

English for Little Thinkers

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Figure 1: Cover

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This illustrated edition is the teaching-manual of 6 September 2026. Endnotes run in one series. Chapter-opening images are original still-lives, not portraits of persons or children. Documents still constrain the facts.

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Welcome

This book exists because the English hour at your table is the whole program. There is no literacy department down the hall and no reading specialist waiting after lunch. There is you, a five- to ten-year-old, and today's idea — letter tiles or a sound box, a question worth waiting for, a page they look through, a sentence they write. That is enough, if you know what to do with the hour.

I wrote this for a capable, busy, willing parent of a five- to ten-year-old. You may be teaching two ages at once, five-to-seven and eight-to-ten, at one table. You may be fitting a reading sit between a job, a toddler, and a grocery run. Many adults feel rusty on how they were taught to read, or never saw systematic phonics named as such. That feeling is common. It is not a verdict. We will move on from it. This book will make you fluent enough in today's idea to hear a wrong turn, and to ask a good question — without taking the pencil or finishing the word.

You do not need to be a reading specialist. You do need to hear a picture guess offered as word reading, a first-letter grab offered as blending, a stopwatch offered as the first fluency move, a leveled ladder offered as proof of phonics, a grammar worksheet pack offered as the writing program, and a blank page offered as “just write.” You need a session shape you can run on a Tuesday. You need a few sentences that actually help. That is the job. A path through ordinary challenges — turn-taking and oral sentences, sounds linked to letters, blending into connected reading, fluency after accuracy, word meaning, story sense and craft, handwriting and spelling that free composition, writing for real purposes — is possible at a kitchen table. The path is not a personality trait and it is not a percentile. It is a small set of moves, practiced with you in the chair.

About 3.4 percent of U.S. students ages 5–17 were homeschooled in 2022–23 —

roughly 1.765 million children.¹ That figure is context, not a ranking. You are one of those tables. Many readers of this book will not be in that pond. They will be after-school, weekend, or kitchen-table parents of enrolled children. The moves still fit. Homeschooling is legal in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. The paperwork is not one load: Texas asks almost nothing of the agency; New York asks for a written plan and reports.² There is no national homeschool diploma and no national “Little Thinkers English I” credit.³ None of Texas, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, or New York requires a critical-thinking course. Reading, English, or language arts is the usual required or tested elementary object.⁴ In the

¹Ellena Sempeles and Jiashan Cui, *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2023*, NCES 2024-113 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, September 2024), Table A-6: 3.4 percent homeschooled, approximately 1,765,000 students, ages 5–17 with a K–12 grade equivalent, 2022–23; kindergarten–2nd grade 4.0 percent; 3rd–5th grade 3.6 percent. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024113.pdf>. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. Latest federal count this book uses; not a 2026 national total. A neighboring 5.2 percent received instruction at home (homeschooled or full-time virtual) and is a different bucket.

²Texas Education Agency, “Home Schooling,” <https://tea.texas.gov/families-and-students/finding-school-your-child/home-schooling>. New York State Education Department, “Home Instruction Questions and Answers,” <https://www.nysed.gov/nonpublic-schools/home-instruction-questions-and-answers>. Homeschooling is legal in all fifty states and D.C.; these two pages illustrate a light-process and a heavier-process pattern, not a national template. This book is not legal advice.

³Texas Education Agency, “Home Schooling”: “The State of Texas does not award a diploma to students that are home schooled.” New York State Education Department, “Home Instruction Questions and Answers”: a high school diploma “may only be awarded to a student enrolled in a registered secondary school.” North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education, “Home School Records Retention & Diplomas FAQs,” <https://www.doa.nc.gov/divisions/non-public-education/home-schools/faqs/records-retention-diplomas>: the State does not issue a diploma or a transcript; the home-school chief administrator does. “Little Thinkers English I” is not a credit in any opened statute.

⁴Texas Education Agency, “Alternative Schooling,” restating *Leeper*: bona fide instruction using a written curriculum of reading, spelling, grammar, math, and a course in good citizenship. North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education, “Home School Requirements and Recommendations”: annual nationally standardized test in English grammar, reading, spelling, and mathematics. Pennsylvania 24 P.S. § 13-1327.1(c)(1): elementary shall include English, arithmetic, science, geography, history, civics, safety education, health and physiology, physical education, music, and art. Virginia Department of Education, “Home Instruction”: the parent writes a list of subjects; evidence of progress is a composite score, SAT/ACT/PSAT, or an evaluation letter. New York 8 NYCRR 100.10(e)(2)(i): grades 1–6 required subjects are arithmetic, reading, spelling, writing, English language, geography, United States history, science, health, music, visual arts, and physical education. None of these five opened maps names a critical-thinking course. Reading, English, or language arts is the usual required or tested elementary object. The parent reads their own statute.

last federal tables that listed subjects taught at home, basic reading was the English row: 92 percent of K–2 homeschoolers and 83 percent of 3–5; spelling sat near 86 and 85; English or literature rose from 64 to 83 across those bands.⁵ The hour in front of you is the work.

This book is not a reprint. *English for Homeschooling* covers grades 1–12. It ran through literature, composition toward college, Speech, NCAA, AP, and CLEP. One pointer, if you need the later years later. Then we teach at five to ten. This book is not a sequel. *Critical Thinking Skills for Little Thinkers* is the same house, a different subject — reasons, testimony, changing a mind. One pointer, then we teach this age’s English. *Math for Little Thinkers* is the same house for number. One pointer, then we stay with letters and sentences.

What a good English hour looks like

You sit down already knowing today’s idea. An object is on the table — letter tiles, a sound box, a decodable page, a library book, a pencil. The child warms up on words or talk they can already get right. You model one move out loud, short. Then they try, and you wait. You ask one good question — not “did you get it?” but “what sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?” Three seconds feels long. It is the work. Practice mixes the new move with last week’s. The hour ends with one or two items they do alone. You stop talking sooner than feels polite. The child talks, blends, and writes. You hold the key. That is the hour. The next long piece of this front matter, *The English Hour*, will teach it in full. Later chapters will not reinvent it.

⁵Jiashan Cui and Rachel Hanson, *Homeschooling in the United States: Results from the 2012 and 2016 Parent and Family Involvement Survey*, NCES 2020-001 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), Table 9: basic reading taught that year, 92 percent of K–2 homeschoolers and 83 percent of 3–5 homeschoolers (64 percent of all K–12); spelling 86/85/64; English or literature 64/83/80. Quote the reading/ELA rows. Do not reuse arithmetic, computer science, history, or foreign-language rows as English. The 2023 First Look did not republish the subject-taught tables. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf>.



Figure 2: A kitchen-table English hour

Children this age already talk and listen. They do not wait for a readiness gate forever, and they do not become readers because a parent bought a stopwatch kit.⁶ Shared reading aloud, kitchen talk, and making motivate. They do not replace

⁶National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000): phonemic-awareness teaching is highly effective; phonemic awareness with letters; systematic phonics yields significant benefits in kindergarten through sixth grade and for struggling readers; the claim that kindergarten children are “not ready” for phonics instruction is not supported when letter–sound prerequisites can be taught; guided repeated oral reading with feedback helps word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendations 2 and 3, strong evidence: teach students to recognize and manipulate segments of sound, and link those sounds to letters; teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf.

systematic decoding or written composition. Fluency comes after accuracy. Three-cueing is not how we identify words. Grammar worksheets are not the writing program.

What you will actually get

Each teaching chapter does eight jobs, always in the same order, so you are never hunting for the move.

You will learn why this week's idea is worth the struggle, understand it yourself with the wrong answers you should hear, and get a session you can run this week: exact wording, named try-its in and out of the home, and a talk box. Your student gets a short section of their own. If it isn't clicking, you get three diagnostics and a next move. Tools, including AI, stay optional and adult-side. You get a plain checklist for "done enough," so you place by skill rather than by birthday.

The eight teaching chapters follow the work, not twelve thin grade labels: speaking and listening; sounds, letters, and phonics; blending and connected reading; fluency after accuracy; vocabulary; comprehension and story sense; handwriting, spelling, and sentence building; writing for purposes. Records and resources come last.

This week you can learn the session shape well enough to hear a picture guess. Today the child can link a sound to a letter, blend a short word, or write a label that becomes a sentence.

What this book will not do

This book will not hand you 180 days of worksheets. A year of photocopies is not a teaching method, and I will not pretend it is. Coverage is a map. Depth is the hour.

It will not sell you a curriculum. Later, a short resources chapter names common programs by fit — parent load, style, how they place a student — so you can choose. Combining does not turn a brand into a course name. The transcript still says Reading, Language Arts, or English.

It will not treat a stopwatch kit as fluency, a leveled ladder as phonics proof, three-cueing as word reading, or a grammar pack as the writing program. Shared reading

is motivation, not the whole lesson.

It will not promise a score. There is no guaranteed percentile, no English diploma, and no certificate of fluency inside these pages. What this book can promise is a path: the ideas in order, at the skill the child actually has, until they can do the next one unaided.

It is not “Little Thinkers English I,” not a Science-of-Reading franchise, and not a sequel to *Autonomous AI and Education*. One English-hour AI box lives in the next long piece; later chapters point back.

It is not a culture-war pamphlet. Safe literacy objects only: letter tiles, sound boxes, a decodable page, a library book, a street sign or store label as print, a recipe step, a postcard. Live fights stay off this table.

And this is not a book that lectures your child about you, or you about your character. The student is a person, not a percentile. When this book speaks to them, it speaks with respect. No baby-talk. No research sermon.

The promise

If you only remember one sentence, remember this: a path through elementary English is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not.

The work is to take this child through English they can actually use — sounds linked to letters, blending that matches the page, fluency after accuracy, words and stories that mean something, handwriting that frees a real sentence — without skipping the code because they are “a good talker,” and without parking them in a workbook that is too easy because a catalog printed a grade on the cover. You will sometimes slow down. You will sometimes skip ahead. Birthday is not placement.

Three things have to hold. You understand today’s idea well enough to hear a wrong turn. The child attempts first, with speech, then print, then a written sentence. Any helper — including an AI tool — stays on your side of the table: a supplement you host and constrain, not a partner during the attempt, not a photo-to-key, and not a secret friend.

You can do this. You do not have to know next year’s idea today. You have to know this week’s idea well enough to sit still while they struggle, then ask one good question. Start here. Read *How to Use This Book This Week*, then the one-

page list of five things, then *The English Hour*. After that, open the chapter that matches the skill in front of you. You will know more after one chapter than you know this morning. Your child will have something to try today. We can do this.

How to Use This Book This Week

Start at the skill in front of you, not on page one because a catalog, a birthday, or a well-meant relative said so.

This book is a handbook you open to this week's idea, not a novel you read cover to cover. The eight teaching chapters follow the work, not twelve thin grade labels. Records and resources come last. Age bands here are 5–7 and 8–10. They tell you the grain of the same ideas. They do not tell you where *this* child sits.

This book does not replace the program already on the shelf. If a reading curriculum, a library read-aloud habit, a kitchen letter hunt, or a store-label hour you already use is working, keep it. Use this book to hear a wrong turn, to run the hour, and to name the work a stranger can read. Combine honestly. The title is still Reading, Language Arts, or English. Never a brand. Never Little Thinkers English I.

Two ages at one table

You may be teaching a five-to-seven-year-old and an eight-to-ten-year-old in the same sit. That is ordinary. The session shape in *The English Hour* still holds; the object on the table and the grain of the question change.

The younger child talks and builds. Letter tiles, a spoken full sentence, a short blend that matches the letters — that is enough. The older child can hold a little more: multisyllabic decoding, morphology, connected text with growing fluency, a short paragraph for a purpose. You may run a twenty-five-minute phonics sit with one child and a forty-minute writing sit with the other. You need two first problems, not two personalities.

Pick the chapter by skill, not by birthday

Open the chapter you think is right. Skip to **What “done enough” looks like** at the end of the *previous* chapter, or to **If it isn’t clicking** in the one you opened. If the child can already do those checks unaided, you are too early. If the checks from two chapters back are still failing, drop back.

If they still guess from the picture — if they can talk about the story and still fail to look through the letters — they are still in the decoding chapters, whatever their age. What they can read and write depends on what they have already been invited to try, not on a birthday.⁷

If they cannot yet write a labelled sentence for a reader, they are still on an early rung of the writing ladder, whatever the birthday. A nine-year-old who still faces a blank page with no talk, draw, or plan is not “behind in essays.” They are still learning that writing is for a purpose.

If they can already blend connected text accurately and write a short paragraph for a reader, and they are still in a “grade 2 reading workbook” only because the cover says so, skip ahead. Instruction for a six-year-old need not be “first grade”; it should match what the student needs and already knows.⁸ A publisher’s grade

⁷National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000): kindergarten “not ready” claims for phonics are not supported when letter–sound prerequisites can be taught; phonemic awareness with letters and systematic phonics benefit beginning and struggling readers. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendations 2–3, strong evidence: sound–letter links and decoding/word parts/write-and-recognize; Recommendation 4, moderate evidence: connected text daily. Placement follows skill, not birthday. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf.

⁸New York State Education Department, “Home Instruction Questions and Answers,” <https://www.nysed.gov/nonpublic-schools/home-instruction-questions-and-answers>: instruction for a six-year-old need not be “first grade”; “instruction should be geared to the level appropriate to the student’s needs and previous level of achievement.” Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010): the Standards “define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach.” A map of typical U.S. public-school placement, not a homeschool statute. Publisher placement language opened for this book says the same grain in ordinary words: levels need not match grade labels; Foundations-style work for younger children and Essentials-style work for older ones; Brave Writer age bands 5–7 /

label is a scope, not a legal grade.

How you use the parent half

Most of each teaching chapter is for you. Read it *before* the lesson, not over the child's shoulder.

Why this matters tells you what this idea unlocks. **For the parent: understand it yourself** gives one everyday picture, one precise picture, and three to five wrong answers you should be able to hear. Sit with those.

How to teach it this week assumes the session shape from *The English Hour*. It will not rebuild the hour. It will give you this week's named try-its — at least one in the home and one outside it — the wording for *this* idea, and a talk box: an exact opening question, three to five follow-ups, how to wait, and what a stuck silence usually means. Later chapters supply this week's questions. They do not reinvent the shape.

Practice that actually builds learning names the try-its with time, materials, safety, the fun, and the skill. The kitchen, the walk, the store, and the library *are* the practice — and still land on the letters and the written sentence. Shared reading motivates; it does not replace decoding or composition. **Tools, including AI** is optional and adult-side; rules live once in *The English Hour*. **What “done enough” looks like** is how you leave: unaided work, not a perfect Tuesday.

You do not have to read the whole chapter tonight. You do have to read the parent half of *this week's* idea before you sit down with the child.

“Lesson plans” in this book means this week's session shape. “Assessment tests” means a short skill check, an exit ticket, a done-enough checklist, and optional publisher placement. Neither is a 180-day dump. Neither is a percentile battery. Neither is NAEP.

The five-minute parent warm-up

Five minutes. Child not yet in the chair. Phone face down.

1. Read today's idea until you can say it in one sentence.

8–10. A “grade 2 reading workbook” is a publisher's scope, not a legal grade.

2. Look at one object yourself — the tiles, the sound box, the page. Ask, out loud, what would count as a check. Stay off any tool until you have looked.
3. Glance at the “wrong answers you should be able to hear.” Name the one you would have given at fourteen.
4. Write one sentence you will actually say. Not a speech. Example: “What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?” Or: “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?”
5. Close the book to the student page. You are ready.

If you are learning the idea *while* they are stuck, you will talk too much. Prepare first. Then sit still.

How the student uses “For the student”

Every teaching chapter includes a short section written to the student, not about them. One or two pages. Warmer. Direct. What the idea is, a tiny worked example, two tries, an “explain it back” prompt, and one challenge. Hand it over after your short model, not instead of it. You stay in the room.

The student page is not something to send off with an unsupervised chatbot. The attempt is still theirs. You still hold the key.

In the home and outside it

Every teaching chapter names try-its at the table and try-its on a walk, at a store, at the library, or on a trip. Fridge letters, recipe labels, street signs, postcards, and craft questions motivate. They do not replace the phonics sit or the written sentence.

When to skip ahead

Skip ahead when this chapter’s “done enough” checklist is already true *unaided*. Slow down when the same wrong turn repeats after a clear look. **If it isn’t clicking** will give you three likely causes and a next move. Hearing a wrong answer, then asking a better question, then naming a better move if needed, is teaching. Silence in the face of a guessing-from-the-picture habit is not kindness.

For this week: pick the chapter by skill. Do the five-minute warm-up. Run the hour as *The English Hour* describes it. Let the student page be theirs. Stop talking sooner than you want to.

If You Only Remember Five Things

Keep this page. The chapters will add wording, objects, and this week's questions. They will not replace these.

1. Code and meaning belong together. Reading is the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension. If either is missing, the child is not yet reading that page, no matter how well they talk about the picture.⁹ A program that advertises only phonics forever, or only meaning forever, is selling a fragment. Three-cueing is not how we identify words. Meaning and structure help comprehension after the word is read. They do not replace looking through the letters.

2. Systematic phonics with letters. Phonemic awareness links to letters early. Systematic phonics is a planned sequence, practiced in isolation and in connected text — not a year of oral sound games with no print, and not a leveled ladder offered as proof the code was taught.¹⁰ Decodable text is a practice condition. A

⁹National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000): comprehensive programs address phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension together; systematic phonics benefits beginning and struggling readers. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendation 1 (academic language, minimal evidence, still recommended) sits beside Recommendations 2–3 (strong) and 4 (moderate connected text): code and meaning belong in the same program. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf. Simple View product logic and Scarborough's Rope diagnose which strand is fraying; they are not a franchise badge.

¹⁰National Reading Panel (2000): phonemic-awareness teaching is highly effective, especially with letters; systematic phonics yields significant benefits. Foorman et al., Recommendations 2–3, strong evidence (17 and 18 studies): sound ↔ letters; decode, analyze word parts, write and recog-

child who can learn letter–sound links does not wait for a readiness gate forever. Start now, with tiles they can move, then a finger under the word, then a page.

3. Fluency comes after accuracy. Guided oral reading with feedback builds word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. A stopwatch is not the first fluency move. Time a reader only after they can already get the words right slowly. Silent reading alone is not a fluency program while decoding is still fraying.¹¹ Praise a clear look-through and a mind changed after a reread — not speed as identity.

4. Writing is a process for real purposes — not a worksheet pack. Handwriting and spelling free composition; they are not the whole writing program. Talk, then draw, then label, then sentence, then paragraph by band. Model a sentence. Write one together. Then they write alone, for a reader.¹² A grammar pack alone is not the writing program. A blank page with no teaching is not kindness. “Just write” without a purpose is not the path.

5. A path through elementary English is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not. Place by skill, not birthday. If a stranger asks what you taught, the title is Reading, Language Arts, or English — not a brand, and not Little Thinkers English I. The dated notebook, the oral reading check, and the short writing sample live inside that title. Everyday stakes. No live controversy on the table.

Shared reading aloud, kitchen talk, and making motivate. They do not replace systematic decoding or written composition. The library is a free English hour — start there when you need a book, not a kit.

The child talks, blends, and writes. You ask one good question and wait. You hold the key. If this week needs a compass, this is it. Five things. Then sit down and

nize words. Recommendation 4, moderate evidence: connected text daily; the panel discourages guessing unknown words from beginning letters or pictures. A leveled ladder is a difficulty ladder, not proof that the code was taught.

¹¹National Reading Panel (2000): guided repeated oral reading with feedback had a significant positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension; programs of independent silent reading with minimal guidance, by themselves, were not shown to reliably improve reading as a causal fluency program. Foorman et al., Recommendation 4. Fluency is accurate first.

¹²Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 2, strong evidence (25 studies): teach students the writing process for a variety of purposes; Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing so transcription frees composition. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. A grammar-worksheet pack alone is not that program.

teach.

The English Hour

The hour has a shape. Learn it once. Later chapters will give you today's idea, today's try-it, and today's questions. They will not rebuild this hour. When a chapter says "run the session," it means this.

You do not need a school bell. You need a warm-up, a short model, a real attempt, one good question then wait, mixed practice, and an unaided exit — chosen from a small menu so the day can hold. Ages 5–7 may finish nearer twenty-five minutes; ages 8–10 may need forty-five. The shape does not change.

Sit down having already done the five-minute parent warm-up from *How to Use This Book This Week*. You know today's idea well enough to hear a picture guess. The child talks, blends, and writes. You hold the key. Twenty-five to forty-five minutes most weekdays, plus one named try-it outside the home, is the right ambition.¹³ There is no national table of homeschool English minutes.

Life of the habit, as a session rhythm, lives here: revisit yesterday; mix last week; stop.

¹³Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendation 4, moderate evidence (22 studies): each student reads connected text every day. Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 1, minimal evidence: provide daily time for students to write; the panel still judged daily writing time worth recommending. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf; https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Session length in this chapter is pedagogical design for the kitchen table, not a national English-minutes study (none was found). North Carolina DNPE *recommends* (not law) five hours across all subjects; Pennsylvania statute names 180 days or 900 elementary hours for the whole program. None of these is a national English block.

The daily menu (pick two to four)

Optional components. Do not always do all of them. One named move done well beats a rushed medley.

Piece	Clock	What it is
Warm-up / talk box	2–5 min	Known talk or known words; one authentic question
Phonics sit	8–15 min	Sounds, letters, blending — while code is still being learned
Connected reading	8–15 min	Decodable or controllable text; or assisted oral reading with feedback
Read-aloud	10–20 min	Language and knowledge above decoding level, on language days
Shared writing / independent try	5–15 min	Talk → draw → label → sentence → paragraph by band
Exit ticket	2–4 min	Unaided; book closed; no chatbot

If a day only holds twenty minutes, keep the phonics sit *or* the shared sentence *or* the read-aloud. Federal practice guides recommend daily connected text and daily writing time; they do not require a ninety-minute school block at your table.¹⁴

1. Warm-up / talk box

Two to five minutes. Known talk or known words. Already-right material. This is retrieval and turn-taking, not a test of character.

¹⁴Foorman et al., Recommendation 4; Graham et al., Recommendation 1. Dose honesty: pick two to four components. Twenty minutes of one named move beats a rushed medley.

Say: “We’re going to start with things you already know.”

Ages 5–7: a full oral sentence. “Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?” Ages 8–10: a word already mapped, or a short retell.

Keep this short. The talk-box shape below fills the question when today’s chapter needs it.

2. Short model (phonics sit or writing sit)

Three to seven minutes inside the phonics or writing piece. One worked example, think-aloud, tiles or page visible. Then you stop. Show the move. Then fade.

Say: “I’m going to show this one short. Then you’ll try.” “Watch. I hear /sh/. The letters are *s* and *h*.”

On the second pass, leave a hole. When the idea is new, show one incorrect example — a picture guess, a first-letter grab, a stopwatch before accuracy — and ask what went wrong. If you are still talking at minute eight, close the model.

3. Student attempt

This is the center of the hour. Eight to fifteen minutes. One to four items of *today’s type*. Speech, then tiles or finger under the word, then a written word or sentence, as needed. Hand them “For the student” or the first try-it. Then you talk less than you want to.

Say: “This one is yours. I’ll be quiet.” Then be quiet. If they stall: ask, wait, hint, then model — not the reverse. Ask: “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?” Wait. Count a slow three. If you fill the silence, you took the problem back.

Hint, one hint: “Look through the whole word. Point under each letter.” If they are still stuck after a real try: “I’ll show this one step. Then you take it.” Keep your hands off their pencil. Do not finish the word.

4. One good question, then wait

One to three minutes of clock time that feels longer. The talk around it can run using the talk-box shape below. Not “did you get it?”

An authentic question is one for which you have not already written the answer. “What is the vocabulary quiz word?” is recitation. Say: “What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?” Or: “Who wanted what — and how do you know?”

Then wait. A slow three after you ask. A slow three again after they stop. Robert Stahl called that silence *think-time*; that label is classroom-origin, not a literacy RCT. About three seconds is a convention, not a sacrament.¹⁵ Mary Budd Rowe found the same pause in elementary science class — science class, not a reading trial.¹⁶ If they are mid-blend or mid-retell, do not cut them off. If the silence is hard, look at the letters or the tiles, not at the child. One question. Maybe a follow-up. Then stop.

5. Mixed practice / connected reading

Five to fifteen minutes. Yesterday and last week mixed with today. Not forty of the new item. Connected reading sits here when there are words they can decode: a short decodable page, or assisted oral reading with feedback. Read-aloud above decoding level sits here on language days. Kitchen labels and library craft questions can sit inside this mix; they do not replace the phonics sit or the written sentence.¹⁷

¹⁵Robert J. Stahl, “Using ‘Think-Time’ and ‘Wait-Time’ Skillfully in the Classroom,” ERIC Digest ED370885 (1994), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED370885.pdf>: eight categories of classroom silence; about three seconds as a convention. Classroom-origin. Not a finding that wait-time teaches reading, and not a homeschool randomized trial.

¹⁶Mary Budd Rowe, “Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables: Their Influence on Language, Logic, and Fate Control,” NARST paper, ERIC ED061103 (1972), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED061103.pdf>: elementary science classes; teachers typically waited about one second after a question and 0.9 seconds after a student answer; extending both to three to five seconds changed discourse. Rowe is science class. This book does not cite Rowe 1972 as a literacy randomized trial or mash Rowe and Stahl as a reading RCT.

¹⁷National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000): guided repeated oral reading with feedback helps word recognition, fluency, and comprehension; SSR-alone is insufficient as a causal fluency program before decoding is in place.

Say: “Two from today. One from last week. Then we stop.”

6. Exit ticket

Two to four minutes. Two to four items, one of them yesterday’s skill. Book closed. No hints. No chatbot. Say: “These few are yours. I won’t help. That’s the point.” Done-enough is “right, or wrong-with-a-reason we can use tomorrow,” not a percentage.

Praise a clear look-through or a mind changed after a reread — not speed. If a wrong answer keeps coming, hear it, ask a better question, then name a better move if needed. Leaving a wrong answer uncorrected is not kindness.

If the hour goes sideways

Use this as a debug, not a verdict.

- Child guesses from the picture → point back at the letters; try a word with no picture.
- Child grabs the first letter and invents the rest → slow blend; finger under each letter.
- Child cannot start → smaller code load, tiles, re-model one.
- Child is accurate slowly, then rushed wrong under a timer → untimed accuracy; delay the clock.
- Child waits for rescue → count three; sit on your hands.
- Session is only worksheets → put one word on tiles; write one shared sentence.
- Parent feels rusty and finishes the word → put the tiles back; let them blend and say.¹⁸

Revisit yesterday. Mix last week. Stop. That is the habit. It is not a diploma.

Foorman et al., Recommendation 4: connected text daily; discourage guessing from pictures or first letters. Shared reading and kitchen talk motivate; they do not replace systematic decoding or written composition.

¹⁸Hearing a wrong answer, then asking a better question, then naming a better move if needed, is teaching. Silence in the face of a guessing-from-the-picture habit is not kindness. “Never correct the child” is not this book’s rule.

The talk-box shape, once

Later chapters will fill this week's opening question. They will not reprint this shape.

Opening question. Authentic. About whose turn and a full sentence, first sound and letter, slow-then-fast blending matching letters, known words and where to slow down, word meaning in this sentence, who wanted what and how you know, say-then-write the first word, or what the reader should know. No answer you have already written. Not "did you have fun" and not "what is the vocabulary quiz word." Locked openings live in the teaching chapters.

Three to five follow-ups. Pick; you do not need all five every Tuesday. Meaning. Representation (tiles / finger under the word / sketch / sentence). Type or evidence. Check: Does that match the letters or the story? Mind-change: You may change your mind.

How to wait. After you ask, a slow three. After they stop, wait again. If they are mid-blend or mid-retell, do not cut them off. Look at the letters or the tiles, not at the child, if the silence is hard.

What a stuck silence usually means. The question was vague. Wait-time was zero. They are hunting a picture cue or guessing what you want. The word is outside today's code. They offered a first-letter grab. They think reading means "look at the picture and guess," or writing means a blank page with no plan. Pose, wait, and point back at the print.

The in-home try-it shape, once

Later chapters will fill named types. They will not reprint this spine.

Time. A short sit, then stop. Five minutes at the fridge. Fifteen with a recipe card. Pedagogical design, not a national minutes table.

Materials. Household objects: fridge magnets, a recipe already in the drawer, a photo to caption, a sibling who will take a turn, a dated notebook, a pencil. You do not need a kit.

Safety. Ordinary: small tiles are a choking hazard for the youngest. Food hygiene for recipe reading. Tone: curious, not courtroom.

The fun. Finding the letter. Reading the next recipe step. Captioning a photo. Sibling retell. Word-of-the-day at dinner. A dictation note to family.

The skill. First sound linked to a letter. A label that becomes a sentence. Retell with who-wanted-what. Encoding a taught word. Writing for a real reader.

Types you will meet: fridge letter hunt; recipe label; caption the photo; sibling retell; word-of-the-day at dinner; dictation note. A recipe is a step to read, not a nutrition sermon.

The out-of-home try-it shape, once

“Outside” means the walk, the store, the library, the park, a trip postcard. Later chapters fill named types; they will not reprint this spine.

Types you will meet: street-sign or store-label sound-out (only words within today’s code); library craft question — “what did the writer do?”; museum or park label; menu or flyer; postcard from a trip; bus-ad word meaning for ages 8–10 about ordinary commercial language.

Safety, once. Roads, aisle courtesy. No tasting unknown things. No shoplifting a “test.” No lecture to a stranger’s child. No public quiz of a cashier. No photographing strangers. A street sign is print, not a sermon about a city.

The library is a free English hour. In the last federal tables that asked, two-thirds of homeschool households used the library as a source of curriculum and books.¹⁹ Start with a \$0 read-aloud when you need a book.

¹⁹Jiashan Cui and Rachel Hanson, *Homeschooling in the United States: Results from the 2012 and 2016 Parent and Family Involvement Survey*, NCES 2020-001 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), Table 6: 66 percent of homeschool households used the library as a source of curriculum and books in 2016 (K–2, 78 percent; 3–5, 70 percent). The 2023 First Look did not republish that table. Ellena Sempeles and Jiashan Cui, *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2023*, NCES 2024-113, Table A-5: 53 percent of the Homeschool-total row visited a library in the past month, versus 29 percent of all K–12 — a visit, not a curriculum-source percent.

This week, said plainly

One focus skill. Four or five English hours of the session shape. Mixed review of last week inside every hour. One in-home try-it and one out-of-home try-it. Friday: look at exit tickets; pick one diagnostic wrong answer or weak retell; decide whether next week repeats, narrows, or moves on. That is the honest answer to “lesson plans,” not 180 days written in advance.

A short skill check is three objects, not a battery: an exit ticket of two to four items; one diagnostic wrong answer the child explains; a done-enough checklist by skill, not by grade. Optional fourth: a publisher placement after a gap. Not NAEP. Not a percentile.

The AI rules, once

Later chapters will point here in one sentence. They will not reprint this box. The child talks to the parent. The parent may use a tool. The child does not sit alone with an open chat. The English is on the table: letter tiles, a sound box, a page, a pencil. The child attempts first. The parent holds the answer key.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as the child’s partner. You may generate a four-line SCRIPT for after the attempt (including a parent read-aloud script the adult voices), and you may ask a tool to explain a named page or pattern to you. No child-facing chat. No child account.

Ages 8–10: still parent in the room. The child may sit next to you while you use a tool. They may hear a hint after they have tried. They may not have their own companion account. They may not be asked to “prompt the tutor until it agrees.” Unaided first. SCRIPT after the try.

You may, on your account, after the child has tried:

- Explain this idea *to you* from a named lesson (title, page, or today’s object: letter tiles, sound boxes, a decodable page). You still have to hear a wrong turn yourself.
- Extra isomorphic practice with the answer key held by you. New CVC words, new sentences, a short dictation list. The child never sees the key. Do not generate “practice” by photographing tonight’s worksheet.

- A labelled SCRIPT after the try — a short spoken sequence for *you* to say, not a paragraph for the child to copy. Parent read-aloud scripts are adult tools.
- A hint after an attempt. A hint is a question or a named idea, not the finished word or story.
- Diagnose work the child already produced. You hear the diagnosis and decide. Crop to the paper. Do not upload the child's face.

You may not:

- Paste the worksheet and ask the tool to complete it.
- Ask “what’s the answer” or “just write the story” during the child’s attempt, or let the child ask that of a window.
- Photo-to-key. Point a camera at a comprehension packet so a filled key pops up. That loop is a solver. Photo-to-answer is the ban.
- Park an unsupervised chatbot as the child’s partner during the attempt — not at 5, not at 7, not at 10. No “reading friend” account.
- Write the student’s work. The model does not fill “I think the word means ____ because ____.”
- Invent facts (what letters are on the page, whether the word is *ship* or *shop*, what the story actually said). Look.
- Grade the child’s work from a detector score.
- Print a certificate of fluency.
- Hand the child an agent (Hermes Agent, Grok Bot, or any cloud-computer worker) as a reading or writing partner.
- Use a voice-clone or deepfake toy as the “reading teacher.”
- Rewrite-on-demand of the reading passage so the child does not decode.

In a high-school math trial (Bastani and colleagues), an unguarded chatbot made practice look better and left students worse on the test with the window closed.²⁰ This is a useful study, not a promise that

²⁰Hamsa Bastani, Osbert Bastani, Alp Sungu, Haosen Ge, Özge Kabakçı, and Rei Mariman, “Generative AI without guardrails can harm learning: Evidence from high school mathematics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 26 (2025): e2422633122. Field experiment, nearly 1,000 Turkish high-school math students, grades 9–11: a ChatGPT-like tool raised

every home will see the same result. That is not a 5–10 literacy trial. The kitchen-table rule it supports: the model may prepare the adult and the next page; it may not do the child’s reading or writing.

Federal practice guides and the National Reading Panel name phonemic awareness with letters, systematic phonics, connected text, guided oral reading, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing for purposes. They do not name a chatbot as the reading teacher.²¹

Detectors mislabelled more than half of some human essays as machine-written.²² Do not police a seven-year-old’s “I see a cat” with a score. Language models invent sources.²³ If you asked a tool for a paper on phonics, open the IES guide or the NRP summary.

Names, in ordinary language. Hermes 4 is a model. Hermes Agent is an agent. Grok is a chat assistant. Grok Bot is a cloud-computer agent. Game artist makes pictures. None is a 5–10 English class. There is no Grok Bot education SKU.

COPPA covers children under 13. Ages 5–10 are under 13. The 22 April 2026 compliance date has passed.²⁴ Keep accounts, logs, and keys on the parent side.

assisted practice 48 percent relative to control, then cut unaided exam grades 17 percent; a guarded tutor that withheld the answer raised practice 127 percent and left the unaided exam about the same as control. This is a high-school math trial, not a 5–10 literacy trial. The transferable caution is the crutch.

²¹Search of National Reading Panel (2000); Foorman et al., NCEE 2016-4008; Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010); and Graham et al., NCEE 2012-4058, for a recommendation to sit a child with a generative chatbot as the reading teacher: it is not there. They name phonemic awareness with letters, systematic phonics, connected text, guided oral reading, vocabulary, comprehension strategies and discussion, and writing for purposes.

²²Weixin Liang, Mert Yuksekgonul, Yining Mao, Eric Wu, and James Zou, “GPT detectors are biased against non-native English writers,” *Patterns* 4, no. 7 (2023): 100779; average false-positive rate on human TOEFL essays 61.22 percent.

²³William H. Walters and Esther Isabelle Wilder, “Fabrication and errors in the bibliographic citations generated by ChatGPT,” *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): 14045: 55 percent of GPT-3.5 citations and 18 percent of GPT-4 citations were fabricated in that study.

