

Units of Study in Phonics, Grades K—2
By Lucy Calkins and TCRWP Colleagues

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Question: *What are some of the key ideas that informed your thinking as you developed these phonics units?*

Lucy Calkins:

So I want to talk for a minute about the principles upon which this approach to phonics, the Phonics Units of Study, are based. And the very first principle is the clear belief, the knowledge that schools need to have a research-based systematic approach to phonics. And what's important is not just that the school adopts a systematic research-based approach to phonics but that teachers are actually teaching that. So often we see schools that say we're doing this phonics approach or that phonics approach, but the phonics is so complicated that involves so much cutting and pasting and baggies, just so much different levels and so forth, that teachers aren't actually teaching that. It's too awkward to get to. So we've deliberately tried to develop a research-based approach to phonics that is also lean and efficient and will be a joy for teachers to teach. And you'll see that the arc of the curriculum follows the same sort of research-based arc of curriculum of all phonics units.

The second thing that we believe is that phonics is for reading and for writing and that transference is not an optional extension, but it's instead, it's the only reason to learn phonics is to use it as readers and writers. So that changes two things. It changes the pace of phonics and it changes the content of phonics. So if your phonics approach is all about teaching kids phonics so that they use it as readers and writers, then the phonics needs to go more quickly. For example we know that kindergartners are listening to us saying words slowly and listening to the sounds in words and using what they hear to label beginning and ending sounds. So that means that you really can't have a phonics approach that teaches sort of a letter a week. You need to give kids access to more letters more quickly and invite them to begin to use what they know right away as writers. We know for example level C books have contractions, so you can't wait and teach contractions in first grade when level C books have contractions. Level E books have C-V-C-E patterns, and so you need to be moving to teach kids long vowels at the beginning of first grade. So the content of your phonics instruction needs to be more rapid in order for the phonics to be actually transferring into reading and writing. And then the second thing is that if you're really teaching phonics for transfer, the content will change a little bit. So for example when we know kids are writing how-to books, might as well have one of the high frequency words that they're learning be put because they're all using put in those how-to books. Or if kids are writing narrative, might as well have some of the high frequency words that they're learning be words like said or then that are so essential to narrative writing.

For more information on the Units of Study in Phonics from Lucy Calkins and TCRWP colleagues, visit: unitsofstudy.com/phonics

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So first of all, phonics is foundational, and secondly, it's all for transference. And it's always teaching, teaching phonics so that the kids use it as readers and as writers. And I'm going to just talk about one third thing, although there's of course others. But I think it's really important to understand that when teaching phonics, you're not just teaching item knowledge. You're also teaching kids strategies for using that item knowledge. So for example, let's say you saw that a kid spelled the word blue B-U. Well I think it would be easy to look at that and to think, this child needs more help with blends and to kind of pause everything and go and teach the 22 blends. But there's another way of looking at it that a child who spelled blue B-U also or perhaps instead needs instruction in the importance of after you write something, reread honestly and really try to see what you wrote. Reread it and realize, I just wrote bunot blue. And then go back and listen again. And especially listen for some of those hidden sounds like the second letter in a blend that you often miss. So in that way you're teaching not just the 22 blends, but you're teaching kids the strategies for using phonics on the run as readers and writers.