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**Phonics and Phonemic Awareness:  
Classroom Guide to Best Practices and  
Top 5 Phonics/Word Work Lessons**

*“How do you figure out a word you don’t know when you are reading?”*

I pose the question to the third graders seated on the floor during small-group instruction. The answers are telling:

“Reread it.”

“Sound it out.”

“Karate chop it into parts you know.”

“Skip it!”

“Ask a friend.”

James proudly offers his simple suggestion for word attack: “If I don’t get a word, I just stare at it a little longer.” Another child, Arianna, admits that she learned about phonics and figuring out unknown words by watching her favorite television show, “Wheel of Fortune.”



## What Do You Remember About Learning to Read?

Do you recall phonics lessons from your elementary school days? Even now I can vividly picture my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Evanston, with her rubber-tipped wooden pointer, as she pointed to letters, sounds, and various prefixes and suffixes on a phonics chart. Our job as good readers was to speak on cue the corresponding sounds as she pointed to each one. I can recall wondering what on earth all this noise and nonsense had to do with reading. Now we know from the research that programs that focus too much on teaching letter–sound relationships in isolation and not enough on putting phonics to work in meaningful contexts are not effective (Akhavan, 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Today we teach phonics as a means to help children read well and enjoy reading in real books (Akhavan, 2008).

## Phonics and Phonemic Awareness 101

Phonics is defined as knowing the connection between spoken sounds and the corresponding written letters or sound–symbol relationships

(National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Routman, 2000). Phonics begins with an understanding that each letter stands for a sound. Those letters and sounds are grouped into words. An effective way to teach phonics is using patterns and analogies to figure out unknown words (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002).

Phonics should also be taught explicitly and systematically in the early grades (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999) and then continued at upper grades as a more sophisticated word study where students consider vocabulary, roots, prefixes, suffixes, and the Greek and Latin origins of words. Researchers suggest connecting phonics instruction to text rather than teaching phonics in isolation (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

## Weighing in on the “P” Word

The goal of phonics instruction—or the relationship between sounds and letters—is to give students the tools they need to unlock words during reading. Children who have a strong awareness of phonemic structures are better readers (Adams, 1990).

Phonics is one of the critical pillars of a research-based reading program that also includes phonemic awareness, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Unfortunately, in the past, many debates have raged in the media, legislature, universities, and schools about how phonics should be taught. It seems that everyone has an opinion on the ever-popular “P” word! Perhaps parents at your school or even some of your non-educator friends have cornered you to ask if you believe in teaching phonics.

Most educators do agree that our students need phonics and phonemic awareness in order to read well, and 98% of primary-grade teachers regard phonics as a very important part of their reading program (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000). Researchers have also found that most primary-grade teachers do engage their students on a regular basis in some sort of lesson on phonics. The question then is when, how, and how much phonics should be taught and under what circumstances? The International Reading Association’s (1997) position statement on phonics suggests that explicit instruction in phonics is an important aspect of reading instruction that is embedded in the context of a more complete reading and writing program.

## Phonics Instruction in the Classroom

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

The middle school students stumble over many of the words that are found in the history chapter such as *oligarchy*, *mediate*, and *mercenaries*, thus losing meaning as they read.

First graders “guess” and skip words rather than attempting to figure them out.

During fifth-grade small-group instruction, English language learners meet with their teacher to read the district’s basal text. Several students in the group encounter difficulty figuring out the pronunciation and meaning of the selection vocabulary.

The purpose of phonics instruction is to provide students with the decoding skills so they can efficiently

the vowel and sounds that follow it in the syllable, such as the phonogram, *all*. When a rime is combined with an onset, or beginning sound or sounds, many new words may be formed such as *mall*, *call*, *stall*, etc.

Example: If students know the rime *ump* and the word *jump*, they can figure out the words *stump*, *pump*, and *lump*.

**Analytic Phonics:** Teaching students to analyze letters and sounds learned in previous words to use in pronouncing

*“The best way to develop fast accurate perception of word features is to engage in meaningful reading and writing, and to have multiple opportunities to examine those same words out of context, in isolation, in all their glory.”*

—Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston (2000)

and quickly figure out unknown words as they read. There are many effective, research-based strategies to arm students with the phonics and decoding tools they need the most. Phonics instruction doesn’t have to be dry. Today there are many meaningful and game-like ways to make the learning “stick” when you teach phonics lessons.

