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SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

THE READING WARS:
IDEOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL CONFLICTS IGNITED BY THE WRITINGS
OF RUDOLF FLESCH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
HUMANITIES PROGRAM IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

BY
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NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

FEBRUARY 2024

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Acknowledgments.....	vii
List of Figures and Tables.....	viii
Chapter 1	1
Introduction.....	1
Need	1
Purpose	5
Method	5
Structure	6
Methods of Teaching Reading	8
Look-Say Method Defined	8
Phonics Method Defined.....	10
Importance of the Study	12
Historical Background.....	13
Rudolf Flesch and Reading	20
Summary	24
Chapter 2.....	26
Review of the Literature	26
History of American Literacy Education	26
The Life and Writings of Rudolf Flesch	31
Consequences of Rudolf Flesch’s Writings	32
Reading Wars	34
Current State of Literacy Education in the United States and its Consequences	36
Criticisms of Rudolf Flesch.....	43
Unpublished Writings	46
Chapter 3	48
The History Behind the Reading Wars	48
Literacy Education During the 1600s.....	49
Literacy Education During the 1700s.....	51

Literacy Education During the 1800s.....	55
Literacy Education During the 1900s.....	67
Chapter 4.....	75
The Man Behind the Reading Wars.....	75
Biography.....	75
Books About Readability and Writing.....	77
Reading Expert.....	91
Chapter 5.....	93
The Book That Ignited the Reading Wars.....	93
Chapters 1-4.....	94
Chapter 5-8.....	109
Chapters 9-11.....	116
The Exercises.....	127
Chapter 6.....	130
The Reading Wars Continued.....	130
Chapters 1-5.....	130
Chapters 6-10.....	153
Chapters 11-15.....	165
Chapter 7.....	176
The Consequences of the Reading Wars.....	176
The Reading Wars: Early Years.....	176
The Reading Wars: Latter Years.....	192
Chapter 8.....	201
The Reading Wars Reignited.....	201
Hard Words.....	201
At A Loss For Words.....	204
Sold A Story.....	208
Conclusion.....	216
Bibliography.....	221
Primary Sources.....	221

Books.....	221
Journal and Other Articles.....	225
Websites and Online Resources	231
Dissertations and In-Person Interview	234

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to answer the question: what were the social and cultural effects of Rudolf Flesch's thoughts and writings on late 20th-century American literacy education? The purpose is to provide an understanding and articulation of the cultural and educational ramifications of Rudolph Flesch's books *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981). To achieve this goal an understanding and articulation of the cultural and educational ramifications of Rudolf Flesch's books will be offered. This qualitative study will look at the history, arguments, and productive consequences of this ideological and pedagogical debate. An examination of the current state of reading education and recommendations for further study will also be discussed.

This dissertation is limited to reading instruction in the United States. And while a history of reading instruction will be offered, it is limited to mostly northern states. Many factors influence who receives reading instruction and the type of reading instruction they receive, including race, gender, and socio-economic background. This dissertation is not an attempt to answer those complex questions. Rather, its goal is to examine the effect of two of the most influential books on reading instruction in the United States from the mid-twentieth century until present: Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981) and how Flesch's writings outlined the history and flaws of a specific method of reading instruction and proposed a solution to the current literacy crisis. An overview of the history of literacy instruction and the methods used from the

1600s to the publication of Flesch's first book in 1955 will lay the foundation for the study. An understanding of the early life and writings of Rudolf Flesch will provide insight into who he was and what made him an expert in literacy. Doing so will provide the basis for an in-depth analysis of his best-selling books, which will lead to an examination of the ramifications and consequences of his writings on American literacy education. A review of the current state of literacy instruction and recommendations for further study will be offered in the conclusion.

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List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1. <i>The Reading Brain</i>	2
Figure 2. <i>Percentage of US Students Proficient in Reading</i>	18
Figure 3. <i>Matthew Effect on Reading</i>	20
Table 1. <i>Flesch Readability Formula Focusing on Reading Ease</i>	81
Table 2. <i>Flesch Readability Formula Focusing on Reading Interest</i>	82
Figure 4. <i>Alphabet Chart</i>	128
Figure 5. <i>Lesson 18</i>	129
Figure 6. <i>Venn diagram of the three-cueing system</i>	205
Figure 7. <i>Decoding effects in visual word ERPs</i>	207

Chapter 1

Introduction

Need

This dissertation seeks to answer the question: what were the social and cultural effects of Rudolf Flesch's thoughts and writings on late 20th-century American literacy education? Reading is the singularly human activity of making meaning from a series of symbols. This technology, which emerged 12,000-15,000 years ago, has changed the ability to communicate and mark history.¹ Alphabetic writing is a very recent event in human history, making its first appearance about 5,000 years ago in Egypt.² The spelling of modern American words was not determined until Noah Webster's dictionary was published in 1828.³ Although a human activity, reading is not a natural activity. While the human brain has evolved to support spoken language, it has not developed the functional pathways and adaptations necessary for reading with the same degree of ease.⁴

The human brain has had over 100,000 years to support spoken language but a mere 12000-15000 to support written language.⁵ There is a multitude of studies that point to the fact that the human brain is not wired to read in the same way it is wired for spoken

¹ Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*, Dallas, TX: Voyager Sopris Learning, 2019. 9.

² Ibid., 10.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid.

language. MRI brain scans have shown that reading takes place in 3 areas of the brain and that the brain has had to adjust to accommodate this relatively new technology of reading.⁶ The temporoparietal cortex, the inferior frontal cortex, and the occipitotemporal cortex all need to work together to complete the visual processing, language comprehension, and speech production required for reading.⁷

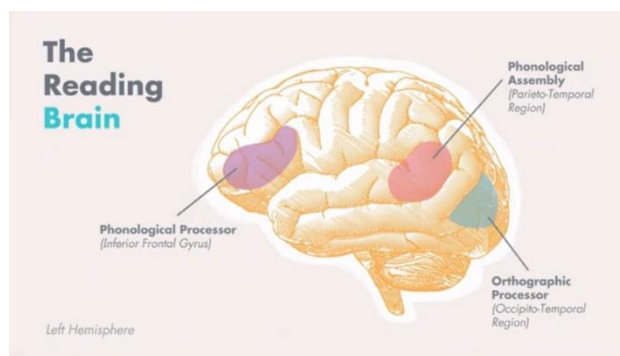


Figure 1. *The Reading Brain*. Image from Building the Reading Brain | Zaner-Bloser. Based on research from Sandak, Mencl, Frost, & Pugh, 2004; Houdé, Rossi, Lubin, & Joliot, 2010.

These different areas of the brain must interact and form new connections for reading to occur. Although reading is a distinctively human activity, it is not instinctive or intuitive. There is no genetic component to reading. Every person must be taught how to read. Since the brain has not yet evolved to make meaning from symbols effortlessly, it is no surprise that many struggled to learn how to read. The common misconception that reading language is as natural as speaking language has been repeatedly disproved. Brain

⁶ Guinevere F. Eden and Louisa Moats, "The Role of Neuroscience in the Remediation of Students with Dyslexia," *Nature Neuroscience* 5 Suppl, no. S11 (2002): 1080–1084. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nn946>. Accessed June 12, 2022.

⁷ Maryanne Wolf, *Proust, and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, Basingstoke, England: Icon Books. 2008.

research is now able to inform reading instruction so that teachers can effectively implement all aspects of reading instruction. Unfortunately, the instruction in many schools has not reflected this knowledge.⁸ According to recent surveys conducted by the National Council on Teacher Quality, only 29% of the over 1000 teacher training courses for reading instruction include the five essential elements of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension) Almost 80% of teacher preparatory programs lacked the coursework in teaching struggling readers.⁹ There is often a gap between research and practice. Reviews of research have revealed a lack of systematic guidelines which clarify how collaboration between researchers and policymakers can be achieved.¹⁰ In the case of reading instruction, one reason for the gap is that the methods of psychological experimentation required to explain how reading takes place in the brain were not developed until the 1970s.¹¹ Another major factor is the influence textbook publishers have had on how children are taught to read. In 1967, Jeanne Chall, who wrote *Learning to Read the Great Debate*, found that basal program publishers wielded incredible power when it came to the selection of district reading programs and thus how reading was taught. School administrators tended to believe the

⁸ Mark S. Seidenberg, Matt Cooper Borkenhagen, and Devin M. Kearns, “Lost in Translation? Challenges in Connecting Reading Science and Educational Practice,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, no. S1 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.341>.

