

Phonics

Overview Guide



Waterford Early Learning's **Six Instructional Strands for Literacy**



Research-Based Principles

The study of phonics helps students understand the connections between the sounds of language (including individual phonemes) and the symbols of language (graphemes). Research shows that all students can benefit from phonics instruction that is explicit, systematic, cumulative, and individualized.

Beginning readers must be taught “how to relate a new code, written script, to an existing code, spoken language” (Seidenberg, 2014, p. 331). Because the brain does not process words as whole visual units but instead processes all the information represented by individual letters (Adams, 1990), explicit and systematic phonics instruction is central to learning to read. And although English orthography is complex, Solity and Vousden (2009) reported that knowledge of the 64 most common letter-sound correspondences, along with the ability to identify approximately 100 of the most common words, enables young readers to identify 90 percent of words they tend to see in texts.

Early phonics instruction is focused on alphabet knowledge, identified by the National Early Literacy Panel as a key predictor of later reading outcomes (2008). As a foundation for building alphabet knowledge, students must understand the underlying alphabetic principle—the idea that speech sounds are represented by letters in systematic and predictable ways. This principle is not intuitive; most students do not discover it independently (Willingham, 2017).

Alphabet knowledge also includes the development of automatic letter recognition and knowledge of letter-sound correspondences. As soon as students know several letter-sound correspondences, they should receive instruction in blending sounds to decode simple words.

The ability to blend individual sounds, or phonemes, is an essential subskill of phonics and strongly predicts reading success. Centering instruction around a focus on the individual phonemes within words is critical, as this helps students cement the connections between sounds and letters (National Reading Panel, 2000).



The orthographic mapping process that happens within the brain's reading network bonds the spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of individual words in long-term memory. Word-mapping instruction that explicitly teaches students to map sounds to letters aligns with the brain's orthographic mapping process and is crucial for developing efficient word reading skills (Ehri, 2020). As soon as students have achieved proficiency with a small group of letter-sound correspondences, they should be guided through the word mapping process to decode and encode simple CVC and VC words. Word-mapping instruction teaches students to isolate the phonemes (individual sounds) in a word and link each phoneme to the letter(s) that represent(s) it.

As students build word mapping skills through explicit instruction and guided practice, their brains are trained to more automatically engage in the orthographic-mapping process when new, unfamiliar words are encountered. As the brain consistently engages in this process over time, students build a large bank of sight words, which enables them to read with fluency. (*Sight words* are defined here as words that a reader can recognize automatically, without the need to decode.) Reading fluency frees up cognitive load, no longer needed for the effort of decoding, making it possible for students to focus on meaning as they read.

Throughout the reading development journey, students need frequent opportunities to apply and reinforce their phonics skill by reading decodable texts. Applying word reading skills in connected, meaningful text supports the orthographic-mapping process as well as the development of reading fluency and comprehension (Ehri, 2020).

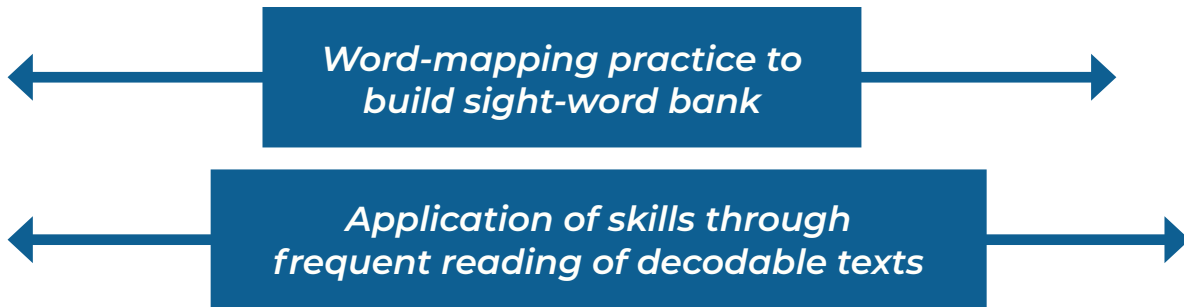
Having consistent instructional routines supports students in building the necessary phonics skills. (See → [Instructional Routines](#) for Word Mapping, Word Building, Decoding, and Reading Decodable Books in a later section within this document.)