²⁴Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 6501 *et seq.*; 16 C.F.R. Part 312. Federal Register 90 FR 16918 (22 April 2025): amended Rule effective 23 June 2025; general compliance date 22 April 2026. Bright line: children under 13. Keep accounts on the parent side.

Not a secret friend. A tool that talks in the first person is still a tool. It does not get a bedroom, a private channel, or a promise to keep secrets from the parent.

You can teach this entire book with no AI. The hour still has the same shape.

A Tuesday, said plainly

Here is an illustration, not a reported family. A parent has spent five minutes looking at letter tiles and a short *a* page. The child warms up on two known oral sentences. The parent shows /m/–/a/–/t/, blends *mat*, then puts the tiles down. The child tries *man*. The parent asks, “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?” and waits. The child guesses from a picture. The parent points back at the letters, and they reblend. Exit: “These two are yours. I won’t help.” On an eight-to-ten day the same shape holds, with a multisyllabic word and a short paragraph for a reader.

You can run that hour. You need today’s idea, a sentence you refuse to finish, and willingness to stop talking. Later chapters will say: run the session as in *The English Hour*.

Chapter 1

Speaking and listening

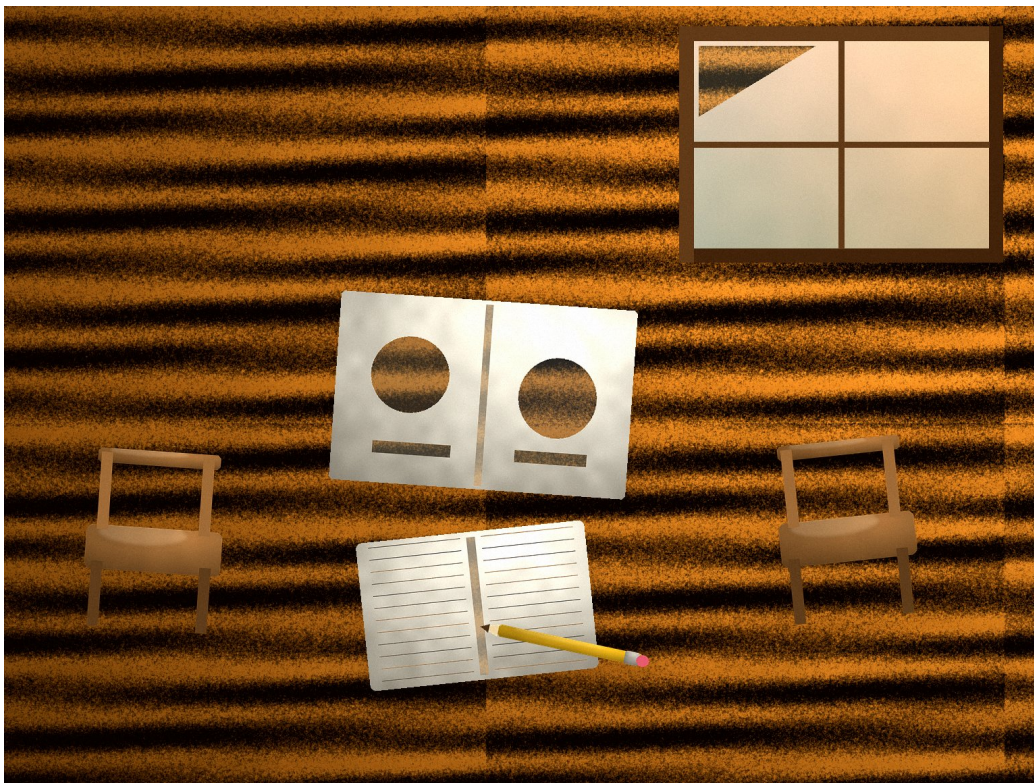


Figure 3: A kitchen-table still-life from a high three-quarter view: two empty chairs, an open picture book face-up with no readable title, a dated notebook with a blank line, a pencil. No people. No logos. No readable package branding.

Why this matters

Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?

That is not a manners quiz. It is not a test of whether the child can recite a speech. It is a question about a real conversation at your table — a sibling who jumped in, a fragment that stopped at “dog park,” a retell that lists objects and never says who wanted what — and about whether talk itself can be taught.

Children this age already talk and listen. That is not the finish line. Academic language — talk that goes beyond the here-and-now, story language with sequence and characters and a problem, a few useful book words used on purpose — is a taught object inside the English hour. The Institute of Education Sciences foundational-skills guide puts it as Recommendation 1. The evidence tier is minimal. The panel still recommends it.²⁵ Minimal does not mean skip talk. It means the causal research base was thinner than the code recommendations that follow. You still teach the move.

What this idea unlocks is everything later that needs a mouth and an ear. Phonemic awareness will ask the child to hear sounds in speech. Phonics will ask them to say those sounds and match them to letters. Blending will ask them to assemble a word out loud. Fluency will ask them to read as if talking. Vocabulary and story sense will ask them to use words and retell. Writing will ask them to say a sentence before they write it. If “speaking and listening” still means only “be polite and sit still,” later pages arrive as quiet worksheets with no voice behind them.

Two refusals belong in the same sitting as the invitation.

Talk does not replace decoding. Oral language fuels the language-comprehension strands of skilled reading — background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, literacy knowledge — but those strands braid with word recognition; they do not substitute for it.²⁶ Shared reading aloud, kitchen talk, and

²⁵Barbara Foorman, Coyne Beyler, Nicole Borradaile, Michael Coyne, Carolyn Denton, Joseph Dimino, Joshua Furgeson, Lynda Hayes, Juliette Henke, Julia Justice, Betsy Keating, Laura Lewis, Samina Sattar, Andre Streke, James Wagner, and Sarah Wissel, *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (NCEE 2016-4008), Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse, 2016 (revised 2019). Recommendation 1, academic language skills (inferential language, narrative language, vocabulary knowledge), minimal evidence; panel still recommends. This is a useful study, not a promise that every home will see the same result. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguide/21>

²⁶Hollis S. Scarborough, “Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading

making motivate. They do not replace a phonics sit or a written sentence. A week that is only cozy conversation under-teaches the code. A week that is only letter drills under-teaches the language the code is for.

This is not a philosophy seminar for five-year-olds, and it is not a competitive debate club. Turn-taking, a full oral sentence, and a short retell are the grain. One pointer: another book in this house, *Critical Thinking Skills for Little Thinkers*, owns little-thinker habits. This book owns English. One pointer, then we teach whose turn and a full sentence.

You do not need to be a speech pathologist. You do need to hear a fragment offered as an answer, and to ask for a full sentence without finishing it for them.

This week you can learn to hear interruption, fragment, and list-retell as three different misses. Today the child can take one clear turn and retell three parts of a familiar story.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults feel rusty on “oral language” as a school object. That is ordinary. Five minutes of this section, then the warm-up at the end, is enough for tomorrow. The child still does the talking.

Everyday picture. Someone asks what happened at the park. A child says, “Dog. Bark. Truck.” You know what they mean. The dog barked at a truck. The meaning is almost there. The sentence is not. Stretching the fragment into “The dog barked at the truck” is not snobbery. It is giving the ear a complete unit that writing can later catch. Another ordinary picture: two siblings; one answers every question; the other never gets a turn. The fast voice is not “more verbal.” The slow voice was never given the pause.

Precise picture. Three ideas sit under “speaking and listening” this week, and they are not the same.

(Dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice,” in *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, ed. Susan B. Neuman and David K. Dickinson (New York: Guilford Press, 2001). Language comprehension strands braid with word-recognition strands; skilled reading is the product of both. Simple View product logic (Gough and Tunmer 1986; Hoover and Gough 1990): reading comprehension collapses if either decoding or language comprehension is near zero — cited here for the braid, not as a newly re-opened PDF pair this draft.

Turn-taking. One voice at a time. After someone stops, a short silence so another speaker — or the same speaker finishing a thought — can enter. Mary Budd Rowe measured those pauses in elementary *science* class, not at a kitchen table. Robert Stahl later called the silence think-time and listed eight kinds of classroom silence; about three seconds after a clear question is a convention, not a sacrament.²⁷ Use the move. You are not replicating a science-class study. Post-response wait is the sibling tool: after one child answers, you wait so the other can add on without you filling the air.

Full oral sentence. Who did what — subject and action, enough for a listener who was not inside the child’s head. “Dog park” is a label. “We walked to the dog park” is a sentence. You stretch; you do not shame the home dialect. Academic language here means talk beyond playground chat: inferential (“why do you think...”), narrative (sequence, characters, problem), and a few book words reused — not policing how the family speaks at dinner.²⁸

Retell. Beginning, middle, end — or who wanted what, what got in the way, how it ended. A list of objects (“dog, truck, ice cream”) is not yet a retell. A causal chain is. Retell of a familiar picture book and retell of a real afternoon use the same muscle. Shanahan and colleagues’ comprehension guide rates focused high-quality discussion of meaning as minimal evidence and still recommends it; a parent and one child can do this.²⁹

Write those three on a scrap: whose turn; full sentence; who wanted what. Circle the first when siblings are in the room. Circle the second when fragments are the default. Circle the third after a story.

²⁷Mary Budd Rowe, “Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables, Their Influence on Language, Logic, and Fate Control,” paper to the National Association for Research in Science Teaching, Chicago, April 1972, ERIC ED061103. Elementary science class; typical wait about one second after a question and 0.9 seconds after a student response; extending both to 3–5 seconds changes discourse. Not a homeschool trial and not a literacy RCT. Robert J. Stahl, “Using Think-Time and Wait-Time Skillfully in the Classroom,” ERIC Digest ED370885, 1994. Think-time; about three seconds as a convention; eight categories of silence; written for classroom teachers generally.

²⁸Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills* (2016), Recommendation 1 how-to: talk beyond the here-and-now; story language; teach a small set of useful words deeply. Not a dialect-shaming programme.

²⁹Timothy Shanahan, Kim Callison, Christine Carriere, Nell K. Duke, P. David Pearson, Christopher Schatschneider, and Torgesen, *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (NCEE 2010-4038), Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse, 2010. Recommendation 3, focused high-quality discussion of meaning of text, minimal evidence.

CCSS Speaking and Listening maps — conversations with rules; ask and answer questions; recount; speak audibly; later, short reports with more formal register when it matters — are a map of typical U.S. public-school expectations, not a homeschool statute.³⁰ Use them as orientation for bands, not as a checklist to laminate.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *“Dog park.”* Offered as the whole answer to “What did you do?” A fragment offered as a sentence. Hear the meaning. Ask for who and what. Do not paste the finished sentence into their mouth as the first move.
2. *The sibling answers for them.* Interruption as the default. Hear the stolen turn. Say whose turn it is. Wait. The fast sibling is not the enemy; the missing pause is the miss.
3. *A retell that lists objects: “boat, fish, storm.”* No who-wanted-what. Hear the inventory. Ask who the story was about and what they wanted. Then first, next, end.
4. *Silence after “Whose turn is it?” because wait-time after the question was zero.* They learned that you will fill it. Hear the rush. Ask again. Count a slow three. Look at the book, not at their face, if the silence is hard.
5. *A long monologue that never lets anyone else in — including you.* Turn-taking cuts both ways. “One idea, then we switch” is a rule you model. A five-year-old speech is not a TED talk.

A sixth you will also hear: they speak in full sentences at the store and collapse into fragments at the table when the question feels like a quiz. The audience changed. Make the question authentic — something you do not already know the wording for — and the sentence often returns.

Five-minute parent warm-up

Do this before the lesson, with a scrap of paper, no child in the room.

Minute 1. Say out loud a fragment a child might offer: “Dog bark.” Stretch it once yourself: “The dog barked at the truck.” Feel the difference. You will ask them to

³⁰National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy* (2010), Speaking and Listening strand, K–5. Used here as a map of typical U.S. public-school placement, not as a homeschool statute.

stretch; you will not always supply the stretch.

Minute 2. Imagine two children. One answers. Practice waiting a slow three before you speak, so the other might add on. That silence is the lesson's hinge.

Minute 3. Pick a familiar picture book in your head. Name who wanted what in one sentence. That is the retell target — not a plot summary essay.

Minute 4. Imagine the child saying “Dog park” when you asked what happened. Decide, without performing, what a scold would do. Decide what “Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?” would do instead.

Minute 5. Write the sentence you will actually say: “Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?” Put the pencil down. That sentence is the lesson.

If you can do those five minutes, you are ready to sit down. The child talks. You hear.

How to teach it this week

A good English hour this week has a shape. The English-hour chapter in the front of this book is the full version, including the talk-box shape, the in-home and out-of-home try-it shape, and the AI rules. Here is the shape scaled to this idea.

Warm-up (2–5 minutes, unaided). One familiar question about the morning or yesterday: “What happened first when we woke up?” No device. No “tell me everything” as the warm-up.

Short model (3–7 minutes). One turn. You take a turn in a full sentence. You wait. You invite their turn. On a short stretch of a familiar book, you model a three-part retell: who, what they wanted, how it ended. You stop. You are showing turn and sentence, not delivering a lecture titled *Oral Language*.

Student attempt (8–15 minutes). One to three turns on today's object — a picture-book page, a real event, a sibling exchange. The child speaks. You wait. Struggle before rescue: ask, wait, hint (“who did what?”), then a short model of *your* sentence, not as their speech.

One good question, then wait (1–3 minutes of clock time that feels longer). “Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?” Not “did you have fun?” After you ask, a slow three is a convention, not a sacrament. After they stop,

wait again. If they are mid-sentence, do not cut them off. Look at the book or the table, not at the child, if the silence is hard.

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes). Yesterday’s full sentence next to today’s retell. A listen-and-add-on with a sibling if one is present. Mixing is how the child learns *when* to stretch a fragment and *when* to wait for a turn. Forty oral drills is not the mix.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes). One full sentence about something real. One three-part retell of a familiar stretch. Done-enough is “clear enough that a listener who was not there can follow,” not a score.

That shape is a practice you impose on whatever book, walk, or dinner is already in the week. It is not a 180-day plan. Pick two to four components most weekdays, twenty-five to forty-five minutes. Talk can sit inside a read-aloud sit; it does not eat the phonics sit when code is the week’s focus.

Exact wording you can say

On turns:

“Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?”

“One voice. Then we switch.”

“I hear you. I’m waiting.”

On sentences:

“Who did what?”

“Can you stretch that into a whole sentence?”

“Say it so someone in the other room would understand.”

On retell:

“Who was that about? What did they want?”

“What happened first? Next? At the end?”

When a sibling jumps in:

“Hold that thought — it’s still their turn.”

When you are about to finish their sentence:

“Your words. I’ll wait.”

Then wait.

Age-band moves: 5–7 / 8–10

5–7. Short turns. Full sentences about the here-and-now, then one inferential question (“why do you think the bear looks sad?”). Retell a familiar picture book in three parts. Speak audibly enough to be heard across a small table. Conversations with a simple rule: one speaker; wait; add one idea. You may scribe a sentence they said if writing fights the sitting. Fragments will appear. Stretching them is the work.

8–10. Same moves, larger grain. Recount an event with detail in order. Short report to the family: what we learned, what we still wonder. Notice formal vs informal when it matters — a thank-you to a librarian vs a joke with a sibling — without a register lecture. Retell with problem and solution named. If an eight-year-old still answers only in fragments and never takes a turn when a sibling is present, they are still in the 5–7 band of this chapter, whatever the birthday. A six-year-old who can wait, speak a full sentence, and retell who-wanted-what is not “too young” for the next idea.

Not a stable skill at either band: treating chat as the whole English hour; replacing phonics with conversation forever; running a debate tournament at five; shaming home speech while asking for “school sentences.” Same faculty. Different grain. Not two species of child.

First try-it for the student

A familiar picture book already on the table, or a real event from the morning:

Say: “Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?”

Wait. If the child offers a fragment, hear it. Ask who and what. If a sibling answers, name whose turn and wait again. Then: “Who was the story about? What did they want?” If they list objects, ask for first, next, end.

Later the same week, the diagnostic item:

the same opening, after a lively dinner when interruption was the air.

If the fast sibling still owns every turn, the pause was never installed. Point back at the rule. The conversation can stay warm. The turn still belongs to one voice at a time.

How to fade help. First sitting: you model a full sentence and a three-part retell; they echo. Second: they speak; you wait; you hint (“who did what?”). Third: they take a turn and retell without your scaffold. Fourth: a cousin of the same job — store, library walk to the car, park ducks — with the book on the shelf. The word *academic language*, if it arrives at all, arrives after the sentence.

When to stop talking. When you hear yourself finishing their sentence. When the sit has become a lecture titled *What Good Speakers Do*. When the child is mid-thought and you have already stacked a second and third question. One good question beats five. Stop while they still have a turn left in them. A second sitting later in the week beats a long sit that ends in a fight.

Practice that actually builds learning

Blocked, for a new move. The day you introduce “full sentence,” give a short set that is only that: three real questions, three stretches from fragment to sentence. The day you introduce retell, only who-wanted-what on one familiar story. Mixing too early makes the child hunt for the “right” school move instead of looking at the talk.

Mixed, for when to use it. Later the same week, a turn-taking sit next to a sentence stretch next to a three-part retell. Mixing is the practice of choosing: is this a turn problem, a sentence problem, or a story-sense problem?

One incorrect example to diagnose. A fragment forever (“dog park”) offered as the answer. Or: a retell that lists objects with no who-wanted-what. Hear the fragment. Hear the inventory. Neither is yet the taught move. The repair is a better question, then the wait, then — if needed — a named fact: “I heard ‘dog park.’ Who went, and what happened?” Silence in the face of a stolen turn is not kindness.

These are illustrations, not reported families.

Named try-it: Sibling story retell (in-home)

Time. Five to ten minutes. Then stop.

Materials. One familiar picture book, or a shared memory of yesterday. A scrap of paper if you want to jot whose turn produced a full sentence.

Safety. Ordinary sibling fairness. No shaming the fast talker as “bad.” No forcing a soft-spoken child to perform for guests. The tone is curious, not courtroom.

The fun. Being the one who gets the turn. Being the one who remembers what the character wanted.

The skill. Turn-taking. Full sentence. Retell with who-wanted-what.

Say: “Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?” After one child speaks, wait a slow three so the other can add one idea. Then: “Who wanted what — how do you know?” Five-to-seven: three parts, short. Eight-to-ten: add the problem that got in the way.

Named try-it: Dinner recount in three parts (in-home)

Time. Three to seven minutes at a meal you were eating anyway.

Materials. The day itself. Optional: a sticky note with “first / next / end.”

Safety. Ordinary meal. No interrogation about feelings as a trap. No recording the child without the family’s usual consent norms.

The fun. Being the family reporter. Getting the ending right.

The skill. Narrative language. Sequence. Full sentences about a real event.

Say: “Tell what happened today in three parts — first, next, end — in full sentences.” If they list food and toys, ask who did what. If a fragment appears, stretch once together, then they try the next sentence alone. Kitchen talk motivates. The full sentence still gets said.

Named try-it: Library storytime follow-up (out-of-home)

Time. Five to ten minutes on the walk to the car or on a bench outside.

Materials. Whatever was read at storytime, or one picture book from the visit.

Safety. Ordinary library. Roads in the parking lot. No quiz of the librarian as performance. No lecture to another family's child. If a display is a live fight, walk to a different bay.

The fun. Being the person who can tell what the story did.

The skill. Retell after a real listen. Full sentence for a real audience (you).

Say: "Whose turn is it to tell what happened — and can you say it in a full sentence?" Then who wanted what. The library hour is motivation. The retell still happens. Many homeschooling families already use the library; a visit is ordinary, not a special programme.³¹

Named try-it: Park ducks or store errand sentence (out-of-home)

Time. Two to five minutes inside an outing you were taking anyway.

Materials. Ducks, a playground moment, or one errand item.

Safety. Roads. Water. Aisle courtesy. No public quiz of a cashier. No photographing strangers. A store is print and errands; it is not a sermon about shopping.

The fun. Reporting live. One clear sentence that works.

The skill. Full oral sentence about the here-and-now, then one stretch beyond it ("why do you think the duck left?").

Say: "Tell me one thing we came for, in a full sentence." Or, at the park: "What happened first with the ducks — next — end?" Five-to-seven: one sentence. Eight-to-ten: two or three linked with *because* or *then*.

Blocked / mixed, in this week. Monday: sibling retell, only turns and who-wanted-what. Tuesday: dinner recount, only sequence sentences. Wednesday: mix turn + sentence. Thursday: park or store sentence. Friday: library follow-up, and one diagnostic fragment or stolen turn.

³¹National Center for Education Statistics, *Homeschooling in the United States: Results from the 2012 and 2016 Parent and Family Involvement in Education Surveys* (NCES 2020-001), Table 6: library as a source of curriculum and books is common among homeschooling families. NCES, *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2023* (NCES 2024-113): library visits remain ordinary. Different survey questions across years; do not swap percentages casually.

Talk box

This is an illustration, not a reported family. A book is on the table. The parent has not announced a definition.

Opening question

“Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?”

Not: “Did you have fun?”

Follow-ups (pick three to five; you will not use all of them every sitting)

1. What did ____ just say — can you add one idea?
2. Wait — finish your thought. Show me with a sentence, then a sketch if you want, then (later chapters) a written line.
3. Who was that about? What happened first?
4. Does that sentence say who did what? Let’s check.
5. You may change your mind after you hear your sibling. Try it another way.

How to wait

Ask. Count a slow three in your head. Look at the book or the table, not at the child’s face, if the silence is hard. After they stop talking, wait again before you speak — especially if a sibling might add on. If they are mid-sentence or mid-retell, do not cut them off. A follow-up that arrives in half a second trains the child to wait *you* out, not to think. Three seconds is a convention, not a sacrament — Stahl’s think-time, from classroom teaching. Rowe’s windows were science class. Use the pause. Neither is a homeschool trial of speaking.

What a stuck silence usually means

The question was vague. Or wait-time after the question was zero, and they learned that you will fill it. Or they are hunting what you want to hear. Or a sibling always answers, so their turn never arrives. Or they offered a fragment and can feel it was not enough. Or they think “speaking” means perform a speech. Or they think listening means waiting to talk. Next move: smaller ask, wait, point back at the book or the day. “Who did what?” is a hint. The finished sentence pasted into their mouth is not a hint; it is the grab. Done enough this week: a spoken full sentence

and a three-part retell. “There was a bear. He wanted honey. He got stuck — then he got out.”

For the student

This page is for you.

Whose turn is it — and can you say that in a full sentence?

That is a question about talking with people you live with. It is not a test. A short answer like “dog park” can be true. A full sentence helps the listener: “We walked to the dog park.”

When someone else is talking, you wait. Waiting is part of listening. When it is your turn, you take it. You do not have to make a speech. One clear sentence is enough for many turns.

After a story, you can retell. Who was it about? What did they want? What happened first, next, and at the end? Listing things — boat, fish, storm — is a start. Saying who wanted what is the retell.

A tiny worked example

Someone asks what happened in the book.

You say: “The mouse wanted a cookie.”

That is a full sentence. It says who and what.

Then: “First he asked. Next he got milk. At the end he was full.”

If your sibling starts talking on your turn, a grown-up can say it is still your turn. You finish. Then they go.

If you and a grown-up heard the story differently, you look at the page again. You may change your mind. That is not losing.

Two tries

1. At home. Take one turn at dinner. Say one full sentence about your day. Then listen while someone else takes a turn. Add one idea after they finish — not in the middle.

2. After a library book, or after ducks at the park. Retell in three parts: who wanted what; first; end. Say it so someone who was not there can follow.

Write nothing if writing fights the sitting. Talk the sentence. Your grown-up can remember it. If you are older and writing is easy, you may write: “I said . **Who wanted .**”

Explain it back

Tell someone at the table, in your own words, what a full sentence needs — who and what — and what you do when it is not your turn. Then retell a familiar story with three parts. Then say one time you used a fragment, and how you can stretch it.

Challenge

Someone answers every question for you. What is missing? How do you get your turn without a fight? Someone says “dog, truck, ice cream” after a story. What did they list? How do you retell who wanted what instead?

You are allowed to struggle. You may use a book, a walk, a meal. You talk. You listen. If you get stuck, ask for a hint — not the finished speech. Then try again.

When you talk, a sentence is enough for today. You do not have to write a paragraph. You do not have to call yourself a speaker. Today you take a turn, you say a full sentence, and you can retell three parts.

A story a computer told in your voice is a scene. It is interesting. It is not your turn.

If it isn’t clicking

Three diagnostics. Each one has a next move. None of them is a verdict on talent, and none of them is a reason to wait for a birthday.

1. The child answers in fragments, and cannot yet stretch to a full sentence.

“Dog park.” Or a shrug plus one word. Next move: smaller ask — “Who went? What did they do?” — then “put those together.” Model one sentence on *your* turn. Hand it back. Stay here if fragments still wear “answer” clothes after several weeks of short sits. Phonics in the next chapters will ask them to say sounds and words out loud; a mouth that only offers labels will need this stretch. A human

who will wait for a sentence, not a tablet that talks over them, is a reasonable next step if the hour has become a fight.

2. Turns never arrive — interruption, or silence because wait-time was zero.

The fast sibling owns the air, or the quiet child has learned you will fill every pause. Next move: name whose turn; wait a slow three twice; look at the book, not at faces. “One idea, then we switch.” Slow down the pile of questions until one turn can finish. A child who can chatter alone and cannot wait is not done with this chapter. Go ahead once they can take a turn, leave a turn, and add one idea after listening. A tutor or a trusted adult for one child at a time is useful if the sibling pattern still owns every sitting after a couple of weeks *and* the hour has become a fight.

3. Retell stays a list of objects, with no who-wanted-what.

Inventory is doing the work of story. Next move: one familiar book; ask only “who?” and “what did they want?” before first-next-end. Draw three boxes if it helps. If silence after the question is a wall, shorten the sit and use the talk-box opening once. If you hear yourself narrating the whole plot, you have started doing the work. If the hour has become a fight after a stretch of daily short sits, a human who will wait, not a chatbot that fills the silence, is the release valve.

When to slow down. Fragments still the only answer shape. Stolen turns still the default. Retells still inventories. Sits so long that nobody wants a turn. Those are brakes. “Not ready” because of age is the brake this book will not use. “Not ready” because a full sentence has not yet named who-did-what is a real brake. A debate club is not a reason to skip dinner recount.

When to go ahead. The child can take one clear turn and leave one. They can stretch a fragment into a full sentence most of the time on familiar topics. A three-part retell of a familiar story has happened. At least one out-of-home sentence or retell has happened. Short sits are ordinary. Then sounds and letters in the next chapter have a voice to work with. Being “good at talking” because a child chatters through dinner is not a reason to skip turn-taking.

When to get a human tutor. You have run the turn, or the sentence stretch, or the wait after the question, for a stretch of daily sittings, and the same diagnosis is still the one in the room, and the hour has become a fight. A tutor is a release valve, not a failure of the sitting. Keep yourself as the person who can still hear a fragment offered as an answer. Outsourcing the hearing is the thing to avoid, not

asking for help.

Hearing which strand is thin — turn, sentence, or retell — is enough.

Correct a thin answer without crushing the attempt. “I heard ‘dog park.’ Who went, and what happened?” Then wait. “Never correct the child” is not this book’s rule. Hearing a wrong shape, asking a better question, then naming a better move if needed, is teaching.

Tools, including AI

Optional helpers for you, the adult. The full rules live in the English-hour box in the front of this book. This chapter is a pointer, not a second policy paper.

The short version: the child talks and listens first. You hold the turn and the question. A tool may explain today’s idea *to you*, suggest extra practice questions you then vet, write a short script for *you* to say after the child has tried, offer a hint after an attempt, or help you diagnose a retell the child already gave. The child looks at people and pages. The child talks in the room.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as the child’s partner. Ages 8–10: still parent in the room. Unaided first. A labelled SCRIPT after the try — a few lines for you to say, not a paragraph for the child to copy as their speech.

Leave these out of the hour: a chatbot as the only conversation partner; a tool that writes the child’s sentence; a camera pointed at a worksheet so answers pop up; a detector score; a certificate of speaking; a voice-clone “reading teacher”; a tool asked to invent what the story said. Look. Ages five to ten are under 13. You hold the account.

A language model will happily finish the child’s sentence. Treat every model-supplied “full sentence” as untrusted until it lives in the child’s mouth. Fluent talk from a tool is performance, not the child’s English. In a high-school math study, an unguarded chatbot made practice look better and left students worse when the window was closed. That paper is high-school mathematics, not a 5–10 literacy trial. The crutch is still the sitting condition.³² If the tool takes the turn, the child

³²Hamsa Bastani, Osbert Bastani, Alp Sungu, Haosen Ge, Özge Kabakcı, and Rei Mariman, “Generative AI without Guardrails Can Harm Learning: Evidence from High School Mathematics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 26 (2025): e2422633122. GPT Base raised assisted practice grades and cut unaided exam grades in a high-school mathematics

is a spectator.

A book, a meal, and a walk are tools too. Use them, then fade them.

What “done enough” looks like

Placement is by skill, not birthday. A “grade 2 language workbook” is a publisher’s scope, not a legal grade, and not a transcript line. A dinner turn, a library retell, and a park sentence can place the same child in three different rooms, because they cut the grain differently. Choose by fit. This book names programmes as options in the resources chapter. It does not rank them. The record, when you need one, is a dated notebook, the task named, plus an exit ticket, plus one diagnostic item. The title a stranger can read is Reading, or Language Arts, or English. It is not Little Thinkers English I.

Checklist before moving on

- You can hear a fragment offered as an answer, and you can ask for a full sentence without finishing it.
- You can hear a stolen turn, and you can name whose turn it is and wait.
- The child can take one clear turn and leave one, at least in a short sit.
- The child can stretch a familiar fragment into a who-did-what sentence most of the time.
- At least one three-part retell has happened: who wanted what, or first–next–end.
- At least one out-of-home sentence or retell has happened: library walk, park, or store.
- Sits can be short. A spoken sentence is enough. You did not require a formal speech as the proof.
- You can hear interruption, fragment, and list-retell, and you can ask a good question, without taking the turn.

If most of that list is true, go on to sounds, letters, and phonics, even if the birthday says otherwise. If the birthday says “second grade” and turns still never arrive, stay. The next chapter asks what sound they hear first — and which letter makes it. It needs a voice that can take a turn and say a word on purpose.

randomized trial in Turkey, nearly 1,000 students, grades 9–11. Not a 5–10 literacy trial. The sitting condition — a tool that produces the response — is the mechanism used here.

A path through elementary English is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not.

Chapter 2

Sounds, letters, and phonics



Figure 4: A kitchen-table still-life from a high three-quarter view: letter tiles scattered beside a three-box sound strip, a pencil, a sticky note with a blank line, a dated notebook. No people. No logos. No readable package branding.

Why this matters

What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?

That is not a quiz about the alphabet song. It is not a test of whether the child can name twenty-six letters in order. It is a question about a word that is actually in the air — *map, ship, fast* — and about whether the first sound they hear can be linked to a letter they can point to, build with a tile, and write.

Phonemic awareness is hearing the smallest sounds in spoken words. Phonics is linking those sounds to letters in a planned sequence, then using the links to read and write words. The National Reading Panel found that teaching children to manipulate phonemes was highly effective across conditions, and that phonemic awareness taught *with letters* worked better than phonemic awareness without letters. Systematic phonics produced significant benefits for kindergarten through sixth grade and for children having difficulty learning to read. The Panel rejected the claim that kindergarten children are “not ready” for phonics.³³

The Institute of Education Sciences foundational-skills guide puts the same core as two strong recommendations: develop awareness of sound segments in speech *and how they link to letters* (Recommendation 2, strong evidence, seventeen studies); teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words (Recommendation 3, strong evidence, eighteen studies).³⁴ Strong evidence does not mean every kitchen will see the same result. It does mean you are not inventing this week’s work out of hope.

What this idea unlocks is the code half of reading. Without sound–letter links, blending in the next chapter has nothing to assemble. Without encoding — writing the letters for sounds they hear — spelling stays a copy task. Without a planned sequence, “phonics” becomes drive-by mentions when a word happens to appear in a story. Letter names and an alphabet song are starts. They are not the finish.

³³National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction — Reports of the Subgroups* (NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 summary), National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000. Phonemic awareness highly effective; PA with letters; systematic phonics significant benefits K–6 and for struggling readers; kindergarten “not ready” claim rejected. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026.

³⁴Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (NCEE 2016-4008), 2016 (revised 2019). Recommendation 2 strong (17 studies); Recommendation 3 strong (18 studies). This is a useful study, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

A child who can sing the alphabet and cannot link /m/ to *m*, or cannot write *map* after blending it, is not done with this chapter.

Two refusals belong in the same sitting as the invitation.

“Wait for readiness forever; reading blooms without instruction” is the wrong wait when letter–sound prerequisites can be taught. Readiness here is prior opportunity to learn, not a birthday. The other wrong wait is flashcards of whole words as the *only* early method, or a year of clapping syllables with no letters in sight. Irregular words appear as needed for connected text. They are not the whole early program. Synthetic phonics (sounds, then blend) and analytic phonics (known words, then notice patterns) both worked in the Panel’s comparison; neither significantly outperformed the other.³⁵ Do not crown a hand-signal franchise. Do crown a plan you can follow for more than three days.

You do not need to be a reading specialist. You do need to hear /k/ /a/ /p/ offered for *cat*, and to ask for the last letter, without taking the tile.

This week you can learn to hear letter-name instead of sound, sound without a letter present, and a first-letter grab as three different misses. Today the child can link one new sound to its letter and write one word that uses it.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults feel rusty on how they were taught to read — or never saw systematic phonics named as such. That is ordinary. Five minutes of this section, then the warm-up at the end, is enough for tomorrow. The child still builds the word.

Everyday picture. The word *map* on a sticky note. You can say /m/ without naming the letter *em*. You can point to *m* and say /m/. You can stretch /mmaap/, then say *map*. You can hear *map*, then write *m*, *a*, *p*. The mouth, the tile, and the pencil are three doors into the same link. An alphabet poster on the wall is decoration until someone asks which letter makes the first sound in *map*.

Precise picture. Three ideas sit under “sounds and letters,” and they are not the same.

³⁵National Reading Panel (2000), phonics subgroup: systematic phonics; synthetic and analytic approaches both showed benefits in the Panel’s review; the load-bearing claim is systematic and explicit application in reading and writing, not a brand war.

Phonemic awareness with letters. Hear first, last, middle sounds. Blend and segment — with tiles or written letters soon, not years later. Clapping syllables can warm up. It is not the strong recommendation's main object. The Panel and Foorman both want letters in the work.³⁶

Systematic phonics. A planned sequence of sound–spellings. Short daily doses. Review known links; teach one new or focus link; blend and segment words that use it; write one or two; optionally read a sentence crumb that uses today's pattern. Opportunistic “when it comes up in the story” is not a sequence.

Encoding beside decoding. After they blend *ship*, they spell *ship* from hearing. Writing the graphemes is Recommendation 3's partner, not an optional craft hour. Invented spelling on *untaught* patterns can be temporary. On *taught* patterns, expect the taught letters.

Common sound–spellings move from consonants and short vowels into digraphs (*sh, ch, th*), blends, and long-vowel patterns as the sequence advances. Multisyllabic decoding and morphology belong especially in the 8–10 band — and in any younger child who is ready. Confusable shapes (*b / d*) get one taught thoroughly before its twin is added; that obstacle note is in the practice guide.³⁷ High-frequency irregulars (*the, said*) appear as needed so connected text can be read; teach the parts that *are* regular, rather than replacing phonics with an endless whole-word list.