⁹ Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*, Dallas, TX: Voyager Sopris Learning, 2019. 6.

¹⁰ Ayeshah Ahmed Alazmi, and Huda Salem Alazmi. “Closing the Gap between Research and Policymaking to Better Enable Effective Educational Practice: A Proposed Framework,” *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 22, no. 1 (2023): 91–116. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-022-09321-4>.

¹¹ Louisa Cook Moats, *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers*. 3rd ed. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, 2020. 8.

data provided to support one program over another without reviewing any of the available research to verify the truth of their claims.¹² Rudolf Flesch also addressed the impact textbook companies have on reading instructions in his book *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*. In 1929, the Scott, Foreman Company teamed up with well-known University of Chicago education professor William S Gray to produce the Dick and Jane reading series. In 1930, the Macmillan Company asked Professor Arthur Gates of Columbia University Teachers College to produce another look-say basal series. By the middle of the 1930s it was widespread practice to have educational “authorities” authoring basal reading series for the textbook companies.¹³ This conflict of interest allowed for confirmation bias, the tendency to see the results of research as supporting a biased view. Biased research was further bolstered in 1956 by the formation of the International Reading Association with William S. Gray as its first president. The group, later named the International Literacy Association, was founded to improve reading instruction through research. As an international professional organization, it has a network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 128 countries.¹⁴ However, according to Flesch, was founded to “function as a look-and-say defense league.”¹⁵

¹² Jeanne S. Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. 2nd ed. Maidenhead, England: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 1967. 297-300.

¹³ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*, London, England. HarperCollins, 1981. 23

¹⁴ “About Us | International Literacy Association,” accessed August 7, 2023, <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/about-us>.

¹⁵ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 23.

Reading instruction is heavily influenced by more than just research and practice. It is shaped by the historical, social, political, and economic issues.¹⁶ Thus, it is not surprising that methods of reading instruction continue to be a hotly debated issue.

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide an understanding and articulation of the cultural and educational ramifications of Rudolf Flesch's books *Why Johnny Can't Read* (1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* (1981). Specific aims include:

- Provide an overview of the dissertation and a look at the need, method, and structure of the dissertation.
- Provide a literature review for the dissertation.
- Provide an overview of the history of literacy education in the United States.
- Examine the life and writings of Rudolf Flesch.
- Examine the ramifications and consequences of his writings on American literacy education.
- Provide concluding thoughts and recommendations for further study.

Further amplification of these aims is presented below in the structure of the dissertation.

Method

This is qualitative study that will look at the history, arguments, and productive consequences of this ideological and pedagogical debate. It will utilize primary sources such as those of Flesch and others and will also present secondary studies that pertain to the history and pedagogy of literacy education.

¹⁶ Shannon, Patrick, *Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth Century America*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988. 43.

Structure

Chapter One will provide a broad overview of the dissertation, and will include the need, method, and structure of the dissertation. This chapter is an introduction to the dissertation which poses an answer to the question: what was the effect of Rudolf Flesch's books *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981) on late 20th-century education? Chapter One will also describe the scale of the dissertation and briefly introduce the main concepts to be further addressed as well as the ones that will be delimited.

Chapter Two will provide a literature review for the dissertation. This will include an in-depth look at the literature including books, articles, studies, and unpublished materials, such as theses and dissertations. The chapter will not discuss every entry entered in the bibliography. Instead, it will present the core material of the study.

Chapter Three will examine the history of American literacy education up to 1955. It will be sectioned by the centuries starting in the 1600s. The evolution of reading to read the Bible for the salvation of the soul to the need for critical reading skills to compete in an increasingly technological age will provide the foundation of the debate over reading methods. The factors that led to the shift from phonics to the look-say method and the gap between research and practice will also be explored.

Chapter Four will examine the life and writings of Rudolf Flesch. The intent here is not only to provide a biological background on the author and his life but also to offer an insight into the experience and education that designates Flesch as an expert in the field of reading and literacy instruction. This will include an overview of his other books

and articles as well as his readability tests, the Flesch Reading Ease Test, and the Flesch–Kincaid Readability Tests.

Chapter Five will examine the best-selling and critically acclaimed *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955). In his first critically acclaimed book, Flesch took a reproving look at reading instruction in the United States which centered around the look-say method of teaching reading used in the extremely popular Dick and Jane books and other basal reader series. Flesch skewered this instructional method as ineffective because it required children to memorize each word and ignore the fact that English is a phonetically based language, not a pictographic language like Chinese.

Chapter Six will review Flesch's follow-up book, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981). This book is an effort to answer the criticisms of the first book. Flesch also lists all the common excuses used to justify the whole word failure to teach reading. Each chapter offers research and reasons explaining how those excuses are incorrect.

Chapter Seven will examine the ramifications and consequences of Rudolf Flesch's writings on American literacy education. An assessment of the impact his work had on teachers, parents, literacy professors, textbook companies, other researchers, and authors will be conducted. Some of this information will be extracted directly from Flesch's sequel, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981). This chapter will also offer reasons his books were unsuccessful in ending the Reading Wars.

Chapter Eight will discuss the current state of literacy education in the United States. This discussion will include the factors that reignited the Reading Wars,

specifically journalist Emily Hanford's 2018 article “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being Taught to Read?” and her 2019 article, “At a Loss for Words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers,” where she categorizes the look-say method (known today as the whole word method, whole language, or balanced literacy) as a “flawed theory about how reading works, a theory that was debunked decades ago by cognitive scientists, yet remains deeply embedded in teaching practices and curriculum materials.”¹⁷ This chapter will also address Hanford’s podcast, *Sold A Story* (2023), where she once more investigates the debunked theory of reading instruction and the outside influences that affect reading instruction, specifically four reading experts and the company that published their work.

The Conclusion will provide final thoughts and recommendations for further study.

Methods of Teaching Reading

Look-Say Method Defined

Simply stated, the look-say method is a way to teach reading where a word is displayed and then the child is repeatedly told the word until they have it memorized. For example, the word *was* is written on a card and then the child is told the word is *was*. The child would have countless exposures to this word until they knew it. This method relies on the memorization of sight words. Sight words are also referred to as high-frequency words because they are words that are often seen in text and should be known by sight.

¹⁷ Emily Hanford, “At a Loss for Words: How a Flawed Idea Is Teaching Millions of Kids to Be Poor Readers,” *APM Reports*. Last modified August 22, 2019. Accessed June 12, 2022. <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/08/22/whats-wrong-how-schools-teach-reading>.

One requirement of this method is that the child memorizes a list of words and then uses context clues to guess at unknown words. The look-say method is often called the whole-word method because the child is learning whole words at a time. This method is based on the idea that reading acquisition is like, or as natural as, language acquisition. A child learns to speak whole words at a time so it is reasoned they should learn to read whole words at a time. This method was first popularized in the United States by deaf educator and the Reverend Thomas H. Gallaudet (1787–1851), although it was first proposed in 1791 by German educational reformer Friedrich Gedike (1754-1803).

The look-say or whole-word approach was embraced by educational leaders such as Horace Mann who famously stated, “Children would find it far more interesting and pleasurable to memorize words and read short sentences and stories without having to bother to learn the names of letters.” Progressive education pioneer John Dewey (1852-1952) believed that the goal of education should be meaningful and enjoyable. A whole word reading approach fit this new philosophy since the child could pursue learning the words of subjects, they found the most interesting. Whole language seems to put into practice the “learning by doing” philosophy of Dewey and other progressive educators because the child is learning words as they read, as opposed to learning all the necessary skills, such as letter names and sounds, first and then reading. A whole language classroom teaches children to read words that are meaningful to them and provides hands-on experiences for children to explore the language arts. Activities are based on a holistic and thematic approach. Proponents of the whole language emphasize the importance of meaning in reading.