Phonics Skills Development



Beginning	Developing	Advanced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alphabetic principle • Letter recognition • Letter-sound correspondences • Beginning decoding and encoding of words with CVC and VC patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vowel patterns • Decoding and encoding words with simple spelling patterns • Syllable types 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decoding and encoding words with advanced spelling patterns • Multisyllabic words • Word study and morphology



Waterford Early Learning Instruction

→ Phonics Skills Taught and Scope & Sequence

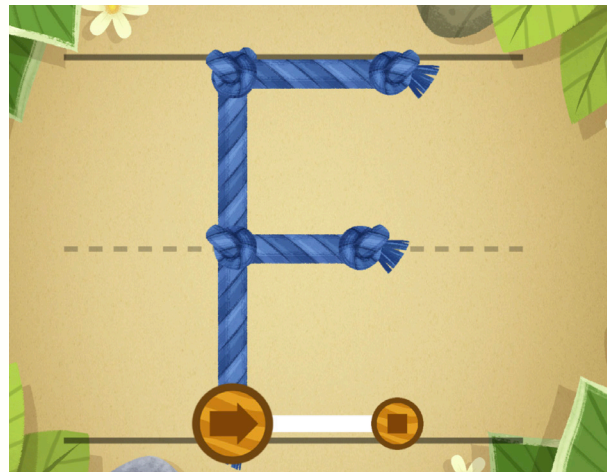
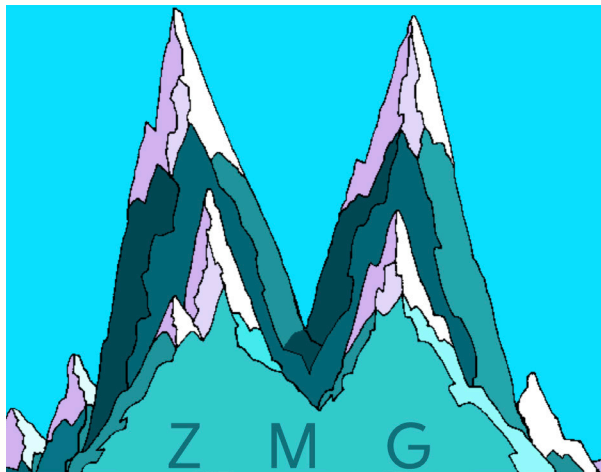
View example phonics activities from Waterford Early Learning's adaptive learning path → [here](#).

Phonics concepts are introduced in a logical sequence as students progress through Waterford Early Learning's adaptive learning path.

Letters are introduced systematically. Instruction for each capital and lowercase letter includes identifying and naming the letter, finding the letter in isolation, and locating it in words. An extensive variety of digital and printable learning activities are provided to ensure students with a range of learning needs are able to build automatic letter-recognition skills.

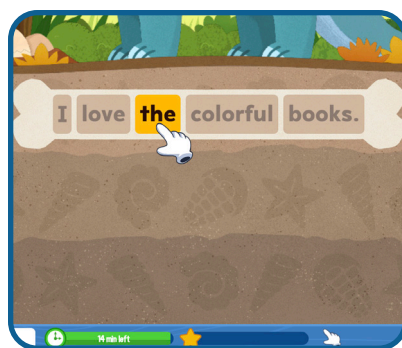
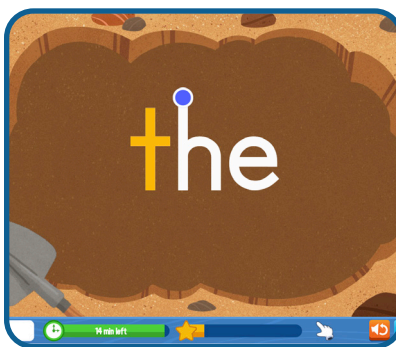
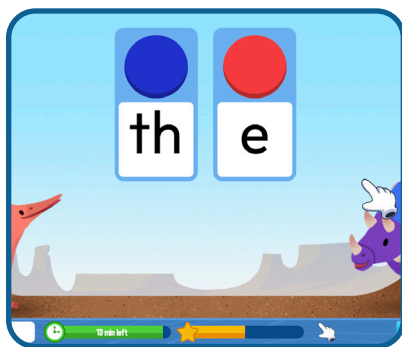
Students receive explicit instruction in the name, shape, and sound of each letter.

Embedded picture mnemonics support letter recognition skills. Instruction is multimodal: students see the letter shape, hear the letter name and sound, and touch to trace as they say the chant for the letter formation.