Write on a scrap: first sound → letter; blend left to right; write what you hear. Circle the arrow. That is this chapter's hinge.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *They say the letter name* em* when you asked for the sound.* Letter-name and sound are different objects. Hear the mix-up. Re-teach: “Letter name *em*, sound /m/.” Then ask for the sound again.
2. *Weeks of sound play with no letter on the table.* Phonemic awareness without letters is the weaker object. Hear the missing tile. Put the letter in. Link.
3. *Whole-word flash as the only method.* They memorize shapes and stall on new words. Hear the ceiling. Keep irregulars limited and needed; return to

³⁶National Reading Panel (2000), phonemic awareness; Foorman et al. (2016), Recommendation 2 how-to: link sound segments to letters; blend and segment with letters present.

³⁷Foorman et al. (2016), Recommendation 2 obstacle note: teach one confusable letter thoroughly before adding its twin (*b/d*).

sound–letter work for the rest.

4. *They blend /k/ /a/ /p/ for cat, or grab only the first letter and guess.* Final sound or middle sound is thin — or they are not looking through the word. Point under each letter. Ask what the last letter says.
5. *They can read map** on a card and cannot write *map* from dictation.* Encoding was skipped. Hear the one-way street. Dictate. Expect *m-a-p* for the taught pattern.

A sixth you will also hear: they confuse *b* and *d* after both were introduced on the same day. Teach one thoroughly. Add the twin later. The guide’s obstacle note is your friend.

Five-minute parent warm-up

Do this before the lesson, with tiles or paper letters, no child in the room.

Minute 1. Say *map*. Isolate /m/. Point to *m*. Say /m/. Feel that the name *em* is not the sound.

Minute 2. Build *map* with tiles. Blend left to right: /mmaap/, then *map*. Then scramble and rebuild.

Minute 3. Hide the tiles. Hear *map*. Write *m*, *a*, *p*. Encoding closes the loop.

Minute 4. Imagine the child saying /k/ /a/ /p/ for *cat*. Decide what a scold would do. Decide what “What sound do you hear last — and which letter makes it?” would do instead.

Minute 5. Write the sentence you will actually say: “What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?” Put the pencil down. That sentence is the lesson.

If you can do those five minutes, you are ready to sit down. The child links. You hear.

How to teach it this week

A good English hour this week has a shape. The English-hour chapter in the front of this book is the full version. Here is the shape scaled to sounds and letters — the phonics sit inside the hour.

Warm-up (1–2 minutes, unaided). Known letter-sounds or a known word family, oral or with tiles. Already-right material. No new pattern in the warm-up.

Short model (2–4 minutes). One sound–spelling or one pattern. “This is /sh/. Two letters, one sound.” Child echoes. Write it. Trace it. You stop. You are showing the link, not delivering a lecture titled *The Alphabetic Principle*.

Student attempt — blend / segment try (3–6 minutes). Build three to six words with today’s link. Child blends left to right. You wait. Struggle before rescue: ask, wait, hint (“point under each”), then model one on *your* tiles, hand back a similar word.

Write one or two (2–3 minutes). Dictation of a word or short phrase using today’s code. Encoding is not optional.

Connected crumb (optional 1–2 minutes). One sentence or a few lines that use today’s pattern. Finger under the words. Richer blending into longer connected reading is the next chapter; a crumb can live here.

One good question, then wait. “What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?” Not “what letter is this?” as the only question. After you ask, a slow three. After they stop, wait again. Look at the tiles, not at the child, if the silence is hard.

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes later in the week). Yesterday’s link next to today’s. One word that changes only the first letter. Mixing is how the child learns *when* a pattern applies. Forty identical worksheets is not the mix.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes). Blend two or three words with today’s link. Write one from dictation. Done-enough is “right, or wrong-with-a-reason we can use tomorrow,” not a percentage.

Most weekdays while the child is learning the code: eight to fifteen minutes for the phonics sit, inside a twenty-five to forty-five minute English hour that still leaves room for read-aloud and a little writing. This is not a 180-day dump.

Exact wording you can say

“What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?”

“Last sound? Middle?”

“Letter name *ess*, sound /s/.”

“Say the sounds, then blend.”

“Point under each letter.”

“If we change this letter, what word do we get?”

“Hear *ship*. Write the letters.”

When they guess from a picture on a crumb:

“Cover the picture. Look at the letters.”

When you are about to take the tile:

“Your hands. I’ll wait.”

Then wait.

Age-band moves: 5–7 / 8–10

5–7. Letter–sound inventory; consonants and short vowels; CVC words; digraphs as the sequence advances; common long-vowel patterns when earlier links hold. Phonemic awareness with letters until single-syllable segmentation is easy. Short daily phonics sits. Dictation of taught words. Irregulars as needed for sentences. Handwriting of letters in tiny bursts so formation does not block encoding — more on handwriting in a later chapter; formation fights do not cancel today’s sound–letter link.

8–10. Keep phonics going into big words: syllable types; common prefixes and suffixes; roots as appropriate. Multisyllabic decoding is phonics grown up, not “post-phonics.” If CVC still fails, teach CVC — birthday is a weak placement test. An eight-year-old who looks fluent on easy text and stalls on *unpacking* still needs this chapter’s grain. A six-year-old who can link sounds to letters, blend CVC, and write the word is not “too young” for digraphs when the sequence says so.

Not a stable skill at either band: letter-name parade as reading; PA without letters for months; whole-word flash as the program; skipping encoding; abandoning decoding at eight because a timed test looked fine on easy text. Same faculty. Different grain.

First try-it for the student

Tiles or paper letters for today’s link — say short *a* and known consonants — already on the table:

Say: “What sound do you hear first in *map* — and which letter makes it?”

Wait. If they say *em*, separate name and sound. If they cannot find the letter, put three choices down and ask again. Then build *map*, blend, then hide and write *map*.

Later the same week, the diagnostic item:

dictate *cat*; they write *cap* — or say /k/ /a/ /p/ when reading *cat*.

Hear the final-sound miss. Point under the last letter. The first letter was not enough.

How to fade help. First sitting: you model the link, build together, they echo the blend. Second: they build; you wait; you hint (“first sound”). Third: they blend and write with little help. Fourth: fridge or store words that use today’s code, skipping words outside it without shame. The word *phoneme*, if it arrives at all, arrives after the tile.

When to stop talking. When you hear yourself blending for them. When the sit has become a lecture titled *What Phonics Is*. When you have stacked five questions on one word. One good question beats five. Stop while they still have a word left in them.

Practice that actually builds learning

Blocked, for a new move. The day you introduce /sh/, give a short set that is only *sh* words: *ship*, *shop*, *fish*. The day you introduce final-sound attention, only words that hinge on the last letter. Mixing too early makes the child hunt for the school move instead of looking at the letters.

Mixed, for when to use it. Later the same week, yesterday’s short *a* next to today’s *sh* next to one change-the-first-letter word. Mixing is the practice of choosing which link applies.

One incorrect example to diagnose. Letter-name instead of sound. Or: /k/ /a/ /p/ for *cat*. Or: weeks of sound games with no letter present. Hear the miss. The repair is a better question, then the letter on the table, then — if needed — a named fact: “You said /p/. This letter is *t*. It says /t/.” Silence in the face of a first-letter grab is not kindness.

These are illustrations, not reported families.

Named try-it: Fridge letter hunt (in-home)

Time. Five to ten minutes.

Materials. Magnets or sticky notes; packages already on the fridge or in the pantry. Today's target sound—spelling on a scrap.

Safety. Ordinary kitchen. No tasting unknown things as a “test.” No shaming who bought what. Small magnets are a choking hazard for the youngest.

The fun. Being the hunter. Finding /m/ in the wild.

The skill. Sound → letter in environmental print. Sort: today's sound vs not.

Say: “What sound do you hear first in this word — and which letter makes it?” Find three matches for today's link. Skip words outside the code without shame. Five-to-seven: first sound mostly. Eight-to-ten: first and last, or a digraph on a label.

Named try-it: Tiles build and sticky dictation (in-home)

Time. Eight to twelve minutes.

Materials. Letter tiles or paper squares; sticky notes; pencil.

Safety. Ordinary table. Tiles off the floor if you have a toddler who mouths objects.

The fun. Building a word that did not exist a minute ago. Leaving a note someone can read.

The skill. Decode and encode with today's link. Foorman Rec 3's write-and-recognize partner.

Build three to six words. Blend each. Then: “Hear *ship*. Write it on the sticky.” Expect the taught pattern. Put the sticky on the fridge as a note to the family. Kitchen motivates. The tiles and the pencil still do the work.

Named try-it: Store-label sound-out (out-of-home)

Time. Two to five minutes inside a shopping trip you were taking anyway.

Materials. One label within reach and within today's code (*jam, map, milk* if *i* is known).

Safety. Aisle courtesy. No shoplifting a "test." No public quiz of a cashier. No photographing strangers. A label is print. It is not a nutrition sermon.

The fun. Reading something real in the world.

The skill. Apply today's sound-spellings. Skip words outside the code without shame.

Say: "What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?" Then blend through the word if the whole word is in reach of today's code. If not, take the first sound and move on cheerfully. Five-to-seven: one word. Eight-to-ten: one word plus "what would change if this letter changed?"

Named try-it: Park or street letter walk (out-of-home)

Time. Five to ten minutes of a walk you were taking anyway.

Materials. Signs, house numbers as numerals-to-ignore, a few printed words at child height.

Safety. Roads. Stay together. The child is the sound-hunter, not a lookout in traffic. Ordinary looking. No lecture to a stranger's child.

The fun. Spotting today's letter in the wild.

The skill. Letter-sound link outside the notebook.

Say: "Find the letter that makes /s/." When they find it in a word they cannot fully read yet, still honor the link: "That letter makes /s/ — we'll read the whole word when we have those patterns." A walk is not outdoor education theory. It is today's link in the world you were already in.

Blocked / mixed, in this week. Monday: tiles only on the new link. Tuesday: fridge hunt, only first sound. Wednesday: mix blend + dictation. Thursday: store

label. Friday: diagnostic final-sound miss, decide whether next week revisits or moves on.

Talk box

This is an illustration, not a reported family. Tiles are on the table. The parent has not announced a definition.

Opening question

“What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?”

Not: “What letter is this?” alone.

Follow-ups (pick three to five; you will not use all of them every sitting)

1. Last sound? Middle sound?
2. Show me with tiles. Finger under the letter. Write the letter that makes /m/.
3. If we change this letter, what word do we get?
4. Does that match what you hear? You said /p/; this letter is *t* — let’s look.
5. You may change your mind. Try it another way.

How to wait

Ask. Count a slow three. Look at the tiles or the letters, not at the child’s face, if the silence is hard. After they stop, wait again before you speak. If they are mid-blend, do not cut them off. A follow-up in half a second trains them to wait *you* out, not to hear the sound. Three seconds is a convention, not a sacrament — Stahl’s think-time; Rowe’s windows were science class. Use the pause. Neither is a phonics RCT.

What a stuck silence usually means

They offered a letter name and can feel it was not the sound. Or wait-time was zero. Or they are guessing what you want. Or the word is outside today’s code. Or they grabbed the first letter and hoped. Or they think reading means look at the picture. Or no letter was on the table, so the sound had nowhere to land. Next move: fewer choices, letter present, wait, point under. “What does this letter say?” is a hint. Pulling the tile into place for them is the grab. Done enough this week: “I hear /m/. The letter is *m*. I can write *map*.”

For the student

This page is for you.

What sound do you hear first — and which letter makes it?

Words are made of sounds. Letters are how we write those sounds down. The alphabet song names letters. Reading asks for sounds too.

You can hear /m/ at the start of *map*. The letter *m* makes that sound. You can say /m/ /a/ /p/, then say *map* fast. You can hear *map* and write the letters.

If you say the letter name *em* when someone asked for the sound, that is a mix-up you can fix. Letter name *em*. Sound /m/.

A tiny worked example

Tiles: *m*, *a*, *p*.

You point: /m/ ... /a/ ... /p/.

Then you say it fast: *map*.

Someone hides the tiles and says “write *map*.”

You write *m*, *a*, *p*.

If you wrote *m*, *a*, *b*, you look at the last sound. /p/ needs *p*. You may change your mind. That is not losing.

Two tries

1. At home. Build three words with today’s letters. Blend each. Write one from hearing. Put a sticky note on the fridge.
2. On a walk or at the store. Find today’s letter on a sign or label. Say its sound. If the whole word uses patterns you know, blend it. If not, take the sound you know and skip the rest for now.

Write nothing if writing fights the sitting. Build with tiles and talk. If writing is easy, write: “I hear . ***The letter is*** .”

Explain it back

Tell someone at the table how a sound and a letter go together. Show one word you built. Show one word you wrote. Say one time you used a letter name instead

of a sound, and what you can do instead.

Challenge

Someone says *cap* when the word is *cat*. What did they miss? How do you check? Someone plays sound games for weeks with no letters. What is missing from the table?

You are allowed to struggle. You may use tiles, sticky notes, a label, a sign. You say the sounds. You look at the letters. If you get stuck, ask for a hint — not the finished word. Then try again.

Today you link one sound to one letter, you blend a short word, and you can write it. You do not have to finish the whole alphabet in one sitting. You do not have to call yourself a reader yet. You are doing reader work.

A worksheet a computer filled is a scene. It is interesting. It is not your hand.

If it isn't clicking

Three diagnostics. Each one has a next move. None of them is a verdict on talent, and none of them is a reason to wait for a birthday.

1. Letter-name and sound stay mixed, or sounds never meet letters.

They say *em* for /m/, or they clap syllables for weeks with no tile. Next move: two objects on the table — name vs sound — then the letter present every time they isolate a sound. Stay here if the mix-up still owns the sit after several weeks of short daily links. Blending in the next chapter will not hold on top of missing sound-letter pairs. A human who will sit with tiles and wait, not an app that only names letters, is a reasonable next step if the hour has become a fight.

2. Blending three sounds collapses, or final/middle sounds are ignored.

Working memory is overloaded, or they grab the first letter and guess. Next move: two-sound blends first; continuous blending (/mmaaat/); tiles that move; cover any picture. Slow down new patterns until *cat* is not *cap*. A child who can sing the alphabet and cannot write *map* is not ready to skip encoding. Go ahead once they can link today's sound to its letter, blend a few CVC words, and write one. A tutor is useful if tagging sounds remains chaotic after a couple of weeks of daily tile work *and* the hour has become a fight.

3. They refuse the pencil, or every sit ends in a shrug when you ask for the first sound.

Encoding was skipped, or wait-time was zero, or the question was vague, or they think reading means picture-guess. Next move: shorter sits; tiles first; one dictation word; the talk-box opening; wait a slow three twice. If you hear yourself placing every tile, you have started doing the work. If the hour has become a fight after a stretch of daily short sits, a human who will wait, not a chatbot that fills the word, is the release valve.

When to slow down. Letter-name still wearing sound clothes. First-letter grabs still the default. No letter on the table. Sits so long that blending never starts. Those are brakes. “Not ready” because of age is the brake this book will not use. “Not ready” because /m/ has not yet met *m* is a real brake. A leveled book pile is not a reason to skip the tiles.

When to go ahead. The child can give the sound for today’s letters most of the time. They can blend a small set of words with those links. They can write one taught word from dictation. At least one out-of-home letter or label hunt has happened. Short sits are ordinary. Then blending into connected reading has somewhere to sit. Being “good at letters” because a child can recite A–Z is not a reason to skip sound–letter work.

When to get a human tutor. You have run the tiles, or the dictation, or the wait after the question, for a stretch of daily sittings, and the same diagnosis is still the one in the room, and the hour has become a fight. A tutor is a release valve, not a failure of the sitting. Keep yourself as the person who can still hear /k/ /a/ /p/ for *cat*. Outsourcing the hearing is the thing to avoid, not asking for help.

Unbranded Orton–Gillingham–based strategies, as a What Works Clearinghouse group, had no studies that met standards in the 2010 learning-disabilities protocol — the Clearinghouse could not draw conclusions.³⁸ That is not a reason to avoid careful sound–letter teaching. It is a reason not to treat a brand name as a proof. Copy ratings honestly when programs are named later in this book.

Correct a wrong sound without crushing the attempt. “I hear /p/ at the end. Let’s look at the last letter.” Then wait. “Never correct the child” is not this book’s rule.

³⁸What Works Clearinghouse, *Orton-Gillingham-based Strategies* (Students with Learning Disabilities protocol), July 2010: no studies meet WWC group design standards; unable to draw conclusions. Labelled school/vendor-adjacent evidence cupboard — not a kitchen RCT.

Tools, including AI

Optional helpers for you, the adult. The full rules live in the English-hour box in the front of this book. This chapter is a pointer, not a second policy paper.

The short version: the child says sounds and builds words first. You hold the tiles and the question. A tool may explain today's pattern *to you*, suggest extra isomorphic words you then vet (answer key held by you), write a short script for *you* to say after the child has tried, offer a hint after an attempt, or help you diagnose a word the child already built. The child looks at letters. The child talks in the room.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as the child's partner. Ages 8–10: still parent in the room. Unaided first. SCRIPT after the try.

Leave these out of the hour: paste the worksheet for the tool to complete; photo-to-key; unsupervised chatbot during the attempt; invent which letters are on the page; rewrite the passage so the child does not decode; a certificate of phonics; a voice-clone teacher. Look. You hold the account.

A language model will happily invent that the word was *ship* when the page said *shop*. Treat every model-supplied letter as untrusted until it lives on the table. In a high-school math study, an unguarded chatbot made practice look better and left students worse when the window was closed. That paper is not a 5–10 literacy trial. The crutch is still the sitting condition.³⁹ If the tool builds the word, the child is a spectator.

Tiles, sticky notes, and a store label are tools too. Use them, then fade them.

What “done enough” looks like

Placement is by skill, not birthday. A “grade 2 phonics workbook” is a publisher's scope, not a legal grade, and not a transcript line. Fridge magnets, store labels, and table tiles can place the same child differently. Choose by fit. The record, when you need one, is a dated notebook, the pattern named, plus an exit ticket, plus one diagnostic item. The title a stranger can read is Reading, or Language Arts, or English. It is not a curriculum brand. It is not Little Thinkers English I.

³⁹Bastani et al., “Generative AI without Guardrails Can Harm Learning,” *PNAS* 122, no. 26 (2025). High-school mathematics trial; not a 5–10 literacy RCT. Sitting condition used here.

Checklist before moving on

- You can hear letter-name offered as sound, and you can separate them in one plain line.
- You can hear a first-letter grab, and you can ask for the last sound and its letter.
- The child can link today's taught sound–spellings to letters most of the time.
- The child can blend a small set of words using those links, left to right.
- The child can write at least one taught word from dictation.
- Encoding has happened beside decoding — not a one-way street.
- At least one out-of-home letter or label try-it has happened.
- Sits can be short. You did not require an alphabet performance as the proof.
- You can hear /k/ /a/ /p/ for *cat*, and you can ask a good question, without taking the tile.

If most of that list is true, go on to blending and connected reading, even if the birthday says otherwise. If the birthday says “third grade” and CVC still collapses, stay. The next chapter asks them to say it slowly, then fast — and whether that matched the letters. It needs sound–letter links that hold.

A path through elementary English is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not.

Chapter 3

Blending and connected reading

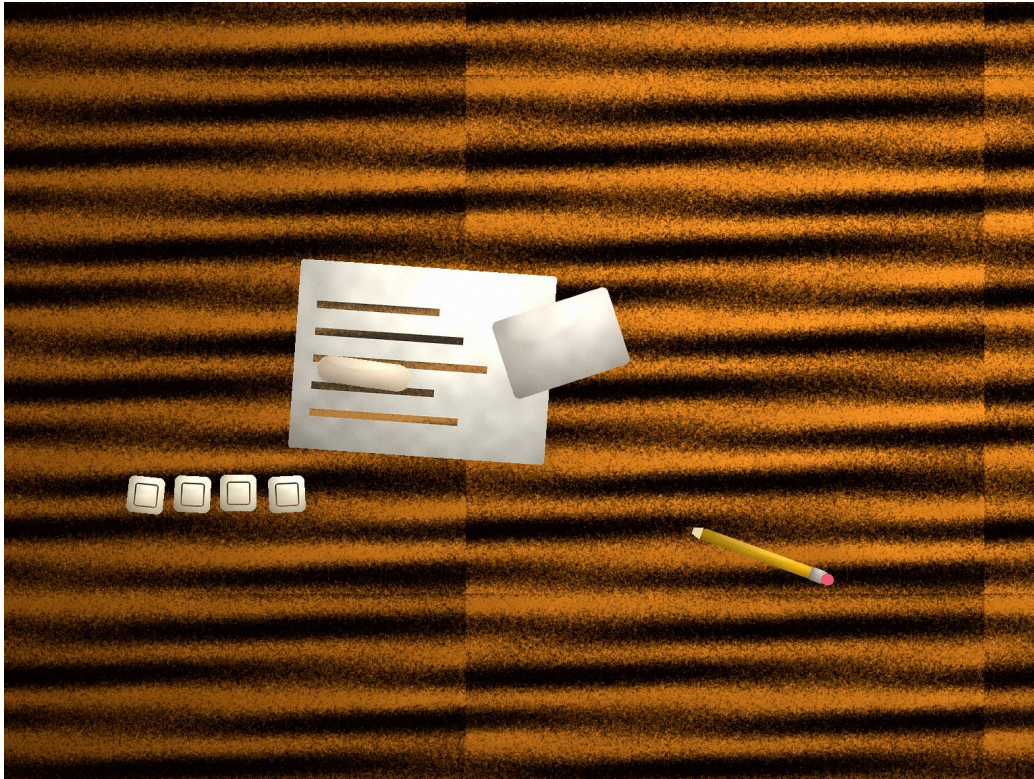


Figure 5: A kitchen-table still-life from a high three-quarter view: a short unmarked decodable page open flat, a finger-shaped silhouette of paper pointing under the first word, letter tiles set aside, a napkin half-covering a picture corner. No people. No logos. No readable brand on the page.

Why this matters

Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?

That is not a tongue-twister game for its own sake. It is not a test of whether the child can recite a word list. It is a question about letters in order on a page — *s-i-p*, *sh-i-p*, a three-sentence crumb — and about whether the slow sounds assemble into a word that actually matches what is written.

Blending is saying sounds in order and assembling a pronunciation that maps to the letters. Connected reading is using that move in real lines of text, every day, with a finger under the words and feedback when a guess appears. The Institute of Education Sciences foundational-skills guide puts decoding and word work as Recommendation 3 (strong evidence) and daily connected text for accuracy, fluency, and comprehension as Recommendation 4 (moderate evidence, twenty-two studies).⁴⁰ The National Reading Panel wanted phonics applied in daily reading and writing — not parked on cards forever.⁴¹

What this idea unlocks is reading as reading. Sound–letter links from the previous chapter stay laboratory tricks until they travel into a sentence. Fluency in the next chapter needs connected text that is already accurate. Vocabulary and story sense need print the child can actually access — or rich read-alouds above their independent level while the code is still growing. If “reading” still means looking at the picture and guessing from the first letter, later pages arrive as a performance of looking clever.

Two refusals belong in the same sitting as the invitation.

Three-cueing — guessing a word from meaning, sentence structure, and a letter or two — is not the method of identifying words. Meaning and structure matter for *comprehension*. They are not a substitute for decoding.⁴² Cover the picture if the child is guessing. Point under the letters. Blend left to right.

⁴⁰Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (NCEE 2016-4008), 2016 (revised 2019). Recommendation 3 strong; Recommendation 4 moderate (22 studies), connected text daily for accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. This is a useful study, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁴¹National Reading Panel (2000), phonics: systematic phonics applied in daily reading and writing; not cards alone as the program.

⁴²Foorman et al. (2016), Recommendation 3 how-to: blend left to right; read and spell decodable words; recognize regular high-frequency words by decoding, not only by guessing. Meaning and structure support comprehension; they do not replace decoding for word identification.

Decodable text is a *practice condition*: connected print written so a high proportion of words can be read with sound–spellings already taught, plus a few taught irregulars. Leveled text is a *difficulty ladder*: books sequenced by a publisher’s or assessment’s levels, often with supportive pictures. Different tools. A What Works Clearinghouse report on Leveled Literacy Intervention found positive effects on general reading achievement, potentially positive effects on fluency, and **no discernible effects on alphabetics** in the studies reviewed.⁴³ Sound Partners, a phonics tutoring program reviewed by the same Clearinghouse family of reports, showed positive effects on alphabetics.⁴⁴ Do not mash them. Do not ban leveled books forever. Do not crown a leveled ladder as proof the code was taught. Do not trap a fluent decoder in baby decodables out of ideology. While the child is learning a pattern, practice that pattern in decodable or controllable text; also read aloud richer books for language. When accuracy on today’s patterns holds, widen the diet.

You do not need to be a reading specialist. You do need to hear a picture guess offered as word reading, and to ask for the letters, without finishing the word.

This week you can learn to hear picture guess, first-letter grab, and “my leveled level proves phonics” as three different misses. Today the child can blend one short word slow-then-fast and read one short connected crumb with a finger under the words.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults were taught to “use the picture” as a word-solving tip. That tip can help a conversation about what a page *means*. It becomes a problem when it replaces looking at the letters. Five minutes of this section, then the warm-up, is enough for tomorrow. The child still blends.

Everyday picture. The word *ship* under a drawing of a boat. A child says *boat* without looking through *s-h-i-p*. The meaning was nearby. The letters were ig-

⁴³What Works Clearinghouse, *Leveled Literacy Intervention* (Beginning Reading), September 2017. Positive effects on general reading achievement; potentially positive on fluency; no discernible effects on alphabetics (K–2 studies meeting standards). School context; vendor product. Honesty card for alphabetics — not a ban on all leveled books.

⁴⁴What Works Clearinghouse, *Sound Partners* (Beginning Reading intervention report). Positive effects on alphabetics, fluency, and comprehension; no discernible effects on general reading achievement. School/supplemental tutoring context; different object from LLI.

nored. Cover the boat with a napkin. Point under *sh*, *i*, *p*. Say it slowly. Say it fast. Does it match the letters? Another ordinary picture: a bookshelf organized by colored levels. The colors are a ladder. They are not a phonics report card.

Precise picture. Three ideas sit under “blending and connected reading,” and they are not the same.

Blending left to right. Each sound in order. Continuous blending helps when chopping stalls (/ssshiiip/ → *ship*). Synthetic and analytic approaches both worked in the Panel’s comparison; you do not need a branded hand-signal kit.⁴⁵ The check is whether the spoken word matches the letters — then whether it makes sense in the sentence.

Connected text daily. Oral reading with modelling and feedback. Text the child can read with high accuracy while building up. Finger under the words. A three-sentence crumb counts. A page counts. Silent staring at a book the child cannot decode does not count as this week’s decoding practice.

Decodable vs leveled honesty. Decodable = practice condition for today’s code. Leveled = difficulty ladder. Use decodable (or highly controllable) text to practice the pattern just taught. Use read-alouds — and later, wider books — for language and knowledge. Recommendation 1’s academic language still sits beside Recommendations 3 and 4; code and meaning belong together.⁴⁶

Write on a scrap: slow → fast → match the letters → sense in the sentence. Circle *match the letters*. That is the hinge before fluency games.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *Picture guess.* They say *boat* for *ship* because of the drawing. Hear the guess. Cover the picture. “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?”
2. *First-letter grab.* They see *s* and say *sail* or *sea*. Hear the grab. Point under each letter. Ask what the last letters say.
3. *Sounds out of order.* They reorder or skip. Hear the scramble. Move a finger left to right. Tiles in order, then the page.

⁴⁵National Reading Panel (2000), phonics approaches: systematic instruction; synthetic and analytic both appeared beneficial in the Panel’s review.

⁴⁶Foorman et al. (2016), Recommendation 1 (academic language, minimal) beside Recommendations 3–4; code and meaning together.

4. “We’re on level H — so *phonics is done*.” A ladder offered as code proof. Hear the category error. Ask whether today’s sound–spellings were taught and practiced. The LLI alphabetics split is the honesty card, not a ban on the shelf.⁴⁷
5. *Refusing all rich read-alouds during code learning — or trapping a fluent decoder in baby decodables forever*. Both exclusives are wrong. Hear the ideology. Keep a crumb of controllable text *and* a richer read-aloud in the week.

A sixth you will also hear: they blend the word correctly in isolation and guess again when the same word sits under a strong picture. The habit returned with the picture. Cover it again. The letters still win for word identification.

Five-minute parent warm-up

Do this before the lesson, with a short word and a napkin, no child in the room.

Minute 1. Write *ship*. Cover any picture. Blend /sh/ /i/ /p/, then *ship*. Check the letters.

Minute 2. Imagine saying *boat* because a drawing suggested it. Feel the miss. Decide what “look at the letters” does that a scold does not.

Minute 3. Read three short sentences that use known patterns, finger under each word. That is the connected crumb.

Minute 4. Say out loud: decodable is practice condition; leveled is ladder. Feel the difference so you can hear a ladder offered as phonics proof tomorrow.

Minute 5. Write the sentence you will actually say: “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?” Put the pencil down. That sentence is the lesson.

If you can do those five minutes, you are ready to sit down. The child blends. You hear.

How to teach it this week

A good English hour this week has a shape. The English-hour chapter in the front of this book is the full version. Here is the shape scaled to blending into connected

⁴⁷WWC LLI (2017), alphabetics rating as in note 43.

text.

Warm-up (2–3 minutes, unaided). Two or three known words in isolation — already accurate. Blend slow-then-fast once each. No new pattern buried in the warm-up.

Short model (3–5 minutes). One word on a whiteboard or tiles. You blend left to right. You say it fast. You check the letters. You read one sentence that uses it, finger under the words. You stop. You are showing the match, not delivering a lecture titled *Decodable Text*.

Student attempt (8–15 minutes). Three to six words, then a short connected crumb (a few sentences or a short page) that uses taught patterns. Finger under the words. You wait. Struggle before rescue: ask, wait, hint (“point under each”), cover the picture, then model one word on *your* turn, hand back the next sentence.

One good question, then wait. “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?” Not “what does the picture tell you?” as the word-reading question. After you ask, a slow three. After they stop, wait again. Look at the letters, not at the child, if the silence is hard.

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes). Yesterday’s pattern in a new sentence next to today’s. One word in isolation next to the same word in a sentence. Mixing is how the child learns that blending travels. Forty identical lines of the same sentence is not the mix.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes). Blend two words slow-then-fast. Read one or two sentences with finger under. Note one miss for tomorrow — picture guess, final sound, or irregular. Done-enough is accuracy we can build on, not speed.

Keep a richer read-aloud in the week even when the focus is blending. Five to fifteen minutes of adult reading above independent level feeds language while the code grows. Assisted oral reading of controllable text is this chapter’s main child-reading object.

Exact wording you can say

“Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?”

“Point under each letter as you say its sound.”

“Cover the picture — try again.”

“What word did you land on — does it make sense in the sentence?”

“Finger under the words.”

“You may change your mind.”

When they guess:

“I hear a guess from the picture. Let’s look at the letters.”

When you are about to finish the word:

“Your mouth. I’ll wait.”

Then wait.

Age-band moves: 5–7 / 8–10

5–7. Blend CVC and taught digraph words slow-then-fast. Read short decodable crumbs with high accuracy. Finger under every word at first; fade as tracking holds. Cover pictures when guessing appears. Keep adult read-alouds rich. Skip words outside today’s code on store signs without shame. Irregulars taught as needed for the crumb.

8–10. Same moves into longer sentences and multisyllabic words that use taught syllable and morphology patterns. Connected text daily still matters. If picture-guessing returns on harder books, return to finger-under and letter check — birthday does not retire the move. Do not keep an accurate, fluent decoder only in baby decodables; widen with books they can read accurately, and keep read-alouds for stretch language. If an eight-year-old still guesses from pictures on CVC crumbs, they are still in the 5–7 band of this chapter.

Not a stable skill at either band: picture-as-word-reading; leveled ladder as phonics proof; only-decodable-forever ideology; only-leveled-forever ideology; silent “reading” of text they cannot decode as the decoding practice. Same faculty. Different grain.

First try-it for the student

A three-sentence crumb using known patterns, picture covered or absent:

Say: “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?”

Wait on the first sticky word. If they guess from memory of a picture, cover it. If they grab the first letter, point through the word. Then read the sentence again with finger under.

Later the same week, the diagnostic item:

the same word under a strong picture.

If *boat* returns for *ship*, the habit is picture-led. Napkin on the picture. Letters first for identification.

How to fade help. First sitting: you blend, they echo, you read a sentence together. Second: they blend; you wait; you hint (“under each letter”). Third: they read a short crumb with brief feedback only on misses. Fourth: a recipe step or street sign within today’s code, then a library book chosen for high accuracy. The word *decodable*, if it arrives at all, arrives after the crumb.

When to stop talking. When you hear yourself saying the word for them. When the sit has become a lecture titled *Why Pictures Are Bad* — pictures are fine for meaning; they are not the decoder. When you have corrected every word before they finished the sentence. One good question beats five. Stop while they still have a line left in them.

Practice that actually builds learning

Blocked, for a new move. The day you introduce slow-then-fast blending, give a short set of isolation words only. The day you introduce cover-the-picture, only words that sit under strong drawings. Mixing too early makes the child hunt for the school move instead of looking at the letters.

Mixed, for when to use it. Later the same week, isolation blend next to sentence reading next to one store label. Mixing is the practice of choosing: blend, check letters, check sense.

One incorrect example to diagnose. Picture guess offered as word reading. Or: “we’re on level G, so we’re doing phonics.” Hear the guess. Hear the ladder-as-proof. The repair is a better question, then the letters, then — if needed — a named fact: “Pictures help meaning. Letters tell us the word.” Silence in the face of a guessing habit is not kindness.

These are illustrations, not reported families.

Named try-it: Finger-under crumb (in-home)

Time. Eight to twelve minutes.

Materials. A three-to-six-sentence decodable crumb or controllable sentences using taught patterns; finger or a clean pointer; napkin for pictures.

Safety. Ordinary table. No shame if the crumb looks “babyish” — practice conditions are temporary tools.

The fun. Getting to the end of a real page of words. Being the person who checks the letters.

The skill. Blending in connected text. Accuracy before speed. Foorman Rec 4’s daily connected reading grain.

Say: “Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?” Finger under each word. Feedback: say the missed word once, child rereads the sentence. Five-to-seven: shorter crumb. Eight-to-ten: longer paragraph of controllable text, same rules.

Named try-it: Cover-the-picture blend check (in-home)

Time. Five to eight minutes.

Materials. One page with a strong picture; napkin or sticky note; the target word visible.

Safety. Ordinary. Do not rip library books — use a sticky that comes off, or a photocopy of a practice page you own.

The fun. The tiny surprise when the word under the boat is not *boat*.

The skill. Refuse picture-as-decoder. Match speech to letters.

Uncover after they blend. Ask whether picture and word agree. If they guessed first, name it kindly and try again with the napkin on. Recipe cards work the same way: read the step that uses known patterns before the photo of the finished dish does the work.

Named try-it: Street-sign or store-label sound-out (out-of-home)

Time. Two to five minutes inside an outing you were taking anyway.

Materials. One sign or label within today's code.

Safety. Roads. Aisle courtesy. No public quiz of strangers. No shoplifting a test. A sign is print — not a sermon about the city.

The fun. Reading the world.

The skill. Blend slow-then-fast on real print. Skip outside-code words without shame.

Say: "Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?" If the sign is only partly in reach, take the taught chunk and move on. Five-to-seven: one word. Eight-to-ten: a short phrase on a flyer if accuracy holds.

Named try-it: Library choose-for-accuracy (out-of-home)

Time. Ten to twenty minutes.

Materials. Library shelf; a short book the child can decode with at most about two errors on a sample page (a practical home rule of thumb, not a WWC threshold).

Safety. Ordinary library. If a display is a live fight, walk to a different bay. Borrowing is the canon.