Phonics Method Defined

Simply stated, phonics is a technique to teach the reading and spelling of an alphabetic language by explaining the relationship between letters and the sounds they make. The goal of phonics instruction is to ensure that the reader knows and applies the Alphabetic Principle. The Alphabetic Principle is that each letter represents a predictable sound and that there is a relationship between written letters(graphemes) and spoken sounds (phonemes). The pairing of written letters with the blending of sounds those letters represent into words is reading (decoding). The ability to pair sounds with the letters that represent them is spelling (encoding). For example, to teach the word *cat*, the child would look at the individual letters in the word c-a-t. They would then make the sounds each letter represents /c/ /a/ /t/. They would blend those sounds to produce the word *cat*. This can be a slow process at first, but once the code is mastered, reading rate, or fluency, quickly develops. This method requires knowledge of the 26 letters of the alphabet, the 75 basic phonemes those letters and letter combinations make, and an understanding of the rules of English.¹⁸ Many argue that English is a language of exception and too complicated to make phonics instruction worthwhile. While English does have a deep orthography, meaning its spelling system represents both speech sound (phonemes) and meaningful units (graphemes) and has been deeply influenced by a variety of languages, it is 96% decodable. Of the 96%, half are regularly decoded and encoded words that follow predictable or known strategies. The other 36% contain one exception to the speech sound, usually on the vowel. The other 10% can be decoded if the

¹⁸ Denise Eide, *Uncovering the Logic of English: A Common-Sense Approach to Reading, Spelling, and Literacy*, 2nd ed. Pedia Learning, 2012. 15.

etymology is known. Only 4% of all English words in print defy explanation and are truly irregular.¹⁹

The phonics approach was the sole method of instruction for centuries. Before that children learned to read through the Alphabetic Method, by which they recited the letters used in each word from a familiar piece of text such as the Bible. In 1570, John Hart, an English spelling reformer, suggested that the focus should be on the relationship between what is now referred to as graphemes and phonemes. “The power of sounds and of some letters have bene over long double for nowe to be recyved single, whatsoever they were aunciently: for that which use by little and little and with long continuance bringeth into any peoples maner of doing is never spoken against without great offence to the multitude...”²⁰ While there are several different ways to implement phonetic instruction, the most common is synthetic phonics. First proposed by Pascal in 1655, synthetic phonics pairs sound (phonemes) with specific letters (graphemes) that are pronounced in isolation and synthesized (blended). This was the only method of instruction because it was effective. Joseph Rice conducted a survey of various public schools throughout the United States. He found that phonics led to better reading fluency than the look-say method. He also gave spelling tests to 33,000 children throughout the United States between 1895 and 1896 and found that the best spelling results were obtained when the phonic method had been used to teach encoding and decoding.²¹

¹⁹ Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*, Dallas, TX: Voyager Sopris Learning, 2019. 169.

²⁰ John Hart, *An Orthography*, Menston, Scholar Press Ltd. Menston: Scholar Press Ltd. 1569. 11

²¹ Rice, Joseph. *The Public School System of the United States*. New York: Arno Press, 1893.

Importance of the Study

This dissertation seeks to clarify and amplify the contemporary consequences of the Reading Wars while offering productive information resulting from this pedagogical and ideological conflict. “Reading Wars” is the term that was coined as a direct result of Rudolf Flesch’s book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It*. It was not the first time that there was a debate between two different methods of reading instruction: phonics versus look-say or whole word. The Reading Wars first began shortly after the look-say method was introduced in Boston schools by Horace Mann (1796-1859), the first secretary of education, and found to be ineffective. Thirty-one schoolmasters wrote a scathing retort to Horace Mann’s “Seventh Annual Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education” wherein he persuasively endorsed the look-say approach. There had been no cause for debate up until this point since there had been no alternative method of reading instruction. Reading instruction had always been based on the Alphabetic Principle and phonic. The fact that Mann’s experiment had failed should have been the end of the war. Yet, a myriad of factors led to the resurgence of the look-say method and its eventual supremacy as a method of reading instruction.

Literacy not only provides a personal benefit to citizens but there are also social and cultural consequences to a nation’s literacy levels. Literacy instruction was and continues to be, influenced and altered due to emerging educational ideas, movements,

and materials.²² Shifting pedagogy and the politicizing of reading instruction have profoundly impacted reading education, illiteracy rates, and literacy policy.²³

Understanding the history of American literacy instruction is a key component to understanding America's current literacy crisis and the direct and indirect influence that Rudolf Flesch's books have had on literacy instruction. Teaching children to read with fluency and comprehension is an essential element of schooling. The purpose of public education is to help support children in acquiring the necessary skills and values for democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility.²⁴ Improving literacy is more than just an educational or societal necessity; it is essential if the United States is to compete in a global economy.²⁵

Historical Background

Literacy is the building block of society, affecting every aspect of life. In colonial times, the goal of literacy instruction was to save souls from the Old Deluder Satan. "One chief project of that old deluder, Satan,' the law read, was to "keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures."²⁶ During the American Revolution, the purpose of reading

²² Thomas L. Good, ed., *American Education: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152.

²³David Davenport, Jeffery M. Jones, and Jeffrey M. Jones. "The Politics of Literacy." *Policy Review*, Apr-May 2005 45–57. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ682505.pdf>.

²⁴ David F. Labree, "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals." *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (1997): 39–81.

²⁵ David Davenport and Jeffrey M. Jones, "The Politics of Literacy," *Policy Review*, Apr-May 2005. 46.

²⁶ Max Farrand, *The Laws, and Liberties of Massachusetts* / Reprinted from the Copy of the 1648 Edition in the Henry E. Huntington Library, with an Introduction by Max Farrand. Huntington Library Publications. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929. "Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647," [Mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/doc/old-deluder-satan-law/download). <https://www.mass.gov/doc/old-deluder-satan-law/download>.

instruction was not only to keep society morally righteous but also to unite a young nation against the political tyranny of England in the 1800s.²⁷ According to Thomas Jefferson, the goal of literacy was:

To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business. To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts, and accounts in writing. To improve, by reading, his morals, and faculties. To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either. To know his rights. To exercise with order and justice those he retains, to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates. And to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment, and in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed.²⁸

The American Industrial Revolution (1876-1914) spurred a new need for literacy as jobs became more technical and less agricultural. At the same time, views on how children learned and should be educated began to change. Before this, the main purpose of schooling was to be able to read the Bible and learn a trade. The Industrial Revolution changed the purpose of school. The focus was no longer on the need to overcome results of the doctrine of Original Sin as expressed in Christianity and to instill a proper moral attitude.²⁹ In the early 1900s, people such as researcher physician Joseph Mayer Rice (1857-1934) argued that contemporary reading instruction is needed to prepare students

²⁷ Patrick Shannon, *Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth Century America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988. vii

²⁸ Thomas Jefferson, Report for University of Virginia, 1818 "Founders Online: Report of the Board of Commissioners for the University of Virginia," University of Virginia Press. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-01-02-0289>.

²⁹ Patrick Shannon, *Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth Century America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988. 10.

for the rapid changes in immigration, urbanization, and industrialization.³⁰ John Dewey and other progressive educators advocated for the student to be involved in their education.

There are countless benefits to reading, both pragmatic and theoretical. Reading improves brain functioning, concentration and memory, and prevents Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline.³¹ Reading builds vocabulary and comprehension while expanding knowledge of the world and oneself.³² Reading increases the ability to empathize and helps develop emotional intelligence.³³ Reading also fights stress and depression symptoms by lowering blood pressure and heart rate.³⁴ Bibliotherapy has been used with positive results since the 1920s helping many deal with social and emotional issues through the reading of and connecting with books.

As novelist Anne Lamott eloquently put it:

What a miracle it is that out of those deaf, flat, small square sheets of worlds flow from beyond worlds, singing to you, comforting you, calming you, or arousing you. Books help us understand who we are and how we should behave. Books show us what society and friendship mean, they teach us how to live and how to

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

³¹ R. P. Friedland, T. Fritsch, K. A. Smyth, E. Koss, A. J. Lerner, C. H. Chen, G. J. Petot, and S. M. Debanne. "Patients with Alzheimer's Disease Have Reduced Activities in Midlife Compared with Healthy Control-Group Members." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 98, no. 6 (2001): 3440–45. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.061002998>.

³² Jessica A. R. Logan, Laura M. Justice, Melike Yumuş, and Leydi Johana Chaparro-Moreno. "When Children Are Not Read to at Home: The Million Word Gap." *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics: JDBP* 40, no. 5 (2019): 383–86. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0000000000000657>.

³³ Natalie Young et al., "Promoting Empathy, Equity, and Awareness Through Read-Alouds with Young Children," *Illinois Reading Council Journal* 49, no. 1 (December 1, 2020): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.33600/IRCJ.49.1.2020.4>.