Letter-sound instruction begins with a group of the most common consonants and vowels so that students can apply foundational skills to begin reading words early (Moats, 2009). In the initial phases of decoding practice, careful attention is paid to including a balance of continuous sounds that can be elongated without distortion (such as /m/ and /s/) and stop sounds (such as /t/ and /k/). Letters that are similar visually (such as *b* and *d*) or phonetically (such as *b* and *p*) are spaced across the learning path to avoid potential confusion. Practice includes both reading (decoding) and spelling (encoding). To see the typical progression for letter instruction, go to → [Resources & Activities](#), FILTER for **View>All Playlists**, and SEARCH for “**Letter-Sound Lesson Progression.**”

Power Words, which include high-frequency words and other words that support students’ comprehension of Waterford Early Learning books, are pre-taught. Students trace and spell each Power Word, distinguish it from similarly spelled words, and identify and read it in sentences before encountering and decoding it in connected texts.

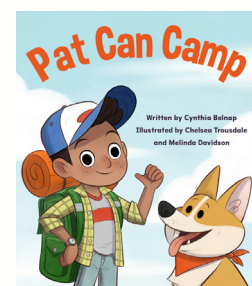
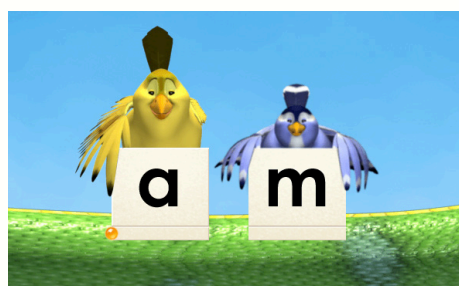


All regularly and irregularly spelled words are explicitly taught with a focus on each letter-sound, or phoneme-grapheme, correspondence. Students are introduced to increasingly advanced phonics patterns, such as vowel teams, *r*-controlled vowels, and diphthongs. The carefully designed progression is focused on high-utility word patterns that can be generalized more broadly.

Phonics instruction is always paired with the reading of connected text. Waterford Early Learning's decodable books, called *Readable books*, align with recently taught phonics skills to provide essential opportunities for students to successfully apply those skills. Readable Book experiences in the adaptive learning path include embedded support for decoding.

Students begin blending and decoding words as soon as the first group of letter-sound correspondences is mastered.

Throughout the program, students receive word mapping instruction, connecting the letters and sounds within words to anchor them in long-term memory. This process enables students to build a large sight word bank, making fluent reading possible. As concepts are taught, students apply their skills, reading well-crafted decodable texts for targeted practice.



The six syllable types are introduced and practiced as corresponding spelling patterns are learned.

CLOSED	vowel "closed in" >> short sound CVC VC	cat af/ter
OPEN	vowel "open" >> long sound CV V	go a/corn
R-CONTROLLED	bossy r V-r	farm bird hor/net
VOWEL TEAM	letters that represent ONE vowel sound vowel + one or more letters	snow night street
MAGIC E	long sound VC-e	snake inside
CONSONANT + LE	final syllable C-le	ta/ble cir/cle

Later, knowledge of the syllable types helps students decode and spell multisyllabic words.

The first panel shows the word 'napkin' with a vertical dashed line between 'p' and 'k'. Blue arrows point left and right from the line, and a green checkmark is at the bottom. The second panel shows a word-building interface with letters 's', 't', 'a', 'p' in colored boxes and a 'lit' button below. The third panel shows the word 'entertain' with a vertical dashed line between 't' and 'er'. Blue arrows point left and right from the line, and a green checkmark is at the bottom.



Waterford Early Learning offers an extensive library of Phonics Transfer Playlists to support multilingual learners. These playlists foster the development of phonics skills in particular areas where phonemes and graphemes differ between English and other languages and are currently available for Cantonese, French, Haitian Creole, Hmong, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. To access these playlists in → [Resources & Activities](#), FILTER for **View>All Playlists**, and SEARCH for “**phonics transfer.**”

Resources

Resources to support phonics skills development in the classroom and at home include the following:

Letter Recognition

- [ABC Songs](#)
- [Capital & Lowercase Letter Instructional Videos](#)
- [Sing Around the World Songs](#)
- In [Resources & Activities](#),
 - SEARCH for “**letter cards.**”
 - FILTER for **Resource Type>Practice Materials**, and SEARCH for “**letter trace.**”

A Waterford account is required to access program hyperlinks (displayed in orange). If you do not have an account, you can request a demo account [here](#).