Common types of phonics instruction include:

**Analogy Phonics:** Teaching students to analyze unfamiliar words using known words and parts within words. Word families are helpful in teaching students to look for patterns. Word families are often called phonograms, rimes, or chunks and are composed of

new ones. This is often called moving from the known to the unknown.

Example: Students associate a particular word with a sound such as a *bat* for the letter *b*.

Then when students encounter other words that have *b* they can refer back to the word *bat*.

**Embedded Phonics:** An implicit approach where phonics lessons and skills are embedded in the text that is currently being read and the student relies somewhat on incidental learning as unfamiliar words occur in the literature.

Example: During reading, the word *night* appears in the text so the



teacher decides to pull that word out and teach it along with other words that have the same rime: *light*, *sight*, and *fight*.

**Phonics Through Spelling:** Using writing to teach students to segment words into phonemes and to then choose letters that go with those phonemes (invented or phonetic spelling).

Example: During writer’s workshop the first graders slowly stretch the sounds in words as they write. One child, Jared, writes his story using “phonetic spelling”. “The dog ran awa frm the grl.” (The dog ran away from the girl.)

**Synthetic Phonics:** Teaching students how to change letters into sounds and blend sounds into words.

Example: Students segment the individual phonemes or sounds in a word such as *dog* by saying the

sounds slowly—/d/ /o/ /g/—and then blending them together to make the word.

## Phonemic Awareness Instruction in the Classroom

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, differentiate, and manipulate sounds, including segmenting and blending those sounds. Phonemic awareness involves the smallest units of sounds in spoken words only and is not about recognizing the written letters but rather the sounds. Phonemic awareness is the most powerful predictor of success in beginning reading. As many as 80–85% of our students acquire phonemic awareness easily with exposure to read-alouds, poetry, songs, tongue twisters, and nursery rhymes (Allington, 2002; Yopp, 1995) and some explicit instruction in the classroom. However, for the 15–20%

who struggle, additional intervention and special training is needed. What does phonemic awareness look like? An example of phonemic awareness is when you are reading a poem aloud to students and you pause for the next rhyming word; students are using phonemic awareness to anticipate the next rhyming word.

Here are some ways to informally assess and provide practice for phonemic awareness. Notice students are not naming letters but making sounds only in their responses.

**Rhyming Words:** Read a poem. Pause so students can insert the rhyming words.

Example: One, two, buckle my \_\_\_\_\_.

**Beginning Sound Substitution:** Change the beginning sound.

Example: What rhymes with *dog* and starts with the sound /l/?

**Sound Isolation:** What does it start with? What does it end with? What sound is in the middle of the word?

Example: What sound does *cat* start with?

What sound do you hear in the middle of the word?

What sound does *cat* end with?

**Syllable Segmentation:** Clap for syllables.

Example: Clap as you say *valentine*.

**Phonemic Segmentation:** Say students' names and other words slowly.

Example: Say *Clifford* slowly, stretching the sounds out. Then say the word quickly.

## Phonics and Word Work in Action

### Primary Phonics During Small-Group Instruction

The first graders settle in around the kidney-shaped table and look eagerly at the front cover of a nonfiction book titled *The Fantastic Flying Squirrel* by Nic Bishop. After previewing the text to make predictions, the students begin to read silently. Miss Jimenez rotates to each student to have them read quietly to her. On page 6, Angela pauses to figure out the word *crunch*. Miss Jimenez coaches her using a variety of decoding strategies. After sounding out the *cr-*, Miss Jimenez asks Angela to look through the word for a part she knows by looking at the class word wall. Angela proudly spots *-unch* as a familiar "chunk" that the class worked on last week using the word *lunch*. She puts the *cr-* and *-unch*

together and smiles proudly. "Great job!" praises her teacher. After all have read the book, Miss Jimenez teaches a quick minilesson to the entire group using individual dry-erase boards. The students work with the teacher to write *-unch* words: *lunch*, *bunch*, *hunch*, *crunch*. She hands out magnetic letters, and students build the words again.

### Practical Teaching Tip

If you do not have magnetic letters handy, you can cut up large-square graph paper and have students write individual letters on the squares to put together to "make" and then "break" up words!