The fun. Choosing. Being allowed to say "this one is too hard to practice decoding today" without failure vibes — that book can be a read-aloud instead.

The skill. Match practice text to accuracy. Decodable or controllable practice $\neq$ forever ban on other books.

Sample a page. If guessing and errors pile up, choose a simpler practice book *and* borrow a richer one for you to read aloud. The library hour is motivation. The accuracy check still happens.⁴⁸

⁴⁸NCES homeschool library-use patterns (NCES 2020-001; NCES 2024-113): library visits and books as ordinary family practice — orientation, not a program effect size.

Blocked / mixed, in this week. Monday: isolation slow-then-fast only. Tuesday: finger-under crumb. Wednesday: cover-the-picture check. Thursday: street sign. Friday: library accuracy choose, plus one diagnostic picture guess.

Talk box

This is an illustration, not a reported family. A short page is on the table. The parent has not announced a definition.

Opening question

“Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?”

Not: “What do you think the word is from the picture?”

Follow-ups (pick three to five; you will not use all of them every sitting)

1. Point under each letter. What word did you land on?
2. Show me with tiles, then with your finger under the word on the page.
3. Does it make sense in the sentence?
4. Cover the picture — try again. Does that match the letters?
5. You may change your mind. Try it another way.

How to wait

Ask. Count a slow three. Look at the letters or the finger-track, not at the child's face, if the silence is hard. After they stop, wait again. If they are mid-blend or mid-sentence, do not cut them off. A follow-up in half a second trains them to wait *you* out, not to assemble the word. Three seconds is a convention, not a sacrament — Stahl's think-time; Rowe's windows were science class. Use the pause.

What a stuck silence usually means

They are hunting a picture cue. Or wait-time was zero. Or the word is outside today's code. Or they grabbed the first letter. Or they think reading means guess what the adult wants. Or they blended correctly and distrust the answer because the picture disagrees. Next move: napkin on the picture, fewer words, wait, point under. “What's the middle sound?” is a hint. Saying *ship* for them is the grab. Done enough this week: “I said it slowly, then fast. It matched the letters. Then I read the sentence.”

For the student

This page is for you.

Say it slowly, then say it fast — did that match the letters?

Reading a word means looking at the letters in order. You say each sound. Then you say the word fast. Then you check: did that match what is written?

Pictures are interesting. Pictures can help you think about what a page *means*. Pictures are not how you decide what the word *says*. If a boat is in the picture and the letters are *s-h-i-p*, the word is *ship*.

You can put your finger under each word when you read a short page. That keeps you honest. If you get stuck, go slow, then fast, then check the letters.

A tiny worked example

Letters: *s h i p*.

You say slowly: /sh/ ... /i/ ... /p/.

You say fast: *ship*.

You check: those letters make *ship*. Yes.

In a sentence: “The ship is big.” Finger under each word. If you said *boat*, you look again. You may change your mind. That is not losing.

Two tries

1. At home. Read a short crumb with your finger under the words. Cover a picture once on purpose and blend the sticky word. Write nothing if writing fights the sitting.
2. On a walk, at the store, or at the library. Sound out one sign or choose a short book you can read with only a couple of sticky words on a page. If a book is too hard for you to decode today, ask a grown-up to read it aloud — that still counts as English time.

Explain it back

Tell someone how slow-then-fast works. Show a word you blended. Say what you do when a picture tempts a guess. Say how you know a practice book is a good fit today.

Challenge

Someone says the level color on a sticker means they finished phonics. What might still be missing? Someone always looks at the picture first to name the word. What should they try instead?

You are allowed to struggle. You may use a finger, a napkin, tiles, a short page. You look at the letters. You talk the sounds. If you get stuck, ask for a hint — not the finished word. Then try again.

Today you blend one word slow-then-fast, you check the letters, and you read a short connected crumb. You do not have to finish a long chapter book to be doing real reading work.

A page a computer rewrote so you would not have to decode is a scene. It is interesting. It is not your reading.

If it isn't clicking

Three diagnostics. Each one has a next move. None of them is a verdict on talent, and none of them is a reason to wait for a birthday.

1. Picture guess or first-letter grab is still the default word-reading move.

They say *boat* for *ship*, or *sail* from *s*. Next move: napkin on pictures; finger under letters; isolation blend before the sentence; shorter crumbs. Stay here if guessing still owns connected reading after several weeks of short daily sits. Fluency next chapter will not heal a guessing habit — it can freeze it in place if you add speed too soon. A human who will wait for the blend, not a voice that supplies the word, is a reasonable next step if the hour has become a fight.

2. Isolation blending works; connected text falls apart.

Tracking, memory, or irregulars in the crumb are the bottleneck — or the text is outside today's code. Next move: even shorter crumbs; pre-teach one irregular; point under every word; reread the same three sentences. Check whether sound-letter links from Chapter 2 still hold. Go ahead once they can blend taught words and read a short crumb with high accuracy and brief feedback. A tutor is useful if connected reading remains chaotic after a couple of weeks of daily crumbs *and* the hour has become a fight.

3. The diet is only baby decodables long after accuracy, or only leveled books with no code practice.

Ideology is doing the scheduling. Next move: name the week's purpose. If the purpose is practicing a new pattern, use controllable text. If the purpose is language and knowledge, read aloud richer books. If the child can decode accurately, widen independent reading. If alphabets are the goal, do not crown a ladder that showed no discernible alphabets in the reviewed LLI studies as the code program.⁴⁹ If silence after "did that match the letters?" is a wall, shorten the sit and use the talk-box opening once. If you hear yourself finishing every word, you have started doing the work.

When to slow down. Guessing still the default. Crumbs still far outside the code. Sits so long that blending never starts. Speed talk before accuracy. Those are brakes. "Not ready" because of age is the brake this book will not use. "Not ready" because letters still lose to pictures is a real brake. A color level is not a reason to skip the napkin.

When to go ahead. The child can blend taught words slow-then-fast and check the letters. They can read a short connected crumb with high accuracy. Picture guessing has been interrupted and replaced at least some of the time. At least one out-of-home print try-it has happened. Short sits are ordinary. Then fluency after accuracy has somewhere to sit. Being "on a high level" because pictures carry the book is not a reason to skip blending.

When to get a human tutor. You have run the crumb, or the cover-the-picture check, or the wait after the question, for a stretch of daily sittings, and the same diagnosis is still the one in the room, and the hour has become a fight. A tutor is a release valve, not a failure of the sitting. Keep yourself as the person who can still hear a picture guess. Outsourcing the hearing is the thing to avoid, not asking for help.

Correct a wrong word without crushing the attempt. "I hear *boat*. Let's look at these letters." Then blend. "Never correct the child" is not this book's rule.

⁴⁹WWC LLI (2017), no discernible alphabets — use when alphabets is the week's goal.

Tools, including AI

Optional helpers for you, the adult. The full rules live in the English-hour box in the front of this book. This chapter is a pointer, not a second policy paper.

The short version: the child blends and reads first. You hold the page and the question. A tool may explain today's idea *to you*, suggest extra isomorphic sentences you then vet, write a short script for *you* to say after the child has tried, offer a hint after an attempt, or help you diagnose a crumb the child already read. The child looks at letters. The child talks in the room.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as the child's partner. Ages 8–10: still parent in the room. Unaided first. SCRIPT after the try.

Leave these out of the hour: rewrite-on-demand of the passage so the child does not decode; photo-to-key; paste the worksheet; unsupervised chatbot during the attempt; invent what letters are on the page; a certificate of decoding; a voice-clone teacher. Look. You hold the account.

A language model will happily tell you the word was *boat*. Treat every model-supplied reading as untrusted until it lives under the child's finger. In a high-school math study, an unguarded chatbot made practice look better and left students worse when the window was closed. That paper is not a 5–10 literacy trial.⁵⁰ If the tool finishes the word, the child is a spectator.

A napkin, a finger, and a short page are tools too. Use them, then fade them.

What “done enough” looks like

Placement is by skill, not birthday. A “grade 2 reader” label is a publisher's scope, not a legal grade, and not a transcript line. A crumb, a street sign, and a library sample page can place the same child differently. Choose by fit. The record, when you need one, is a dated notebook, the text named, plus an exit ticket, plus one diagnostic miss. The title a stranger can read is Reading, or Language Arts, or English. It is not a level color. It is not Little Thinkers English I.

Checklist before moving on

⁵⁰Bastani et al., *PNAS* 122, no. 26 (2025). High-school mathematics; not a 5–10 literacy RCT.

- You can hear a picture guess offered as word reading, and you can ask for the letters.
- You can hear a leveled ladder offered as phonics proof, and you can separate practice condition from difficulty ladder.
- The child can blend taught words slow-then-fast and check whether speech matches letters.
- The child can read a short connected crumb with high accuracy and finger-under tracking as needed.
- Feedback on misses has happened without you taking over the whole page.
- Richer read-alouds have continued beside code practice — not either/or forever.
- At least one out-of-home print try-it has happened.
- Sits can be short. You did not require a long novel as the proof.
- You can refuse three-cueing as word reading in one plain move: cover, point, blend.

If most of that list is true, go on to fluency after accuracy, even if the birthday says otherwise. If the birthday says “fluent” and guessing still owns the page, stay. The next chapter asks which words they already know for sure — and where to slow down. It needs accuracy first.

A path through elementary English is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not.

A note on “how decodable” as a percentage: the National Reading Panel did not isolate a magic decodable percentage as its own causal factor, and later secondary discussions of percentage bands are not required for your kitchen rule of thumb.⁵¹ You need text the child can read with taught patterns at high accuracy while practicing. You do not need a legal number printed on a box.

When siblings share the hour, the younger may read the controllable crumb while the older partner-reads a harder page they can still decode accurately — or the older reads aloud a stretch for language while the younger tracks with a finger on

⁵¹Timothy Shanahan, discussions of NRP and decodability (including Shanahan on Literacy readings of the Panel): decodable percentage was not isolated as a separate causal factor in the Panel’s work; Jenkins et al. 2004 is often cited in secondary literature for equivalence across decodability bands — full PDF not required for the kitchen rule of thumb used in this chapter. Do not invent a “70% decodable” legal number.

a simpler line. Same opening question. Different grain. Not two species of child.

Chapter 4

Fluency after accuracy



Figure 6: A kitchen-table still-life from a high three-quarter view: an open short page with no readable branding, a small kitchen timer set to the side and not touching the page, a pencil, a dated notebook with a blank line. No people. No logos.

Why this matters

Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?

That is not a stopwatch challenge. It is not a test of how many words per minute a child can perform under pressure. It is a question about a short passage the child can already read accurately — which words are solid, which word still sticks — and about whether rereading with feedback can make the reading sound more like talking, in service of meaning.

Fluency is accurate, appropriately paced, expressive reading that helps comprehension. The National Reading Panel found that guided repeated oral reading with feedback had a significant positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. Programs that mainly encouraged large amounts of independent silent reading with minimal guidance did not meet the Panel's bar for causal evidence as fluency interventions — especially before alphabetic and word-reading skills are in place.⁵² Correlation (better readers read more) is not the home program.

The Institute of Education Sciences foundational-skills guide's Recommendation 4 wants connected text every day with modelling, scaffolding, and feedback — accuracy and fluency so comprehension can happen. The evidence tier is moderate.⁵³ Order matters: sounds and letters; decoding; daily connected text with feedback; as accuracy stabilizes, rate and expression improve. Leading with a stopwatch for a guessing reader trains guessing. Timing, if used at all, is brief and only on already-accurate material — never the identity of being a good reader.

What this idea unlocks is reading that can carry meaning without burning all the child's attention on each word. Vocabulary and story sense in later chapters need bandwidth. Writing needs a reader who can hear how sentences sound. If “fluency” still means a race, later pages arrive as anxiety with a timer.

Two refusals belong in the same sitting as the invitation.

⁵²National Reading Panel (2000), fluency: guided repeated oral reading with feedback — positive impact on word recognition, fluency, and comprehension; independent silent reading with minimal guidance — Panel unable to find a positive causal relationship for such programs as achievement interventions; silent reading not effective as the *only* fluency instruction before alphabetic and word-reading skills are in place. This is a useful body of evidence, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁵³Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills* (NCEE 2016-4008), Recommendation 4, moderate evidence: connected text every day; modelling; feedback; high accuracy while building fluency.

Stopwatch-first fluency is the wrong first move. Theatrical “expression” that ignores accuracy is the other wrong move. Independent silent reading alone is not the fluency program for a child who cannot yet decode well. Rereading a known page with feedback is the object. Words-per-minute charts and commercial listening apps may become progress checks later; they are not the soul of this week. Analogy to timed math facts after accuracy is pedagogical only — do not cross-wire those citations as a literacy trial.⁵⁴

You do not need to be a reading specialist. You do need to pick a passage that is already accurate before any timing thought, and to ask where to slow down, without grabbing the page.

This week you can learn to hear timing-a-guessing-reader, WPM-as-identity, and SSR-alone-before-decoding as three different misses. Today the child can reread one short page with feedback and name one sticky word.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults remember timed reading as the main fluency memory from school. That memory is incomplete. Accuracy, rate, and expression work together — and accuracy comes first. Five minutes of this section, then the warm-up, is enough for tomorrow. The child still reads aloud.

Everyday picture. A short paragraph the child decoded yesterday with only one sticky word. You read it once, smooth and ordinary — not theatrical. They read it aloud. You note the sticky word, look at the letters together, they reread the sentence. Tomorrow they read the same paragraph again. It sounds more like talking. A timer sits in a drawer. Another ordinary picture: a child guessing through a hard page while someone calls time. Speed rose. Reading did not.

Precise picture. Three ideas sit under “fluency after accuracy,” and they are not the same.

Accuracy first. Choose text the child can already read with a high degree of accuracy — Foorman Rec 4’s condition while fluency builds.⁵⁵ If they are guessing,

⁵⁴There is no IES “timed reading Recommendation 6” clone in the foundational-skills or writing guides opened for this book. Do not invent one. Do not mash mathematics timed-facts recommendations as a literacy RCT.

⁵⁵Foorman et al. (2016), Recommendation 4 how-to: text students can read with a high degree

return to Chapters 2–3. Fluency practice on inaccurate reading practices the wrong thing.

Guided repeated oral reading with feedback. Adult models once. Child reads aloud. Brief feedback on missed words (say the word; child rereads the sentence). Optional: same passage tomorrow. That is the NRP object — not a race, not silent minutes alone as the intervention.

Expression in service of meaning. Does it sound like talking? Does the voice match what the sentence means? Expression without accuracy is a performance. Accuracy without any phrasing can still be a stage — then nudge toward natural speech on the second read.

Common Core fluency stems on the U.S. map put accuracy before rate in the word-reading parents often see on report cards; treat that as orientation, not a homeschool statute.⁵⁶

Write on a scrap: accurate → reread with feedback → sound like talking. Circle *accurate*. That is the hinge.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *Timing a guessing reader.* Errors and picture guesses under a stopwatch. Hear the category error. Put the timer away. Fix accuracy first.
2. *WPM as identity.* “I’m a 90” or “I’m slow.” Hear the label. Ask which words were sure and which were sticky. The person is not a number.
3. *SSR-alone as the fluency program before decoding holds.* “Just read more by yourself.” Hear the NRP caution. Add guided oral reading with feedback; keep wide reading as motivation when it does not replace teaching.
4. *Theatrical expression that sails past wrong words.* Hear the performance. Stop. Fix the word. Then reread the sentence with meaning.
5. *Skipping rereads because “we already did that page.”* Hear the impatience. Repeated reading *is* the practice. New book every minute is not always kinder.

of accuracy as they build fluency.

⁵⁶Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (2010), Reading Foundations fluency stems — accuracy, appropriate rate, expression — used as a map, not a homeschool statute.

A sixth you will also hear: they are accurate and slow, and someone starts a speed game before the second calm reread. Slow accurate is information. Add rereads and modelling first; only later, if at all, a brief timing check on the same accurate passage.

Five-minute parent warm-up

Do this before the lesson, with a short familiar paragraph, no child in the room.

Minute 1. Read the paragraph aloud yourself, smooth and ordinary. Feel “model,” not “perform.”

Minute 2. Mark one word that might stick for your child. Decide the feedback: say the word, they reread the sentence — not a lecture.

Minute 3. Imagine starting a timer while they guess. Decide what “Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?” does instead.

Minute 4. Put any timer to the side of the table in your mind — present as optional later, not hovering on the page.

Minute 5. Write the sentence you will actually say: “Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?” Put the pencil down. That sentence is the lesson.

If you can do those five minutes, you are ready to sit down. The child reads. You hear.

How to teach it this week

A good English hour this week has a shape. The English-hour chapter in the front of this book is the full version. Here is the shape scaled to fluency after accuracy.

Warm-up (2–3 minutes, unaided). Two or three words from yesterday’s sticky list, read accurately in isolation. Already-right material. No new hard book as the warm-up.

Short model (2–4 minutes). You read today’s short passage once, smooth and expressive enough to sound like talking — not a stage play. You stop. You are showing the target sound of the reading, not delivering a lecture titled *Prosody*.

Student attempt (8–15 minutes). Child reads the same passage aloud. You listen

for accuracy first. Brief feedback on misses. Child rereads the sentence or the passage. Struggle before rescue: ask where to slow down, wait, hint (“look at the letters on that word”), then supply the word if needed and have them reread — do not turn the sit into you reading the whole page.

One good question, then wait. “Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?” Not “how fast can you go?” After you ask, a slow three. After they stop, wait again. Look at the page, not at the child, if the silence is hard.

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes). Yesterday’s paragraph next to today’s. Partner read with a sibling on a known page. One sentence read for meaning (which word should get a little stress?). Mixing is how the child learns *when* to slow down. Forty timed trials is not the mix.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes). Reread one short known paragraph. Name one sticky word and show the letters. Optional: note whether the second read sounded more like talking. Done-enough is smoother accurate reading, not a personal-best WPM.

Keep phonics and decoding sits in the week if accuracy is still shaky. Fluency practice does not replace code teaching. Wide read-alouds continue for language.

Exact wording you can say

“Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?”

“Did that sound like talking?”

“Which word slowed you down — look at the letters.”

“Read this sentence again — smoother this time.”

“Does the expression match what the sentence means?”

“We’ll try the same page tomorrow.”

When they race and guess:

“Accuracy first. Timer away.”

When you are about to take over the page:

“Your voice. I’ll wait.”

Then wait.

Age-band moves: 5–7 / 8–10

5–7. Very short passages — a few sentences of controllable text already read accurately. Echo read (they echo your sentence). Partner read with you. Reread tomorrow. Name sticky words. Expression = sounds like talking, not drama class. No stopwatch identity. If they cannot yet decode the passage accurately, this chapter waits; return to blending.

8–10. Longer paragraphs and short pages they can already decode. Partner read with a sibling. Self-correction check: “Did that make sense — and did it match the letters?” Timed checks only after accuracy, brief, optional, never the lesson’s name. Keep multisyllabic decoding alive when sticky words are code problems, not “fluency” problems. A nine-year-old who guesses under a timer is still in the wrong chapter. A six-year-old who accurately rereads a short known page more smoothly is not “too young” for this grain.

Not a stable skill at either band: stopwatch-first; WPM-as-self; SSR-alone for weak decoders; skipping rereads; expression without accuracy. Same faculty. Different grain.

First try-it for the student

A short paragraph they already decoded yesterday, timer in another room:

Say: “Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?”

Wait. Let them point to sure words and sticky words. You model once. They read. Feedback on one sticky word. They reread that sentence.

Later the same week, the diagnostic item:

someone suggests timing a page they still guess through.

If speed talk arrives before accuracy, name it. Put the timer aside. Accuracy is still the gate.

How to fade help. First sitting: you model the whole passage; they echo sentence by sentence. Second: they read; you wait; you hint on sticky words. Third: they read with brief end feedback and one reread. Fourth: partner read with a sibling or read a known page to a grandparent on a call with you in the room. The word *fluency*, if it arrives at all, arrives after the second smooth read.

When to stop talking. When you hear yourself reading every other sentence. When the sit has become a lecture titled *What Prosody Is*. When a timer has become the audience. One good question beats five. Stop while they still have a reread left in them.

Practice that actually builds learning

Blocked, for a new move. The day you introduce “reread smoother,” use one short accurate passage only — same page twice. The day you introduce naming sticky words, only that inventory, no timing. Mixing too early makes the child hunt for the school move instead of looking at the page.

Mixed, for when to use it. Later the same week, sticky-word check next to echo read next to partner read. Mixing is the practice of choosing: slow down here, trust that word, reread for meaning.

One incorrect example to diagnose. Timing a guessing reader. Or: “I’m an 85” as the whole self. Hear the race. Hear the label. The repair is a better question, then an accurate page, then — if needed — a named fact: “We reread after words are right. Speed is not the name of the lesson.” Silence in the face of stopwatch-first is not kindness.

These are illustrations, not reported families.

Named try-it: Echo read one paragraph (in-home)

Time. Five to ten minutes.

Materials. One short paragraph already within accuracy; quiet room.

Safety. Ordinary. No recording for shame. No audience that turns the sit into a show unless the child wants a friendly listener.

The fun. Matching the grown-up’s smooth voice. Getting a second try.

The skill. Guided oral reading with a model. Accuracy then phrasing.

You read a sentence. They echo. Then they read the paragraph. Ask: “Which

words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?” Five-to-seven: two to four sentences. Eight-to-ten: a fuller paragraph.

Named try-it: Partner read and sticky-word list (in-home)

Time. Eight to twelve minutes.

Materials. Known page; scrap for two sticky words; sibling or parent as partner.

Safety. Sibling fairness. No mockery of sticky words. Soft voices if a napper is nearby.

The fun. Being partners. Crossing a sticky word off tomorrow when it becomes sure.

The skill. Feedback. Reread. Inventory of sure vs slow-down words.

Alternate sentences or paragraphs. After one pass: list sticky words; look at letters; reread those sentences. Optional tomorrow: same page, check the list.

Named try-it: Park-bench or grandparent reread (out-of-home)

Time. Five to fifteen minutes inside an outing or a call you were making anyway.

Materials. A short known page or familiar picture-book page the child can decode; phone for a grandparent call with parent in the room.

Safety. Roads. Stay together on a bench. Parent in the room on calls. No forcing performance for strangers on a bus. Ordinary courtesy.

The fun. A real listener. Showing that yesterday’s page got smoother.

The skill. Repeated oral reading for a real audience. Fluency in service of communication — not a WPM chart.

Say before they start: “Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?” Afterward: “Did that sound like talking?” Five-to-seven: very short. Eight-to-ten: a page. Library reread of a familiar book works the same

way — borrow what they can already handle for this practice, and borrow stretch books for you to read aloud.⁵⁷

Named try-it: Library familiar-book smoother pass (out-of-home)

Time. Ten to twenty minutes.

Materials. A familiar library book within accuracy for child reading; optional second book for adult read-aloud.

Safety. Ordinary library. Different bay if a display is a live fight.

The fun. Choosing a friend-book. Hearing yourself improve on page three.

The skill. Reread known text. Separate practice book from stretch read-aloud.

Sample a page for accuracy before calling it fluency practice. If guesses pile up, switch roles: you read, they discuss. Fluency practice waits for accuracy.

A worked week sketch — illustrative, not a calendar. Suppose the focus is rereading one accurate paragraph. Monday: model and echo. Tuesday: child reads; sticky-word list; reread sentences. Wednesday: partner read with a sibling on the same paragraph, then a new accurate paragraph of similar difficulty. Thursday: park-bench or grandparent call reread of Tuesday's page. Friday: compare Monday's feel to today's; decide whether next week keeps rereading this grain or returns to decoding because sticky words were mostly untaught patterns. That Friday decision is placement by skill. It is not a birthday rule.

When the English hour also needs a phonics sit, keep fluency short: five to eight minutes of guided oral reading on known text is enough beside code work. Fluency does not have to own the whole hour to be real. Recommendation 4's spirit is daily connected text with feedback — not an hour-long stopwatch clinic.⁵⁸

Blocked / mixed, in this week. Monday: echo read only. Tuesday: sticky-word inventory. Wednesday: partner read. Thursday: park bench or call reread. Friday:

⁵⁷NCES library-use patterns among homeschooling families (NCES 2020-001; NCES 2024-113); ordinary practice orientation.

⁵⁸Foorman et al. (2016), Recommendation 4 — daily connected text with modelling and feedback; home dose is honest and small beside other hour components.

same page as Monday — smoother? — and one diagnostic if someone reached for a timer too early.

Talk box

This is an illustration, not a reported family. A known page is on the table. A timer, if any, is not on the page.

Opening question

“Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?”

Not: “How many words per minute?”

Follow-ups (pick three to five; you will not use all of them every sitting)

1. Did that sound like talking?
2. Which word slowed you down — show me with your finger under the letters.
3. Read this sentence again — smoother this time. What type of sticky was it — new pattern, irregular, or attention slip?
4. Does the expression match what the sentence means? Let’s check.
5. You may change your mind about which words are sticky after a second read. Try it another way.

How to wait

Ask. Count a slow three. Look at the page, not at the child’s face, if the silence is hard. After they stop, wait again. If they are mid-sentence, do not cut them off to “help.” A follow-up in half a second trains them to wait *you* out, not to find the sticky word. Three seconds is a convention, not a sacrament — Stahl’s think-time; Rowe’s windows were science class. Use the pause.

What a stuck silence usually means

They think the job is speed. Or wait-time was zero. Or the passage was never accurate. Or they are guessing what WPM you want. Or a sticky word is outside today’s code and shame arrived. Or they think expression means funny voices. Next move: shorter accurate passage, timer away, wait, point under. “Look at the letters on that word” is a hint. Reading the page for them is the grab. Done enough this week: “I knew these words. I slowed on this one. I reread. It sounded more like talking.”

For the student

This page is for you.

Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?

Fluent reading means the words are right, the pace sounds like talking, and your voice helps the meaning. It does not mean winning a race.

First the words must be right. If you are guessing, slow down and look at the letters — or pick an easier page for practice. Then you read aloud. A grown-up may read it once first. You try. If a word sticks, you look at it, fix it, and read the sentence again. Tomorrow you can read the same page again. That is not cheating. That is practice.

A tiny worked example

A short paragraph about a cat on a mat — words you already know.

A grown-up reads it once, smooth.

You say: “I know *cat* and *mat* for sure. I should slow down on *stretch*.”

You read. You stick on *stretch*. You look at the letters. You try again. You reread the sentence.

The second time, it sounds more like talking. A timer was not the point.

If you and a grown-up disagree about a word, you look at the letters. You may change your mind. That is not losing.

Two tries

1. At home. Echo read one paragraph. Then name sure words and sticky words. Reread once.
2. On a bench, on a call with a grandparent (grown-up in the room), or at the library with a familiar book. Read a known page for a real listener. Ask yourself if it sounded like talking.

Write nothing if writing fights the sitting. Talk the sticky word. If writing is easy, write: “Sure words: . **Sticky:** . Second read felt ____.”

Explain it back

Tell someone what “fluency after accuracy” means in your own words. Show a page you reread. Say why a timer is not the first tool. Say what you do when a word sticks.

Challenge

Someone starts a stopwatch while you are still guessing words. What should happen first? Someone says their WPM number is who they are. What would you ask them instead — about sure words and sticky words?

You are allowed to struggle. You may use a known page, a partner, a second try. You read aloud. You look at sticky letters. If you get stuck, ask for a hint — not the whole page done for you. Then try again.

If a brother or sister reads faster than you, that does not decide your page. Your page is the one you can already read accurately. Sure words and sticky words are about *this* page, not about who is older.

Today you reread one short accurate page with feedback and name one sticky word. You do not have to beat a scoreboard. You do not have to call yourself fast. You are doing reader work.

A certificate of fluency from a machine is a scene. It is interesting. It is not your reading.

If it isn’t clicking

Three diagnostics. Each one has a next move. None of them is a verdict on talent, and none of them is a reason to wait for a birthday.

1. The child is being timed — or racing — while still guessing.

Stopwatch-first. Next move: timer away; return to accuracy work from Chapters 2–3; choose a shorter known passage; guided oral reading without speed talk. Stay here if guessing still owns the page. Fluency practice on inaccurate reading will not fix the code. A human who will wait for accuracy, not an app that only scores rate, is a reasonable next step if the hour has become a fight.

2. Accurate but stuck in word-by-word reading after many calm rereads.

Modelling and echo reading may be thin, or passages are too long, or attention is tired. Next move: shorter passages; you model; echo; partner read; same page

across two days; ask “did that sound like talking?” Check sticky words for untaught patterns — that is decoding, not laziness. Go ahead once a short known passage can be reread more smoothly with feedback. A tutor is useful if rereads never smooth after a couple of weeks of daily short accurate practice *and* the hour has become a fight.

3. SSR-alone, or theatrical expression, is doing the job of guided practice.

“Just read quietly” forever, or funny voices over wrong words. Next move: name the object — guided repeated oral reading with feedback. Keep silent reading as a later consolidation when accuracy is high, not as the only fluency instruction before decoding holds (NRP caution).⁵⁹ If silence after “where should we slow down?” is a wall, shorten the sit and use the talk-box opening once. If you hear yourself finishing the page, you have started doing the work. If the hour has become a fight, a human who will listen, not a chatbot that reads for them, is the release valve.

When to slow down. Guessing under time pressure. WPM labels as identity. Skipping rereads. Passages far outside accuracy. Those are brakes. “Not ready” because of age is the brake this book will not use. “Not ready” because accuracy has not stabilized is a real brake. A fluency app is not a reason to skip the model-and-reread.

When to go ahead. The child can read a short chosen passage accurately. Rereads with feedback have happened. They can name sure words and sticky words. At least one out-of-home or real-audience reread has happened. Short sits are ordinary. Then vocabulary and story-sense chapters have bandwidth to work with. Being “fast” on guesses is not a reason to skip accuracy.

When to get a human tutor. You have run the accurate passage, or the reread, or the wait after the question, for a stretch of daily sittings, and the same diagnosis is still the one in the room, and the hour has become a fight. A tutor is a release valve, not a failure of the sitting. Keep yourself as the person who can still hear stopwatch-first. Outsourcing the hearing is the thing to avoid, not asking for help.

Correct a wrong word without crushing the attempt. “I hear a guess. Let’s look at that word, then read the sentence again.” “Never correct the child” is not this

⁵⁹National Reading Panel (2000), fluency caution on SSR-alone as in note 52. The Panel did not find silent reading harmful — insufficient high-quality causal evidence for minimal-guidance programs as fluency interventions.

book's rule.

Tools, including AI

Optional helpers for you, the adult. The full rules live in the English-hour box in the front of this book. This chapter is a pointer, not a second policy paper.

The short version: the child reads aloud first. You hold the page and the question. A tool may explain today's idea *to you*, suggest an extra isomorphic paragraph you then vet for accuracy fit, write a short SCRIPT for *you* to say after the child has tried (including a parent read-aloud model script you voice), offer a hint after an attempt, or help you diagnose a recording or notes from a reading the child already did. The child looks at the page. The child talks in the room.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as the child's partner. Ages 8–10: still parent in the room. Unaided first. SCRIPT after the try.

Leave these out of the hour: unsupervised chatbot as reading partner; rewrite-on-demand so they do not decode; photo-to-key; voice-clone teacher; certificate of fluency; detector score; invent what the page said. Look. You hold the account. Oral-reading apps that claim to listen and intervene are design claims on vendor pages unless you open a study — keep them optional and never ahead of accuracy.⁶⁰

A language model will happily praise speed. Treat every model-supplied “you're fluent” as untrusted until it lives in an accurate reread you heard. In a high-school math study, an unguarded chatbot made practice look better and left students worse when the window was closed. That paper is not a 5–10 literacy trial.⁶¹ If the tool reads the page, the child is a spectator.

A known page, a partner, and a second try are tools too. Use them, then fade them.

What “done enough” looks like

Placement is by skill, not birthday. A “grade 2 fluency packet” is a publisher's scope, not a legal grade, and not a transcript line. Echo reading, a park-bench

⁶⁰Vendor oral-reading app claims remain design claims unless a specific study is opened; photo-to-answer and write-the-child's-story remain bans per the English-hour AI box.

⁶¹Bastani et al., *PNAS* 122, no. 26 (2025). High-school mathematics; not a 5–10 literacy RCT.

page, and a library familiar book can place the same child differently. Choose by fit. The record, when you need one, is a dated notebook, the passage named, plus a note on sure vs sticky words, plus one reread observation. The title a stranger can read is Reading, or Language Arts, or English. It is not a WPM scoreline. It is not Little Thinkers English I.

Checklist before moving on

- You can hear stopwatch-first on a guessing reader, and you can put accuracy first.
- You can hear WPM offered as identity, and you can ask for sure words and sticky words instead.
- The child can read a short chosen passage with high accuracy before fluency games.
- Guided repeated oral reading with feedback has happened — model, read, brief fix, reread.
- The child can name at least one sticky word and look at its letters.
- At least one real-audience or out-of-home reread has happened.
- Sits can be short. You did not require a personal-best timer score as the proof.
- Silent reading alone was not used as the only fluency instruction while decoding was still weak.
- You can ask a good question, without taking the page.

If most of that list is true, go on to vocabulary and word meaning, even if the birthday says otherwise. If the birthday says “fluent” and guessing still owns timed pages, stay. The next chapter asks what a word means in this sentence. It needs bandwidth that accuracy and calm rereading help free.

Shared reading aloud still motivates this week. It does not replace the child’s accurate oral reread of a known page.

A path through elementary English is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not.

Chapter 5

Vocabulary and word meaning



Figure 7: A kitchen-table still-life: an open picture book with one word circled in soft pencil, a mug, three example/non-example cards, and a dated notebook. No people. No brand logos. No dictionary page as the whole program.

Why this matters

What do you think this word means in this sentence?

That is not a vocabulary quiz. It is not a cue to recite the dictionary line. It is the question that turns a new word from a list item into something the child can use tomorrow at lunch. *Enormous* in “the enormous pumpkin sat on the porch” is not the same as *enormous* on a worksheet that says “write a synonym.” Context is the first teacher. Your short explanation is the second. Reuse is the third.

This chapter is word meaning — caught and taught. Children catch words from talk, from books you read aloud, from labels on the fridge, from a museum placard. They are also taught a few words on purpose: a child-friendly meaning, an example, a non-example, another chance to hear the word in a new place. The National Reading Panel found that vocabulary instruction can improve comprehension, that methods should fit the child’s age, that repetition and multiple contexts matter, and that copying dictionary definitions is the weaker comparison.⁶² Foorman and colleagues folded academic vocabulary into academic language — still recommended even when the experimental base is thin.⁶³ A weekly spelling list is useful for spelling. It is not, by itself, the vocabulary program.

What this idea unlocks is almost everything later that looks like “understanding the book.” If the child can decode *reluctant* but has no working meaning for it, the sentence stays hollow. If they can say a child-friendly meaning and use the word about the dog who will not come in from the rain, the sentence opens. Morphology in the eight-to-ten band — prefixes, suffixes, roots — unlocks families of words without pretending a five-year-old needs a Latin course.

⁶²National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), vocabulary determinations: vocabulary instruction can improve comprehension; methods should fit the child’s age; repetition and multiple contexts matter; incidental learning from rich storybook reading helps; pre-teaching before hard passages helps; combinations help; copying dictionary definitions is the weaker comparison. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁶³Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendation 1, academic language (inferential language, narrative language, vocabulary knowledge), minimal evidence; the panel still recommends. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf.

You do not need to be a linguist. You do need to hear a copied dictionary line offered as understanding, a one-shot quiz offered as teaching, and a spelling list offered as the whole vocabulary program — and to ask what the word means *in this sentence*, then use it again at dinner. Hearing those wrong turns is teaching. Filling the silence with the perfect adult definition is not.