Letter-Sound Correspondences

- [Consonant Phonemes](#)
- [Vowel Valley](#)
- [Letter-Sound Songs](#)
- [Letter-Sounds Connections 1: Video](#)
- [Letter-Sounds Connections 2: Video](#)
- [Letter-Sounds Connections 3: Video](#)
- In [Resources & Activities](#),
 - FILTER for **Resource Type>WEL Activity**, and SEARCH for “**letter trace.**”
 - FILTER for **Resource Type>WEL Activity**, and SEARCH for “**letter sounds.**”
 - FILTER for **View>All Playlists**, and SEARCH for “**phonics transfer.**”

Word Work

- [Word Mapping](#)
- [Word Mapping Template](#)
- [Word Ladder Template](#)
- [Six Syllable Types](#)
- [Build Two-Syllable Words](#)
- In [Resources & Activities](#),
 - FILTER for **View>All Playlists**, and SEARCH for “**Waterford phonics songs.**”
 - FILTER for **Resource Type>Practice Materials**, and SEARCH for “**blending.**”



Power Words

- [Power Words](#)
- [Word Cards: Power Words](#)
- [Roll a Power Word](#)
- In [Resources & Activities](#),
 - FILTER for **Resource Type>Practice Materials**, and SEARCH for “power words” and “power word.”

Decodable Books

- [Beginning Readers and Decodable Books](#)
- In [Resources & Activities](#), go to
 - Collections>Books: Read With Me.
 - Collections>Books: Foldables.
 - Collections>Books: Readables.

Playlists

- In [Resources & Activities](#),
 - FILTER for **View>All Playlists** and **Subject & Strand>Literacy>Phonics**.

Family Resources

- [Family Fact Sheet: Phonics](#)
- [Hoja de datos familiares—Método Fonético](#)
- [Family Video: Phonics](#)
- [Video de elemento de instrucción método fonético](#)
- In [Resources & Activities](#),
 - FILTER for **Subject & Strand>Phonics** and SEARCH for “learning together.”



Instructional Routines

The following instructional routines can serve as frameworks for whole-class, small-group, and individual instruction. These routines leverage the elements of effective instruction that are built into the adaptive learning path for Waterford Early Learning.

Word Building

Use this routine to provide guided practice for segmenting, blending, and the application of phonics rules.

Resources

→ [Word Ladder Template](#)

→ [Six Syllable Types](#)

1. Ask students to spell a word with letter cards, letter tiles, or paper and pencil. For example, say, “Spell *hat*.”
2. Guide students to **say** each sound as they place or write the letter or letters to spell each sound.
3. Give students a series of directions to guide them to build new words. For example:
 - “Change *h* to *c*. What is the new word?” (*cat*)
 - “Change *t* to *n*. What is the new word?” (*can*)
4. Support students as they **read** the list of words they made.
5. Throughout the process, guide students to focus on meaning. For example, you can display visuals and/or discuss the words’ meanings.

For a challenge, give directions that require students to choose the correct letter(s):

1. Ask students to spell a word with letter cards, letter tiles, or paper and pencil. For example, say, “Spell *hat*.”



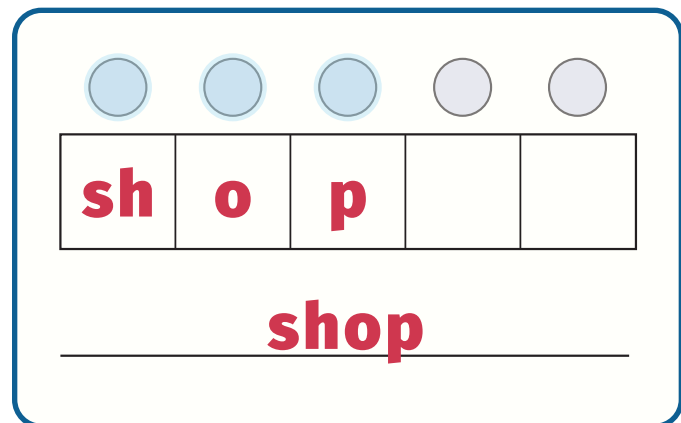
2. Give students a series of directions to guide them to build new words. For example:
 - “Change /h/ to /m/. What is the new word?” (*mat*)
 - “Change /ă/ to /ě/. What is the new word?” (*met*)
 - “Now change one letter to make the word *pet*.” (Students change *m* to *p*.)

Word Mapping

Use this routine to provide explicit instruction for the word mapping process that will support the development of a large sight word bank.