³⁴ Gökmen Arslan, Murat Yıldırım, Masood Zangeneh, and İsmail Ak. "Benefits of Positive Psychology-Based Story Reading on Adolescent Mental Health and Well-Being." *Child Indicators Research* 15, no. 3 (2022): 781–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-021-09891-4>.

die. They are full of all the things that you don't get in real life—wonderful, lyrical language, for instance, right off the bat. And quality of attention: we may notice amazing details during the course of a day but we rarely let ourselves stop and really pay attention. An author makes you notice, makes you pay attention, and this is a great gift.³⁵

The ability to read enhances the worldview of the reader. Reading sparks creativity, wonder, awe, and the expanding of knowledge. A reader can learn how to do anything given the right book. Reading improves communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Readers can gain perspective and share the ideas, thoughts, and emotions of others. Reading provides limitless opportunities to learn, grow and achieve.

Another important purpose of reading instruction is to have highly skilled workers in an increasingly technical age.³⁶ The ability to read has a direct impact on employment opportunities, crime rates, health outcomes, and gender equality.³⁷ Literacy is linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as higher education, income, health and civil engagement.³⁸ There is a direct relationship between income and literacy. The average annual income of an adult in 2017 with a sixth-grade reading level is \$63,000. Adults who read at a third to fifth-grade level make on average \$48,000, and those who read below the third-grade level make a mere \$34,000 a year on average.³⁹

³⁵ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Brunswick, VIC, Australia: Scribe Publications, 2008. 51.

³⁶ Denise Eide, *Uncovering the Logic of English: A Common-Sense Approach to Reading, Spelling, and Literacy*, 2nd ed. Pedia Learning, 2012. 22.

³⁷ “United States.” *World Literacy Foundation*. Carlos, June 2, 2021.
<https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/united-states/>.

³⁸ David Card, “The Causal Effect of Education on Earnings” *Handbook of Labor Economics*, Elsevier, 1999. 1801–63.

³⁹ Jonathan Rothwell, “Assessing the Economic Gains of Eradicating Illiteracy Nationally and Regionally in the United States,” 2020.

The ability to read is also a critical factor in health outcomes since health literacy is dependent upon the ability to read.⁴⁰ A 2005 study of 2,923 Americans concluded that those with limited health literacy had lower use of preventive services, higher hospitalization rates, and less overall health knowledge.⁴¹ It is estimated that illiteracy costs the United States economy an estimated \$300 billion annually.⁴² The effects of illiteracy include generational cycles of poverty, limited employment opportunities, increased chances of poor health, criminal behavior, and dependence on charity and welfare.⁴³

According to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which examines the performance of both public and parochial students across the nation, only 35% of 4th-graders and 34% of 8th-graders performed at or above *Proficient* in reading and have “solid academic performance and demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter.”⁴⁴ These percentages were lower than in 2019.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Michael S. Wolf, Julie A. Gazmararian, and David W. Baker, “Health Literacy and Functional Health Status among Older Adults,” *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 165, no. 17: (2005) 1946–52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

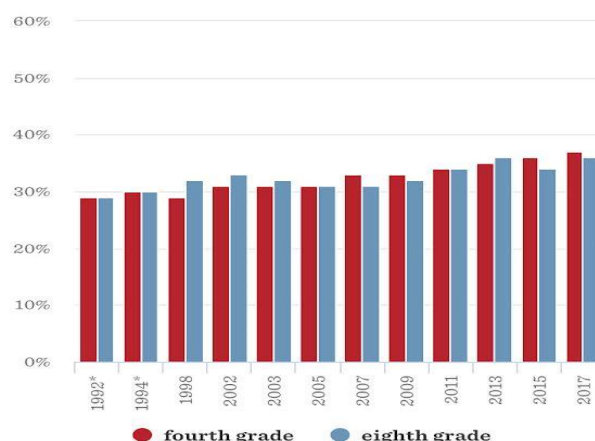
⁴² Anthony Cree, “The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy: A Snapshot of Illiteracy in a Global Context,” 2012. <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A63953>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Nick Gaehde and Lexia Learning, “Illiteracy Is Costing America — Here’s Why,” *USA Today*. March 2, 2022. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sponsor-story/lexia-learning2022/2022/03/02/illiteracy-costing-america-heres-why/6848450001/>.

⁴⁵ “Assessments - Reading | NAEP,” [National Assessment of Educational Progress] n.d. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/>. Accessed September 13, 2022.

Percentage of U.S. students proficient in reading



SOURCE: The National Assessment of Educational Progress ([Grade 4](#) | [Grade 8](#)). *In 1992 and 1994, testing accommodations were not permitted.

Figure 2. *Percentage of US Students Proficient in Reading*. Image from The National Assessment of Educational Progress Grade 4 and Grade 8.

The United States has one of the lowest literacy rates in the developed world⁴⁶ with 42 million adults functionally illiterate.⁴⁷ Low adult literacy skills cost an estimated \$106 – \$238 billion in health care costs every year.⁴⁸ An increase of just 1% in literacy scores leads to a 2.5% rise in labor productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP.⁴⁹ In an

⁴⁶ Denise Eide, *Uncovering the Logic of English: A Common-Sense Approach to Reading, Spelling, and Literacy*, 2nd ed. Pedia Learning. 2012. 11.

⁴⁷ Diane McGuinness, *The Why Our Children Can't Read, and What We Can Do About It: A Scientific Revolution in Reading*, New York, NY: Free Press. 1999.

⁴⁸ John A. Vernon, Antonio Trujillo, Sara J. Rosenbaum, and Barbara DeBuono "Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy." (2007)
https://hsrc.himmelfarb.gwu.edu/sphhs_policy_facpubs/172/.

⁴⁹ "Literacy Facts," n.d. Literacytexas.org. Accessed December 23, 2022.
<https://www.literacytexas.org/impact/literacy-facts/>.

increasingly technological age, the ability to read with fluency and comprehension has never been more important.

Yet, how instruction is delivered has been, and continues to be, a fiercely debated issue. The literacy crisis in the United States comes at a time when jobs are becoming increasingly technical and the need for highly specialized workers is rising dramatically.⁵⁰ Until the 1920s, reading was taught in a straightforward manner that directly linked spelling to reading, encoding to decoding.⁵¹ The educational reform movements of the 1920s and 1930s spurred a radical shift in reading instructions. Instead of focusing on the sounds letters represent and using those sounds to create words, teachers taught the whole word. This was called the look-say or whole-word method. This method was ineffective because it did not teach the student any skills to decode the word. It relied strictly on memorization. The brain can only hold 2000 sound-symbol pairings, which means a student would be severely limited on how many words they would be able to “read.”⁵²

There is a cumulative effect in the development of reading. Students who have early success in acquiring reading skills tend to continue to have reading success whereas students who fail to learn to read before the third or fourth grade tend to have more difficulty learning new skills throughout life. Those students who fall behind in reading read less, increasing the gap between them and their peers. Later, when students need to

⁵⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 16.

⁵¹ Denise Eide, *Uncovering the Logic of English: A Common-Sense Approach to Reading, Spelling, and Literacy*. 2nd ed. Pedia Learning, 2012. 22.

⁵² Diane McGuinness, *Why Our Children Can't Read, and What We Can Do About It: A Scientific Revolution in Reading*, New York, NY: Free Press. 1999. 45.

read to learn (as opposed to learning to read) their lack of reading skill causes difficulty in other subjects. In this way they fall farther and farther behind in school, dropping out at a much higher rate than their peers. This is known as the Matthew Effect in reading.