### Intermediate Word Work

Mr. Fen's sixth graders engage in active word-study activities as they study word origins, work on strategies for reading unfamiliar words, and study spelling patterns. Every week Mr. Fen involves students in lessons using a variety of word-learning activities that help students focus on phonics skills that are appropriate for sixth graders. The room is loaded with

wall charts listing features of words (such as words using the same root word or prefix) the class has collected in lessons throughout the year.

Students work in pairs to sort words. Today students will analyze how words change when they go from a verb to a noun such as introduce–introduction, discuss–discussion, and donate–donation. The categories for the sort include words that don't change in spelling, words that drop the final *e*, and those with other changes. The room is lively with discussion, debate, and hands-on sorting of the words on cards. Later in the week, the students will create and act out skits for each of the words.

### Practical Teaching Tip

Students save the words in envelopes in their word-study notebooks and periodically mix and match the categories of words to sort. Type up the words on a sheet that is divided into boxes, and have students cut apart the words.



## Guidelines for Effective Phonics/Phonemic Awareness Instruction

### *Provide Many Opportunities for All Students to Read.*

Studies show the amount of reading a child does affects decoding ability. Samuels, LaBerge, and Bremer (1978) discovered that struggling second graders used letter-by-letter decoding to figure out words. Eventually readers with higher literate capability in upper grades rely on word parts rather than individual letters to decode unknown words. Phonics instruction should be practiced as students read and enjoy real books. Struggling readers are often pulled to do more work in phonics worksheets and isolated drills when instead they

need meaningful, explicit phonics instruction along with opportunities to read more (Adams, 1990; McGill-Franzen, Zmach, Solic, & Zeig, 2006). The goal of explicit phonics instruction is application to real texts.

### *Teach Phonics and Phonemic Awareness Skills in a Logical Sequence.*

Your district most likely will provide you with an approved research-based sequence for explicitly teaching phonemic and phonics skills that comes from your district or state adopted curriculum. The Common Core State Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org/>) offer a logical scope sequence for phonics for each grade level. Phonics and phonemic awareness should be taught in the early grades and word study (prefixes, base words, suffixes, etc.) in grades 3–12.

*What Strategies Do Good “Word Solvers” Use?*

- Discriminate letters in print quickly.
- Recognize whole words as units.
- Use word parts.
- Use known words to figure out unknown words.
- Sound out words by individual letters or letter clusters.
- Use base words to analyze parts.
- Analyze words left to right.
- Check attempts by using letter parts and word parts.
- Use context.
- Use references and resources such as dictionaries to look up meanings and pronunciations.
- Substitute words of similar meaning.

Adapted from Fountas and Pinnell (2001).



## 37 Rhymes That Create 500 Commonly Used Words

ack, ain, ake, ale, all, ame an, ank,  
ap, ash, at, ate, aw, ay

eat, ell, est

ice, ick, ide, ight, ill, in, ine, ing,  
ink, ip, it

ock, oke, op, ore, ot



### *Base Instruction on Student Needs.*

Assess student needs often and teach word work and phonics in small-group settings so students' needs are targeted.

### *Provide Explicit, Scaffolded Instruction and Model Strategy Use for Students.*

Teach your phonics lessons using the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) where the teacher demonstrates, guides cooperative practice, and then has students try on their own. You can teach students the sounds that letters and words make but be sure to connect this learning with real texts. This sort of scaffolding is an example of what Routman (2011) calls "I do. We do. You do."

Example: The teacher models how to read compound words while reading a text aloud. The teacher models how to figure out compound words found

in the reading by breaking them into parts, rereading, and so on. Students hunt for compound words in teams or pairs. The cooperative practice may continue for another round. Then students practice on their own and keep track of the words and sounds in a notebook.

When modeling the use of phonics skills, the following techniques are options for showing students how to use decoding strategies to figure out unknown words.

*Masking:* When reading with any grade level, the teacher may use sticky notes to cover up or mask words while using a document camera, interactive whiteboard, or Big Book. You can cover the first letter leaving the remaining letters for students to guess what you have covered and then reveal the rest of the word letter by letter. Model how you figured out the word using the

phonics and context of the sentence as well as to confirm the word.

*Cloze:* Cover a word every five words or so. You can leave the beginning sound out or cover it entirely. Students work together as the teacher models how to figure out the missing words.