This week you can learn to pre-teach one word before a read-aloud and reuse it once that day. Today the student can use today's word in a new sentence about something they can see.

Picture the struggle worth having. The child says “*enormous* means big.” That is a start, not an end. You ask for the sentence. You ask for a kitchen use. You ask whether a pea is enormous. The meaning gets edges. Edges are what later reading needs when the book stops explaining itself. A life of English for ordinary challenges includes the store sign, the postcard, the sibling argument about whether the storm was fierce. Lists alone do not build that life. Talk in context does.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults feel rusty on how they learned new words — often by reading a lot, sometimes by memorizing lists, rarely by naming the method out loud. That is ordinary. Five minutes of this section, then the warm-up at the end, is enough for tomorrow. The child still says the meaning.

Everyday picture. You are reading a picture book about a storm. The word is *fierce*. Before you turn the page where the wind becomes fierce, you say: “Fierce means strong and a little scary — like a wind that pushes hard.” You act a small push with your hand. After the page, you ask: “What do you think *fierce* means in this sentence?” Later, at lunch, you say: “That mustard is fierce.” The child laughs or argues. Either way, the word got a second home. That is caught and taught in one day.

Precise picture. Vocabulary has *breadth* (how many words) and *depth* (how well a word is known — multiple meanings, how it relates to near neighbors, how it behaves in a sentence). At ages 5–7, depth for a few words beats a long list skimmed once. Child-friendly explanations, acting out, examples and non-examples, and reuse in talk are the moves. At ages 8–10, add morphology: *un-* can mean “not,” *-ful* can mean “full of,” *re-* can mean “again.” Academic verbs (*compare, explain, describe*) earn explicit attention because school-shaped tasks keep using

them. Spelling the word and knowing the word are partners. They are not the same job.

The National Reading Panel did not crown one best method. Direct teaching helps. Incidental learning from rich storybook reading helps. Pre-teaching before a hard passage helps. Combinations help. Dictionary copying, used as the main diet, is the weaker comparison.⁶⁴ Foorman Recommendation 1 puts vocabulary knowledge inside academic language alongside inferential talk and narrative language.⁶⁵ Scarborough's Rope puts vocabulary on the language-comprehension side of the braid: word recognition can become automatic while language comprehension stays strategic.⁶⁶ If decoding is strong and meaning is thin, you will hear fluent empty reading. If meaning is rich and decoding is frayed, you will hear smart guesses that do not match the letters. Diagnose which strand is fraying. Do not pick a franchise war.

Caught words arrive because life is full of talk and print. Taught words arrive because you chose them. Both count. A child who only ever meets words in packets will under-catch. A child who only ever "picks things up" will miss the academic verbs and the story-critical adjectives that books assume. The kitchen move is small: catch freely, teach a few on purpose, reuse what you teach.

Knowledge across days helps too. If this week's read-alouds stay near weather, gar-

⁶⁴National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), vocabulary determinations: vocabulary instruction can improve comprehension; methods should fit the child's age; repetition and multiple contexts matter; incidental learning from rich storybook reading helps; pre-teaching before hard passages helps; combinations help; copying dictionary definitions is the weaker comparison. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁶⁵Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendation 1, academic language (inferential language, narrative language, vocabulary knowledge), minimal evidence; the panel still recommends. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf.

⁶⁶Hollis S. Scarborough, "Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice," in *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, ed. Susan B. Neuman and David K. Dickinson (New York: Guilford Press, 2001). Vocabulary sits on the language-comprehension side of the Rope; word recognition can become automatic while language comprehension stays strategic. Simple View product logic (Gough and Tunmer; Hoover and Gough tradition): diagnose which strand is fraying. Background-knowledge as a neighborhood for words is practice wisdom aligned with the Rope, not a named kitchen RCT.

dens, or how animals hide, the same word family keeps returning without a worksheet. That is practice wisdom aligned with the background-knowledge strand of the Rope — useful, not a named kitchen RCT.⁶⁷ You are not building a university major. You are giving words a neighborhood.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *“It means...” followed by a copied adult dictionary sentence the child cannot use.* The child performed a lookup. Ask: “Say it like you would tell a friend. Use it about something in this room.” If they cannot, the definition was never theirs.
2. *A correct synonym on Monday’s quiz, then blank stares when the word returns in Thursday’s book.* One exposure was treated as enough. Multiple contexts beat a single test. Plan a second and third hearing on purpose.
3. *The spelling list offered as proof the child “knows” the words.* Spelling *because* is not the same as using *because* to join two ideas, and it is not the same as knowing *enormous*. Keep the spelling work. Add meaning work for a few chosen words.
4. *A morphology worksheet on un-* and re- for a child who still cannot blend CVC reliably.** Morphology belongs mainly in the eight-to-ten band, and even then it rides on top of decoding. If short words still break, teach the code first. Birthday is a weak placement test.
5. *“I don’t know” after you asked for the meaning with no sentence on the table.* The question was vague. Put the word back in a sentence. Point. Ask again: “What do you think this word means *in this sentence*?”

A sixth you will also hear: the child uses the first letter and the picture to invent a meaning that fits the illustration but not the print. Meaning work does not license three-cueing as word reading. If the week’s work is still decoding, look at the letters. Then talk meaning.

⁶⁷Hollis S. Scarborough, “Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice,” in *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, ed. Susan B. Neuman and David K. Dickinson (New York: Guilford Press, 2001). Vocabulary sits on the language-comprehension side of the Rope; word recognition can become automatic while language comprehension stays strategic. Simple View product logic (Gough and Tunmer; Hoover and Gough tradition): diagnose which strand is fraying. Background-knowledge as a neighborhood for words is practice wisdom aligned with the Rope, not a named kitchen RCT.

Five-minute parent warm-up

Do this before the lesson, with tomorrow's picture book and a sticky note, no child in the room.

Minute 1. Pick one word worth teaching — not every hard word. Choose a word the story needs, that the child will meet again, that you can explain in a short child-friendly phrase.

Minute 2. Write your child-friendly meaning on the sticky note. Act it once with your hands. Invent one example and one non-example ("A mouse is *tiny*. An elephant is not *tiny*.").

Minute 3. Mark where you will pause in the book — before the word if you will pre-teach, or right after if you will ask in context.

Minute 4. Plan the reuse: dinner, a walk, a fridge note. One reuse is enough for today.

Minute 5. Write the sentence you will actually say: "What do you think this word means in this sentence?" Put the pencil down. That sentence is the lesson.

If you can do those five minutes, you are ready to sit down. The child tries the meaning. You wait.

How to teach it this week

A good English hour this week has a shape. The English-hour chapter in the front of this book is the full version, including the talk-box shape, the in-home and out-of-home try-it shape, and the AI rules. Here is the shape scaled to vocabulary and word meaning.

Warm-up (2–5 minutes, unaided). Yesterday's word in a new oral sentence. Or a quick morphology warm-up for ages 8–10: "What does *re-* often mean? Try *rebuild*." No device. No list of twenty.

Short model (3–7 minutes). One word. Child-friendly meaning. Example. Non-example. You say it in a sentence. Then you stop talking.

Student attempt (8–15 minutes). The child hears or reads the word in a sentence, says a meaning in their own words, uses it about something they can see, and — for 8–10 — notices a word part if one is there. You wait.

One good question, then wait. “What do you think this word means in this sentence?” Not “what’s the vocabulary word?” Not “did you memorize number four?” After you ask, a slow three is a convention, not a sacrament. Stahl wrote about think-time for classroom teachers. Rowe measured pauses in elementary science class. Use the pause. Neither is a literacy RCT.⁶⁸

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes). Yesterday’s word beside today’s. A known easy word beside a new one. For 8–10, one morphology item beside one context item. Mixing keeps the word from living only on Monday’s card.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes, unaided). “Use today’s word in a new sentence about something in this room.” Or: “Is a whisper *fierce*? Why or why not?” Done-enough is “usable meaning, or wrong-with-a-reason we can fix tomorrow,” not a percentage.

That shape is a practice you impose on whatever book, label, or walk is already in the week. It is not a 180-day vocabulary calendar.

A sample week (illustration, not a mandate).

Monday: Pre-teach *fierce* before the storm book. Ask the locked question after the page. Exit ticket: one oral sentence.

Tuesday: Reuse *fierce* at breakfast. Teach nothing new, or add a light non-example sort. Mix yesterday’s word into the warm-up.

Wednesday: New word from an informational book (*habitat* or a simpler neighbor like *shelter* for younger listeners). Same shape.

Thursday: Out-of-home try-it — park label or library craft with Wednesday’s word.

Friday: Diagnostic wrong answer (copied glossary line, or a picture-only guess). Done-enough checklist. One celebration of a real reuse you overheard.

If a day only holds twenty minutes, keep the one-word teach *or* the reuse — one named move done well beats a rushed list of ten.

⁶⁸Robert J. Stahl, “Using ‘Think-Time’ and ‘Wait-Time’ Skillfully in the Classroom,” ERIC Digest ED370885 (1994), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED370885.pdf>: about three seconds as a convention; classroom-origin. Mary Budd Rowe, “Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables,” NARST paper, ERIC ED061103 (1972): elementary science class; extending pauses changed discourse. Use for the pause. Neither is a literacy RCT.

Exact wording you can say

On meaning in context:

“What do you think this word means in this sentence?”

“Show me the word with your finger. Now say it in your own words.”

“Use it about something in our kitchen.”

On examples and non-examples:

“Is a mouse *enormous*? Is a bus *enormous*? How do you know?”

“Give me a yes example and a no example.”

On morphology (8–10):

“Do you see a part you know? What does that part often mean?”

“If *happy* means glad, what might *unhappy* mean?”

On changing one’s mind:

“You may change your mind after the next page.”

“Does your meaning still fit, or should we revise?”

How to fade help. Day 1: you pre-teach and model the sentence. Day 2: you point at the word and wait. Day 3: the child finds a word worth wondering about and tries a meaning first. When they are stuck after a real attempt, give a hint (“Is it more like *big* or more like *angry*?”), then model a *different* sentence with the same word. Do not grab the book and finish their thought.

When to stop talking. After the child-friendly meaning and one example. After one good question. After they have used the word once. More talk from you is not more vocabulary for them.

Age-band moves: 5–7

Stay with a few words deeply. Pre-teach one word before a read-aloud. Act it out. Sort two or three example/non-example cards. Reuse at lunch. Do not dump morphology packets. Do not require dictionary copying. Listening comprehension during read-alouds is a legitimate home for new words while decoding is still

growing. If the child is reading a decodable, pick a word from the *read-aloud* for depth work, not every rare word in the practice book.

Age-band moves: 8–10

Keep context teaching. Add morphology in short bursts: one prefix or suffix for a few days, then another. Notice multiple meanings (*bat* the animal, *bat* the stick). Teach a few academic verbs in the jobs they do: “Explain means tell how or why so someone else understands.” Depth includes “where else have we heard a word like this?” If CVC still fails, teach CVC — morphology does not replace the code.

First try-it for the student (today, five minutes). Open to one sentence with today’s word. Ask the locked question. Wait. Have them use the word about an object on the table. Write their sentence in the dated notebook if they cannot write it yet; if they can, they write one line.

Fading help across four days (same word or a tight pair).

Day 1 — You pre-teach. You model one sentence. Child repeats a meaning in their own words. Day 2 — You point. You wait. Hint only after a real try: “Is it more like ___ or ___?” Day 3 — Child finds the word, tries meaning first, then checks with you. Day 4 — Child teaches the word to a sibling or stuffed animal in two sentences. You listen for a usable meaning, not a performance.

If Day 2 still needs a full model, stay there. Speed is not the virtue. Ownership is.

Store-label micro try-it (out-of-home, three minutes). In a grocery aisle you already entered, read one word on a package as print — *crispy*, *frozen*, *organic* only if you will explain it simply. Ask the locked question. Use the word about something else in the cart. Safety: aisle courtesy, no tasting unknown items, no “test” that looks like shoplifting, no quizzing a cashier. The package is print practice. It is not a nutrition sermon.

Practice that actually builds learning

Named try-its beat vague “talk about words more.” Each one below names time, materials, safety, the fun, and the skill.

In-home try-it: Word-of-the-day dinner use

Time. 5–8 minutes at a meal. **Materials.** Today’s word on a sticky note or the fridge. **Safety.** Ordinary meal manners. No forcing a shy guest to perform. **The fun.** The family tries to slip the word into talk without breaking the conversation. **The skill.** Multiple exposures in a new context — NRP’s repetition and multiple contexts, kitchen grain.⁶⁹

How: Put the word where everyone can see it. Anyone may use it. The child of the English hour gets the first try. Celebrate a real use, not a forced one. If nobody can use it naturally, you model once: “This soup is *enormous* — look at my bowl.” Then stop.

In-home try-it: Act out and sort

Time. 8–10 minutes. **Materials.** Three index cards: the word, one yes example, one no example. Space to move. **Safety.** Clear the floor for one big gesture. No climbing on furniture for “enormous.” **The fun.** Acting is allowed. Being wrong on the sort is allowed and revised. **The skill.** Child-friendly meaning plus examples/non-examples.

How: You say the meaning and act it. Child acts it. Then sort: “Does this picture/card go with *fierce* or not?” Ask them to explain one sort out loud.

Out-of-home try-it: Museum or park label, one new word

Time. 5–10 minutes on a visit you were already making. **Materials.** Eyes, one sticky note or phone note for the parent (not a child account). **Safety.** Stay with the family. Do not block aisles. Do not lecture other visitors’ children. Do not touch exhibits. **The fun.** Finding a word the placard needed. **The skill.** Academic or content vocabulary in an informational sentence.

⁶⁹National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), vocabulary determinations: vocabulary instruction can improve comprehension; methods should fit the child’s age; repetition and multiple contexts matter; incidental learning from rich storybook reading helps; pre-teaching before hard passages helps; combinations help; copying dictionary definitions is the weaker comparison. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

How: Read one short label together. Pick one word. Ask: “What do you think this word means in this sentence?” Use it on the walk back to the car about something you both can see.

Out-of-home try-it: Bus-ad or poster meaning (mainly 8–10)

Time. 3–5 minutes while waiting or walking past. **Materials.** A public poster or transit ad with a clear sentence (print as print — not a sermon about the city). **Safety.** Traffic awareness. Sidewalk courtesy. No photographing strangers. No arguing with an advertiser on the spot. **The fun.** Noticing that ads try to make you feel or think something. **The skill.** Word meaning in persuasive print; light “what are they trying to make us think?” without turning into media culture war.

How: Read the line. Ask the locked question about one word. Follow with: “What do they hope we will feel?” One exchange. Then walk on.

Out-of-home try-it: Library craft — use the new word on the shelf

Time. 5–10 minutes at the library. **Materials.** Library card, today’s word, shelves. **Safety.** Library voice. Careful with books. No rearranging a whole bay for a game. **The fun.** Hunting a book cover or blurb where the word could fit. **The skill.** Transfer: the word lives outside the original story.

How: After you check out (or before), the child uses today’s word in one oral sentence about a book they see. Optional for 8–10: write the sentence on a scrap to tuck in the dated notebook at home.

Talk box

Opening question (locked): “What do you think this word means in this sentence?”

Follow-ups (pick three to five, not all at once):

1. Meaning: “Say it in your own words — like you’d tell a friend.”
2. Representation: “Use it about something in our kitchen / on this shelf. Or sketch what it makes you picture.”

3. Type or relation: “Is it more like *big* or more like *angry*? / Do you see a word part you know?”
4. Check: “Does your meaning still match this sentence?”
5. Revise: “You may change your mind after the next page. Try it another way.”

How to wait. After you ask, count a slow three before you speak again. After they stop, wait again — a second silence often brings a better try. If they are mid-sentence, do not cut them off. Look at the print, not at their face, if the silence is hard. Stahl’s think-time and Rowe’s science pauses are classroom-origin tools for the pause. They are not a reading RCT.⁷⁰

What a stuck silence usually means. The question floated without a sentence on the table. Wait-time was zero. They are hunting a picture cue instead of the word. They are guessing what you want. The word is outside anything they have heard. They offered a first-letter grab and froze. They think “vocabulary” means the quiz list. Your job is to put the finger under the word, ask once more, and wait — not to fill the silence with the adult definition as the child’s answer, and not to turn the table into a fight.

Blocked practice vs mixed practice

When a word is brand new, stay blocked for a few minutes: meaning, example, non-example, one use. Then mix: yesterday’s word, today’s word, a morphology bit for 8–10. A whole week of only one word with no reuse later is blocked past usefulness. A quiz of twenty strangers with no teaching is mixed past usefulness.

One incorrect example to diagnose

A parent hands the child a worksheet: “Write the definition. Write a synonym. Write a sentence.” The child copies from a glossary, writes a synonym from a list, and produces “The *enormous* is good.” The blanks are filled. The word is not known. This is dictionary-copying as the program — the weaker comparison

⁷⁰Robert J. Stahl, “Using ‘Think-Time’ and ‘Wait-Time’ Skillfully in the Classroom,” ERIC Digest ED370885 (1994), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED370885.pdf>: about three seconds as a convention; classroom-origin. Mary Budd Rowe, “Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables,” NARST paper, ERIC ED061103 (1972): elementary science class; extending pauses changed discourse. Use for the pause. Neither is a literacy RCT.

the Panel warned about.⁷¹ Next move: close the worksheet. Put the word in a real sentence from a book. Ask the locked question. Require one oral sentence about something visible. Save the worksheet, if you use it at all, for a one-minute warm-up after the word already lives in talk.

Library, walk, store, and kitchen *are* practice. They do not replace a short, planned meaning lesson for a few chosen words.

Blocked for a new move, mixed when it is time

First meeting of *reluctant*: stay with that word. Meaning, act-out, example, non-example, one use. The next day, put *reluctant* beside yesterday's *fierce* and ask which fits "the cat would not come in." That is mixed practice for meaning, not a random quiz. For ages 8–10, mix a morphology prompt with a context prompt: "What does *re-* often do? Now, what does *reluctant* mean in this sentence?" Two different tools. Both serve understanding.

Sibling and multi-age notes

If a younger and older child share the hour, the younger can act and sort while the older writes a morphology note. Same word. Different exit tickets. Do not require the five-year-old to define *prefix*. Do not excuse the nine-year-old from using the word in a real sentence because they can chant a root list.

For the student

Words are tools. Some you catch because people keep saying them. Some you learn on purpose because a book needs them.

Here is the move. Look at the word in a sentence. Ask what it means *there*. Say it in your own words. Use it about something you can see. If you are older and you

⁷¹National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), vocabulary determinations: vocabulary instruction can improve comprehension; methods should fit the child's age; repetition and multiple contexts matter; incidental learning from rich storybook reading helps; pre-teaching before hard passages helps; combinations help; copying dictionary definitions is the weaker comparison. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

spot a part like *un-* or *-ful*, say what that part often does. You may change your mind when you read the next line.

Tiny worked example. Sentence: “The fierce wind pushed the gate.” You might say: “Fierce means strong and a little scary.” Kitchen reuse: “That pepper is fierce.” Check: Does “strong and a little scary” still fit the wind? Yes.

Try 1. In your book, find today’s word. Put your finger under it. Tell what you think it means in that sentence. Then use it about something in the room.

Try 2. Make a yes example and a no example. “A whisper is / is not _____ because...”

Explain it back. Teach a stuffed animal or a sibling: “Here is what _____ means in this sentence. Here is how I used it.”

Challenge. Ages 5–7: use the word at dinner without being asked. Ages 8–10: find another word with the same useful part (*re-*, *un-*, *-ful*) and say what changed.

You are allowed to wait. You are allowed to revise. Looking at the sentence is part of the work.

If it isn’t clicking

Diagnostic 1 — The child copies a long adult definition and cannot use the word. Next move: scrap the copied line. Ask for a friend-sized meaning in one short sentence. Require a use about a visible object. If needed, you model one use, then they try a different object.

Diagnostic 2 — The word is “known” on the quiz and gone by Thursday. Next move: plan two reuses before the week ends — dinner and a walk. Keep a tiny “word we own” list in the dated notebook, not a graveyard of twenty.

Diagnostic 3 — Morphology work collapses because decoding is shaky. Next move: pause prefix packets. Return to blending and connected reading that matches taught patterns (Chapters 2–3). Bring morphology back when short words are stable, or keep morphology oral-only for a while (talk about *unhappy* while you read aloud).

When to slow down. If every page has five new words and none get a second home, teach fewer words. Depth beats a parade.

When to go ahead. If the child uses taught words spontaneously in talk, add a second word in the same week or begin light morphology at 8–10.

When to get a human tutor. If oral language seems very thin across settings, or word learning never sticks despite multiple exposures and clear explanations, ask a trusted teacher, speech-language professional, or local evaluator for guidance. Bring samples of the child’s talk and the dated notebook. This book cannot diagnose a language disorder.

Correct a wrong meaning without crushing the attempt: “I hear you saying it means *tiny*. Let’s look again — the pumpkin filled the whole porch. Does *tiny* still fit? You may change your mind.”

Tools, including AI

Optional helpers for you, the adult. Keep this short. The English-hour chapter holds the full AI box.

You may, on your account, after the child has tried: ask a tool to explain *to you* a child-friendly meaning for a named word in a named sentence; generate two example/non-example pairs you will voice; draft a four-line SCRIPT for you to say after their attempt; create isomorphic practice (new sentences with the same word) with the answer key held by you.

You may not: paste the vocabulary worksheet and ask for the filled key; let the child sit alone with an open chat as a “word friend”; ask the model to write the child’s “I think the word means ___ because ___”; invent what the book’s sentence said — look at the page; detector-grade a child’s sentence; hand the child an agent as a vocabulary partner.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as the child’s partner. Ages 8–10: still parent in the room; unaided first; SCRIPT after the try. Point back to the English-hour AI rules, including the off-age Bastani caution: a tool may prepare the adult and the next page; it may not do the child’s word work.⁷²

⁷²Hamsa Bastani et al., “Generative AI without guardrails can harm learning: Evidence from high school mathematics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 26 (2025): e2422633122. High-school math field experiment; not a 5–10 literacy trial. One cautionary mechanism for adult tools: a tool may prepare the adult and the next page; it may not do the child’s word work. Full AI rules in *The English Hour*. Keep accounts and keys on the parent side (COPPA under-13).

Paper tools that help: sticky notes, example/non-example cards, the dated notebook, the picture book itself. A glossary can support one look-up after a try. It is not the program.

What “done enough” looks like

Use skill, not birthday. A “grade 2 vocabulary workbook” is a publisher’s scope, not a legal grade, and not a transcript line. Put the work under **Reading, Language Arts, or English**. Never a brand name as the credit line. Never Little Thinkers English I.

Done enough for this chapter’s grain — ages 5–7

- ☐ Hears a taught word in a sentence and gives a child-friendly meaning in their own words.
- ☐ Uses the taught word in a new oral sentence about something visible.
- ☐ Gives one yes example and one no example for the word.
- ☐ Reuses the word once later the same day with a light prompt.
- ☐ Looks at the print when asked what the word means in *this* sentence (not only the picture).

Done enough — ages 8–10

- ☐ Everything in the 5–7 list, more consistently across a few words.
- ☐ Notices a common prefix or suffix and says what it often means in at least two words.
- ☐ Talks about a second meaning when a word has one, or says “same letters, different job.”
- ☐ Uses an academic verb (*explain, compare, describe*) in a short oral task when taught.
- ☐ Revises a first meaning after more context without melting down.

Placement note. If decoding is not yet solid, keep vocabulary rich in read-alouds and talk, and keep code lessons in their hour. Meaning and code belong together over the week. One strand does not cancel the other.

Exit ticket you can reuse. “What do you think this word means in this sentence? Use it about something you can see.” Right, or wrong-with-a-reason for tomorrow — not a percentile.

When this checklist is mostly yes on a short set, two ways (oral meaning + a use), and it holds after a night, move on. Mix last week's words into warm-ups. Revisit a favorite word next Tuesday on purpose. You are building a life of English for ordinary challenges — not a diploma, not a percentile, and not a trophy for the longest weekly list.

Records grain (points forward). Date the word, the child-friendly meaning they offered, and one sentence they used. That line lives inside Reading, Language Arts, or English — never as “Vocabulary Packet Level B” on a transcript a stranger must decode. Optional vendor placement tests can help you choose a program's starting point. They are not this chapter's done-enough checklist, and they are not a national percentile.

One limit line, then keep teaching. The Panel's vocabulary findings and Foorman's academic-language recommendation are useful maps. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.^{73 74} Teach the next word anyway.

⁷³National Reading Panel, *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching Children to Read*, NIH Pub. No. 00-4769 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), vocabulary determinations: vocabulary instruction can improve comprehension; methods should fit the child's age; repetition and multiple contexts matter; incidental learning from rich storybook reading helps; pre-teaching before hard passages helps; combinations help; copying dictionary definitions is the weaker comparison. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED444126.pdf>. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁷⁴Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendation 1, academic language (inferential language, narrative language, vocabulary knowledge), minimal evidence; the panel still recommends. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf.

Chapter 6

Comprehension and story sense

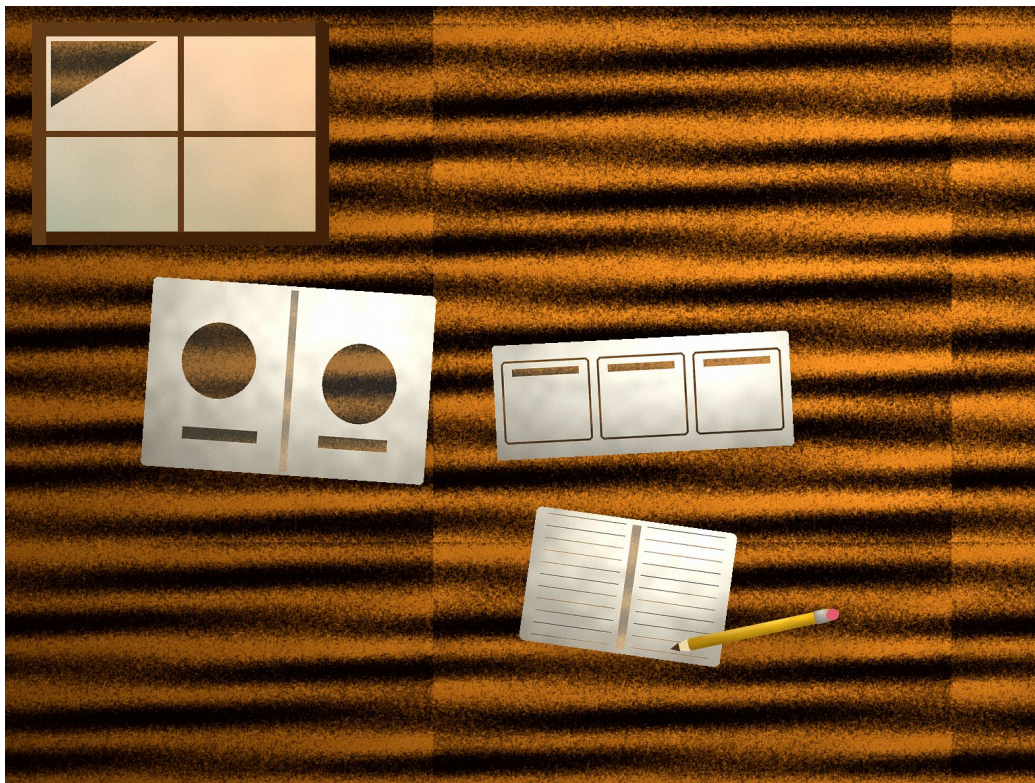


Figure 8: A kitchen-table still-life: an open library book, three empty storyboard panels labelled beginning / middle / end in light pencil, and a dated notebook. No people. No brand logos. No main-idea worksheet stack.

Why this matters

Who wanted what — and how do you know?

That is not a quiz-show trick. It is not a cue to recite the moral. It is the question that turns a pile of pages into a story the child can hold. A character wanted something. Something got in the way. Something happened next. Evidence lives on the page — a face in the drawing, a line of dialogue, a change from sunny to stormy. When the child can name who wanted what and point to how they know, comprehension has a spine.

This chapter is story sense and comprehension strategies — teachable moves with uneven evidence tiers the book must respect. Shanahan and colleagues (2010) recommend teaching comprehension strategies with strong evidence, teaching text structure with moderate evidence, and holding focused discussion of meaning even though that experimental base is thinner. Purposeful text selection and motivating contexts round out the guide.⁷⁵ In ages 5–7, much of this work happens while listening to you read; story grammar comes first. In ages 8–10, strategies ride on text the child can decode, informational structures get names, and craft talk stays one question deep: “What did the writer do?” — not AP literature.

What this idea unlocks is the difference between saying words and understanding a book. Decoding without meaning is empty fluency. Meaning without code is guessing dressed as reading. The Simple View’s product logic is the household picture: if either decoding or language comprehension is near zero, understanding collapses.⁷⁶ Scarborough’s Rope braids the same truth: word recognition can become automatic while language comprehension stays strategic.⁷⁷ Diagnose which

⁷⁵Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁷⁶Simple View product logic (Gough and Tunmer; Hoover and Gough tradition): Reading Comprehension $\approx$ Decoding $\times$ Language Comprehension — if either factor is near zero, understanding collapses. Cited for diagnosis, not as a newly re-opened PDF pair this draft.

⁷⁷Hollis S. Scarborough, “Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)abilities,” in *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, ed. Neuman and Dickinson (New York:

strand is fraying. Do not pick a franchise that sells only one side.

You do not need to be a literature professor. You do need to hear a main-idea worksheet pack offered as comprehension, a strategies poster with no book offered as teaching, and silence at the table because “discussion has minimal evidence” — and to ask who wanted what, then wait for the evidence. Hearing those wrong turns is teaching. Filling the silence with your own perfect retell is not.

This week you can learn to ask one story-sense question and wait. Today the student can retell a familiar story naming who wanted what.

Picture two children who both “finished the book.” One can say the mouse wanted cheese, the cat was the problem, and the evidence is the peeking page. The other says the book was about being brave and cannot point to a line. Both may have enjoyed the art. Only one built story sense they can reuse tomorrow on a different book. That reusable spine — want, problem, evidence — is why the struggle is worth it.

Comprehension is also where code and meaning meet in public. If you only ever ask about feelings and themes while the child still guesses words from pictures, you train a habit this book refuses as word reading. If you only ever blend and never ask who wanted what, you train empty accuracy. The English hour can hold both across the week: a phonics sit when code is still growing, and a story-sense talk on a read-aloud or on controllable text. Shared reading aloud motivates. It does not replace the question.

Knowledge helps. A child who has talked about storms will follow a storm story more easily. Building a topic across a few days — gardens, animals that hide, how mail works — is ordinary practice wisdom, not a culture-war curriculum fight. Keep examples safe: kitchen, park, library, postcard. No live controversy as the story object.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults were taught comprehension as a packet: find the main idea, circle the detail, write the moral. Packets can rehearse. They do not replace a book worth

Guilford Press, 2001). Language comprehension stays strategic; word recognition can become automatic; skilled reading is the braid. Diagnose which strand is fraying.

reading and a real question. Five minutes of this section, then the warm-up, is enough for tomorrow. The child still does the retell.

Everyday picture. You finish a short picture book about a mouse who wants cheese on the other side of a sleeping cat. You close the book halfway — or leave it open — and ask: “Who wanted what — and how do you know?” The child says the mouse wanted the cheese. You wait. They point to the page where the mouse peeks around the bowl. That pointing is evidence. If they say “because mice like cheese” with no page, you gently send them back to the book: “How do you know *from this story?*”

Precise picture. *Story grammar* (narrative structure) gives names to the bones: characters, setting, goal or want, problem, events, resolution. Shanahan Recommendation 2 rates text-structure teaching as moderate evidence.⁷⁸ *Comprehension strategies* are moves readers use on purpose: predict and check, ask a question, picture the scene, notice when meaning breaks (“Does this make sense?”), summarize in a few sentences. Recommendation 1 rates strategy teaching as strong — with modelling and guided practice, not a year-long poster curriculum that never finishes a book.⁷⁹ *Discussion* means focused talk about meaning. The evidence tier is minimal; the panel still recommends it. Minimal means thin experimental base, not “skip talk.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁷⁹Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁸⁰Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010):

Informational text has structures too: sequence, compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution in a science or social topic. Ages 8–10 can name a structure after you model it on a short article or placard. Ages 5–7 can still follow a sequence in a how-to or a life-cycle book without the academic label.

Strategies, named without a franchise. Activate what you already know before a page — lightly, not a twenty-minute lecture. Predict what might happen; check after. Ask a question the page might answer. Picture the scene (or sketch it). Monitor: “Did that make sense?” Summarize in a few sentences, not a chapter reprint. Shanahan Rec 1 wants these taught with modelling and practice.⁸¹ You model one. They try one. You do not assign all six every night.

Text structure, named without a worksheet empire. For stories: want and problem are enough to start; adding setting and resolution comes next. For information: “This placard is a sequence — first, next, last.” “This page compares two nests.” Moderate evidence supports teaching structure; the kitchen version is naming the bones on a real page, not filling twenty graphic organizers that never return to talk.⁸²

Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁸¹Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁸²Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth

Discussion that fits a table. One child, one parent, one book: that is already discussion. Siblings can take turns answering the locked question. Stahl's post-response wait helps a quieter child speak.⁸³ You are not running a seminar. You are refusing to let the fastest voice own every meaning.

Craft grain at 5–10 is one question deep. "What did the writer do on this page?" might land on: showed the fear instead of saying *scared*; used a repeating line; put the important object in the picture first. That is noticing. It is not thesis-driven literary theory. It is not symbolism hunts. It is not AP.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *A fluent oral reading with no idea who wanted what.* Decoding may be fine; language comprehension or attention to meaning is frayed. Ask the locked question. If needed, reread a key page aloud together, then ask again.
2. *"The main idea is friendship" with no link to events.* A theme word was grabbed from the air. Ask: "Who wanted what? What got in the way? What happened at the end?" Build up. Theme can wait.
3. *A strategies poster recited ("I predict... I visualize...") while the book sits closed.* Strategies without text are empty. Open the book. Model one strategy on one page. Stop.
4. *Picture-and-first-letter guessing offered as "I understood the story."* Meaning cues help comprehension after words are identified. They are not the method for identifying words. If the week's code work is shaky, return to Chapters 2–3. Then come back to story sense on a read-aloud.
5. *AP-shaped craft talk at age six: "How does the authorial voice construct otherness?"* Wrong grain. Ask one concrete craft question: "What did the writer show instead of tell?" Then move on.

A sixth: silence because someone told you discussion has only minimal evidence. The tier is honest. The recommendation still stands. One good question and a wait is enough discussion for a kitchen.

Five-minute parent warm-up

reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁸³Robert J. Stahl, "Using 'Think-Time' and 'Wait-Time' Skillfully in the Classroom," ERIC Digest ED370885 (1994). Mary Budd Rowe, "Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables," ERIC ED061103 (1972), elementary science. Pause tools for discussion; not a literacy RCT.

Do this before the lesson, with a familiar short book, no child in the room.

Minute 1. Skim. Name who wanted what in one sentence.

Minute 2. Mark one page that holds evidence of the want or the problem.

Minute 3. Plan one craft question, one question deep: “What did the writer do on this page?”

Minute 4. Decide where you will stop reading to ask — end of book for a short picture book; after a clear problem for a longer one.

Minute 5. Write the sentence you will say: “Who wanted what — and how do you know?” Put the pencil down.

If you can do those five minutes, you are ready. The child retells. You wait.

How to teach it this week

The English-hour chapter holds the full session shape. Here is the shape scaled to comprehension and story sense.

Warm-up (2–5 minutes). Retell yesterday’s story in thirty seconds: who wanted what. Or for 8–10: “What structure did yesterday’s short article use — sequence or compare?”