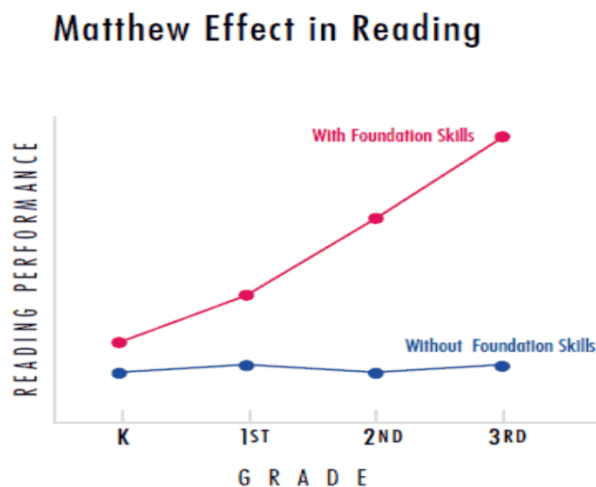


Figure 3. *Matthew Effect on Reading*. Image by Kevin Stanovich, July 5, 2013. Matthew Effect - Keith Stanovich (weebly.com)

“Slow reading acquisition has cognitive, behavioral, and motivational consequences that slow the development of other cognitive skills and inhibit performance on many academic tasks.”⁵³

Rudolf Flesch and Reading

Rudolf Flesch, a lawyer, librarian, and author, recognized the massive failure of the look-say method, stating, “One hundred twenty-four such studies have carefully compared phonics first and look and say. Not a single one proved the superiority of look

⁵³ Keith E. Stanovich, “Matthew Effect in Reading: Some Consequences of Individual Differences in the Acquisition of Literacy,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1986): 390.

and say.”⁵⁴ He argued that it was illogical to teach a phonetic language such as English the same way one would teach Chinese characters.⁵⁵ In his best-selling 1955 book, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It*, he made an impassioned plea to America's parents to stop relying on the broken school system to teach reading and take matters into their own hands. This book had far-reaching implications as it spoke directly to parents, providing them with the means to correct the illiteracy that resulted from the look-say method. Flesch, a major proponent of phonics-first instruction, set off a controversy that was to become known as the Reading Wars.

Although the term was new, the controversy was not. The Reading Wars were truly just the same issue that had been brought to light during the 1800s when Horace Mann argued that “Children would find it far more interesting and pleasurable to memorize words and read short sentences and stories without having to bother to learn the names of letters” and advocated a change in focus away from phonics to the look-say method. This disagreement continues today and was reignited in 2019 by journalist Emily Hanford of APM Reports. In her article, “At a Loss for Words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers,” she discusses how the three cueing system, which is a major aspect of the look-say method, (the whole language reading approach) is a “flawed theory about how reading works, a theory that was debunked decades ago by cognitive scientists yet remains deeply embedded in teaching practices

⁵⁴ Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

and curriculum materials.”⁵⁶ With the look-say approach, when a child comes to an unknown word, one they haven’t memorized, they try to guess the correct word from the context of the sentence and/or the associated picture. Once they make a guess, they are to ask themselves, the three cues: Does it look right? Does it sound right? Does it make sense? If the word they have guessed fits into the context and passes the three cueing checking system, the child can be confident that they have read the word correctly. They will not know for sure, however, since they don’t have the skills necessary to deconstruct the word into its individual sounds.

This approach was the target of Rudolf Flesch’s book *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do About It*, which became a national bestseller and sparked what soon became referred to as the Reading Wars. Flesch argued that the look-say approach was ineffective and counterintuitive well before the MRI brain scanning technology was available to prove him correct. The Reading Wars are ideological and pedagogical disagreements between a whole language versus a phonics approach to reading instruction. In *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do About It*, Flesch blasted how the public school system was teaching students to read. Flesch argued that teachers must systematically teach phonics to students so that they can read. The whole word approach, or look-say approach, as he described it, where a student looks at a word and the accompanying picture to “read,” is not effective. According to Flesch, it was simply guessing.

⁵⁶ Emily Hanford, “How a Flawed Idea Is Teaching Millions of Kids to Be Poor Readers,” *APM Reports*. Last modified August 22, 2019. <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/08/22/whats-wrong-how-schools-teach-reading>.

In 1981, Flesch once more called for action noting that while textbook companies may have added a dash of “incidental phonics” into their whole language curriculums and repackaged it as “balanced literacy,” this was still not enough to teach children to read effectively. Incidental phonics is teaching a phonic skill in isolation, for example, teaching digraphs (that two letters make one sound /sh/, /th/, /ch/, /ph/, /wh/, /ck/) as a student happens upon it, or just because, without connecting back to previously taught skills. Synthetic phonics, which Flesch advocated, is a bottom-up approach to reading and spelling. Instruction begins with phonemes, the basic units of sound, and the alphabetic code. Taught in a systematic, explicit manner with one skill following another until mastered, students learn to blend and segment words of increasing complexity, while learning the rules of the English language. Flesch argued for the need for this “phonics first” approach. In *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, Flesch explained why his 1955 warning was ignored and the disastrous consequences of such.

Why Johnny Can't Read was the first in a series of public debates over how reading instruction should be delivered. While the book was mostly geared toward parents because it included an explanation of how they should take control of their child's reading instruction, it sparked the politicizing and polarizing debate on reading instruction that continues today. Since Flesch's book, and its 1981 sequel *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*, there have been countless books, articles, and discussions both for and against the use of systematic phonetic instruction. According to recent surveys conducted by the National Council on Teacher Quality, only 29% of the over 1000 teacher training courses for reading instruction include the five essential elements of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics,

fluency, vocabulary and comprehension) Almost 80% of teacher preparatory programs lacked the coursework in teaching struggling readers.⁵⁷ According to the National Council of Teacher Quality, the number of teacher preparation programs in the nation to embrace reading science has increased to 51 percent of 1,000 evaluated programs across the country. This is up from just 35 percent seven years ago.⁵⁸ So while there is improvement, more work needs to be done.

Before Flesch's books, the method of reading instruction was left to college professors, textbook companies, and tradition. After the publication of his first book, however, his readers began to question the effectiveness of this since assessment data revealed that students were not learning to read effectively and the number of those diagnosed as dyslexic continued to rise.⁵⁹ Flesch encouraged parents to get involved with their children's reading instruction. He argued that since the school system was not going to properly teach the student to read, it was up to the parents to do it themselves at home.

Summary

As noted earlier, this dissertation seeks to answer the question: what the social and cultural effects were of Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can*

⁵⁷ Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*, Dallas, TX: Voyager Sopris Learning, 2019. 6.

⁵⁸ "Teacher Prep Review: Program Performance in Early Reading Instruction (2020)," National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.nctq.org/publications/2020-Teacher-Prep-Review:-Program-Performance-in-Early-Reading-Instruction>.

⁵⁹ Helland Turid, "Trends in Dyslexia Research during the Period 1950 to 2020—Theories, Definitions, and Publications," *Brain Sciences* 12, no. 10: (2022) 1323. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci12101323>. 2022.

Do About It (1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981). Through a qualitative study, an understanding and articulation of the cultural and educational ramifications of Rudolf Flesch's books will look at various aspects of this ideological and pedagogical debate. The next chapter will include an in-depth literature review of the core material to provide the reader with an understanding of the existing research and debates relevant to this study.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The Reading Wars are ideological and pedagogical disagreements between a whole word versus a phonics approach to reading instruction. The term was first coined because of Rudolf Flesch's best-selling book, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It*. To gain insight into the controversy, and the critical role Rudolf Flesch played, it is essential to understand the history of the two methods of reading instruction, the biography of Rudolf Flesch, specifically what made him an expert around literacy education, and an understanding of the impact of his work. This requires an in-depth look at the literature including books, journals, and articles, as well as a keen focus paid to the core material of the study. This is no small feat since there are several scholarly works on the Reading Wars. The volume of material will be selective.

History of American Literacy Education

Understanding the numerous factors that have influenced American literacy lays the foundation for the Reading Wars. A limited number of books focus on the history of literacy instruction as opposed to literacy practice. One of the preeminent books on the topic is Nila Banton Smith's *American Reading Instruction*. First published in 1934 and updated in 1965 and 1986, *American Reading Instruction* covers reading instruction in the United States beginning with the colonial era. Through extensive research, Smith shows the evolution of literacy instruction in the United States. As a supporter of the look-and-say approach, she does an excellent job of explaining the factors that led to the repeated resurgence of the method. E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in*

Colonial America. Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book (2005) is an excellent companion to Smith's book, adding a human-interest aspect. Monaghan uses case studies to illuminate the education of females and minorities. She also outlines how reading instruction was religiously motivated and writing instruction was secularly motivated. An exhibition of the material discussed in the book was presented at the 44th Annual Convention of the International Reading Association in San Diego, California from May 2-7, 1999, featuring many of the instructional primers, spellers, and readers discussed in Smith's books bringing to life the history of reading instruction in the United States.

Barbara Ruth Peltzman's *Reading Instruction in America: A History* (2015) discusses the myriad of reading methods used in American schools from the 19th to the 21st century. The author discusses how teachers can be influenced by the current fads in education rather than using the best strategies for their students. Peltzman's book offers an examination of past methods and why they fell in and out of favor. This book provides a fuller picture of how policies and politics influence education.