### *Coach Students During Reading in the Use of Phonics/Word Strategies*

During small-group or individual reading time, coach students as they read orally by asking them to use good-reader strategies to figure out words.

Encourage students to think about the following strategies:

- What does the word begin with?
- What would make sense here?
- Do you see any parts you know in the word?

- Look at the picture.
- Reread from the beginning of the sentence.
- Does that sound right?
- Does it look right?
- Change the vowel sound.
- What is another word that would make sense here?
- Read on.

### Teach Students to Look for Patterns.

The brain seeks patterns. Teach students to look for patterns so they can use those patterns to figure out related words. Teach rimes, such as the 37 rimes that make up 500 commonly read words. If a student can read *hill*, then he can also read *will*, *pill*, and *sill*. When you teach common prefixes, suffixes, and root words, students can use those patterns to read dozens of words.

### Keep a Visual Record of Classroom Words.

While you read to and with the class from read-alouds, the district's basal text, or core literature, you can easily help students apply phonics and word-study skills. One way to do that is to model and keep running charts of the skills you are teaching. If students can see what they've been told orally, they are more likely to remember it. Akhavan (2008) says, "If you think it, ink it." Collect words from the texts you are reading with your class. For example, you might model how to figure out words using the *-tion* prefix and then create a chart of words that end in *-tion*. Or another chart might have words with the vowel sounds or with a silent e. It is helpful to use just one skill per chart.

A word wall is a place to put words in alphabetical order. You may include words from the books students are reading across the curriculum as well as spelling words and high-frequency words. You can color-code them and underline or outline the patterns in words that are on the wall. Play guessing games by giving word riddles for the words on the word wall.

### Reinforce Phonics and Word Work Using Game-like Activities.

Students enjoy games. Play simple, easy-to-prepare games like Wordo (Cunningham, 2008), a game similar to Bingo, or concentration with word meanings or pictures on cards that students match to the words. Students may also draw five to seven words and write stories or make up a skit using the words. Or you might play Blend Baseball where students are divided into two teams. The pitcher says a word slowly in parts, and the student at bat blends the word to go to first base. Continue as in baseball with home runs (Blevins,

## Most Common Prefixes and Suffixes in Order of Frequency

Prefixes		
Highest frequency	High frequency	Medium frequency
un- (not, opposite of)	over- (too much)	trans- (across)
re- (again)	mis- (wrongly)	super- (above)
in-, im-, ir-, il- (not)	sub- (under)	semi- (half)
dis- (not, opposite of)	pre- (before)	anti- (against)
en-, em- (cause to)	inter- (between, among)	mid- (middle)
non- (not)		under- (too little)
in-, im- (in or into)		
Suffixes		
-s (plurals)	-ly (characteristic of)	-al, -ial (having characteristics of)
-ed (past tense)	-er, -or (person)	-y (characterized by)
-ing (present tense)	-ion, -tion (act, process)	-ness (state of, condition of)
	-ible, -able (can be done)	-ity, -ty (state of)
		-ment (action or process)
		-ic (having characteristics of)
		-ous, -eous, ious (possessing the qualities of)
		-en (made of)
		-ive, -ative, itive (adjective form of a noun)
		-ful (full of)
		-less (without)

2000). See the list of Online Resources at the end of this article for phonics-building activities.

### *Reinforce and Teach Phonemic Awareness Using Silly Word Games, Poetry, and Songs.*

There are many fun ways to allow students to develop an ear for phonemic awareness. When reading poetry, leave out the rhyming words and allow students to chime in with the words.

### *Reinforce Phonics and Word Work During Writing.*

Reading and writing are reciprocal. When students use reference charts and word-study notebooks, they will often select words from those sources as they write. Or they may analyze the words and create new ones based on the rhyming patterns or word parts.

### *Provide Manipulatives to Use During Lessons.*

Be sure to allow students to reinforce the learning using a variety of hands-on tools including magnetic letters, letter and picture cards, word and letter cards, and individual dry-erase boards and markers.

