Seven-Step Structured Literacy Lesson Framework

An explicit sequence grounded in the Science of Reading — designed for consistent daily use across K–3.

This framework is the instructional backbone of any effective phonics lesson. Each lesson follows this sequence in order — from reviewing previously learned concepts to reading connected decodable text — because the steps are designed as a coherent progression, not a menu of independent activities. Each step builds on what came before it. The framework is grounded in the Science of Reading and reflects evidence-based principles for explicit, systematic phonics instruction.

1 Review of Previously Learned Concepts

A fast-paced, teacher-led review of previously taught phoneme-grapheme correspondences using a visual Sound Wall system and related cards. Students produce the phoneme when shown the grapheme (reading direction) and, in more advanced lessons, identify the grapheme when given the phoneme (spelling direction). This step maintains automaticity with prior learning and prevents decay of established correspondences over time.

2 Phonemic Awareness Warm-Up

One or more brief, oral-only activities targeting phonemic awareness skills. No print is used in this step. Tasks are drawn from the phonemic awareness progression — isolation, identification, blending, segmentation, and manipulation — and are selected to match the phonological demands of the phoneme being taught, including its position in words and whether it can be held and stretched or is a brief stop sound. At minimum, one activity in this step focuses on the specific phoneme introduced or reviewed in Step 3. In Kindergarten lessons, this step may also include broader phonological awareness tasks such as syllable counting or rhyme recognition.

3 Introduction or Review of New Concept

Explicit instruction in a new phoneme-grapheme correspondence or structured review of a previously introduced one. The teacher shows the Sound Wall card, explains the name of the card (the visual keyword), names the phoneme that the card represents, and then presents the grapheme that is the focus of the lesson. This process uses a multisensory routine to cement the phoneme-grapheme correspondence: students hear the phoneme, see the grapheme, and anchor the correspondence in a memorable visual reference. On review lessons, this step revisits the correspondence with brief guided practice before students apply it in Steps 4 and 5. This step is the anchor of the lesson — every subsequent step depends on the phoneme-grapheme correspondence established here.

4 Blending and Word Reading (Decoding)

Explicit instruction and practice in decoding words containing the phoneme-grapheme correspondence(s) introduced or reviewed in Step 3, alongside words that cumulatively review previously taught correspondences. This step has two phases. In the first phase, the teacher guides students through structured blending routines appropriate to the grade band: vowel-first blending, sound-by-sound blending, continuous blending, syllable blending, and whole word blending. In the second phase, the focus shifts to building automaticity — students read words rapidly from a blending board or word list and engage in analysis of word structure using the words they have just read. In early Kindergarten, this step may use alternatives to formal blending routines, such as word-building and word-chain activities.

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5 Word Spelling (Encoding)

Expressive practice in which students encode words using the phoneme-grapheme correspondence(s) introduced or reviewed in Step 3, alongside words that cumulatively review previously taught correspondences. Encoding is treated as a parallel strand to decoding — not a separate skill — and is sequenced to match the phonics progression exactly. In early Kindergarten, encoding activities include word building with letter tiles, Elkonin boxes with letters, and word sorting by spelling pattern. Beginning in late Kindergarten and continuing through Grade 3, the primary encoding routine is sound-by-sound spelling dictation, in which students segment words into syllables, segment syllables into phonemes, and map each phoneme to a grapheme using the Sound Wall as a reference. Beginning in the latter half of Grade 1 and continuing through Grade 3, sentence-level dictation is added as an extension of this routine, requiring students to apply phonics knowledge, high-frequency word recognition, and basic conventions at the sentence level.

6 High-Frequency Word Practice

Purposeful practice with words students will encounter in the decodable text read in Step 7. Words are selected because they appear in the upcoming text, not drawn from a generic frequency list. Instruction is grounded in orthographic mapping: rather than asking students to memorize words simply by rote, the teacher guides students through a quickly paced phoneme-grapheme analysis of each word — identifying what is regular, what follows a pattern not yet taught, and what is genuinely irregular. Fully decodable words are decoded, not memorized. Words containing an untaught pattern are flagged as upcoming learning: students are told this is a pattern they will learn later and are asked to pay particular attention to that part of the word. Only words with a truly unpredictable correspondence are treated as exceptions to the system.

7 Decodable Text Reading

Connected text reading in a decodable text controlled to the phoneme-grapheme correspondences taught in or before the current lesson. Decodable texts are used specifically because they allow students to practice applying taught phonics skills in connected reading — not leveled readers, not predictable text. This step has two purposes that build on each other: accuracy and fluency. Students first read for accuracy, applying decoding skills to unfamiliar words and receiving immediate corrective feedback from the teacher. Repeated reading of the same text — through whisper reading, choral reading, partner reading, echo reading, or timed reading practice — then builds fluency by developing the automaticity that accuracy practice alone cannot produce. The decodable text is the culminating application of everything practiced in Steps 1 through 6 within the lesson.

A Word About Sequence

Each step is cumulative — not independent. The Sound Wall anchors Steps 1, 3, and 5. Steps 4 and 5 are parallel decoding/encoding strands. Step 6 prepares students for Step 7.

In previous frameworks, Step 5 (Encoding) was placed at the very end of the lesson sequence. The rationale was that encoding is more cognitively demanding than reading decodable text. While that remains true, some structured literacy frameworks have since moved encoding earlier — before reading connected text — reflecting practitioner preference rather than a distinct research base. This framework recommends Encoding at Step 5: encoding at this position allows students to consolidate the phoneme-grapheme correspondence before applying it in connected text, and gives the teacher an opportunity to identify and correct errors before students read independently in Steps 6 and 7.

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