Short model (3–7 minutes). Read or finish a short text. Think aloud once: “I notice the mouse keeps looking at the cheese — I think that’s what he wants. The cat is the problem.” Then stop narrating.

Student attempt (8–15 minutes). Child retells with beginning–middle–end or problem/solution. Points to evidence. For 8–10, may write one evidence sentence. You wait.

One good question, then wait. “Who wanted what — and how do you know?” After you ask, a slow three. Stahl think-time / Rowe science wait — use for the pause; not a literacy RCT.⁸⁴

⁸⁴Robert J. Stahl, “Using ‘Think-Time’ and ‘Wait-Time’ Skillfully in the Classroom,” ERIC Digest ED370885 (1994). Mary Budd Rowe, “Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables,” ERIC ED061103 (1972), elementary science. Pause tools for discussion; not a literacy RCT.

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes). Yesterday’s narrative beside today’s. Or a narrative beside a short informational sequence. One craft question beside one structure question — not five stacked.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes). Oral: “Who wanted what? How do you know?” Or three-panel sketch labelled. Done-enough is sense-with-evidence, not a percentage.

Exact wording you can say

“Who wanted what — and how do you know?”

“What happened first, next, at the end?”

“What problem showed up — how was it solved?”

“How do you know they felt ____? Show me the page.”

“What did the writer do on this page?”

“Does this make sense so far — or should we reread?”

“You may change your mind.”

How to fade help. Day 1: you model the retell bones. Day 2: you ask and wait; prompt “first / next / end” only if stuck. Day 3: child retells first; you ask only for missing evidence. Day 4: child teaches the story to a sibling in one minute.

When to stop talking. After one think-aloud. After one good question. After they have pointed to evidence once. Do not turn the sofa into a lecture on theme.

Age-band moves: 5–7

Lead with listening comprehension during read-alouds. Story grammar: characters, want, problem, end. Three-panel beginning–middle–end. Predict before a page; check after. “Does this make sense?” as monitoring. Craft: one show-not-tell or repeating-line notice. Keep text they decode matched to taught code; do rich comprehension on the read-aloud if needed.

Age-band moves: 8–10

Strategies with modelling on text they can decode. Informational structures named. Problem/solution talk with evidence sentences. Craft still one question deep. Sum-

marize in three to five sentences. If decoding collapses on the “comprehension” passage, the passage is wrong for independent reading — assist, or switch the hard thinking to a read-aloud, and teach the code elsewhere in the hour.

First try-it for the student (today). After a familiar short story, ask the locked question. Wait. Have them point to one page as evidence. Sketch three panels if they like pictures.

Exact wording — more you can steal

On evidence: “Show me the page that makes you think that.” “Is that from the story, or from what you know about real mice?”

On monitoring: “Stop — did that sentence make sense? Should we reread?” “Which words do you already know for sure — and where should we slow down?” (Fluency chapter’s cousin; use when reading aloud connected text.)

On informational text (8–10): “Is this telling steps, comparing two things, or explaining why something happened?” “What does the heading suggest we will learn?”

On fading into independence: “You ask the question tonight. I’ll answer first, then you try on the next book.”

Struggle before rescue. Ask. Wait. Hint (“Was it the mouse or the cat who wanted something?”). Then model on a *different* short paragraph. Do not grab the retell and finish it as theirs. Do not paste a machine summary as their comprehension.

Dose honesty. Foorman and Shanahan write for schools. Your hour is 25–45 minutes most weekdays; comprehension may own ten of those minutes on a language day, or ride inside the read-aloud. One named move done well beats a rushed medley of predict-question-visualize-summarize-theme.

A sample week (illustration). Mon: read-aloud + who wanted what. Tue: same story, child retells alone. Wed: new story, problem/solution. Thu: library craft question. Fri: diagnostic (theme-word with no events) + done-enough. If only twenty minutes, keep the one question and the retell.

Worked hour sketches

Sketch A — ages 5–7, twenty-five minutes, read-aloud focus.

Warm-up (3): “Yesterday the bear wanted honey. What was the problem?” Model (5): New short book; one think-aloud on the want. Student attempt (10): Locked question; three-panel sketch; finger on evidence. Mixed (4): Compare to yesterday’s want in one sentence. Exit (3): Oral who-wanted-what.

Sketch B — ages 8–10, forty minutes, decode-then-think.

Warm-up (3): Morphology or fluency phrase from Chapter 4, brief. Connected reading (12): Child reads a short story or article they can decode; you note miscues lightly. After-reading (8): Locked question + one craft question + structure name if informational. Independent try (12): Three to five sentence written retell or explanation; plan aloud first. Exit (5): Thirty-second oral problem/solution.

Sketch C — mixed ages, thirty minutes.

Shared read-aloud for story sense (15). Younger draws panels; older writes evidence sentence (10). One library plan for Thursday (5). Phonics sits live on another day of the week if code still needs them.

These sketches are illustrations, not a 180-day calendar. Pick the grain that matches skill, not birthday.

More wrong turns, named so you can hear them

7. *Quiz-show discussion*: rapid-fire “What color was the hat? How many sisters?” with no want or causal chain. Detail questions can check attention. They are not story sense by themselves.
8. *Meaning-only while decoding is frayed*: every miss is “made sense in context” praise while letters are ignored. Praise meaning *after* the word is looked at. Chapters 2–3 own the code repair.
9. *Leveled ladder offered as proof they comprehend because the level rose*: a difficulty ladder can move a composite score without proving story sense was taught — and some school ladders show weak alphabetic effects in WWC ratings.⁸⁵ Ask who wanted what anyway.

⁸⁵What Works Clearinghouse, *Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI)*, Beginning Reading, September 2017: positive effects on general reading achievement; potentially positive on reading fluency; **no discernible effects on alphabets**. School small-group object. A leveled ladder is not proof that the code was taught. Label school; do not crown a kitchen franchise.

10. *Silence after a wrong retell because “never correct the child.”* That is not this book’s rule. Correct the reason: “You said the cat wanted cheese. Let’s look at who is peeking. You may change your mind.”

Practice that actually builds learning

In-home try-it: Beginning–middle–end retell

Time. 8–12 minutes. **Materials.** Familiar picture book; paper with three boxes; pencil. **Safety.** Ordinary. **The fun.** Drawing stick figures is allowed. **The skill.** Narrative structure (Shanahan Rec 2 grain).⁸⁶

How: Read or recall. Child sketches or tells first / next / end. You ask once: “Who wanted what — and how do you know?” Finger on evidence.

In-home try-it: Problem/solution talk

Time. 5–10 minutes after a short story. **Materials.** The book. **Safety.** Ordinary. **The fun.** Arguing kindly about what the *real* problem was. **The skill.** Causal chain, not a list of random events.

How: “What went wrong? What fixed it — or what changed?” If they list five events with no problem, say: “Which of those was the problem?” Wait.

In-home try-it: What did the writer do?

Time. 3–5 minutes. **Materials.** One page with a clear craft move (show-not-tell; repeating line; close-up picture). **Safety.** Ordinary. **The fun.** Feeling like a detective for one page. **The skill.** Craft grain — one question deep, not AP.

⁸⁶Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

How: Ask only: “What did the writer do on this page?” Accept concrete answers. Stop before symbolism.

Out-of-home try-it: Library craft question

Time. 10–15 minutes at the library. **Materials.** Library card; one picture book chosen together. **Safety.** Library voice; careful with books. **The fun.** Picking the book is part of motivation (Shanahan Rec 5 moderate).⁸⁷ **The skill.** Discussion of meaning after a real book (Rec 3 minimal, still do it).⁸⁸

How: Read on a couch or floor. Ask the locked question. Optional: write one evidence sentence at home later.

Out-of-home try-it: Museum or park sequence labels

Time. 5–10 minutes. **Materials.** A sequence of labels or signs that tell steps or a life cycle. **Safety.** Stay with family; do not block exhibits; do not lecture strangers’ children. **The fun.** Noticing order in the real world. **The skill.** Informational sequence structure.

How: “What happened first, next, last — according to the labels?” One pass. Walk on.

⁸⁷Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁸⁸Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

Out-of-home try-it: Park “who wanted what?” (parent-invented micro-story)

Time. 3–5 minutes on a bench. **Materials.** Imagination; a non-controversial tiny story (squirrel wants acorn; dog wants ball). **Safety.** Ordinary park safety; no involving other people’s pets without leave. **The fun.** Making a two-minute story together. **The skill.** Transfer of story grammar without a book in hand — then return to books soon so evidence stays tied to print.

How: Tell a six-sentence story. Ask the locked question. Next English hour, ask the same shape about a real book.

Talk box

Opening (locked): “Who wanted what — and how do you know?”

Follow-ups:

1. Meaning: “What happened first, next, at the end?”
2. Representation: “Show me with a three-panel sketch / finger under the evidence line.”
3. Type/evidence: “What problem showed up — how was it solved? How do you know they felt ____?”
4. Check: “Does your retell match the page we just pointed to?”
5. Revise / craft: “What did the writer do on this page? You may change your mind.”

How to wait. Slow three after the question. Second wait after they stop. If mid-retell, do not cut them off. Look at the page if silence is hard.

Stuck silence usually means. Question was vague (no book open). Wait-time was zero. They are hunting what you want. They think the moral is the answer. Decoding ate all their attention. They offered a theme word and froze. They think comprehension means a worksheet. Pose, wait, point back at the print.

Blocked vs mixed

New story grammar week: stay with who/want/problem for a few days. Then mix: craft question beside structure; narrative beside short informational sequence. A laminated strategies list with no book is not blocked practice — it is empty practice.

One incorrect example to diagnose

A parent prints fifty “main idea” worksheets and skips read-alouds for two weeks. The child circles options. Asked who wanted what in yesterday’s library book, they shrug. The packet replaced the book. Next move: stop the stack. Read one short book. Ask the locked question. Require finger-on-page evidence. Use a worksheet later, if at all, as a one-minute warm-up after the story sense is already oral.

Library, walk, and museum labels *are* practice. They do not replace modelling a strategy on a page or teaching story bones on purpose.

In-home try-it: Sibling retell swap

Time. 8 minutes. **Materials.** One familiar book; timer optional. **Safety.** Kind turn-taking; no mocking a wrong retell. **The fun.** Each sibling is the “teacher” for one minute. **The skill.** Narrative language (Foorman Rec 1 grain) plus structure.⁸⁹

How: Child A retells who wanted what. Child B checks evidence with finger on page. Switch roles on a second short book another day.

Out-of-home try-it: Store flyer sequence (print as print)

Time. 5 minutes in an aisle or parking-lot pause. **Materials.** A grocery flyer or how-to card with clear steps. **Safety.** Aisle courtesy; no blocking; no tasting; no cashier quiz. **The fun.** Finding order in ordinary print. **The skill.** Informational sequence.

How: “What does this say to do first? Next?” One exchange. The flyer is print. It is not a nutrition sermon.

⁸⁹Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

Mixed practice note. After two narrative days, put a sequence placard or flyer beside a story retell: “Which one has a *want*, and which one has *steps*?” Naming the difference is the learning.

For the student

Stories have wants. Someone wants something. Something gets in the way. You can say what happened — and you can show how you know from the page.

Here is the move. When the story ends (or at a good stopping place), answer: who wanted what — and how do you know? Point to the page. You can also say what happened first, next, and at the end. Sometimes ask what the writer *did* on one page — showed a feeling, repeated a line, put a clue in the picture. One craft notice is enough.

Tiny worked example. A fox wants grapes. They are too high. The fox leaves and says the grapes were sour. Who wanted what? The fox wanted the grapes. How do you know? He jumped and reached. Problem? Too high. What did the writer do at the end? Had the fox change the story he tells himself. (You do not need the word *irony*.)

Try 1. After today’s book, say who wanted what and point to evidence.

Try 2. Fill three panels: beginning, middle, end — or tell them out loud.

Explain it back. Teach someone the story in one minute with a want, a problem, and an end.

Challenge. Ages 5–7: catch a show-not-tell page (“they didn’t say *sad* — they showed tears”). Ages 8–10: after a short informational piece, name the structure (sequence, compare, cause) and give one detail that fits.

You may wait. You may change your mind when you look again.

If the book is hard to read with your eyes, it is still fair to do story sense while someone reads it aloud. Your job is still the want, the problem, and the evidence. When your decoding is stronger, you will do the same moves on pages you read yourself.

Sometimes the writer hides the feeling in what a character *does*. Feet stomping can mean anger. A long look at a closed door can mean worry. Saying what the

writer did is noticing that trick — once. You do not need a long essay about it.

If it isn't clicking

Diagnostic 1 — Fluent reading, empty retell. Next move: shorter chunks. Ask after two pages, not only at the end. Reread the want-page together. Check listening comprehension on a read-aloud; if listening retell is strong but print retell is weak, decoding load may be too high for that book.

Diagnostic 2 — Theme words with no events. Next move: ban the moral for a week. Require want → problem → end. Theme returns later as a guest, not the host.

Diagnostic 3 — Strategies recited, book closed. Next move: one strategy, one page, think-aloud once, then their turn on a *different* page. Put the poster away if it becomes a script. A bookmark in *your* pocket that reminds you to model one strategy is fine. A laminated performance the child must recite before every page is not.

Slow down when every book is new and hard. Repeat a familiar story for structure practice.

Go ahead when evidence-based retells are easy — add informational structure or a second craft notice in a week.

Get a human tutor if comprehension stays near zero across easy read-alouds and simple books for months despite decoding support, or if attention and language concerns appear across settings. Bring the dated notebook and a short oral sample. This book does not diagnose.

Correct without crushing: “I hear *friendship*. Let’s look — who wanted what on page four? You may change your mind.”

Tools, including AI

Point back to the English-hour AI box. You may ask a tool to explain *to you* story grammar for a named book you describe; draft a parent SCRIPT of questions after the child’s attempt; generate an isomorphic retell checklist you hold.

You may not: photo-to-key a comprehension packet; paste the passage and ask the model to answer the questions for the child; rewrite the passage so the child does not read; park a chatbot as a reading partner; invent what the story said — look; detector-grade a retell; hand the child an agent.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as partner. Ages 8–10: parent in the room; unaided first; SCRIPT after. Bastani stays an off-age caution for adult tools.⁹⁰

Paper tools: three-panel template, sticky flags for evidence pages, dated notebook. A strategies bookmark can remind *you* what to model. It is not the child’s performance script.

What “done enough” looks like

Skill, not birthday. Publisher grade labels are not legal grades. Titles a stranger can read: **Reading / Language Arts / English.**

Ages 5–7

- ☐ Retells a familiar story with beginning, middle, end.
- ☐ Names who wanted what and points to evidence.
- ☐ Names a problem and how it was solved (or what changed).
- ☐ Makes one prediction and checks it.
- ☐ Answers one craft question concretely (“what did the writer do?”).

Ages 8–10

- ☐ Above, on text they can decode, with less prompting.
- ☐ Summarizes in a few sentences without copying whole pages.
- ☐ Names a simple informational structure and fits one detail.
- ☐ Monitors “does this make sense?” and rereads when it does not.
- ☐ Keeps craft talk one question deep without floating into theory.

Exit ticket. “Who wanted what — and how do you know?” Right with evidence, or wrong-with-a-reason for tomorrow.

When the checklist holds on a short set after a night, move on. Mix last week’s story bones into warm-ups. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster

⁹⁰Hamsa Bastani et al., *PNAS* 122, no. 26 (2025): e2422633122. High-school mathematics; off-age caution for adult tools. Full AI rules in *The English Hour*.

replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading.⁹¹ Then teach the next story. Open the book. Ask the question. Wait for the page. That is enough English for an ordinary afternoon, and it is real comprehension work at this age band.

Records grain. Date the book title (generic is fine), the child's who-wanted-what sentence, and whether evidence was pointed to. That lives under Reading, Language Arts, or English. Optional vendor comprehension quizzes are not this checklist. NAEP is not this checklist. A percentile is not the promise.

Multi-age note. Younger child draws three panels while older child writes a five-sentence summary and names one informational structure from a short article. Same sofa. Different exit tickets. Do not require AP craft from either.

Limit line. Shanahan's tiers are honest maps for kitchens that are not RtI offices. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.⁹² Keep asking who wanted what.

Connecting back without reprinting earlier chapters

Chapter 1's oral sentences and retell feed this chapter's story sense. Chapter 4's fluency-after-accuracy keeps meaning available during oral reading — a stopwatch-first habit steals the attention needed for who-wanted-what. Chapter 5's word meaning prevents hollow summaries full of vague words. Later, Chapter

⁹¹Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁹²Timothy Shanahan et al., *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2010-4038 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, September 2010): Recommendation 1, teach comprehension strategies, strong evidence; Recommendation 2, teach text structure, moderate evidence; Recommendation 3, high-quality discussion, minimal evidence (still recommended); Recommendation 4, choose texts carefully, minimal evidence; Recommendation 5, establish motivating contexts, moderate evidence. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/readingcomp_pg_092810.pdf. Strong evidence for strategies does not mean a poster replaces topic knowledge and books worth reading. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

8 will ask the child to write a short retell or explanation for a reader; the bones you teach here become the plan they say aloud before they write.

If you only remember one kitchen move from this chapter, make it this: close the worksheet stack for a day. Open a short book. Ask who wanted what. Wait. Point to the page. That move scales from a five-year-old on your lap to a ten-year-old with an article about how bridges hold. The grain stays ordinary. The evidence stays on the page. The craft question stays one deep. The diploma stays unclaimed — you are building a path through elementary English, not a literature degree.

Friday diagnostic ritual (illustration). Child offers a theme word with no events. You classify: theme-grab. Next week's plan: two days of want-problem-end only; ban morals; require finger evidence. Write that plan in the dated notebook. Done-enough is not a smile. It is a checklist you can point to. When most boxes are yes on a short set, hold after a night, shown two ways (oral + sketch or sentence), move forward. Revisit a familiar story next Tuesday on purpose so structure stays warm. Mix last week's informational sequence into a warm-up. That rhythm is the life of English inside the hour — not a ninth teaching chapter, and not a trophy.

Keep the pencil in their hand for the sketch. Keep the question in yours.

Chapter 7

Handwriting, spelling, and sentence building



Figure 9: A kitchen-table still-life: lined paper, a pencil, a generic numbered-arrow letter model on a scrap, and a short family note begun with one careful word. No people. No brand logos. No thirty-minute formation worksheet stack.

Why this matters

Say the sentence out loud — now write the first word carefully.

That is not a calligraphy contest. It is not a cue to underline nouns for twenty minutes. It is the question that turns talk into print without losing the idea. The child already said a sentence. The hand must catch the first word. Formation, spelling, and sentence sense are the gears that free composition. When those gears jam, the child stops mid-thought to remember how *b* faces, or how *because* goes, or whether “me and him goed” can sit on a thank-you note. When the gears turn, attention returns to what the reader should know.

This chapter is Graham and colleagues’ Recommendation 3 — moderate evidence from nine studies in the elementary writers guide: teach fluent handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing so composition has room to breathe.⁹³ These skills are foundations. They are not the whole writing program. Chapter 8 owns process and purposes (Recommendation 2, strong). A year of letter worksheets that never become a sentence is a fragment. A blank page with no transcription teaching is a different fragment. Five minutes of deliberate letter practice, then the letter inside a real word and a real sentence, beats a thirty-minute formation packet that dies on the page.

What this idea unlocks is almost every later writing job at ages 5–10: the fridge note, the postcard, the caption, the short paragraph. Encoding partners with Foorman’s decode-and-write recommendation: children learn words by reading them and by writing them.⁹⁴ Invented spelling is a stage while patterns are still being taught. It is not a forever policy that never shows the conventional form when a reader needs it. Cursive is a choice some families love. It is not a federal re-

⁹³Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁹⁴Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendation 3, strong evidence (18 studies): decode, analyze word parts, write and recognize words. Encoding partners spelling. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf.

quirement on the Common Core map.⁹⁵ Typing rises toward the age-ten edge as a purposeful tool. It does not replace handwriting at five.

You do not need to be an occupational therapist. You do need to hear a grammar packet offered as the writing program, a thirty-minute formation sit that never enters a sentence, and “just type it” offered before the hand can form letters — and to say the sentence out loud, then write the first word carefully.

This week you can learn to run a five-minute letter burst and then require that letter in a real sentence. Today the student can write one taught word carefully and read it back.

Picture the struggle worth having. The child says, “Please feed the dog.” They write *P* backwards, then freeze. You do not grab the pencil. You ask which letter first. You model in the air. They try again. The sentence survives. That survival is the point. Composition in Chapter 8 will ask for plans and purposes. This chapter makes sure the pencil can keep up.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults feel rusty on how letters were taught — circles and sticks, or numbered arrows, or “just copy this line.” That is ordinary. Five minutes here, then the warm-up, is enough for tomorrow. The child still holds the pencil.

Everyday picture. You want a note on the fridge: *Dog needs walk*. The child can say it. You ask them to say it again. Then: “Say the sentence out loud — now write the first word carefully.” They write *Dog*. You celebrate the careful *D*. Then the next word. Spelling *needs* may be *ned*s this month if the long-vowel pattern is untought — you can accept the temporary spelling *and* show the conventional form when grandma must read it. The note is authentic purpose. The careful first word is transcription. Both matter.

Precise picture. *Handwriting* here means grip that is stable enough, posture that does not fight the page, and letter formation efficient enough that working memory

⁹⁵Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010): the map does not require cursive; keyboarding appears as upper-elementary map edges. Coordinates for typical U.S. public-school placement, not a homeschool statute. Family preference for cursive is fine; panic without a statute is not.

is not spent on every stroke. Graham Rec 3 how-to grain includes short motor practice — for example, writing a letter five to eight times — from memory, with numbered arrows or clear models, then applying letters in words and authentic writing. Writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient.⁹⁶ *Spelling* connects to phonics: dictate words that use today's pattern; expect taught patterns to be spelled with taught letters; teach high-frequency words needed for connected writing; bring morphology into spelling in the eight-to-ten band (*un-*, *-ing*, common roots). *Sentence construction* means combining, expanding, and varying sentences — not underlining parts of speech as the program. *Typing* enters as children approach tasks that benefit from a keyboard (Common Core map edges around grades 4–5 for keyboarding to produce writing). At 5–7, prioritize formation. At 8–10, add purposeful typing without dropping spelling and handwriting.

Berninger's program of work, synthesized in the panel guide, treats transcription and composition as related but separable: weak handwriting and spelling can bottleneck idea generation on the page.⁹⁷ Individual journal articles are not all reopened here; the IES synthesis is the warrant. Limit line: this is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.⁹⁸

⁹⁶Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁹⁷Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁹⁸Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *Thirty minutes of isolated letter rows, then no sentence.* Formation without application. Next day: five-minute burst, then “write *dog* in a note.”
2. *Invented spelling forever, even on a thank-you grandma must read, with no conventional model.* Stage treated as policy. Show the conventional form for the reader’s sake; keep temporary spellings on untought patterns during drafty practice.
3. *A grammar worksheet pack as the week’s “writing.”* Underlining nouns is not Rec 2 and is only a tiny slice of Rec 3’s sentence work. Stretch an oral sentence into a written one instead.
4. *Keyboarding replacing all handwriting at age five because “the world is digital.”* The world still hands you forms, cards, and classroom pencils. Graham wants fluency with both across the elementary span. Sequence: formation first at 5–7; add typing later.
5. *“Cursive is required or they won’t graduate.”* Anxiety without a statute. CCSS does not require cursive.⁹⁹ Family preference is fine. Panic is not a curriculum.
6. *Detector-grade spelling or a shame spiral over one reversed letter.* Reversals are common early. Teach formation. Do not grade the child’s character.

Five-minute parent warm-up

Minute 1. Pick one letter that has been messy — say *b*. Trace the model once yourself. Minute 2. Write *b* five times from memory. Check against the model. Minute 3. Write the word *bat* or *big* carefully. Minute 4. Say a short sentence aloud that uses that word. Write the first word carefully. Minute 5. Write the line you will say to the child: “Say the sentence out loud — now write the first word carefully.”

You are ready. They hold the pencil.

base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

⁹⁹Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010): the map does not require cursive; keyboarding appears as upper-elementary map edges. Coordinates for typical U.S. public-school placement, not a homeschool statute. Family preference for cursive is fine; panic without a statute is not.

How to teach it this week

English-hour shape, scaled to transcription and sentence building.

Warm-up (2–5 minutes). One letter burst (five to eight formations) from memory. Or two high-frequency words written once each.

Short model (3–7 minutes). Show formation with arrows or a clear model. Say the stroke sequence briefly. Write one word. Say one sentence. Write the first word carefully as they watch. Stop talking.

Student attempt (8–15 minutes). Letter burst → word → sentence first word → finish the sentence if stamina allows. Or dictation of three words using today's phonics pattern. Or combine two short oral sentences into one written sentence (8–10 especially).

One good question, then wait. “Say the sentence out loud — now write the first word carefully.” Stahl/Rowe pause tools — not a literacy RCT.¹⁰⁰

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes). Yesterday's letter beside today's. A known spelling pattern beside a new word. One sentence-combining item beside a dictation word.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes). Write one taught word carefully and read it back. Or write one complete sentence that can be read back. Done-enough is readable attempt with taught patterns honored, not perfect calligraphy.

Exact wording you can say

“Say the sentence out loud — now write the first word carefully.” “Which letter first? Show me in the air.” “Does your written word match the sounds you said?” “That pattern was today's — use the letters we practiced.” “Can we combine these two short sentences?” “Read back what you wrote — does it say what you meant?” “You may erase one letter and try it again.”

How to fade help. Day 1: model strokes and the first word. Day 2: air-write together, then they go alone. Day 3: they start; you point to the model only if stuck. Day 4: word appears inside a note to a real person with no burst first if formation held yesterday.

¹⁰⁰Robert J. Stahl, “Using ‘Think-Time’ and ‘Wait-Time’ Skillfully in the Classroom,” ERIC Digest ED370885 (1994). Mary Budd Rowe, “Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables,” ERIC ED061103 (1972), elementary science. Pause tools; not a literacy RCT.

When to stop talking. After the stroke cue. After the locked question. Do not narrate every pencil move. Do not finish the word for them.

Age-band moves: 5–7

Grip and posture check without nagging forever. Letters in short bursts. Memory writing, not only copying under a model forever. Dictation of CVC and taught patterns. Captions and one-sentence notes. Accept invented spelling on untought patterns; show conventional form when a real reader needs it. Sentence work: who + did what; add a where; capital and end mark as taught. Skip long grammar packs.

Age-band moves: 8–10

Increase handwriting speed/legibility in short drills that still end in sentences. Spelling patterns and morphology in encoding. Sentence combining and expanding. Purposeful typing for a paragraph once or twice a week without dropping pencil work. Teach the convention that fixes *this* unclear sentence — not a year of isolated grammar. If formation is still very weak, stay longer on 5–7 handwriting grain; birthday is a weak placement test.

First try-it (today). Say a three-to-five word sentence. Child repeats. Write the first word carefully. Finish if they can. Read back.

Sample week (illustration). Mon: letter *d* burst + words + sentence. Tue: dictation of short-*a* words. Wed: combine two oral sentences. Thu: postcard sentence out-of-home. Fri: diagnostic (formation packet with no sentence) + done-enough. Twenty-minute day? Keep the burst-plus-one-word or the dictation — one named move.

More grain for this week

Stroke talk that stays short. For a *b*: “Start at the top, down, up, around.” Then silence. For a *d*: contrast with *b* on purpose if reversals appear — two models side by side, one word each (*bat*, *dad*). Do not deliver a lecture on laterality. Do not shame.

Dictation protocol (illustration). You say *ship*. Child echoes. Child taps or boxes sounds if that helps. Child writes. You look at *sh* and *i* and *p* if those were taught. If they wrote *sip*, ask: “What letters make /sh/?” Point to the model digraph. They

fix. That is teaching. Silence while *sip* stands as *ship* is not kindness when the pattern was taught.

High-frequency words. Some words appear constantly (*the, said, was*). Teach a few as needed for connected writing. Still look at the letters. Still connect to whatever regular parts exist. Do not build a pure memorization religion that never maps sounds.

Sentence sense without a grammar franchise. Ask: “Who is this about? What did they do?” If the page says *ran to the park*, ask what’s missing. Expand: add *when* or *where*. Combine: *The dog ran. The dog was wet.* → *The wet dog ran* or *The dog ran and got wet.* Steal one sentence pattern from today’s read-aloud and write a new sentence with the same bones (Graham Rec 2b’s model-from-text idea, used here as sentence fuel).¹⁰¹ A purchased underlining packet may rehearse one idea for five minutes. It is not the program.

Typing without abandoning the pencil (8–10). Once a week, after a handwritten draft or plan, type the same three sentences. Parent in the room. Accuracy of thought first. Hunt-and-peck is fine at the start. The goal is purposeful production, not a typing trophy. Accessibility tools (dictation, TTS) can help a child with diagnosed needs — they do not replace decoding or spelling practice when this week’s work is looking at letters and forming them.

Worked hour sketches

Sketch A — ages 5–7, twenty-five minutes. Warm-up: three *ms* from memory (2). Model: *m* in *mom*, *map* (4). Attempt: burst + two words + one sentence first word carefully (12). Mixed: yesterday’s *a* word beside today’s (4). Exit: write *map*, read back (3).

Sketch B — ages 8–10, forty minutes. Warm-up: morphology spelling (*reheat, unhappy*) (4). Dictation of five pattern words (8). Sentence combining two pairs

¹⁰¹Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

(10). Authentic note or paragraph start with careful first words (12). Exit: read back and fix one spelling you taught (6).

Sketch C — multi-age. Younger does letter burst + caption. Older does combining + typed copy of the caption expanded to three sentences. Same table.

More wrong turns

7. *Copywork that never asks them to compose a word of their own.* Copywork can train attention and formation. Add one original sentence twice a week.
8. *Spelling list identical to “vocabulary program.”* Chapter 5 already refused that mash. Spell *because*; also teach meanings elsewhere.
9. *Parent rewrites every sentence into adult prose before anyone reads it.* Fix one taught pattern. Leave voice. Chapter 8 will revise for purpose; do not erase the child’s attempt into your essay.
10. *“We’ll do handwriting when they’re older — for now only tablets.”* Waiting out formation often means a ten-year-old who still cannot fill a library slip. Short bursts now are kinder.

Practice that actually builds learning

In-home try-it: Letter burst then real note

Time. 8–12 minutes. **Materials.** Model letter, lined paper, pencil, fridge magnet or tape. **Safety.** Ordinary pencil safety. **The fun.** The note goes somewhere real. **The skill.** Graham Rec 3 application after short practice.¹⁰²

How: Five to eight formations. Write today’s word. Write a note (*Dog needs walk. / I fed the cat.*). Post it. Read it back.

¹⁰²Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

In-home try-it: Dictation with today's phonics pattern

Time. 8–10 minutes. **Materials.** Paper; three to five words from this week's code. **Safety.** Ordinary. **The fun.** Being the “spelling radio” — you say, they write. **The skill.** Encoding as Foorman Rec 3's partner.¹⁰³

How: Say the word. Child says sounds. Writes. Check taught pattern letters. Untaught patterns: accept temporary spelling; show conventional once at the end if needed.

In-home try-it: Sentence combining

Time. 8–12 minutes. **Materials.** Two short sentences on strips (The dog ran. The dog was fast.). **Safety.** Ordinary. **The fun.** Building a longer sentence that still makes sense. **The skill.** Sentence construction (Graham Rec 3 / Table 7 grain).¹⁰⁴

How: Read both. Ask how to join. Child writes one sentence (*The fast dog ran.* / *The dog ran and it was fast.*). Read back. Ages 5–7 may do this orally first; writing comes when stamina allows.

Out-of-home try-it: Postcard one careful sentence

Time. 10–15 minutes (museum bench, café wait, end of trip). **Materials.** Postcard or index card; pencil; stamp later. **Safety.** Don't lose the child in a crowd; don't annotate strangers. **The fun.** Real mail. **The skill.** Handwriting + spelling + sentence for an audience.

¹⁰³Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, July 2016), Recommendation 3, strong evidence (18 studies): decode, analyze word parts, write and recognize words. Encoding partners spelling. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_070516.pdf.

¹⁰⁴Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

How: Say what the reader should know (preview of Chapter 8). Say the sentence. Write the first word carefully. Finish. Read back.

Out-of-home try-it: Library hold slip or name from memory

Time. 3–5 minutes. **Materials.** Library slip or scrap; library card. **Safety.** Library manners. **The fun.** Official-feeling writing. **The skill.** Memory writing of name and a word or two.

How: Child writes name carefully without copying card letter-by-letter if they can. Add one word (*please* / title word). Check.

Out-of-home try-it: Thank-you on a napkin after a visit

Time. 5–8 minutes. **Materials.** Napkin or receipt back; pencil. **Safety.** Courtesy to hosts; no climbing furniture to “deliver.” **The fun.** Surprise note. **The skill.** Authentic sentence; conventional spelling for a reader when you can help.

How: Locked question shape. One sentence. Deliver before you leave if appropriate.

Talk box

Opening (locked): “Say the sentence out loud — now write the first word carefully.”

Follow-ups: 1. Meaning: “What do you want this note to tell them?” 2. Representation: “Which letter first? Finger under the word when you read back.” 3. Type: “Can we combine these two short sentences?” / “Which spelling pattern is today?” 4. Check: “Does your written word match the sounds you said? Read it back — does it say what you meant?” 5. Revise: “You may erase one letter and try another way.”

How to wait. Slow three after the ask. If mid-formation, do not jab the pencil. Look at the model letter if silence is hard.

Stuck silence usually means. They forgot the sentence (say it again together). Wait-time was zero. Letter formation anxiety. Spelling fear on an untought pattern. They think writing means fill a grammar blank. They are waiting for you to grab the pencil. Pose, wait, point to the model — do not finish the word.

Blocked vs mixed

New letter: blocked burst. Then mix into words and sentences. New spelling pattern: blocked dictation. Then mix with yesterday's pattern. Sentence combining: blocked on one join type (*and*), then mix with *because* when ready. A grammar pack of thirty underlines is not sentence building.

One incorrect example to diagnose

A parent buys a thick grammar-and-cursive bundle and calls it writing for six weeks. The child underlines verbs and traces ovals. Asked to write a note to dad, they freeze. Transcription never entered authentic composition; process never started (Chapter 8). Next move: five-minute letter burst, one sentence note, read-back. Keep any worksheet as a one-minute warm-up only if it serves today's letter or pattern.

In-home try-it: Caption the photo (transcription focus)

Time. 8–10 minutes. **Materials.** Printed photo or phone photo (parent holds device); paper. **Safety.** No uploading child's face to random tools; crop if diagnosing later with AI per English-hour rules. **The fun.** Family pictures. **The skill.** Label → sentence with careful first word.

How: Child says caption. Writes first word carefully. Finishes label or sentence. Read back. Ages 8–10 may write two sentences.

Connecting chapters

Chapter 2–3 give the code that spelling encodes. Chapter 5's words show up in sentences here. Chapter 6's retell becomes a written retell when the hand is ready. Chapter 8 takes these sentences and asks what the reader should know — process and purposes. Without this chapter, Chapter 8's blank page feels cruel. With only this chapter, you get neat rows and no authors. Hold both.

Sibling note. Do not compare letter beauty across siblings aloud. Compare each child to yesterday's note. Progress is personal.

Fatigue note. If the hand tires at five minutes, stop at five. A short daily burst

beats a weekly hour of tears. Graham’s how-to favors multiple short sessions.¹⁰⁵

For the student

Your hand helps your ideas get onto paper. First you say the sentence. Then you write the first word carefully. Then the next.

Here is the move. Say what you mean out loud. Write the first word. Make the letters the way you practiced. Check: does it match the sounds? Read it back. If two short sentences feel choppy, try joining them. If a word uses today’s pattern, use today’s letters.