## Word Ladder

*Example submitted by Timothy Rasinski*

<b>Work</b>	change a letter to make what this article is about
<b>Word</b>	change a letter to make something you need to fish
<b>Worm</b>	change a letter to make the opposite of cool
<b>Warm</b>	subtract a letter to make the opposite of peace
<b>War</b>	rearrange the letters to make food that is uncooked
<b>Raw</b>	change a letter to make a male sheep
<b>Ram</b>	add a letter to make a word that means to stuff something inside a box
<b>Cram</b>	change a letter to make a mollusk that is used in chowder
<b>Clam</b>	add two letters to make a word that means a loud continuous noise or uproar
<b>Clamor</b>	subtract the first letter and change the M to make a word that means WORK
<b>Labor</b>	

(T. V. Rasinski, personal communication, 2011)



## Lori's Top 5 Phonics/ Word Work Lessons

For this article I have selected some commonly accepted “best practice” activities for engaging students in practicing phonics and word learning. These are some of the most effective activities that you can use to reinforce phonics skills. Hopefully, they will become familiar routines in your classroom!

### 1 *Win at Wordo (Cunningham, 2008)*

This game, similar to Bingo, can be played with students of any age. Students fill up a Wordo card by copying one word in each box from the class word wall.

For younger students you can make cards ahead of time, making sure the cards are different. To vary the game, try calling out the definition rather than the word.

### 2 *Score With Word Sorts (Cunningham, 2008; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001)*

Using a collection of words on cards, you can create ways for students to sort words. Although students could write the words as they sort them into categories, the learning is much more concrete and hands-on when they sort and manipulate cards. There are many meaningful ways to sort.

A closed sort means that the teacher assigns categories for sorting the words, such as words that start with /d/ or /c/ or words that end in the same suffix. An open sort means that the students create the categories for sorting the words. They analyze the words and come up with groupings for them. A speed sort is fun and

gamelike, as students race one another and the clock to categorize all the words. A blind sort is when the teacher calls out the words in a given category and then the students figure out what the words have in common. Try using word sorts as group work, as a partner activity, as a center or independent activity, or as a teacher-led activity during whole-class or small-group reading.

Here are some sample ways to sort words:

- Length
- Syllables
- Words that start or end the same or that have the same vowel sound
- Words that start like names of students in the class
- Rhyming words
- Spelling patterns
- Word families
- Meaning

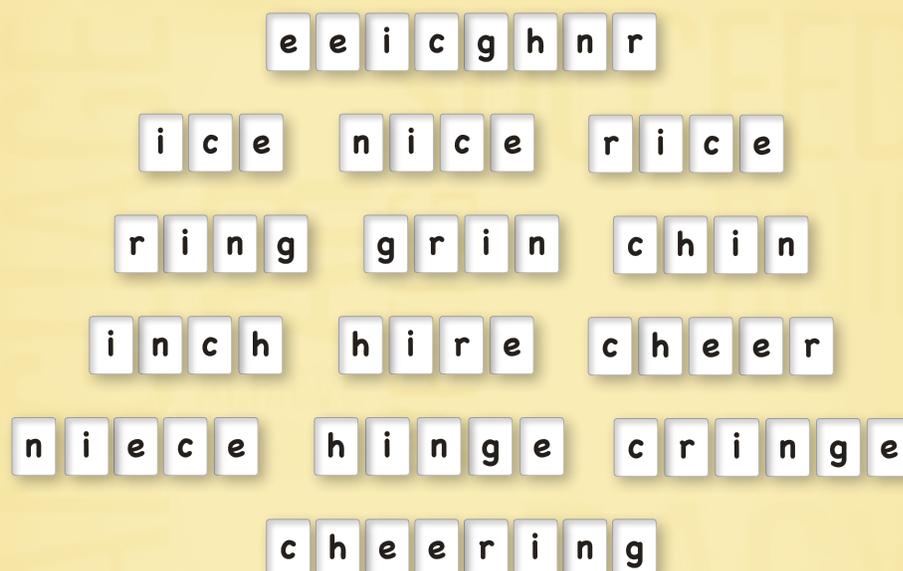
### 3 *Move It, Make It: Making Words (Cunningham, 2008)*

Making Words is a highly interactive manipulative activity where students move letter cards or magnetic letters around to form new words. The teacher or leader reads off the directions, and students listen to the words and select the letters needed to make the words. Students may also make a word then record it on a dry-erase board or paper. Making Words can be played in a center, at students' desks, or in a teacher-led small-group lesson. You can select a word from the text the students are reading or use the Online Resources listed at the end of this article.

Directions:

1. Select a word you want your students to make.
2. Make large individual letter cards for your copy of the word that you can use to demonstrate on a pocket chart.

