

The A Beka Approach to Reading



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Dr. Phyllis Rand (ed.)

The Abeka curriculum is known for its successful early reading program, developed and refined for nearly 20 years before its publication. It is an intensive (or synthetic) phonics approach (learning letter names, sounds, blends, words) with the focus first on learning to read (K–2) and then on reading to learn. Because of its success, only slight changes have been made in the program over the years, despite the various reading reforms circulating in the world of education.

Beginning in the mid 1800s, American reformer Horace Mann demonized the phonetic approach by which Americans had traditionally learned to read. He and others characterized this traditional method as mindless drill and practice. The new “better way,” known as the **whole word method** or **look-say** would become the status quo for many decades. Children being taught by look-say are expected to memorize a large number of words. Later, phonics might be added more as a method of analysis (“Can you hear the same beginning sound in *ball*, *boy*, and *bread*?”) than as a tool for teaching beginning reading. Accompanying this approach is the idea of **reading skills** taught via controlled vocabulary of **basal readers**(ex. *Dick and Jane*) and accompanying workbooks, and hefty teacher’s manuals.

The serious literacy problems resulting from this teaching method led to scientific research and testing and more reform. **Readability** formulas influenced reading curricula from the early 1900s to the 1980s. Developmental psychology introduced the idea of **reading readiness**. Psychology also brought the idea of **remediation** or diagnosing individual reading problems

and treating them as medical problems. And the reforms and recommended solutions to America's literacy problem continue.

The modern science of **linguistics** now tells us that pronunciation need not be taught as a reading skill because it is picked up naturally. The new field of **psycholinguistics** has established a holistic model for language development that highly influenced reading educators: *children learn to read and write naturally—the same way they learn to walk and talk. Exposure to meaningful language experiences help students discover the patterns of English and construct meaning on their own.*

These reforms are based on philosophical foundations, such as the radical constructivist epistemology of psycholinguistics, and further, they reflect a fundamental shift in the views of reading and language in particular and education in general.

During these reforms, there have always remained advocates for phonics-based teaching. In the late 1960s, Jeanne Chall's magnum opus *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* examined the empirical research base and concluded that there was no longer a debate—look-say should be out and phonics should be back in, she argued. If the main objective is teaching everyone to read, phonics is the way to go. If the objectives are more psychological, political, sociological, etc., phonics remains unpopular.

The Abeka approach is to give students the tool of phonics and let them read. The approach teaches discrete literacy skills—phonics, spelling, language, writing, vocabulary development, comprehension—in a natural reading context. Numerous reading reforms have gone in and out of fashion during the centuries that this approach has taught thousands of children to read.

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