Tiny worked example. Sentence: “Sam has a big dog.” Say it. Write *Sam* carefully. Then *has*. Then the rest. Read back. If *big* was today’s pattern, check *b-i-g*.

Try 1. Say a sentence about something in the room. Write the first word carefully. Finish if you can. Read it to someone.

Try 2. Write today’s letter five times from memory. Then put it in a word. Then put the word in a sentence.

Explain it back. Teach someone how you form today’s letter — strokes in order — then show the word.

Challenge. Ages 5–7: post a three-word fridge note someone actually uses. Ages 8–10: combine two short sentences into one and type the same sentence once on a keyboard with a parent in the room.

You may erase. You may try again. The pencil stays in your hand.

¹⁰⁵Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

Extra tries

Try 3. Ask someone to dictate three words that use today's pattern. Write them. Circle the letters that show the pattern. Read them aloud.

Try 4. Write two short sentences about the same animal. Join them into one. Read both versions. Which one do you like for a postcard?

If your hand gets tired, shake it out. Do five good letters rather than thirty shaky ones. Quality of formation beats a full page of rushes. Your ideas still matter even when the letters are learning. Say the idea. Then catch what you can on paper. Tomorrow you will catch more.

Grown-ups sometimes write for you once so you can see how the sentence looks. That is a model. Then it is your turn to write a sentence — maybe the same idea in your letters, maybe a new idea. A machine that writes the whole story for you is not help. It is borrowing someone else's work and calling it yours. Your parent knows the English-hour rules for tools.

If it isn't clicking

More branches

Diagnostic 4 — Reversals everywhere after age eight. Next move: slow, contrasted practice (*b/d, p/q*) with keywords and pictures *after* formation, not as the only cue. Keep short daily bursts. If school-age struggle is severe and reading is also affected, ask a human evaluator — bring dated samples. Still teach; do not wait forever for a label before practicing.

Diagnostic 5 — Sentence combining produces longer nonsense. Next move: return to oral combining only for a few days. Write the good oral sentence together. Then have them copy once and write a second new sentence alone. Sense first; length second.

Diagnostic 6 — Typing is fluent; spelling in typing is wilder than on paper. Next move: slow the typing. Spell aloud before keys. Keep pencil dictation in the week. Do not let autocorrect become the spelling teacher during practice (turn it off for the exercise).

When to get help is also about you: if every writing session becomes a fight,

change the demand size first (one word, then one sentence). If fights continue for weeks despite short successes, a human teacher or specialist can coach both skill and session design. Bring what *did* work for five minutes — that sample is gold.

Diagnostic 1 — Beautiful letter rows, blank when asked for a sentence. Next move: cut isolated practice to five minutes. Require immediate application in a word and a note. Celebrate the note more than the row.

Diagnostic 2 — Spelling chaos on patterns you already taught. Next move: dictate only taught patterns for a few days. Have them say sounds before writing. Keep a small “patterns we own” card. Show conventional forms for high-frequency words needed in notes.

Diagnostic 3 — Ideas are rich orally; hand cannot keep up; tears at writing time. Next move: shorten the written demand (one sentence). Allow draw-and-label first. Scribe once, then they copy or write a second sentence (gradual release toward Chapter 8). Check grip/fatigue; if pain or extreme avoidance persists, ask a human professional. Bring samples.

Slow down when letters are still wild — fewer new letters, more application.

Go ahead when words are readable and sentences appear with light prompts — add combining and light typing at 8–10.

Human tutor / OT / teacher: seek help if grip and formation stay severely impaired, if writing pain is real, or if spelling never maps to taught phonics across months. This book does not diagnose dysgraphia or dyslexia; it teaches kitchen moves.

Correct without crushing: “I see *d* facing the wrong way. Watch once. Now you try one. Then we’ll write *dog* in the note.”

Tools, including AI

Point back to the English-hour AI box. You may ask a tool to explain *to you* a stroke order for a named letter; generate a short dictation list matching a named phonics pattern with PARENT KEY; draft a SCRIPT for after their attempt.

You may not: photo-to-key a spelling test; have the model write the child’s sentence; park a chatbot as the writing partner; detector-grade spelling; invent that

cursive is legally required; hand the child an agent.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as partner. Ages 8–10: parent in the room; unaided first. Bastani remains off-age caution.¹⁰⁶

Paper tools: lined paper, pencil grip aid if helpful, letter model card, dated notebook. Vendor handwriting programs can fit (Chapter 10) — fit not crown. Classical copywork can serve formation and attention if it ends in something the child can read back. Neither is Rec 2 by itself.

What “done enough” looks like

Skill, not birthday. **Reading / Language Arts / English** — never a brand, never Little Thinkers English I.

Ages 5–7

- ☐ Forms today’s letter from memory several times with a clear model available.
- ☐ Writes a taught word carefully enough that an adult can read it.
- ☐ Spells a taught-pattern word with the taught letters in dictation.
- ☐ Writes one complete sentence (capital and end mark as taught) that can be read back.
- ☐ Does not stop at letter rows — applies letters in a word or note the same day.

Ages 8–10

- ☐ Above, with improving legibility and speed in short tasks.
- ☐ Spells common patterns and begins morphological spellings when taught.
- ☐ Combines or expands sentences on purpose.
- ☐ Types a short paragraph occasionally with parent support available, without dropping handwriting practice.
- ☐ Fixes one unclear sentence by changing word order or adding a missing part — not by underlining alone.

Exit ticket. “Say the sentence out loud — now write the first word carefully.” Then read back.

¹⁰⁶Hamsa Bastani et al., *PNAS* 122, no. 26 (2025): e2422633122. High-school mathematics; off-age caution for adult tools. Full AI rules in *The English Hour*. Keep accounts where the parent can open them.

When the checklist holds on a short set after a night, move on — into Chapter 8’s purposes with a hand that can help. Mix last week’s letter and pattern into warm-ups. Handwriting alone does not produce authors. It frees them to try.¹⁰⁷

Records grain. Date the letter practiced, a dictation sample, and one sentence read-back. Store under Reading, Language Arts, or English. Optional vendor handwriting or spelling placement can help you start a program — fit not crown; IES does not certify vendor placement as an RCT. Pennsylvania portfolios and other state samples want writing evidence; a dated sentence is honest evidence. A brand name is not the transcript line.

Life of the habit — not in this chapter’s done-enough. Session rhythm (revisit yesterday’s letter; mix last week’s pattern) lives in the English hour. Life-of-the-habit tips for writing purposes live in Chapter 8’s done-enough. Records live in Chapter 9. Do not invent a ninth habit chapter.

Limit line again. Moderate evidence means the panel found a workable base, not a kitchen guarantee.¹⁰⁸ Teach the burst. Demand the sentence. Then go write for someone who will read it.

Practice that builds learning — store and kitchen micro moves

Kitchen recipe step (in-home). Read one step together (*Stir the soup.*). Child writes *Stir* carefully as a label on a sticky note for the pot. Safety: stove is adult space; child writes away from burners. Skill: word in authentic context.

¹⁰⁷Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

¹⁰⁸Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018), Recommendation 3, moderate evidence (nine studies): teach handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing / word processing so transcription frees composition; short, frequent practice then authentic application; writing letters in isolation forever is insufficient. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

Street sign copy (out-of-home, careful). On a safe sidewalk stop, child air-writes the first letter of a walk signal or street name, then writes the word once on a notepad. Safety: traffic; no standing in roads; print as print — not a city sermon. Skill: formation from environmental print.

These micros do not replace the dictation lesson. They keep letters living outside the workbook.

Parent encouragement that stays specific. Prefer: “Your *g* sits on the line today — and you used it in *dog* on the note.” Avoid: “You’re so smart at writing” with no artifact. Prefer: “You said the sentence, then you caught the first word.” Avoid: sarcasm about messy pages. Messy pages that can be read are drafts. Unreadable rows that never become sentences are unfinished teaching.

What this chapter refuses, one more time. Grammar-worksheet-as-writing-program. Formation-without-application. Invented-spelling-as-forever. Keyboard-only at five. Cursive panic as curriculum. Detector shame. AI-written sentences pasted as theirs. Blank-page cruelty without transcription teaching — and the opposite cruelty of never composing.

Say the sentence out loud. Write the first word carefully. Read it back. That small loop, done often, is how transcription becomes a servant of meaning instead of a wall. When the loop holds after a night, on a short set, shown in a note someone actually reads, you are done enough with this week’s letter and pattern — ready to put sentences to work for real purposes in the next chapter. The postcard, the caption, and the short paragraph are waiting. Your job this week was to make sure the first word could land on the page without losing the idea that started in the mouth.

Revisit Tuesday’s letter on purpose. Mix last week’s pattern into Friday’s warm-up. Stop when the note is readable. That is enough for an ordinary English hour at this age. Then go write for a real reader again tomorrow.

Short bursts. Real notes. Read-backs. That loop keeps handwriting in service of meaning.

Chapter 8

Writing for purposes



Figure 10: A kitchen-table still-life: a postcard, a photo with a blank caption line, and a dated notebook open to a short planned paragraph. No people. No brand logos. No blank “just write” page as the whole program.

Why this matters

What do you want the reader to know?

That is not a five-paragraph essay prompt. It is not a cue to fill a blank page until the timer dings. It is the question that turns writing from a performance into a job. Someone will read this — dad on the fridge, grandma on a postcard, a sibling under a photo, maybe a co-op friend. The child decides what that person should know. Then they talk, maybe draw, maybe label, then write a sentence, then — when the band and the skill are ready — a short paragraph. The ladder is the teaching. The blank page is not.

This chapter is Graham and colleagues' Recommendation 2 — strong evidence from twenty-five studies: teach the writing process for a variety of purposes, with gradual release from you to them.¹⁰⁹ Plan, draft, share, evaluate, revise, edit. Purposes at elementary grain: tell what happened, explain how or why, persuade someone of a small claim, convey an experience. Recommendation 1 wants daily time to write; the evidence tier is minimal, and the panel still insists — while warning that time alone is insufficient.¹¹⁰ A grammar worksheet pack is not this program. An AI-written story pasted as theirs is not this program. A rigid factory that forces

¹⁰⁹Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018): Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommendation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

¹¹⁰Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018): Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommendation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

five paragraphs onto a six-year-old is not this program.

What this idea unlocks is a life of English for ordinary challenges: the thank-you, the caption, the retell someone else can follow, the short explanation of how the hamster's cage works. Chapter 7 freed the hand. Chapter 6 gave story bones. Chapter 5 gave words. This chapter puts them to work for a reader. Shared reading and kitchen talk motivate. They do not replace written composition.

You do not need to be a novelist. You do need to hear “just write” offered with no teaching, a grammar pack offered as writing, and a fluent machine paragraph offered as the child's voice — and to ask what the reader should know, then wait for a plan in talk before any pencil moves.

This week you can learn to replace “just write” with talk, plan, then one sentence. Today the student can tell what the reader should know, then write one sentence (ages 5–7) or a short paragraph (ages 8–10).

Picture two afternoons. On the first, a blank page and a sigh. On the second, a photo on the table, a spoken sentence, a drawn dog, the label *dog*, then *The dog got the ball.* written and read back. Same child. Different teaching. The second afternoon is this chapter.

For the parent: understand it yourself

Many adults were assigned writing as “go write about summer” with no model of how writers start. That rust is ordinary. Five minutes here, then the warm-up, is enough. The child still owns the words.

Everyday picture. A photo from the park. You ask: “What do you want the reader to know?” The child says, “The dog got the ball.” For ages 5–7, they draw the dog, label *dog* and *ball*, then write or dictate that sentence. For ages 8–10, they plan aloud three sentences: what happened, why it mattered, what happened next — then write a short paragraph, read it to you, change one word. The fridge or a postcard is the audience. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived.¹¹¹

¹¹¹Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018): Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommen-

Precise picture. The writing ladder by band: **talk** → **draw** → **label** → **sentence** → **short paragraph**. Ages 5–7 live mostly in talk, draw, label, and one dictated or scaffolded sentence. Ages 8–10 add short paragraphs and a named purpose. Gradual release: you model, you write together, they try with support, they try with less. Process is flexible, not a factory. A child may revise by swapping one word. That counts. Rec 4’s “community of writers” has minimal evidence; fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience.¹¹²

Purposes (guide Tables 4–5 grain): narrate/tell; inform/explain; opinion/persuade at kid scale (“We should walk the dog before dinner because...”); convey experience. Keep topics safe and ordinary — kitchen, park, library, pets, trips. No live controversy as the writing object.

Wrong answers you should be able to hear

1. *“Just write” on a blank page with no talk or plan.* Next move: locked question; oral sentence; then pencil.
2. *Grammar pack as the week’s writing.* Underlining is not composing. Use Chapter 7 for sentence tools; use this chapter for purposes.
3. *A fluent paragraph that appeared while a chatbot window was open and the child “helped.”* Performance, not learning. Unaided first. Tools for you after, per English hour.¹¹³

dation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

¹¹²Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018); Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommendation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

¹¹³Hamsa Bastani et al., “Generative AI without guardrails can harm learning: Evidence from high school mathematics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 26 (2025):

4. *Five-paragraph essay for a six-year-old.* Wrong grain. One sentence or a labelled drawing is honest.
5. *No audience ever — every piece dies in a folder.* Post one piece a week where a human will see it.
6. *Process as rigid stations that punish a child who needs to redraw before writing.* Flexible process. The ladder allows drawing.

Five-minute parent warm-up

Minute 1. Pick tomorrow's audience (fridge, grandma, sibling). Minute 2. Pick the purpose (tell / explain / thank / caption). Minute 3. Say aloud the locked question and one follow-up: "Who is the reader?" Minute 4. Decide the rung: label, sentence, or short paragraph. Minute 5. Write the sentence you will say: "What do you want the reader to know?"

Ready. They talk first.

How to teach it this week

English-hour shape, scaled to writing for purposes.

Warm-up (2–5 minutes). Oral: "What do you want the reader to know about yesterday's park?" Or reread last week's sentence.

Short model (3–7 minutes). You plan aloud for thirty seconds. You write one sentence or a tiny paragraph. You read it back and change one word. Stop.

Student attempt (8–15 minutes). Talk → (draw/label as needed) → write. Struggle before rescue. Pencil stays theirs. You may scribe once, then they write the next line (5–7).

One good question, then wait. "What do you want the reader to know?" Stahl/Rowe pause — not a literacy RCT.¹¹⁴

e2422633122. High-school math; assisted practice can look great while unaided skill does not grow. Not a 5–10 literacy trial. Full allows/bans for ages 5–10 live in *The English Hour*. COPPA covers children under 13; keep accounts parent-held.

¹¹⁴Robert J. Stahl, "Using 'Think-Time' and 'Wait-Time' Skillfully in the Classroom," ERIC Digest ED370885 (1994). Mary Budd Rowe, "Wait-Time and Rewards as Instructional Variables," ERIC ED061103 (1972), elementary science. Pause tools for "What do you want the reader to know?" — not a literacy RCT.

Mixed practice (5–10 minutes). Yesterday’s thank-you beside today’s caption. Or a narrative sentence beside an explain sentence.

Exit ticket (2–4 minutes). Read aloud what they wrote. Checklist: purpose clear? Readable? One revision optional. Done-enough is attempt-with-purpose, not publishable prose.

Exact wording

“What do you want the reader to know?” “Who is the reader?” “Say the sentence out loud first.” “What comes first?” “Read it back — did they get your point?” “You may revise one word.” “Show me with a sketch, then a sentence.”

Fade help. Day 1: you model plan + sentence. Day 2: they plan; you help spell taught words. Day 3: they write first; you ask only the locked question. Day 4: share with the real audience.

Stop talking after the model. After one question. After they have a plan in talk. Do not dictate their ideas as your prose.

Age-band moves: 5–7

Talk and draw heavily. Labels count. One sentence is a win. Dictation to you, then copy or rewrite, is gradual release — labelled hypothetical in research memos as kitchen-scale Rec 2, not a franchise RCT.¹¹⁵ Thank-you, caption, fridge note. No multi-page essays.

¹¹⁵Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018): Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommendation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

Age-band moves: 8–10

Short paragraphs with named purpose. Plan aloud (bullets or spoken). Draft. Share. Revise one thing. Edit one taught convention. Informational explain and opinion at kid scale. Library craft paragraph about problem/solution. Typing allowed after thought exists on paper or in talk. If transcription collapses, return to Chapter 7 rungs without dropping purpose talk.

First try-it today. Audience on the table. Locked question. Oral sentence. Write it (or label + sentence). Read back.

Sample week. Mon: caption photo (5–7 label/sentence; 8–10 three sentences). Tue: revise yesterday’s one word + share. Wed: thank-you note. Thu: postcard out-of-home. Fri: diagnostic (blank page freeze) + done-enough including habit tips below. Twenty-minute day? Keep talk + one sentence.

Worked hour sketches and more wording

Sketch A — ages 5–7, twenty-five minutes, caption purpose. Warm-up: reread yesterday’s fridge note (2). Model: talk about a new photo, write one sentence aloud as you write (5). Attempt: child talks, draws, labels, writes one sentence (12). Share with sibling (4). Exit: read back (2).

Sketch B — ages 8–10, forty minutes, explain purpose. Warm-up: morphology or spelling burst from Ch 7 (3). Plan aloud for “how we feed the fish” (5). Draft short paragraph (15). Share and revise one unclear sentence (10). Exit: name the purpose in one spoken line (2). Optional type of final three sentences later in the day (parent in room).

Sketch C — multi-age park day write-up. Shared experience. Younger: labelled picture + sentence on a postcard. Older: paragraph with first/next/last. Same picnic table. Different done-enough.

More exact wording you can steal

On purpose: “Are we telling what happened, explaining how, thanking, or saying what we think?” “If grandma reads this, what is the one thing she must not miss?”

On process: “Plan out loud for twenty seconds. Go.” “Draft means get it down — messy is allowed.” “Share means read it to a person.” “Revise means change an idea or a word so the reader gets it.” “Edit means fix a taught spelling or end mark

— one thing.”

On ladder: “Say it. Draw it if you need. Label. Now catch the sentence.” “You already told me. Your job is to trap those words on paper.”

On refusing machine authorship: “The window can help me after you try. It does not write your piece.”

Gradual release in four sits (illustration). Sit 1: You write a thank-you while thinking aloud; they help choose one detail. Sit 2: Shared pen — you write the first sentence, they write the second. Sit 3: They write both; you ask only the locked question and wait. Sit 4: They write and deliver without a rehearsal audience, then tell you how it went.

Dose honesty. Graham Rec 1 wants time; the tier is minimal.¹¹⁶ Your home is not a ninety-minute writers’ workshop block. Fifteen focused minutes with a real audience outruns an hour of prompts nobody will read. If the day only holds ten minutes, keep talk + one sentence.

Practice that actually builds learning

In-home try-it: Caption the photo

Time. 10–15 minutes. **Materials.** Photo; paper; pencil. **Safety.** Family photos only; no strangers’ faces scraped online. **The fun.** Remembering the day. **The skill.** Ladder rungs + purpose (tell/convey).

How: Locked question. Draw/label if 5–7. Sentences/paragraph if 8–10. Read to a family member.

¹¹⁶Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018): Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommendation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

In-home try-it: Dictation note to family

Time. 8–12 minutes. **Materials.** Paper; fridge. **Safety.** Ordinary. **The fun.** Secret message that becomes public on the fridge. **The skill.** Authentic audience (Rec 2b / Rec 4 grain).¹¹⁷

How: Child tells you the sentence. For 5–7 you may write once; they copy or write a second. For 8–10 they write first. Post it.

In-home try-it: Plan-aloud then three-sentence retell (mainly 8–10)

Time. 12–15 minutes. **Materials.** Familiar story from Chapter 6; notebook. **Safety.** Ordinary. **The fun.** Being the storyteller on paper. **The skill.** Process: plan → draft; story sense into writing.

How: Who wanted what (oral). Plan three sentences. Write. Read back. Revise one word.

Out-of-home try-it: Postcard from a trip (or a park day)

Time. 10–15 minutes. **Materials.** Postcard; pencil; stamp later. **Safety.** Stay with family; don't lose supplies in wind. **The fun.** Real mail. **The skill.** Purpose + audience beyond the kitchen.

How: Locked question. One careful sentence (Ch 7) or short paragraph. Address with help.

¹¹⁷Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018): Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommendation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

Out-of-home try-it: Thank-you after a visit

Time. 8–10 minutes before leaving or that evening. **Materials.** Card or napkin. **Safety.** Courtesy; no forcing shy children to perform for strangers. **The fun.** Making a host smile. **The skill.** Persuade/thank as purpose.

How: “What do you want them to know you liked?” Write it. Deliver.

Out-of-home try-it: Library craft paragraph (8–10)

Time. 15 minutes at library or after. **Materials.** One book; notebook. **Safety.** Library manners. **The fun.** Opinions allowed if kind and evidenced. **The skill.** Explain problem/solution in writing.

How: Read. Oral who-wanted-what. Write short paragraph. Optional share with librarian if appropriate — never demand a stranger’s time.

Talk box

Opening (locked): “What do you want the reader to know?”

Follow-ups: 1. Meaning: “Who is the reader? Why does this matter to them?” 2. Representation: “Say the sentence out loud first. Sketch if you need to.” 3. Type/purpose: “Are we telling, explaining, thanking, or giving an opinion?” 4. Check: “Read it back — did they get your point?” 5. Revise: “You may revise one word. Try it another way.”

Wait. Slow three. Second wait after they stop. If mid-sentence drafting, do not cut them off. Look at the audience object (postcard, photo) if silence is hard.

Stuck silence usually means. No audience named. Wait-time zero. Blank-page fear. They think writing means fill blanks. Ideas empty because topic is fake. Transcription overload. They wait for you to invent the story. Pose, wait, return to talk and draw — do not paste a machine story as theirs.

Blocked vs mixed

New purpose (thank-you): stay with thank-you notes for a few days. Then mix caption + thank-you. Process steps can be blocked (today we only plan orally) then mixed (plan and draft same day). A random prompt pile with no teaching is not mixed practice — it is abandonment.

One incorrect example to diagnose

Parent says “Write a story” and leaves. Child stares. Parent later pastes a chatbot tale into the notebook. The page looks done. The child learned that writing is something adults and machines finish. Next move: delete the paste from the record of *their* work. Ask the locked question about a photo on the table. Talk. Draw. One sentence in their hand. Celebrate the sentence.

In-home try-it: Opinion at kid scale (8–10; oral ok at 5–7)

Time. 10–12 minutes. **Materials.** Two real options (walk now vs later; which book to renew). **Safety.** Kind disagreement; no mockery. **The fun.** Being persuasive without a courtroom. **The skill.** Opinion/persuade purpose with a because.

How: Locked question framed as “What do you want them to decide?” Child says claim + because. Writes one or three sentences. Share with the decision-maker.

In-home try-it: How-to card

Time. 12–15 minutes. **Materials.** Index card; a job the child can do (water plant; set forks). **Safety.** No stove/knife jobs without adult hands on the dangerous parts. **The fun.** Teaching the household. **The skill.** Explain/inform; sequence from Ch 6.

How: Oral steps. Write first/next/last (labels at 5–7; sentences at 8–10). Post near the job.

Connecting without reprinting

Chapter 1’s full oral sentences are the raw material. Chapter 7’s careful first word is the bridge. Chapter 6’s who-wanted-what becomes written retell. Chapter 5’s taught words show up when the reader needs *fierce* or *shelter*. The English hour’s AI box stays in force: unaided first; parent account; no secret friend. This book is not a reprint of *English for Homeschooling* high-school composition, and not a sequel to *Critical Thinking Skills for Little Thinkers*. One pointer each, if needed, then teach 5–10 writing jobs.

Vendor fits, not crowns. Some families like a gentle writing-conversation approach; others like structured outlines at the age-labelled edge. Chapter 10 names fits. Neither replaces talk→write for a reader this week.

For the student

Writing is how you tell a reader something they were not inside your head to hear. First you decide what they should know. Then you say it. Then you put it on paper — maybe with a picture and a label first.

Here is the move. Name the reader. Answer: what do you want them to know? Say the sentence out loud. Write it (or draw and label, then write). Read it back. Change one word if you want. Give it to the reader when you can.

Tiny worked example. Reader: Grandpa. Know: we saw a red bird. Sentence: “We saw a red bird at the park.” Read back. Revise: “We saw a bright red bird at the park.”

Try 1. Pick a photo. Tell what the reader should know. Write one sentence (or a short paragraph if you are ready).

Try 2. Write a thank-you for something real. Deliver it.

Explain it back. Teach someone your steps: reader → know → say → write → read back.

Challenge. Ages 5–7: post a labelled picture with one sentence on the fridge. Ages 8–10: write three sentences that explain how to do a simple job at home, then revise one unclear word.

You may draw first. You may change your mind. The words should be yours.

More tries

Try 3. Explain on paper how to make a sandwich you actually make. Use first, next, last. Read it to someone while they pretend to follow — fix any step that confuses them.

Try 4. Write two sentences about the same photo: one that *tells what happened*, one that *tells how you felt*. Notice how the purpose changed the words.

If writing feels heavy, climb down one rung. Draw. Label. Say the sentence. Write only the first word carefully (Chapter 7), then the rest. Climbing down is smart. Staying stuck on a blank page is optional.

Your reader is a real person. Write like you mean to help them understand — not like you mean to fill lines. Filling lines is a trick schools sometimes teach.

Knowing is the real job.

If it isn't clicking

Diagnostic 1 — Freeze at blank page. Next move: remove blankness. Put a photo or object down. Talk first. Draw. Label. One sentence only.

Diagnostic 2 — Fluent talk, nothing on paper. Next move: scribe one sentence, then they write the next. Or record oral plan on paper as bullets they expand. Check Chapter 7 for transcription bottlenecks.

Diagnostic 3 — Long copy from a book or window, little original thought. Next move: close the model after one mentor sentence. Require their own about a lived object. Ban paste-from-chat during the attempt.

Slow down to labels and single sentences until success is normal.

Go ahead when sentences are easy — short paragraphs, named purposes, light revise/edit.

Human tutor: if writing avoidance is extreme across months despite tiny rungs, or language seems impaired across speaking and writing, ask a trusted teacher or specialist. Bring dated samples of talk-to-writing attempts. This book does not diagnose.

Correct without crushing: “I hear a great oral sentence. Let’s catch the first word on paper. You may change your mind about the ending.”

More branches

Diagnostic 4 — Every piece sounds like a list with no point. Next move: return to the locked question before drafting. Require one sentence that states the point, then details. For retells, drag Chapter 6’s want/problem into the plan aloud.

Diagnostic 5 — Revision means recopying neater without changing meaning. Next move: ban recopying for a week. Revision = change one word or add one because. Neat copy can wait until after the idea move.

Diagnostic 6 — Child refuses audience (“nobody can see it”). Next move: shrink audience to stuffed animal or diary for two days, then fridge. Private draft-

ing is fine; never-sharing forever blocks Rec 2's share step. Negotiate a safe first reader.

Diagnostic 7 — Parent over-edits into adult voice. Next move: you may fix one taught spelling. You may ask a question about clarity. You may not replace their sentences with yours and call it their portfolio. Pride belongs to their attempt.

When sessions are kind and short and still stuck after many weeks, get a human second pair of eyes. Bring three dated samples across a month, including one oral plan you wrote down while they talked. Patterns show up in samples more clearly than in memory.

Practice extras — walk and store

Menu or flyer sentence (out-of-home). On a wait-for-food bench, child writes one sentence: what they want the server or parent to know (*I would like water please.*). Safety: courtesy; no criticizing staff; print as print. Skill: purpose under time pressure.

Museum exit line (out-of-home). Before leaving, one sentence on a notepad: what they want tomorrow's breakfast audience to know about one exhibit. Safety: don't block exits; don't touch exhibits. Skill: informational convey.

These extras keep writing tied to life. They do not replace the planned English-hour draft.

Tools, including AI

Point back to the English-hour AI box — hard. You may ask a tool to explain *to you* gradual release for a named purpose; generate mentor sentence patterns you will voice; draft a SCRIPT after their try; diagnose a photo of *paper only* (crop faces).

You may not: write the child's story; "fix to an A"; photo-to-key a prompt packet; unsupervised chatbot partner; rewrite-on-demand so they do not compose; detector-grade a child's paragraph; hand them an agent as author.

Ages 5–7: no live open chat as partner. Ages 8–10: still parent in the room; unaided first; SCRIPT after. Bastani is off-age caution: assisted practice can look

great while unaided skill does not grow.¹¹⁸ A fluent filled page from a machine is performance, not their English.

Paper tools: photos, postcards, dated notebook, simple plan checklist (reader / know / first sentence). Vendor writing programs (Chapter 10) by fit and age label — not crowns.

Kitchen examples

Allowed after a try (parent account). You describe their draft in your own words and ask how a parent might prompt a clearer because-clause — then *you* decide what to say. You generate three isomorphic thank-you openers for *you* to model on a different day. You ask for a child-friendly explanation of “revise vs edit” for your own clarity.

Blocked. Pasting “write a story about a dragon in the style of a nine-year-old” and putting it in their notebook. Photo of the worksheet answered by the window. Child alone with a “writing buddy” chat. Detector score on their thank-you note. Certificate of young author printed from a tool.

The eight-to-ten band can type prompts quickly. That ability raises the Bastani-shaped risk: practice looks amazing with the window open and shrinks when it closes.¹¹⁹ Keep unaided first as a habit, not a slogan.

Paper still wins most days: photo, postcard, pencil, notebook. The tool is optional. The reader is not.

¹¹⁸Hamsa Bastani et al., “Generative AI without guardrails can harm learning: Evidence from high school mathematics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 122, no. 26 (2025): e2422633122. High-school math; assisted practice can look great while unaided skill does not grow. Not a 5–10 literacy trial. Full allows/bans for ages 5–10 live in *The English Hour*. COPPA covers children under 13; keep accounts parent-held.

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What “done enough” looks like

Skill, not birthday. Titles a stranger can read: **Reading / Language Arts / English**. Never a brand. Never Little Thinkers English I. A “grade 3 writing workbook” is a publisher’s scope, not a legal grade, and not a transcript line.

Ages 5–7

- ☐ Names a reader and what that reader should know (oral).
- ☐ Talks before writing.
- ☐ Draws and labels when needed.
- ☐ Writes or carefully copies one complete sentence that can be read back.
- ☐ Shares at least one piece with a real audience in the week.

Ages 8–10

- ☐ Plans aloud before drafting.
- ☐ Writes a short paragraph with a named purpose (tell, explain, thank, opinion).
- ☐ Reads back and revises at least one word or sentence.
- ☐ Edits one taught convention without turning the hour into a grammar pack.
- ☐ Shares with an audience beyond the notebook.

Exit ticket. “What do you want the reader to know?” Then show the sentence or paragraph. Right-enough with purpose, or wrong-with-a-reason for tomorrow — not a percentile.

Life of the habit (this heading only — not a ninth chapter)

Writing for purposes becomes ordinary when the hour has a rhythm you can keep on busy weeks. These tips live here, in done-enough, on purpose. They are not a separate teaching chapter titled “life of the habit.” Session rhythm also lives in the English hour; the file you keep lives in records.

- **Revisit next Tuesday.** Reread last week’s postcard or caption. Change one word. Same purpose, warmer skill.
- **Mix last week’s purpose.** If last week was thank-you, warm up with one thank-you sentence before this week’s explain piece.
- **Tiny often beats rare huge.** Three sentences on four days outruns one painful “big story” on Sunday night.

- **Audience on a calendar.** One share per week is enough: fridge, mail, co-op, sibling.
- **Stop.** When the checklist is mostly yes on a short set, two ways (oral plan + written piece), holding after a night, move on. Do not grind neatness forever.
- **Not a diploma.** A path through elementary English is the promise. A certificate of authorship is not. A percentile is not.
- **Not NAEP.** Your exit ticket is kitchen grain. National scores describe school populations; they are not your child's report.
- **Return to talk when stuck.** The ladder still has rungs below. Going back to draw-and-label is teaching, not failure.
- **Keep code and transcription warm.** Mix a Chapter 7 burst into writing weeks so the hand does not fray.
- **Keep story sense warm.** A Chapter 6 who-wanted-what makes a better written retell.
- **Tools stay parent-hosted.** The habit is the child's attempt first — not a secret friend in a browser.
- **Date the notebook.** Future-you (and Chapter 9) needs the date, the purpose, and one line about what was hard.

When most boxes are yes, you are done enough with this week's purpose writing. Mix. Revisit. Share. Stop. That is the life of the habit at ages 5–10 — ordinary English for ordinary readers who matter.

Records grain. Date the piece, name the purpose and audience, staple or tape a photo of the postcard if the original mails away. Oral reading check and writing sample in Chapter 9 sit under Reading / Language Arts / English. Optional vendor placement is a starting tool, not this checklist. State portfolios that ask for writing samples want something like what you already have in the dated notebook — not a brand title.

Multi-age peace. Celebrate different rungs on the same day without ranking siblings. “You labelled three things and wrote a sentence” and “you wrote a paragraph and revised” can both be done-enough.

Limit line. Strong evidence for teaching process and purposes comes from school studies synthesized for elementary grades.¹²⁰ This is a useful study base, not a

¹²⁰Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, June 2012; revised 2018): Recommendation 1, provide daily time to write, minimal evidence (time alone is insufficient; the panel still recommends); Recommendation 2, teach the writing process

promise that every home will see the same result. Ask the question anyway. Wait for talk. Let them write for someone who will read.

Why purposes beat carnival prompts

A prompt about a carnival the child never attended teaches invention theater. A prompt about the dog that stole the sock this morning teaches composition from lived material. Graham's purposes want real communicative jobs.¹²¹ Homeschool life is rich with those jobs if you name them: the lost library book note, the weekend plan for dad, the labelled seed jar, the postcard from grandma's house. You do not need a prompt book to start. You need a reader and the locked question.

Invention is allowed — stories can be imagined — but even imagined stories benefit from plan talk and a reader who will hear them read aloud. The refusal is not “never fiction.” The refusal is “blank page, no teaching, no audience, no ladder.”

Sibling and energy notes

If one child writes fast and another bleeds energy at the first word, do not make the fast child the standard aloud. Give the slower writer the photo and the talk box first while the faster writer plans a paragraph in another room or on the floor with a clipboard. Reconvene to share. Sharing is the community grain you can afford without a classroom writing workshop franchise.

for a variety of purposes with gradual release, strong evidence (25 studies); Recommendation 3, handwriting/spelling/sentence/typing foundations, moderate evidence; Recommendation 4, create an engaged community of writers, minimal evidence — fridge, grandma, and co-op still count as audience. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/writing_pg_062612.pdf. Authentic purpose beats a carnival prompt the child never lived. This is a useful study base, not a promise that every home will see the same result.

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Friday illustration (labelled, not a mandate). Diagnostic wrong: blank-page freeze. Classification: no audience, no talk. Next week's plan: photo on table Monday–Wednesday; locked question every day; one sentence only until success feels boring; Thursday postcard; Friday share + habit checklist. Write that plan in the dated notebook. Done-enough is not a vibe. It is boxes you can tick after a night's sleep.

You have now walked vocabulary, story sense, transcription, and purposes across Stage 3. The path through elementary English continues in records and resources — still without a diploma promise, still without a brand on the transcript line. For tonight, one reader. One thing they should know. One sentence in a child's hand.

Hearing “just write” as a wrong turn is part of your fluency as a teacher of English at home. Hearing a grammar pack as the whole program is the same fluency. Hearing a machine paragraph as the child's voice is the same fluency. You do not scold yourself for years of blank-page assignments in your own schooling. You change tomorrow's table: photo, question, talk, sentence, reader. That change is enough to start the habit the done-enough list describes — revisit, mix, share, stop — without pretending a diploma hides in the notebook.