### Making Words Example



Adapted from Cunningham (2008).

3. Create as many smaller words as you can using the letters. Choose the words that will help you illustrate the spelling or phonics patterns you are teaching. Write the words on cards, one per card.
  4. Pass out only the letters that students need for the word.
  5. Name the letters with students.
  6. Display the same letters on the pocket chart.
  7. Next read aloud a short word you want students to make.
  8. After students make the word, invite a student volunteer to make the word with your large letter cards so students can check their work.
  9. Read aloud the next word and tell students to change the word and make it longer.
  10. Continue by asking a volunteer to help make the words each time you provide one.
  11. The last step is to ask students to use all the letters to make the word of the day.
5. The activity continues as students mix up the letter cards again to rebuild.

### **5** *Let's Play the Name Game!* (Diller, 2002; Cunningham, 2008)

Younger students especially enjoy playing games related to their names.

Directions:

1. Create a sentence strip with each child's name and picture.
2. Ask students questions about the names, such as which name is longest, shortest, starts with \_\_\_\_, has chunks that you know, what do these names have in common, and so on.
3. Clap syllables in names, sort names, and alphabetize names.
4. Create one tongue twister per day using a student's name. Examples: Lori licks lollipops. Audrey actually acts audaciously! Tim tickles toes on Tuesdays!
5. Use the names on display to refer to when children are sounding out words. You can create analogies such as, "If you can read *Tracey*, you can read the word *truck*."

### **4** *Build, Fix, Mix!* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001)

This activity is a wonderful hands-on, partner study technique with a gamelike feel.

Directions:

1. After a lesson on a sound or spelling patterns, choose 3–4 words to study or allow students to choose the words.
2. In the Build stage, students make the words using magnetic letters or letter cards.
3. In the Mix stage, they mix up the letter cards.
4. In the Fix stage, they rebuild the words.

## Q&A

*How can I help my English language learners (ELLs) learn the phonics and phonemic awareness they need to succeed in English?*

By playing up the strengths and helping shore up the areas of English that give ELLs problems, you can make learning to read in English easier for your students who speak another language. The good news is that second-language learners respond well to all the wonderful language games, word walls, poems, songs, and activities highlighted in this column. It is especially important to expose ELLs to a print-rich environment with lots of oral language and explicit phonics instruction. Developing vocabulary is of critical importance for ELLs. Reading instruction should not overemphasize phonics and phonemic awareness.

ELLs face some of the following challenges:

They may or may not be literate in their own language. If they are learning to read in English, phonics and phonemic instruction is easier. If they are not literate, they need to first understand print concepts.

Some of the sounds in the child's language may transfer to English, while other children come from languages that do not contain any of the sounds in English. Older children especially need to be taught the differences in sounds between languages.

## Online Resources

### Timothy Rasinski's

#### Word Ladders sample:

See samples of word ladders to use in your classroom to help build phonics knowledge:

[http://www.timrasinski.com/presentations/word\\_ladders\\_1-3.pdf](http://www.timrasinski.com/presentations/word_ladders_1-3.pdf)

[http://www.timrasinski.com/presentations/word\\_ladders\\_3-6.pdf](http://www.timrasinski.com/presentations/word_ladders_3-6.pdf)

#### Other samples and presentation materials by Rasinski:

<http://www.timrasinski.com/?page=presentations>

#### [Reading Rockets: English Language Learners and the Five Essential Components of Reading Instruction:](#)

Find out how teachers can play to the strengths and shore up the weaknesses of English language learners in each of the Reading First components.

#### [ReadWriteThink.org:](#)

Here are some lessons and interactive tools to help students with phonics and phonemic awareness:

[Building Phoneme Awareness With Phoneme Isolation](#) by Sarah Dennis-Shaw (grades K–2)

[Generating Rhymes: Developing Phonemic Awareness](#) by Sarah Dennis-Shaw (grades K–2)

[Dr. Seuss's Sound Words: Playing with Phonics and Spelling](#) by Traci Gardner (grades K–2)

[The Big Green Monster Teaches Phonics in Reading and Writing](#) by Maureen Gerard (grades K–2)

[Interactive Word Family Sort tool](#)

#### [SMART Exchange:](#)

Smart Exchange has lots of really great interactive whiteboard activities for phonics and other areas of the curriculum.

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