**	___ **Z**
___ **G**	___ **L**	___ **Q**	___ **V**	

short vowel sounds				
___ **a**	___ **e**	___ **i**	___ **o**	___ **u**

long vowel sounds					
___ **A**	___ **E**	___ **I**	___ **O**	___ **U**	___ **Y**

BEGINNING BLENDS					
___ **sl**	___ **sc**	___ **br**	___ **pr**	___ **spr**	___ **bl**
___ **st**	___ **sw**	___ **cr**	___ **tr**	___ **cl**	___ **gl**
___ **sp**	___ **sk**	___ **dr**	___ **gr**	___ **fl**	___ **spl**
___ **sn**	___ **sm**	___ **fr**	___ **scr**	___ **pl**	___ **tw**

ZENO SIGHT WORDS				
___ he	___ you	___ from	___ she	___ said
___ of	___ he	___ had	___ when	___ out
___ and	___ on	___ I	___ an	___ if
___ to	___ as	___ not	___ their	___ some
___ a	___ are	___ have	___ there	___ would
___ in	___ they	___ this	___ her	___ so
___ is	___ with	___ but	___ can	___ people
___ that	___ be	___ by	___ we	___ them
___ it	___ his	___ were	___ what	___ other
___ was	___ at	___ one	___ about	___ more
___ for	___ or	___ all	___ up	___ will

___ into	___ like	___ made	___ way	___ know
___ your	___ could	___ over	___ each	___ little
___ which	___ has	___ see	___ called	___ such
___ do	___ him	___ first	___ did	___ even
___ then	___ how	___ new	___ just	___ much
___ many	___ than	___ very	___ after	___ our
___ these	___ two	___ my	___ water	___ must
___ no	___ may	___ also	___ through	
___ time	___ only	___ down	___ get	
___ been	___ most	___ make	___ because	
___ who	___ its	___ now	___ back	

38 MOST COMMON PHONOGRAMS					
___ ay	___ ank	___ ot	___ y	___ ink	___ ock
___ ll	___ ick	___ ing	___ out	___ ow	___ ake
___ ip	___ ell	___ ap.	___ ug	___ ew	___ ine
___ at	___ ot	___ unk	___ op	___ ore	___ ight
___ am	___ ing	___ ail	___ in	___ ed	___ im
___ ag	___ ap.	___ ain	___ an	___ ab	___ uck
___ ack	___ unk	___ eed	___ est	___ ob	___ um