

# Beyond the Reading Wars: How the Science of Reading Can Improve Literacy

June 12, 2018



A scientific report from an international team of psychological researchers aims to resolve the so-called “reading wars,” emphasizing the importance of teaching phonics in establishing fundamental reading skills in early childhood. The [report](#), published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), shows how early phonics skills are advanced with a rich reading curriculum throughout the school years.

Scientists Anne Castles (Macquarie University), Kathleen Rastle (Royal Holloway University of London), and Kate Nation (University of Oxford) report their conclusions as part of a thorough, evidence-based account of how children learn to read. They synthesize findings from more than 300 research studies, book chapters, and academic journal articles published across a variety of scientific fields.

“We decided to bring this knowledge together in one place to provide an accessible overview,” Nation says. “We didn’t want it to be buried in the scientific literature, we wanted it to be useful to teachers charged with the vital task of teaching children to read.”

For several decades, the “reading wars” have been waged between teachers, parents, and policymakers who champion a phonics-based approach (teaching children the sounds that letters make) and those who support a “whole-language” approach (focused on children discovering meaning in a literacy-rich environment).

“Writing is a code for spoken language, and phonics provides instruction for children in how to crack that code,” says Castles. “Phonics is an essential basis for becoming a good reader, but it isn’t enough on its own — one aim of our review was to describe the other key ingredients that must be combined with phonics to support good reading development.”

To acquire sophisticated literacy skills, for example, children must progress from identifying individual sounds to recognizing whole words. They must also be able to pull forth the meaning of different words quickly within a particular context in order to comprehend a whole unit of text, whether it’s a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire page.

Although teachers, parents, and policymakers recognize literacy as an essential skill that all children should learn, existing policies and practices often fail to incorporate the most effective strategies for learning and teaching reading. As a result, low literacy remains a pressing issue in developed and developing nations around the world.

“We have a really strong scientific understanding of how children learn to read, and there is no longer any need for ‘reading wars,’” says Rastle. “Our review describes this evidence base, and provides concrete recommendations for drawing on it in the classroom.”

In a [commentary](#) accompanying the report, psychological scientist Rebecca Treiman (Washington University in St. Louis) dismantles two common misconceptions that often stymie evidence-based approaches to reading instruction: that reading to children teaches them how to read and that children learn to read through independent discovery. The new report provides critical insight, Treiman says, because it highlights the specific processes by which early phonics instruction allows children to gain understanding and reading experience over time.

“Literacy opens up knowledge, opportunity, and enjoyment. Building it requires good instruction, solid foundations in vocabulary and language comprehension, and extensive reading practice,” Castles, Rastle, and Nation note. “By taking advantage of the strong evidence base around what helps children learn to read, we can support more children to go on to become confident, skilled readers.”

The report was supported by the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders, the Economic and Social Research Council, and The Leverhulme Trust.

The full report and accompanying commentary are available online:

**Report:** [Ending the Reading Wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert](#)  
Anne Castles, Kathleen Rastle, Kate Nation

**Commentary:** [What research tells us about reading instruction](#)  
Rebecca Treiman