For regularly spelled words:

1. Give each student a copy of the → [Word Mapping Template](#).
2. Say a word, and ask students to listen to the sounds—for example, “*shop*, /sh/ /ŏ/ /p/.”
3. **Say** and **move/draw**: Students say the sounds, “/sh/ /ŏ/ /p/,” moving counters above the Elkonin boxes (Elkonin, 1973) for each sound. For the word *shop*, students move counters above three boxes.
4. **Say** and **write**: Students say the sounds, “/sh/ /ŏ/ /p/,” as they write the corresponding letter or letters in individual Elkonin boxes to spell each sound. Guide students to understand that the word *shop* is a closed syllable in which a vowel is followed by a consonant, so the *o* makes a short sound.
5. **Blend** and **read**: From left to right, students move their finger under each box, blending the sounds and then saying the whole word: “/sh/ /ŏ/ /p/, *shop*.”
6. **Cover** and **write**: Students cover the boxes and write the full word on the line below the boxes.



- 7. Check:** Students remove their hand to check the spelling.
- 8. Read:** Students read “/sh/ /ō/ /p/, *shop*.”
- 9. Show** the word in context within a book or by displaying it in a complete sentence. **Repeat** the steps with additional words that include similar patterns.
10. Provide ample **practice** with reading the word in connected decodable text and using the words in writing.

For words with irregular spellings:

1. Say a word and ask students to listen to the sounds—for example, “*they*, /th/ /ā/.”
- 2. Say and move/draw:** Students say the sounds, “/th/ /ā/,” moving a counter or drawing a line for each sound. For the word *they*, students move two counters or draw two lines.
- 3. Say and write:** Students say the sounds, “/th/ /ā/” as they write the corresponding letter or letters to spell each sound. (Note: Guide students to understand that although we hear a long *a* sound in *they*, this sound is spelled with the letters e-y.)
- 4. Blend and read:** From left to right, students move their finger under each letter, blending the sounds and then saying the whole word: “/th/ /ā/, *they*.”
- 5. Read** again. Students read “/th/ /ā/, *they*.”
- 6. Show** the word in context within a book or by displaying it in a complete sentence.
7. Provide ample **practice** with reading the word in connected decodable text and using the word in writing.

For multisyllabic words:

1. Say a word and ask students to listen to the syllables—for example, “*birthday*, *birth - day*.”
- 2. Say and draw** (syllables): Students say the syllables, “*birth - day*,” drawing a long line for each syllable.



3. **Say and draw** (phonemes):
Students say the phonemes in the first syllable, drawing a short line for each sound: /b/ /er/ /th/.

4. **Say and write**: Students say the sounds, /b/ /er/ /th/, as they write the corresponding letter or letters to spell each sound. Guide students to understand that *birth* is an r-controlled syllable and that the /er/ sound in this word is spelled with the letters *i-r*.

5. **Blend and read**: Students move their finger from left to right under the letters, blending the sounds and then saying the whole syllable: “/b/ /er/ /th/, *birth*.”

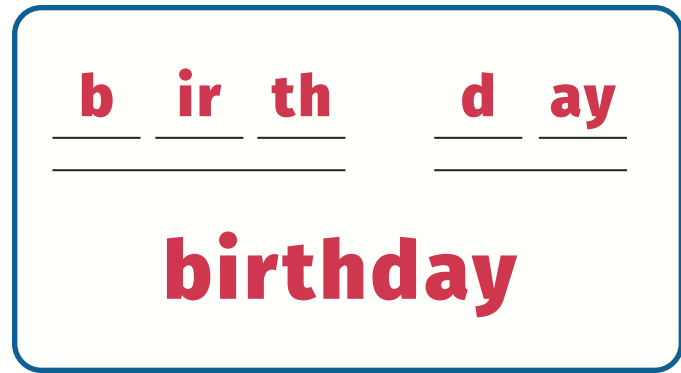
6. **Repeat** the process for the second syllable, “day.” Guide students to understand that “day” is a vowel team syllable and that the /ā/ sound in this syllable is spelled with the letters “*a-y*.”

7. **Read** the syllables and the whole syllable: Students read “*birth / day, birthday*.”

8. **Write and read**: Students write and read the full word.

9. **Show** the word in context within a book or by displaying it in a complete sentence.

10. Provide ample **practice** with reading the word in connected decodable text and using the words in writing.



Decoding

Use this *whole-word* blending routine for decoding instruction.

1. **Model** the whole-word blending method for decoding words. For example, with the word *sat*:
 - Point under each letter, stretching the sounds where possible. Say /sss/ /äää/ /t/.
 - Slide your finger slowly under all three letters, blending the sounds to say /sssääät/.



