

FAQ Video Transcripts

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Question: *How is phonics taught across the kindergarten and first grade units?*

Natalie Louis:

The design of phonics, the units from K all the way through one, is that there are ten units total. So there's five in kindergarten and then five in first grade. I started to think about the unit ones in both grades. Unit one in kindergarten is very different from unit one in first grade obviously, in a huge way because unit one in K is the beginning.

But in both K and 1 we begin unit 1 with name study. Names are the first things that kids care about. Those are the first letters that you come to be interested in because somebody spent some time picking out your name. Somebody loved you and gave you that name, and it's often hanging over your crib in letters or it's on some blanket that you love, so it just feels natural. And when you're in Kindergarten, you also want to know the names of your friends, the other people in your class.

And so we use the name as the vehicle for teaching letter sounds with the idea that kids aren't naturally very interested in letter sounds. I don't think kids come to the planet thinking "I can't wait 'till we learn letter sounds!" I think they're really interested in whatever they're interested in: trucks or puppies or swimming. So how do we get them to be interested in letter sounds? I think name is the perfect vehicle.

And then we return to name again at the start of first grade. But now with first graders who know so much more about, because they've had a whole year of kindergarten where they've learned some principles about how letters and sounds work. In first grade, it's so interesting because we still start with name, but in each of the three parts of that unit, we think about there are three ways to read words.

You read words by decoding them, so when you decode a word, you have to know things about the individual parts. That's sort of like phonics principles. You know, you need to know what a blend is or you need to know what a vowel is.

You also read words by sight, so there's a bend about the high frequency words. And then you also read words by analogy. So there's the last bend in that first grade, first unit is about using the words that are on the word wall to help you use what you know to read new words.

So for instance, play is on there. And you need to read stay, but play can help you, right? You can ask yourself do I know a word like this word when you're reading stay? Oh yeah, kind of looks like play.

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Units of Study in Phonics, Grades K—2
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So those three kind of ways of attacking or reading words by decoding them, by sight or by analogy, that's how the first unit in first grade goes.

First grade is a year when they're really working hard on making big tracks in their reading. Going from very simple books in first grade all the way, by the end to beginning chapter books.

Then the second unit in kindergarten is, I really think of it as like the end of the alphabetic principle. So if the first unit in K was name study, the second unit, I think of it as like finishing up letter sound knowledge. The alphabetic principle is really I know the name of a letter. I know the sound it makes. And I know how to make it, you know, I know how to actually write it on the paper.

The first two units in K are sort of like I'm learning to do both those things first with names in unit one and then with the alphabet chart in unit two. We don't really teach every single, there isn't a lesson on every single letter in those first two units. Which I think, that could at first make people nervous. But first of all, if you just think about that, does every letter need equal time? Does X need the same amount of time as M?

First of all, if you look at frequency, it doesn't, in terms of the English alphabet and how it works, it actually doesn't. But also couldn't kids be learning some of the letter sounds less explicitly? We believe they do. From what we're doing with name study, we believe that the kids will have so much exposure to, and then across the two units, they will have so much exposure to letter sound, letter name, alphabetic principle that it doesn't really go day 1-M, day 2-S, day 3- T.

Unit three is about word parts in kindergarten. This one feels sort of revolutionary because I think most phonics programs don't talk about word parts so early. We decided to do that, I think mostly because we think about kindergartners, that their writing is stronger in the beginning than their reading. And it feels like if I teach you that this word part, like for instance the word it is on the word wall. I-T, it. That this word part can help you make a lot more words, you know, let's just say one word helps you make 15 words. That feels super powerful for me, as a kindergartner. It feels almost like a magic power.

They do get it, as a super power because it goes with the super powers unit in reading. So they get word part power. Mabel gets a Wonder Woman costume, she gets a lasso because Wonder Woman has a lasso. She lassos up villains but the kids get to lasso up word parts, so they lasso up, in 'sit' they learn to lasso up 'it' to help them make other words by changing the onset or the first letter.

Unit four is switching to inside of words that are consonant-vowel-consonant words, there are vowels. Kids learn, they get another super power which is short vowel

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power. They come to really obsess in that unit, in unit four of kindergarten about the sounds that the vowels make because they are really hard. They can be really tricky to hear the difference in the sounds. But also in unit four of K, they're starting to do more reading. It's almost like their reading life is starting to catch up to their writing life.

So we want the kids to be able to attack a vowel in more than one way. So one way to attack the vowel in the word 'sit' is you can say, "I see a part, so I see ssss it, and I have it." Or let's say that's not working for you. You're like, I don't really see it in that, you could attack it letter by letter. So you could say, "I can do sss i ttt. Right, that's letter by letter to help me read the word sit. So it's almost like units three and four in K are complimentary because it gives kids two ways to attack tricky words in their books.

Then unit five in kindergarten and unit five in first grade, I think of those two as a lot alike, too. In kindergarten unit five, now that we've studied words for the whole year, you're like a word lover, now. We have that reading unit which is called Becoming Avid Readers. Sort of like the phonics unit goes a little bigger picture, we have new learning in that unit which is blends. We end up teaching a lot about blends in unit five of kindergarten.

But also, it's about now that you've been learning so much in phonics, you are able to learn more yourself. That unit ends with phonics projects. So we teach the kids, and the teachers, really, a little template for Day One of a phonics project goes like this. Day Two goes like this. Day Three goes like this. Then the idea is, teachers can either reach back to content we've already done earlier in the year where they're feeling like maybe we could use some more practice. And/or we've got some suggestions for other topics that they might cover that we haven't done so much with like more on contractions or more on possessives or some of the things that are showing up in their reading that we haven't done a whole unit on.

Same thing in first grade then. That's sort of how the first grade unit works where it's like we've studied phonics. You guys are ready to maybe run your own little phonics inquiry projects where you're studying some different topics. They study "r" controlled vowels in that which is new. But then there's like this, what are some of the other things? There's like a bend on capital letters which could feel like, oh is that phonics? Yeah, maybe not phonics, but it's conventions, right? It's the kind of thing that we want first graders to be starting to pay more attention to.

And in the middle of first grade, kind of cool because they work on long vowel. So where the middle of kindergarten was sort of short vowel in two different ways, the middle of first grade is sort of long vowels. Different patterns for the long vowel sound in words, with a little tiny stop in the middle of the year on ends of words. So we know that in first grade the endings of words cause kids lots of trouble because there's a lot more variety. There's suffixes and there's the e-r and the i-n-g and the e-

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d. Wait, that's the same word? That's play with e-d on the end and e-r on the end and i-n-g? Or there's a blend at the end of that word? But wait, aren't blends only in the beginnings of words? That's sort of how kindergartners thinks of blends. So we talk about blends in the middle or at the end or digraphs in the middle or the end of words in that middle unit.