"The Expansion of Primary Education, 1870-1940: Trends and Issues" by Aaron Benavot from the University of Georgia and Phyllis Riddle from Stanford University addresses the "uneven, tentative, and varied" expansion of primary education across the globe during this period. This comprehensive research includes information from 126 nations and colonies from 1870 to 1940 providing a big-picture overview of education. It was important for this author's current research that the area of historical review is limited to the northeast United States.

Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth Century America (1988) is a slim book by Patrick Shannon that succinctly discusses the influence of factors outside of education that deeply impacted the manner and methods of reading instruction. Shannon's critical eye explores the influence publishing companies had, and continue to have, on literacy instruction. He explains in detail how societal shifts, such as going from an agricultural to an industrial society, changed people's view of education. Shannon also details how cultural shifts also impact who becomes instructional decision-makers. Shannon's critical eye expertly outlines how literacy instruction has transformed from an interaction between student and teacher to a transaction between the school district and textbook company. He does not shy away from detailing the price students and teachers pay as a result.

The importance of the role many political figures held in shaping literacy instruction cannot be underestimated. When it comes to the proliferation of the look-and-say method the first name often mentioned is Horace Mann. In 1839, he wrote *Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report of the Hon. Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education*, touting the value of the look-and-say method. This was the beginning of the Reading Wars as after years of argument, thirty-one schoolmasters wrote *Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report of the Hon. Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education* (1844) explained the flawed thinking and unsupported reasoning behind the look-and-say method Mann supported. The schoolmasters went on to decry the lack of teacher input in the implementation of literacy instruction. Mann's advocacy and the schoolmasters' protest mirror the debate sparked by Flesch's books. This argument continues today. It is interesting to note how history is repeated and how

politics and society have and continue to have profound effects on reading instruction.

Denise Eide's *Uncovering the Logic of English: A Common-Sense Approach to Reading, Spelling, and Literacy* (2012) begins her incredibly informative book laying a brief foundation of the history of literacy instruction and how the result was the current literacy crisis that the United States is facing. This vital book clearly and simply explains the rules of English. Eide persuasively argues that when students are explicitly taught the spelling rules, they increase their ability not only to accurately spell words but also to read and decode unknown words, regardless of the number of syllables. This is a must-read to effectively teach phonics. Without understanding the rules of English, phonetic instruction will not be as robust. This is the same argument made by the thirty-one schoolmasters in 1844. Like Flesch, Eide also addresses parents, but unlike Flesch, she also speaks to educators and how they can bring systematic instruction in phonics into the classroom. Each rule is stated, explained, and then examples are provided.

Samuel T. Orton hesitantly offered up "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading, as a Source of Reading Disability" in the February 1929 edition of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. He makes note that his concerns do not surround the method, but how it affects a small group of children. For this group, the sight reading (look-and-say) method is not merely ill-adapted, it is an obstacle that "may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far reaching damage to their emotional life." In his article, Orton called out the same "faulty teaching methods" as the 31 schoolmasters who questioned Horace Mann in 1837.

Equally as respected as Smith's *American Reading Instruction* is *Teaching to Read: Historically Considered* by Mitford Mathews. This hard-to-find book describes the journey of the alphabet to modern-day (1966) literacy instruction. Mathews' book is professionally researched, and he corrected a mistake Smith made and repeated by Flesch in his first book. Mathews was able to discern the truth behind a publicity stunt.

"Apparently John Russell Webb published a primer in 1846 – *The New Word Method* – in the preface of which he gave an account of the origins of the word method. The story was no doubt propaganda for the primer, pure and simple, but it must be referred to here for it deceived Dr. Nila Smith and Dr. Rudolph Flesch, both of whom seem to have accepted it at face value." In his follow-up book, Flesch noted the correction and added that Mathews scholarly work had settled the matter "once and for all" determining that the look-and-say method could be traced back to German educator Friedrich Gedike.

An Essential History of Current Reading Practices (2008) edited by Mary Jo Fresch is a collection of essays by various reading experts that deal with the changes in theory, research, and practice from the mid-1950s to the early 2000s. Each essay, written by well-known reading experts, takes an in-depth look at various reading topics, including phonics, family literacy, guided reading, reading comprehension, fluency, content reading, children's literature, remedial and clinical reading, spelling and vocabulary, and teacher education. Special attention is paid to the issues, trends, and political forces that shape how instruction is delivered through both policy and practice. An added feature of this collection is the extensive references included at the end of each essay. This allows the reader the opportunity to dig more into the research for a greater understanding of the topic.

Two dedicated researchers, Robert J. Tierney, and P. David Pearson, examine the history and shifts of reading instruction in *A History of Literacy Education: Waves of Research and Practice* (2021). The authors discuss how the changes in pedagogy, research, and theory “verge on revolutionary.” This book examines the often-overlooked history of reading instruction and the impact that it has had on students.

The Life and Writings of Rudolf Flesch

The most crucial book for this dissertation is Rudolf Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do About It*. Originally written in 1955, this classic book about reading instruction politicized how reading was taught in public schools. Geared towards parents, the author contends that schools do not do enough direct instruction in systematic phonics. The result is students are unable to meet reading standards and the number of students diagnosed as dyslexic drastically increased. The impact that this book had was so profound that it has remained in continuous print ever since.

Flesch wrote the impactful follow-up to the 1955 work, *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* in 1981. In the sequel, Flesch discusses not only the research behind proving the effectiveness of phonemic instruction but also discusses the reaction to the research from proponents of the whole-language approach. He addresses the common excuses given to parents to explain students’ reading failure. Suggestions to remedy the issue of illiteracy are also provided.

Flesch is equally famous for his readability formulas, The Flesch Readability Formula and the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Formula. which dramatically changed how newspaper articles, insurance policies and other information writing are crafted. He was

an ardent supporter of the Plain English movement and wrote in a highly relatable, if not passionate literary style.

While there is no biography about Rudolf Flesch, much of what is known about him comes from the autobiographical information written in the jacket of his many books. Additional information comes from his 1986 New York Times obituary.

Consequences of Rudolf Flesch's Writings

Wiley Blevins' *A Fresh Look at Phonics: Common Causes of Failure and 7 Ingredients for Success* is based on twenty-five years of classroom experience. The author discusses the seven ingredients for reading success: readiness skills, scope and sequence, blending, dictation, word awareness activities, high-frequency words, and reading connected text. The author also outlines ten common reasons why phonics instruction fails. Teachers also offer activities and instructional guides to improve reading outcomes for all students. While Blevin mentions the importance of other components of reading instruction, he, like Flesch, advocates systematic phonics instruction as the best way to ensure that all students learn to read.

Recipe for Reading: Intervention Strategies for Struggling Readers (2000) by Nina Traub and Francis Bloom discusses using a systematic approach to teaching letter names, sounds, and words. The authors guide phonetic instruction using phonemic awareness drills and word lists that build upon skills previously taught. This book helps struggling readers learn to read in a logical, sequential manner that ensures reading success like Flesch's suggestion in *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

Noted linguist Leonard Bloomfield developed a system of reading instruction for his children that was so effective that it quickly caught the attention of others. This

method is outlined in his book, *Let's Read: A Linguistic Approach* (1961). Designed around the idea that English has many familiar spelling patterns that make reading easier. The book includes systematic lessons which build on the previously taught skill. This method was specifically mentioned in both *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981) and *Teaching to Read* (1966) by Mitford Mathews. Both authors touted the effectiveness of Bloomfield's method for teaching reading. They both also relayed William S. Gray's response to the excellent reading he heard from a first-grade student. Gray, the author of and major proponent of look-and-say stated that a child who read the word *satellite* in a sixth-grade textbook was merely "word calling" since he was unable to give a thorough definition of the word. This demonstrates the dismissiveness of look-and-say supporters of phonics instruction effectiveness.

In his book *Victims of Dick and Jane and Other Essays* (2003), Samuel Blumenfeld agrees with Flesch's summation that teaching reading through a look-and-say approach "flies in the face of all logic and common sense." Blumenfeld also addresses some of the consequences of Flesch's 1955 work, such as the creation of the International Reading Association. While this association has done many things to help promote the improvement of reading instruction, it was created to defend the look-say method and helped to promote that method over phonics. Another result was the formation of the Reading Reform Foundation by Watson Washburn, an esteemed New York lawyer who noticed his nieces and nephews were having difficulty learning to read. Blumenfeld further discusses the history of the look-and-say approach, the influence of Horace Mann, John Dewey and William Gray as well as those who spoke out against it, like Samuel Orton, Rudolf Flesch, and himself. Blumenfeld suggests that the solution to this problem

is a return to private education, either religiously affiliated one that teaches phonics first or homeschooling, to do just that.