What do you want the reader to know? Ask it. Wait. Write. Share. That is Chapter 8. Keep the pencil theirs. Keep the account yours. Keep the audience real. Ordinary English for ordinary challenges — done enough for this week's writing page now.

Talk first. Write second. Share with someone who will actually read the page. Keep going until the reader smiles. That is enough.

Chapter 9

Records

The English *work* can be as ordinary as a kitchen label and as serious as any classroom hour. The *credit* is a family claim until a stranger can use it — a receiving third-grade teacher, a Pennsylvania evaluator, a New York quarterly reader, a later high-school transcript the family will someday write. That stranger will not have sat at your table. They will have a page.

This chapter is how you make that page at ages 5–10. Lawful, honest, and readable to a stranger are three jobs. Keep them in view.

This week you can date one oral reading check and one short writing sample in a notebook so a stranger could almost read them. Today the student tries the page. You write the line.



Figure 11: An open notebook, a dated line with a miscue note and three handwritten sentences, a pencil, a library book closed with the spine title unreadable. No diploma seal. No grade. No brand. No child.

What you are making

You are making a **dated notebook of English / language arts**, with the task named, plus an **oral reading check**, plus a **short writing sample**, plus optional publisher placement to start a purchased program or restart after a gap. You are not making a national diploma. You are not making Little Thinkers English I.

There is often **no** elementary transcript. When a stranger asks, the title is **Reading, Language Arts**, or **English**. Never a brand. Never All About Reading Level 3. Never Logic of English Foundations B. Never IEW. Never Brave Writer Dart. Never Spelling You See Americana. Never Handwriting Without Tears Grade 2. Never Writing Road to Reading. Never **Little Thinkers English I**. The dated

notebook, the oral reading check, and the short writing sample live *inside* Reading, Language Arts, or English.

There is no federal homeschool diploma and no national English credit at this age.¹²² Texas, North Carolina, and New York do not issue one. Pennsylvania’s supervisor or approved-organization diploma after listed graduation courses is a high-school object, not a five-year-old’s file. Virginia’s list of subjects is a list, not a transcript. A parent-issued diploma can be a real piece of paper later. It is not a registrar’s national reading credit now.

Two readers, even at 5–10, if anyone outside the kitchen asks. The **state**, in a thick jurisdiction: an IHIP, an affidavit, a portfolio, a test in reading and language arts. A **later stranger**: a public school on transfer; a private school; a future high-school transcript. State compliance is not an English diploma. A thick Pennsylvania portfolio can be in statutory compliance with reading and writing samples and no franchise score. A silent Texas year can be lawful with no file at all, provided bona fide written reading, spelling, and grammar are happening. Neither fact is a reason to skip the moves. Both facts are a reason not to fake a credit.

A family that invents “Little Thinkers English I, 1.0, A” for a seven-year-old has created a slogan. A receiving teacher cannot map it. Athletic eligibility and college exams are the wrong object for this book. They belong to an older year and to *English for Homeschooling*. A parent of a nine-year-old who is already anxious about core-course worksheets has been handed the wrong timeline.

The national survey of homeschool subjects offered **basic reading / reading skills**, **spelling**, and **English or literature** checkboxes. In 2016, basic reading was taught that year to 92 percent of K–2-equivalent homeschoolers and 83 percent of the 3–5 band; spelling to 86 and 85 percent; English or literature to 64 and 83 percent.¹²³

¹²²No national homeschool diploma: Texas Education Agency Home Schooling and Alternative Schooling pages (state does not award a homeschool diploma); North Carolina DNPE (the home school issues any later diploma; the State does not); Pennsylvania 24 P.S. § 13-1327.1(d.1) diploma is a high-school object; New York 8 NYCRR 100.10 (home instruction does not yield a local or Regents diploma); Virginia list of subjects is a list, not a transcript. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026.

¹²³Jiashan Cui and Rachel Hanson, *Homeschooling in the United States: Results from the 2012 and 2016 Parent and Family Involvement Survey*, NCES 2020-001, Table 9: basic reading/reading skills taught that year, 92 percent in K–2, 83 percent in 3–5, 64 percent of all K–12-equivalent homeschoolers; spelling 86 / 85 / 64; English or literature 64 / 83 / 80. Quote those rows. Arithmetic, computer science, history, inquiry, and foreign-language percents from the same table are other subjects. The 2023 First Look (NCES 2024-113) did not republish subject-taught tables.

Informal learning does not arrive as “Language Arts, 1.0, B+.” If a thick state later wants a log, the translation is: name the task, date it, keep a sample.

Titles a stranger can read

Print these and only these as elementary names, if a name is needed at all:

Reading / Language Arts / English. Mathematics or Arithmetic. Science. Social Studies / History (if taught). **Art, Music, Physical Education.**

Those names travel. They are the names public elementary reports already use. They are the names homeschool elementary files, when they exist, already follow.

Never a brand. Never Little Thinkers English I.

The brand, if used at all, sits in a parenthetical or in a description: “Language Arts (letter tiles; All About Reading Level 2 as the material; library read-alouds; three sentences about the park).” Combining objects is allowed. Combining does not mint a new title. Library book plus letter tiles plus one purchased lesson is still Reading or Language Arts.

A publisher’s “grade 2 reading workbook” is a scope, not a legal grade, and not a transcript line. Placement is by skill, not birthday. Instruction for a six-year-old need not be “first grade.”¹²⁴

Here is an illustration, labelled as such, not a reported family:

6 September 2026. Oral reading: decodable story 4. Task: digraphs.
Child read 48 words; missed *ship*, *when*; rebuilt with tiles; wrote three sentences about the park.

That is a record a parent, a Pennsylvania evaluator, or a New York quarterly narrative can actually use. It is not a credit. It is not a sitting on a college inventory. It is not a diploma.

¹²⁴New York State Education Department practice: instruction for a six-year-old need not be “first grade.” CCSS-ELA: the standards do not dictate curriculum or teaching methods; what students can learn depends on what they have learned before. Map, not a homeschool statute. National Reading Panel readiness language and Foorman et al. (2016) progression: letter–sound prerequisites can be taught; “too young for phonics” is not a teaching calendar by itself.

The law is a pattern, not one form

U.S. homeschooling is state law. There is no federal English office. Dates and subject lists change. Read your current department page and the statute it cites. A color-coded chart on a membership site is not your statute. Five official-page examples show the range. **None of them requires a critical-thinking course.** Reading, English, or language arts is the usual required or tested elementary object.¹²⁵

Texas. The Agency does not regulate home-school programs. Parents follow a bona fide written curriculum: **reading, spelling, grammar**, math, and good citizenship. *Leeper*, restated on TEA's Alternative Schooling page, names reading, spelling, and grammar. Critical thinking is not named. The state does not award a homeschool diploma. At 5–10 there may be no external reader at all. The kitchen still benefits from a dated notebook if the family later transfers. Transfer is treated like an unaccredited private school. “We did All About Reading Level 2” is not, by itself, a public-school credit. A district may test for placement.

North Carolina. Notice of Intent. Nine calendar months. Each year, a nationally standardized test in **English grammar, reading, spelling**, and mathematics — not a franchise, and not critical thinking. The home school, not the State, issues any later diploma. A five-hour day is a recommendation, not the statute, and not an English-minutes table. DNPE tells the family not to name the homeschool after a curriculum brand. A thinking-about-stories notebook is extra. It is not the annual test. The annual battery is compliance. It is not this book's teaching check, not NAEP, and not a percentile promise.

Pennsylvania. Elementary **shall include English (spelling, reading, writing)**, along with arithmetic, science, geography, history of the United States and Penn-

¹²⁵Texas *Leeper*, restated on TEA Alternative Schooling: **reading, spelling, grammar**, math, good citizenship. North Carolina DNPE: annual nationally standardized test includes **English grammar, reading, spelling**, and mathematics. Pennsylvania 24 P.S. § 13-1327.1: elementary shall include **English (spelling, reading, writing)**; portfolio tests in grades 3, 5, and 8 in reading/language arts and mathematics. New York 8 NYCRR 100.10(e)(2)(i): grades 1–6 require **reading, spelling, writing, English language**; a unit is 6,480 minutes; 900 hours grades 1–6; quarterly reports; annual assessment named tests or narrative; composite above the 33rd percentile or one year of growth. Virginia § 22.1-254.1: parent writes a list of subjects; evidence of progress by 1 August; children under six as of 30 September exempt from evidence-of-progress. None of the five requires a named critical-thinking course. This chapter is not legal advice. The parent reads their own statute.

sylvania, civics, safety, health, physical education, music, and art. No critical thinking. No “Little Thinkers English.” Portfolio tests in grades 3, 5, and 8 are in **reading/language arts** and mathematics, not a franchise sitting. Drop samples into the log of materials. Do not invent a parallel “Little Thinkers” portfolio. 180 days or 900 hours elementary are whole-program hours, not an English-minutes table.¹²⁶ A supervisor diploma is Pennsylvania’s, and it is high school.

Virginia. Notice by 15 August, a parent-written **list of subjects**, and evidence of progress by 1 August: a composite score at or above the fourth stanine, or an equivalent SAT, ACT, or PSAT score, or an evaluation or college transcript the superintendent accepts. English is not named as required because no subject is named as required; the parent writes the list. Reading or Language Arts is the ordinary word to write. Critical thinking is not named. Those sittings are not this book’s short check. Children under six as of 30 September are exempt from the evidence-of-progress subsection. A publisher placement test does not, by itself, satisfy Virginia’s fourth-stanine object unless the parent has chosen a nationally normed battery.

New York. Letter of intent, an Individualized Home Instruction Plan, quarterly reports, and an annual assessment. Grades 1–6 required subjects include **reading, spelling, writing, English language**, arithmetic, geography, U.S. history, science, health, music, visual arts, physical education. Reading, spelling, writing, and English language are named. Critical thinking is not named. Put the work under those titles in the quarterlies: material covered in each IHIP subject. A unit is 6,480 minutes; a library read-aloud can be named under reading. Letter-tile phonics can be named under reading. Home instruction does not yield a local or Regents diploma. Annual assessment: named commercially published tests or, in some grades, a written narrative. Composite above the 33rd percentile or one year of growth is a probation threshold in that regulation. It is not a goal this parent manual advertises as success.

If you live in none of those states, you still have a department page. Open it.

¹²⁶Hours of elementary English instruction in 2022–23 are not in the opened First Look subject/time tables. North Carolina’s five-hour day and Pennsylvania’s 900 elementary hours are whole-program objects, not an English-minutes table. Publisher “20 minutes a day” claims are organization copy, not NCES.

What a short check is

Four objects, not a battery.

1. **A dated notebook.** Date, task named, what the child read or wrote, one sentence of what happened. Under **Reading, Language Arts, or English** if a title is needed. A check that the child cannot yet read should be oral or built with tiles. A five-year-old's check is sounds, talk, and a label, not a silent twenty-item page.
2. **An oral reading check.** The child reads aloud. You note miscues that matter for tomorrow's reteach — “missed *ship*; retaught /sh/” — and one ordinary comprehension sentence. Rate only if useful. Not a stopwatch ceremony. Not a percentile identity. Guided oral reading with feedback is the grain; a kitchen Friday is not a commercial fluency battery.
3. **A short writing sample.** A few sentences, or a short paragraph appropriate to the child's transcription skill, with a purpose named when you can (tell, explain, thank, remember). Handwriting legibility, spelling in use, and a complete sentence are enough at the young end. A short paragraph with a clear purpose is enough at the older end. Not a five-paragraph essay for a six-year-old.
4. **Optional publisher placement** (the organization sells the test). All About Reading and All About Spelling placement; Logic of English Foundations and Essentials placement; Spelling You See skills-based placement; readiness checklists other publishers describe. Use to start a purchased program, or to restart after a gap. IES does not certify them as randomised trials. They place by skill. They do not license a national percentile. They do not satisfy North Carolina unless the chosen test is a nationally standardized achievement test covering English grammar, reading, spelling, *and* mathematics — a publisher reading placement PDF generally is not that battery. They do not satisfy Virginia's fourth-stanine object by themselves.

A parent who feels rusty on how they were taught to read can turn the check into a performance with a tight jaw. The useful move is still: date the work, keep one miscue you can reteach, and leave the pencil in the child's hand while they try.

What a short check is not

NAEP. A percentile promise. A homemade high-stakes battery. Homeschooling was 3.4 percent of K–12 students in 2022–23 (~1.765 million); NAEP Grade 4 reading at 31 percent at or above Proficient is a school-population figure, not a homeschool census and not this kitchen’s score.¹²⁷ Terra Nova as the kitchen model. MAP as an identity. CLEP. AP. SAT. SAT Subject Tests — discontinued; U.S. sittings ended January 2021, last international administrations May and June 2021.¹²⁸ A convenience-sample homeschool scoreboard. This book does not reprint that fight.

NCAA, Common App, and SAT Reading and Writing are the older book. Dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, and credit-by-exam are not this chapter. Scores help a stranger believe a *high-school* transcript. They do not replace a dated oral reading check at seven.

If they transfer

Transfer is a local placement problem. A brand in the title column will not be read as Reading or Language Arts. Another reason the title should already look like Reading, Language Arts, or English.

A receiving teacher who sees “Little Thinkers English I, A” has been given a slogan. A teacher who sees “Language Arts — dated notebook; oral reading of decodable story 4; missed *ship* and *when*, rebuilt with tiles; three sentences about the park” has been given a year they can place.

¹²⁷NCES 2024-113: 3.4 percent homeschooled in 2022–23, about 1,765,000; K–2 4.0 percent; 3–5 3.6 percent. Instruction-at-home 5.2 percent is a different bucket (homeschool or full-time virtual). NAEP 2024 Grade 4 reading: 31 percent at or above NAEP Proficient — NAEP school population, not a homeschool census. NCES has never published a nationally representative homeschool NAEP reading score.

¹²⁸College Board, 19 January 2021 announcement: SAT Subject Tests discontinued; U.S. sittings ended immediately; last international administrations May and June 2021. No CLEP for elementary. No AP at this age. Those objects belong to *English for Homeschooling*.

Place by skill, not birthday

Can the child say the first sound and point to the letter? If not, they are still in the sounds-and-letters chapter, whatever their age. Can they blend a short word so the letters match what they say? If not, they are still in blending and connected reading. Can they read a known page accurately before anyone times it? If not, they are still before fluency-as-speed. Can they form letters and spell enough common words to free a sentence? If not, handwriting and spelling are still freeing composition. High-sounding *titles* cannot skip those moves. A ten-year-old may still be in digraphs. A six-year-old may already write a clear sentence for a purpose. Skill first. Publishers opened for this book say the same in their own placement language: levels do not correspond with grade levels; most students start spelling at Level 1 regardless of age; Foundations and Essentials carry age bands that still place by need.¹²⁹

What to keep in the file

1. A dated notebook: date, task named, what the child read or wrote, one miscue or one sticky spelling you will reteach. Under **Reading, Language Arts, or English**.
2. Oral reading checks from the week, not a crate of every worksheet.
3. Short writing samples — a few honest pages, not every draft.
4. Optional publisher placement, if you used one to start or restart a program — as a placement, not as a yearly IQ.
5. State objects that actually apply: a North Carolina annual English-grammar-reading-spelling-inclusive battery if you are in North Carolina; a Pennsylvania grade 3, 5, or 8 reading/language arts portfolio sample if you are in Pennsylvania; a New York quarterly under reading, spelling, writing, or English language if you are in New York; a Virginia list that includes Reading or Language Arts if you write the list. Compliance stays in its lane.

Life of the habit, as the file you keep, lives here: date the work; name the skill;

¹²⁹All About Learning Press placement page, accessed 6 September 2026: level numbers do not correspond with grade levels; most students start All About Spelling Level 1 regardless of age. Logic of English Foundations (ages 4–7) / Essentials (ages 8+) comparison and placement pages, accessed 6 September 2026: place by age band and need. Spelling You See: skills-based levels, not grade-based. Placement tests are tools the organizations sell. IES / WWC does not certify them as randomised trials.

keep one wrong turn you can reteach. Revisit next Tuesday is a move in Chapter 8. The notebook is how Tuesday leaves a trace.

A path through elementary English / language arts is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not.

Chapter 10

Resources

This chapter names programs families actually meet. It does not rank them. It does not sell them. It is a fit list so you can match an object to the table you already have: how much of the teaching you will carry, whether a kitchen can use it tonight, what it costs in money and in minutes, and whether the child will still talk, blend, and write.

A “grade 2 reading workbook” is a publisher’s scope, not a legal grade. Placement is by skill. The record, as Chapter 9 said, still says **Reading, Language Arts**, or **English**. Combining two honest objects does not mint a new title. Library read-aloud plus letter tiles plus one lesson from a purchased program is still Language Arts.

Independent trials of these programs *in homeschool* remain scarce. Ratings from the What Works Clearinghouse, where they exist, are school-side. They are not a kitchen bake-off. Choose by fit: whether you can hear a picture guess offered as word reading in that program’s pictures, whether the student will generate the work, how much script you want to carry, budget, age label.

This week you can name *why* tonight’s object fits this child — usually a library book and a handful of letter tiles. Today the student tries that page. They are not on a shopping task.



Figure 12: A library card, letter tiles on a table, a generic workbook spine with the title unreadable, a lined page and pencil. No logos. No portraits.

How to read a program

Four questions do the work.

Parent load. Are you reading aloud from a library book you already have? Sitting with a scripted phonics lesson every day? Learning phonograms well enough to hear a wrong blend? Booking a writing method as a second mouth?

Style. Letter tiles and sound boxes? Scripted open-and-go? Phonogram charts and integrated spelling? Copywork and dictation? Partnership writing and voice? Multisensory handwriting? Comics and literature guides?

Cost shape. Nothing tonight. A book you already own. A print set whose dollars sat on a page this access day and will stale. Fees this book did not verify. Confirm

a current price on the page before you buy.

Age label. A five-year-old is not an IEW Level B default. A ten-year-old may still need a “Level 1” phonics book if blending is the skill. Birthday is a weak prior.

Reach numbers on an organization’s page are that organization’s copy, not a home-school census and not an effect size.

Library table, nothing spent

A public-library card. A picture book or beginning reader. A parent’s voice. Letter tiles you already own, or fridge magnets. A scrap of lined paper. A grocery list. A recipe card. A thank-you note. That is tonight.

Fit. One child, low load, low cost. The library you already use is the same shape: a read-aloud plus one question — what sound do you hear first, who wanted what, what do you want the reader to know? In 2016, 66 percent of homeschool households used the library as a source of curriculum and books (78 percent in K–2, 70 percent in 3–5). In 2022–23, 53 percent of the Homeschool-total row had visited a library in the past month, against 29 percent of all K–12.¹³⁰ Those are different questions in different years. Both are a free hour. NYPL and ALA language about libraries is mission, not a kit.

A read-aloud hour is not a transcript line by itself. It does not replace systematic decoding for a child who cannot yet blend. It does not replace handwriting practice for a child who cannot yet form letters. It is the honest starting inventory before a catalog purchase.

Transcript. Reading or Language Arts if a log is needed: “library read-alouds, titles listed.” Never Little Thinkers English I. Never “Library Hour 1.”

Classical **copywork** is the same \$0 shape with a lined page: select a well-written sentence or short passage, sit nearby, let the child copy. Letter formation, spelling in context, punctuation, and later style absorption. Parent load is select and sit.

¹³⁰NCES 2020-001, Table 6: library as a source of curriculum and books, 66 percent (K–2 78; 3–5 70). NCES 2024-113, Table A-5: Homeschool-total 53 percent visited a library in the past month versus 29 percent of all K–12. Do not swap 53 for 66. New York Public Library mission page; ALA Library Bill of Rights Article V (age). Mission, not a kit. Access date for URLs in these notes: 6 September 2026.

Code is none by itself. The passage is literature. Length tracks the child's hand-writing and reading, not a birthday. Materials under Language Arts: "copywork from [title]." Never "Charlotte Mason Year 2" as a fake credit.

The teaching chapters of this book are written for this object first. A purchased program is a fit, not a requirement.

Orton–Gillingham–informed and structured literacy — labelled carefully

"Orton-Gillingham," "Orton-Gillingham-based," "OG-informed," and "structured literacy" appear on many organization pages. They are not interchangeable with "WWC-proven." The What Works Clearinghouse intervention report on unbranded Orton–Gillingham–based strategies (Students with Learning Disabilities topic, July 2010) found that no studies within that review's scope met WWC evidence standards, so the WWC could draw no conclusions about effectiveness or ineffectiveness for students with learning disabilities from that report.¹³¹ Branded OG-related interventions exist as separate objects. This book may describe a program as organization-described OG-informed or structured literacy. It will not say the Clearinghouse proved Orton–Gillingham in your kitchen.

Fit. A family that wants an explicit, sequential code path and will learn the method's precision — or buy a scripted open-and-go that carries that path. Not a statute. Not a clearinghouse endorsement.

Transcript. Reading or Language Arts. Never "OG" as the credit.

Writing Road to Reading / The Spalding Method

Explicit, systematic, multisensory phonemic instruction for spelling, reading, and writing; phonograms; morphology; integrated language arts — as the organization

¹³¹What Works Clearinghouse, *Orton-Gillingham-based Strategies (Unbranded)*, Students with Learning Disabilities topic, July 2010. No studies within scope met WWC evidence standards; WWC unable to draw conclusions about effectiveness or ineffectiveness for students with learning disabilities from that report. Branded OG-related interventions are separate objects. Copy this finding whenever unbranded OG is named as evidence-backed. Vendor "OG-informed" labels are not a WWC effectiveness rating.

describes it. Parent load is high: method precision; often associated with training in school settings. The WWC page for The Spalding Method describes a language arts program for grades K–6 with students working on spelling, writing, and reading 90–120 minutes every day in that school-day figure — a school figure, not a kitchen law.¹³²

As of the WWC Beginning Reading report opened for this book (October 2012), no studies of The Spalding Method met group design standards — so this book will not call it WWC-proven. Families may still choose it by fit. Adolescent Literacy (September 2012) carries the same null on the opened summary.

Fit. A family that wants phonograms and integrated spelling–reading–writing and will sit with a precise method. High load. Not a statute.

Transcript. Language Arts or Reading. Never “Spalding.” Never “Writing Road to Reading” as the credit line.

All About Reading and All About Spelling

Complete phonics, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension across four levels plus a pre-reading program; multisensory Orton–Gillingham instruction as the organization phrases it; scripted lessons; “just 20 minutes a day” as organization copy, not an NCES finding.¹³³ All About Spelling is a seven-level encoding path. Placement: level numbers do not correspond with grade levels; most students, regardless of age, should start spelling at Level 1. Reading and spelling taught separately so a student can progress in reading while mastering spelling at their own pace.

¹³²What Works Clearinghouse intervention page for The Spalding Method® / *Writing Road to Reading*, accessed 6 September 2026. Beginning Reading, October 2012: no studies met WWC evidence standards within scope; WWC unable to draw research-based conclusions about effectiveness or ineffectiveness for beginning reading. Adolescent Literacy, September 2012: same null on the opened summary. Program description on the WWC page includes 90–120 minutes daily in a school-day figure — not a kitchen law. Spalding Education pages, accessed 6 September 2026: structured literacy; phonograms; integrated language arts — organization copy.

¹³³All About Learning Press pages (All About Reading, All About Spelling, placement, Orton–Gillingham), accessed 6 September 2026. Four reading levels plus pre-reading; seven spelling levels; multisensory OG instruction (organization phrasing); “20 minutes a day” organization copy; levels do not correspond with grade levels; most students start spelling Level 1 regardless of age. List price omitted; confirm before you buy.

Fit. A family that wants scripted open-and-go tiles and manuals, moderate materials load, and a skill-based placement. Literature still needs library books for knowledge. An older beginner may start Level 1; that is a placement result, not a scandal.

Transcript. Language Arts or Reading, with the materials in the description. Never “All About Reading Level 3.”

Logic of English — Foundations and Essentials

Foundations: complete language arts for ages 4–7 (some eight-year-olds); phonics, reading, spelling, handwriting, vocabulary, composition, and grammar; Foundations A–D; decode without pictures, guessing, or memorizing sight words — as the organization describes it.¹³⁴ Essentials: ages **8 to adult**; spelling, grammar, vocabulary; Foundations is not a prerequisite; students begin Essentials with Pre-Lessons or Unit One; placement PDF. Organization claim that phonograms and rules explain 98 percent of English words is organization copy, not an independent meta-analysis opened for this book.

Fit. Scripted; Foundations playful for the younger half of this band; Essentials denser for 8+. Age labels match 5–10 unusually cleanly. Handwriting sits inside Foundations (Rhythm of Handwriting); pair Essentials with a handwriting path if needed.

Transcript. Language Arts. Never “Logic of English Foundations B” as the credit line.

Spelling You See

Natural, easy spelling as the organization describes it; no spelling tests; no memorizing word lists; short daily activities; visual memory and letter patterns; copywork and dictation; skills-based placement, not grade-based.¹³⁵ Seven levels: Lis-

¹³⁴Logic of English Foundations–Essentials comparison and About pages, accessed 6 September 2026. Foundations ages 4–7; Essentials ages 8–adult; Foundations not a prerequisite for Essentials; 98 percent of English words — organization claim, not an independent meta-analysis opened for this book. List price omitted.

¹³⁵Spelling You See homepage and levels pages, accessed 6 September 2026. Seven skills-based levels named in the body; no spelling tests as a selling claim; short daily activities; copywork and

ten and Write, Jack and Jill, Wild Tales, Americana, American Spirit, Ancient Achievements, Modern Milestones. Listen and Write for a beginning reader still learning letter names, sounds, and pencil grip; later levels track developmental spelling stages the organization names.

Fit. Low daily prep if presence for dictation is available. Not a full beginning-reading program — pairs with a decoding path. Placement by developmental stage. Still place by skill.

Transcript. Spelling can sit under Language Arts or as Spelling where a state names spelling (Texas, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York). Never “Spelling You See Americana” as the credit line.

IEW at the age-labelled edge

Primary Arts of Language (PAL) for grades **K–2**: blended sound-sight reading; writing from printing through one- to three-paragraph compositions with Structure and Style; reading and writing packages designed to go hand in hand — as the organization describes it.¹³⁶ Level A theme-based Writing Across the Curriculum courses generally geared for grades **3–5**. Core Structure and Style packages for older bands (B grades 6–8; C 9–12) sit above this book’s center.

Fit. Parent load high at first (learn the method), then checklists. PAL Reading is blended sound-sight — not a pure OG franchise; a child with severe decoding needs may still need a more explicit code path. Writing method: imitation, outline, checklist — the opposite of “just journal.” Do not drop a Level B middle-school package on a seven-year-old because a sibling uses it.

Transcript. Language Arts or Composition (if the work is actually composition). Never “IEW.” Never “PAL” as the credit line.

dictation. List price omitted.

¹³⁶Institute for Excellence in Writing primary and product pages, accessed 6 September 2026. Primary Arts of Language K–2; Level A theme-based generally grades 3–5; Levels B and C above this book’s center. Blended sound-sight reading in PAL — organization description.

Brave Writer — age-banded

Start Here age bands on the opened organization page: Ages **5–7 Beginning Writers**; Ages **8–10 Emerging Writers**; then older bands.¹³⁷ *Growing Brave Writers* trains the parent as writing coach; works with a wide age range; for children who can read easily and handwrite comfortably — as the organization describes it. Partnership writing, voice, freewriting, revision — a different theory of help than imitation-from-source-text.

Fit. High presence, lower script density than a fully scripted phonics hour. Phonics is not this product’s center. A five-year-old who cannot yet decode is not “behind in Brave Writer”; they are still in a decoding program.

Transcript. Language Arts or Writing. Never “Dart.” Never “Partnership Writing” as the credit line.

Handwriting Without Tears / Learning Without Tears

Multisensory, explicit handwriting instruction; Print (TK, K–2); Cursive (2–6) — as the organization describes it.¹³⁸ Building Writers and related lines support sentence and paragraph foundations. Organization ESSA Tier 2 language for the handwriting program is school-implementation evidence from the organization that sells the program, not a WWC beginning-reading rating re-adjudicated here. Handwriting is transcription, not decoding — pair with a reading program. Print is the 5–7 center; cursive enters the 8–10 edge.

Fit. Short multisensory lessons. Supports the grain of the IES elementary writing practice guide’s handwriting, spelling, and sentence recommendation — a school guide used as a map, not a kitchen trial.¹³⁹

¹³⁷Brave Writer Start Here and *Growing Brave Writers* product pages, accessed 6 September 2026. Ages 5–7 Beginning Writers; Ages 8–10 Emerging Writers; parent-as-coach training; for children who can read easily and handwrite comfortably — organization copy. List price omitted.

¹³⁸Learning Without Tears / Handwriting Without Tears pages, accessed 6 September 2026. Print TK/K–2; Cursive 2–6; Building Writers / related lines; organization ESSA Tier 2 claim for handwriting is school-implementation evidence from the organization that sells the program, not a WWC beginning-reading rating re-adjudicated here. List price omitted.

¹³⁹Steve Graham et al., *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, NCEE 2012-4058 (IES, 2012). Recommendation 3 (moderate): teach fluency with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word processing. School practice guide. Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*,

Transcript. Handwriting usually under Language Arts. Never “HWT Grade 2” as the credit line.

Other school programs you will see named

These are school-side What Works Clearinghouse ratings, labelled school, copied not rounded, not a reason to sell a franchise at the table.¹⁴⁰

Sound Partners — positive effects on alphabets, fluency, and comprehension; no discernible effects on general reading achievement. Phonics-based tutoring for grades K–3 with below-average reading skills; designed for tutors with minimal training; scripted lessons. The program description notes tutoring can be provided as pull-out, after-school, or by parents who homeschool — still a school/tutor evidence base. Useful as a labelled neighbor for scripted phonics tutoring, not a crown for a boxed curriculum that was not reviewed under that name.

Reading Recovery (updated July 2013) — positive effects on general reading achievement; potentially positive effects on alphabets, reading fluency, and comprehension. One-on-one tutoring for grade 1 struggling readers; trained Reading Recovery teachers; daily 30-minute pull-out, 12–20 weeks. School pull-out intervention, not a homeschool kit. Do not tell a parent to recreate Reading Recovery at the kitchen table without the training model the report describes.

Success for All (updated March 2017) — positive effects on alphabets; potentially positive on reading fluency; mixed on comprehension and general reading achievement. Whole-school reform literacy component; ability-grouped reading

NCEE 2016-4008 (IES, 2016): school foundational-reading guide; useful as a map, not a kitchen RCT.

¹⁴⁰What Works Clearinghouse Beginning Reading intervention reports, accessed 6 September 2026: Sound Partners (September 2010) — positive alphabets, fluency, comprehension; no discernible general reading achievement; seven studies in the evidence base; program description notes parents who homeschool as a possible setting — still school/tutor population. Reading Recovery (updated July 2013) — positive general reading achievement; potentially positive alphabets, fluency, comprehension; grade 1 pull-out, trained teachers. Success for All (updated March 2017) — positive alphabets; potentially positive fluency; mixed comprehension and general reading achievement; whole-school K–4 literacy component; 90-minute ability-grouped reading. Leveled Literacy Intervention (September 2017) — positive general reading achievement; potentially positive fluency; no discernible alphabets; grades K–2 in studies meeting standards. All school-side. Do not launder into kitchen franchises.

90 minutes a day; tutoring for students behind classmates; grades K–4 focus in the beginning-reading review. Whole-school object. Not a homeschool franchise.

Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) (September 2017) — positive effects on general reading achievement; potentially positive on reading fluency; **no discernible effects on alphabetsics**. Short-term supplementary small-group intervention for struggling readers; grades K–2 in the studies meeting standards. School small-group object. A leveled ladder is not proof that the code was taught.

None of these is a parent-at-home randomised trial. None is a kitchen winner. When Spalding or unbranded OG is named again so the sentence stays attached: WWC Beginning Reading October 2012, no studies meet for Spalding; WWC July 2010 LD topic, no studies meet for unbranded OG-based strategies.

Placement tests are tools, not percentiles

All About Reading and All About Spelling placement; Logic of English Foundations and Essentials placement; Spelling You See skills-based placement; readiness checklists other publishers describe. IES does not certify them as randomised trials. They place by skill. They do not license NAEP. They do not write Little Thinkers English I. Use one to start a purchased program or to restart after a gap, as Chapter 9 said.

A child of ten may place into three different “grades” on three tests the same afternoon. That is three grains of “grade,” not a contradiction. Start where the child can succeed, then add.

A short chooser, not a ranking

- If you want nothing spent tonight: a library card, a read-aloud, letter tiles or fridge magnets, a lined page, copywork from a book you already own. Title: Reading or Language Arts.
- If you want scripted explicit phonics and tiles: All About Reading; Logic of English Foundations. Organization OG-informed labels are not a WWC kitchen rating. Title: Reading or Language Arts.
- If you want phonograms and integrated spelling–reading–writing, and will carry high method load: Writing Road to Reading / Spalding. WWC Beginning Reading, October 2012: no studies meet group design standards. Title:

Language Arts.

- If you want encoding as a separate track: All About Spelling; Logic of English Essentials; Spelling You See. Title: Language Arts or Spelling where the state names spelling.
- If you want handwriting fluency: Handwriting Without Tears Print (then cursive at the older edge); or classical copywork. Title: Language Arts.
- If you want composition by imitation and checklist at the age edge: IEW PAL (K–2) or Level A (~grades 3–5). Title: Language Arts.
- If you want parent-as-writing-partner and voice, ages 5–7 / 8–10 by the organization’s Start Here bands: Brave Writer. Still teach decoding separately if the child cannot yet blend. Title: Language Arts.
- If you meet a school WWC name in a conversation: Sound Partners (positive alphabets/fluency/comprehension; no discernible general reading); Reading Recovery (grade 1 pull-out, trained teachers); Success for All (whole-school); LLI (positive general reading; potentially positive fluency; no discernible alphabets). Label school. Do not crown a kitchen franchise.

None of those bullets is “best.” Fit is whether you can hear a wrong turn in that program’s pictures, and whether the student will generate the work. Combining is ordinary: library read-aloud plus one phonics path plus short daily handwriting plus a writing method at the age edge. Combining does not authorize a franken-course title. When the student has unfinished blending, go back, whatever the calendar says. When you are the ceiling, buy a tutor, a co-op English hour, or a video as a second mouth — and unless that institution issues a transcript, you remain the person who dates the notebook. When the destination is a stranger with a page in hand, title the year Reading, Language Arts, or English — the English, not the franchise.

A path through elementary English / language arts is the promise. A diploma is not. A percentile is not. A catalogue star is not a finding.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹Cathy Duffy Reviews is a catalogue with disclosed review copies and affiliate links; Rainbow Resource is a retailer catalogue. Neither is a trial. No homeschool-curriculum randomised trial comparing All About Reading, Logic of English, Spelling You See, IEW, Brave Writer, Handwriting Without Tears, or Writing Road to Reading was opened for this book. NCES 2020-001, Table 3: tutor 23 percent (K–2 and 3–5 both 19); co-op 31 percent (K–2 25; 3–5 32); mother as main provider 78 percent (K–2 85; 3–5 78); formal curriculum 77 percent (K–2 81; 3–5 76). 2023 First Look did not republish these tables.

A Note on Sources

Studies named in the chapters are listed in Notes, in one series at the back. That is where the full citations live, so the teaching pages can stay a teaching voice.

Some items the research behind this book did not open stay out of the teaching voice. I did not invent a coefficient, a statute, or a product feature to fill a hole. If a study is in the chapter, it is in the notes. If we could not open it, it is not used as a finding here.

Program hours, credit claims, and product descriptions in the resources chapter are taken from the companies' own pages. Access date 6 September 2026.