- Repeat several times, saying the word more quickly each time:
/sssääät/ /ssääät/ /sat/.
 - Say the word again: *sat*.
2. **Guide** students to follow the same process to decode the word *sat*.
 3. **Show** the word in context within a book or by displaying it in a complete sentence.
 4. **Guide** students to decode the word in context.
 5. **Repeat** the process with additional words that follow a similar pattern—for example, *mat*, *rat*, and nonsense words such as *gat* or *yat*.
 6. Throughout the process, guide students to focus on meaning. For example, you can display visuals and/or discuss the words' meanings.

When students need more support, use an *additive blending* approach. This method is sometimes called *successive blending*.

1. **Model** the additive blending method for decoding words. For example, with the word *mop*:
 - Put your finger under the letter *m* and say /mmm/.
 - Put your finger under the letter *o* and say /ööö/.
 - Slide your finger slowly under the two letters, blending the sounds to say /mmmööö/.
 - Slide your finger quickly under the two letters, saying /mö/.
 - Put your finger under the letter *p* and say /p/.
 - Slide your finger slowly under all three letters, blending the sounds to say /mmmöööp/.
 - Slide your finger quickly under all three letters, saying *mop*.
2. **Guide** students to follow the same process to decode the word *mop*.
3. **Show** the word in context within a book or by displaying it in a complete sentence.
4. **Guide** students to decode the word in context.



5. **Repeat** the process with additional words that follow a similar pattern words—for example, *top*, *shop*, and nonsense words such as *vop* or *zop*.
6. Throughout the process, guide students to focus on meaning. For example, you can display visuals and/or discuss the words' meanings.

Reading Decodable Books

Use this routine to provide guidance and support as students apply their phonics skills to navigate decodable text.

1. **Select** a decodable book for which students have had the necessary phonics instruction to decode the words included in the text. For example, students who will read [Pat Can Camp](#) should have received instruction for decoding words with the short *a* sound, the consonant blend *-mp*, and a number of high-frequency (*a, I, the, and, my, is, in, on, he, see, have, says*).
2. **Before Reading**
 - **Review** the phonics concepts that will support students in reading the text successfully. Use a word mapping or word building approach. Draw students' attention to the phonics patterns they will see in the book. For example, "In this book, you will see many words you have practiced reading and writing. Look for words with the short *a* sound and the *-mp* blend."
 - Set a **purpose** that relates to meaning. For example, "In this book, we will learn about Pat's camping trip."
 - Activate and build students' **background knowledge**: "Have you ever gone camping? What would you bring on a camping trip? What might you see and do?" Engage students in a discussion about camping. Share books, pictures, or even videos to build students' knowledge about the experience of going camping.



3. During Reading

- As students work to decode, guide them to focus on the letter-sound correspondences in words, drawing upon the instructional routine for decoding outlined above.
- Direct students to reread as necessary to maintain their understanding.
- Keep the focus on meaning by pausing for discussion or to predict what might happen next.

4. After Reading

- Pose questions to help students focus on meaning. Here are some example questions: What did Pat do and see? How was the story the same or different from what you expected? What was your favorite part?
- Review the text to reinforce phonics skills. For example, hunt for words with the short *a* sound or count the appearances of the word *says*.
- Reinforce skills through writing. For example, ask students to make a list of words with the short *a* sound or to complete sentence frames such as the following: At camp I see _____.
- Engage students in multiple readings of the text to support the development of reading fluency.



Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback has been shown to be a particularly powerful form of feedback (Hattie & Jaeger, 1998). It has a substantial effect size, meaning it can significantly improve learning outcomes. Within Waterford Early Learning's adaptive learning path, corrective feedback helps students build new understandings through productive struggle.

As you engage students in the instructional routines outlined above, provide corrective feedback that

- is immediate and timely;
- is targeted and specific;
- is asset-based and encouraging;
- provides additional information, as applicable (e.g., how the letter sounds align with or differ from a student's home language);
- approaches the task in a new way, as applicable (e.g., presenting an additive blending approach as a follow-up to a whole-word blending approach);
- is shared through multiple modalities (e.g., visual and auditory); and
- does not simply provide the correct answer, but instead guides students to confirm or self-correct their thinking to arrive at the correct answer.



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→ A full list of references is included in the [*Educator Overview Guide for Waterford Early Learning: Reading Curriculum.*](#)