Reading Wars

The Reading Wars are an ideological dispute between the whole word and phonics first approach to teaching reading. This argument has been ongoing since Horace Mann and the schoolmasters' public disagreement about reading instruction in the 1800s, and in the 1950s with Rudolf Flesch's incendiary book. In 2019, this issue once more exploded in the media with the release of Emily Hanford's *AMP Reports* article "How a Flawed Idea Is Teaching Millions of Kids to Be Poor Readers." The article explained the problem with the three cueing system used for whole-word instruction. The cueing system encourages students to word guess, which is a frequent practice of poor readers. Hanford points out that although publishers have added some phonics into existing programs to be considered "research-based," they have not created reading instruction programs that completely follow the science of reading. Unfortunately, many teachers believed in the whole-word approach and were never taught how to teach phonics systematically. Hanford notes that while some students will learn to read regardless of how they are instructed, many students won't, which makes the need for instruction that benefits all so pressing. This is the same warning Samuel Orton made in 1929. In October 2022, Hanford released the podcast "Sold a Story." This six-part podcast investigated the influential authors and publishing companies who promoted the disproven idea of whole-word reading, how educators followed suit, and the educational and financial consequences.

Jeanne S. Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* was originally written in 1967 to settle the debate sparked by Rudolf Flesch's 1955 explosive book, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It*. Through extensive research, funded through the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in both the US and Britain, Chall, a Harvard University Graduate School of Education literacy scholar, discusses best practices for reading instruction. She concludes that the most effective reading practice focuses on "code-emphasis," which is phonics. Students who were taught phonics in their early grades had better success with word recognition which led to better comprehension compared to students who were taught to read whole words and whole sentences. In addition, Chall suggests across three editions of the book (1967, 1983, 1996) that phonics alone is not enough, and comprehension-based instruction and quality read alouds are also a critical aspect of reading instruction. When reviewing the Reading Wars, Chall makes two key points; one, reading instruction must be viewed within a broader historical perspective and two, the value of research and evidence forming reading instruction must always be forefront.

In the June 11, 2018, issue of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest: A Journal of the American Psychological Society*, Anne Castles, Kathleen Rastle, and Kate Nation's article "Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert," addresses the wide gap between research knowledge about reading instruction and acquisition and the public's understanding. This article reviews the science of reading, explains the importance of phonics instruction in the English writing system, and reviews effective practices for classroom instruction. The authors end the article by calling an end to the decades-long Reading Wars by recommending balanced, developmentally

informed, and researched based practices predicated on a deep understanding of how English language and writing systems work.

David, and Meredith Liben. *Know Better, Do Better: Teaching the Foundations so Every Child Can Read* (2019). This book is a solid introduction to the science of reading. The authors use stories from their experience teaching reading within the public school system. They discussed the lack of effective reading instruction and how it led to a lack of student proficiency in reading. They also address the Reading Wars and how the politics of reading has turned the focus away from effective instruction. The book is easy to read and includes ideas and references to improve any teacher's practice.

Current State of Literacy Education in the United States and its Consequences

Few reports are as often quoted and used as proof positive how necessary it is to improve reading instruction in America as the National Assessment of Educational Progress Report on Reading, “Assessments - Reading | NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress).” This report shows the appalling state of literacy in the United States. The NAEP is given to over 100,000 American students every two years in fourth and eighth grade and every four years in twelfth. The assessment looks at reading comprehension ability by asking students to answer comprehension questions after reading grade-level material. The 2022 report revealed a lowering of scores from 2019 and is often cited as proof that reading instruction must change to ensure that every child can read with the fluency required to support comprehension. While some have argued that Covid is the sole reason behind this dip, the lack of systematic instruction also bears responsibility.

Lucy Calkins is the author of *The Art of Teaching Reading* (2001). As the founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, she is a Balanced literacy proponent who advocates for a three-cueing system (MSV) based on meaning, looking at pictures or context clues, syntax, the structure of the sentence, or visual, and checking the letters on the page. The author encourages teachers to use a workshop model, demonstrating appropriate reading behavior to the students. Calkins is currently under fire for promoting an idea of how children learn to read that has been disproven and has recently rewritten her curriculum to include more phonics and embrace the science of reading.

While the science of reading has become a common term to encompass all things reading, the actual research is discussed in Stanislas Dehaene's *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (2009). This fascinating book explores each aspect of how the brain learns to read. Using extensive research, Dehaene discusses how we process language, decode, and encode words, and the many dynamic characteristics of the reading brain. He touches upon how the brain learns to read, the dyslexic brain, the connection between reading and symmetry, the reading paradox, and the future of reading. Chapter five was of special interest as it addresses the Reading Wars and the myth of the whole word reading. Dehaene leaves no room for interpretation. Science clearly states that the winner in the Reading Wars is phonics.

Louisa Moats' article, "Teaching Reading *IS* Rocket Science," examines what teachers should know to implement effective reading instruction. The article, part of the American Federation of Teachers June 1999 issue, was well ahead of its time, calling for proper teacher preparation involving the understanding of the structure of the English

language both in spoken and written form, how children develop reading skills, and the implementation of research-based instructional methods. Moats wrote an updated version in 2020 which “emerged from a collaboration between the American Federation of Teachers and the Center for Development and Learning.” The article specifically states that this updated report “doesn’t get us back into the Reading Wars.”⁶⁰ Instead, it outlines the skills necessary to effectively teach reading, specifically the knowledge of language structure and its application to teaching. She also developed LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) training in conjunction with Lexia Learning which is a professional development course for reading and spelling. This course teaches educators how to teach the practical skills involved in a comprehensive reading program, such as phonemic awareness, morphology, orthography, semantics, syntax, and text structure, and of course, phonics.

Well-known whole-word literacy experts, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, book *Guided Reading: Responsive Teaching Across the Grades* (2017) argue that a comprehensive literacy program includes reflective, responsive teaching. Guided reading is the linchpin that holds it together. They also contend that a language-rich text base is essential for students to excel in literacy. Several small case observations are cited as examples of the effect a language-rich classroom has on students’ literacy outcomes. Finally, a list of suggested reading to help guide instruction utilizing whole language theory, practice, and assessment. Fountas and Pinnell are known for their running record reading assessment which included the three-cueing system. The teacher times the

⁶⁰ “Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science,” American Federation of Teachers, July 12, 2023, 3, <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2020/moats>.

student as they read and makes note of any reading mistakes. The teacher then categorizes the “miscues” as either meaning, syntax, or visual. The teacher is then able to figure out which level the child is reading. The alphabetic levels ascend in difficulty from A to Z. School districts are moving away from this assessment because it does not determine reading skill, but rather the ability to recognize repetitive sentence patterns and high-frequency words. Both authors were called out in Emily Hanford’s 2019 article and podcast “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being Taught to Read?” where she states that the two continue to make money from a disproven system of instruction.

David Kilpatrick’s *Equipped for Reading Success: A Comprehensive, Step-by-Step Program for Developing Phoneme Awareness and Fluent Word Recognition* (2021) by David A. Kilpatrick reviews current research that argues for phonemic awareness as a crucial, often missing, piece of the literacy puzzle. Through the many activities that only take one minute each, students can increase phonemic awareness, phonic skills, and sight word recognition. Research has found that this approach is both easy to implement and highly effective.

Stephen D. Krashen’s *Three Arguments Against Whole Language and Why They Are Wrong* (1999), takes direct aim against phonemic instruction, the whole language advocate, Krashen, offers the three most common arguments against the whole language and then systematically challenges each. He contends that skill-building is less effective than comprehension-building. He states that the Goodman-Smith hypothesis is not disproven by fixation studies. Finally, he advocates rich text usage to encourage real reading to eliminate print deprivation. This book is a perfect example of the excuses listed by Flesch in *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read*. His argument that skill building is less

effective than comprehension building ignores the fact that without the ability to decode the sentence, the student will never be able to comprehend it. The Goodman-Smith Hypothesis is that we learn to read words not by decoding each letter but by making sense of what is written on the page. This has been disproven not only by fixation studies but also by MRI imaging, which clearly shows the areas of the brain that are engaged when reading a word. It has been proven that skilled readers do indeed look at each letter in a word, they just do it incredibly fast. No one would argue against a rich text environment, but reading comprehension is a direct result of strong language and decoding skills. Simply having books available is not enough. A beginning reader requires direct instruction in letter-sound associations to be able to first read and then comprehend text.

Diane McGuinness's *Why Our Children Can't Read and What We Can Do About It* (1997), looks at how a writing system's construction dictates the most effective reading method. Thus, English, which is based on an alphabetic code, must be taught through phonics. However, McGuinness argues that the method presented in this book is not the simple fix Flesch proposed in *Why Johnny Can't Read* and it isn't a whole language approach. Rather, her approach focuses on phonemic awareness and the need for a student to hear, understand, and correctly produce English language sounds before being able to read. She also reviews the research on dyslexia, phonological awareness, and the failure of the whole language method to produce fluent readers. She discusses the alphabetic code and why it is the best way to teach reading the English language. Finally, she offers useful information about how to help beginners learn to read.

Another critical book by McGuinness is *Early Reading Instruction: What Science Really Tells Us About How to Teach Reading* (2004). In this book, McGuinness undertakes the daunting task of examining research to discern which reading approach, phonics, or whole language, has real merit in the “Reading Wars.” Based on an analysis of how other countries teach reading, she proposes that a solid reading foundation is based on learning phoneme/symbol correspondences, blending and segmenting phonemes in words, and writing words, phrases, and sentences. She also contends that countless studies have proven the ineffectiveness of the whole language approach and thus it should be abandoned. She urges effective phonics-based programs to be rolled out in classrooms nationwide.

David F. Labree’s *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (1997) article “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals” address three alternative goals in education: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. These are like the issues that were often cited as the reason for school failure before Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. They are also seen as areas that became neglected after his work became so popular. Critics argued that Flesch provided a one size fits all answer to the failing of schools rather than addressing the real and nuanced issues the schools faced and continue to face.

Jan Miller Burkins’ *Shifting the Balance: 6 Ways to Bring the Science of Reading into the Balanced Literacy Classroom* (2021) focuses on what balanced literacy teachers can do to slowly transition to the science of reading in the classroom. Each chapter focuses on one area that can be altered to be more inclusive of science-based reading practices. The six shifts examine reading comprehension, phonemic awareness, phonics,

high-frequency words, cueing systems, and text selection. As many districts move away from whole-word instruction, this book offers a practical way for teachers to become more comfortable incorporating systematic phonics instruction into their practice.

Like *Shifting the Balance*, Daniel J. Moran, and Richard W Malott's *Evidence-Based Educational Methods* (2004) provide a guide to improving instruction using a researched-based method, as well as applying behavioral science findings to instruction. Based on decades of scientific data, a "blueprint" for effective instruction is offered to address the No Child Left Behind directive. The authors also advocate using data to inform instruction and explicit teaching to fill gaps in skills.

Donald Moyle's "Methods of Teaching Reading: The Debate Resolved" in *Support for Learning* 6, no. 3 (August 1991) argues that no one method of instruction is better than another. Rather, a variety of instructional methods should be utilized to teach students how to read. In addition, a wide selection of reading material should be available for students to allow for interest and ability. According to Rudolf Flesch, this is alibi number three for why a student is not reading. Flesch argues in *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* that this excuse ignores the hundreds of studies that have demonstrated the superiority of phonics over the whole word method.

Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It (2018) by Mark Seidenberg. As a psychology professor, Seidenberg conducts a thorough research review into reading research and how the lack of phonics instruction has caused reading difficulties. Like Flesch, he urges a return to phonics instruction. Seidenberg has the advantage over Flesch because he can detail the brain regions where learning to read takes place. With solid science backing his

assertions, Seidenberg makes an even more compelling argument, but with less readability than Flesch.

Maryanne Wolf's *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2008) examines how the same brain that first scribbled on tablets in Sumerian times is now used to read by scrolling through lines of digital text. The book is divided into three sections. The first explains the history of how early humans began to read. The second section deals with the development of more complex reading. The concluding section discusses what happens in the brain when one struggles with reading, specifically how a dyslexic brain is wired differently.

In *The Knowledge Gap* (2019), educational journalist Natalie Wexler designates an entire chapter to the Reading Wars. She starts the chapter with a brief description of Rudolf Flesch's 1955 book *Why Johnny Can't Read* and claims that his book was "the opening salvo in a bitter, long-running conflict known as the Reading Wars..." Wexler continues to explain how the look-and-say approach developed into the whole language approach and eventually the balanced literacy approach. She noted that Flesch's harangues were unlikely to change the beliefs of teachers who wanted their students to appreciate literature, acquire knowledge independently and love reading. Wexler asserts that the way to do this is through systematic phonics, read alouds and discussion of texts, but she adds it is important to explain to teachers why as opposed to just telling them to do it.

Criticisms of Rudolf Flesch

Why Johnny Can't Read created an outpouring of response when it was released. In the book *Reading Chaos to Cure* (1958), Sibyl Terman and Charles Walcutt outline

some of the criticism Flesch received after the release of his 1955 book. They begin chapter one by pointing out the harsh criticism by scores of writers assailing Flesch, who they agree with. They point to Harvard Professor John B. Carroll of Harvard, author of *The Study of Language*, whose entire book was written to target Flesch and his argument. Carroll refutes Flesch and argues that the literacy problem isn't as simple as phonics-first verses look-and-say, but rather how should phonics be taught. This book offers plenty of insight into the direct attacks suffered by Flesch by the reading establishment after the release of *Why Johnny Can't Read* and the bibliography offered many resources used in Chapter 7.

Adam Golub offers a more condensed version of the consequences of Flesch's 1955 book in his 2015 article "Solving the School Crisis in Popular Culture: *Why Johnny Can't Read* Turns 60." More specifically, Golub addresses the impact popular culture has on public debate about education which tends to include an oversimplification of a complex problem, a one-size-fits-all solution, and a method of communication that adds fear or nostalgia into the debate. Golub argues that by doing the above Flesch and those in the field of education were able to neatly sidestep the complex issues of the 1950s which included increasing students' enrollment, growing teacher shortages, declining education budgets, and school segregation. This article illuminates some of the ways *Johnny Can't Read* provided a "pop culture panacea" and allowed very real and difficult issues such as segregation, degradation of teacher status and distribution of resources to be ignored.

One of the more scathing reviews of *Why Johnny Can't Read* came in the March 1956 article in *American Psychologist* by Harvard University's John Carroll. In his article, "The Case of Dr. Flesch" Carroll argues that by not explaining the type of phonics used in the 11 studies cited in *Why Johnny Can't Read*, Flesch distorted the results in favor of

phonics. Another criticism Carroll mentions is that Flesch does not provide enough of an example of tested phonics instruction. Carroll lists four hypotheses to examine. One, that Flesch is right, and the reading experts are wrong. Two, that Flesch distorted the research results in favor of phonics, willingly or otherwise. Three, that Flesch cannot read. Four, that Flesch does not understand elementary statistics. This list is a solid indicator of the rancor insighted by the discussion of elementary reading instruction. Carroll concludes his article with a suggestion that Flesch should have addressed overly anxious parents to collaborate with school authorities and teachers.

The article, “The Devil, According to Flesch” by Louise M. Rettie in *New Republic* (June 13, 1955) is another criticism of *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. Rettie points to three claims Flesch made in 1955. One, that reading was never a problem prior to the introduction of the look-and-say method. Two, that the US would have perfect readers if reading instruction was like the way it is taught in Germany. Three, that every research study ever made demonstrated phonics to be a superior method to whole word. Rettie states that all three bold statements are nonsense. She asserts that the teaching of reading has never been perfect regardless of country or language. Rettie questions whether “Johnny,” the student Flesch claims to have tutored, existed and if so, what were the real circumstances surrounding his difficulty in reading? She concludes by noting that the second half of Flesch’s book is not adequate for the job, and, like phonics alone, does nothing to address the need to comprehend what one reads.

Virgil M. Rogers of *The Atlantic* offers a view of Flesch as an angry author intent on soiling the names of great educators like William S Gray and Arthur I. Gates despite the findings that students were more literate during World War I than World War II. In his

article “Dr. Flesch’s Cure All” (December 1955), Rogers points out that in Flesch makes bold, over-generalizations that all schools have done away with phonics and that phonics-first textbooks are no longer published and then describes classrooms where children being taught phonics are thriving. Roger also disputed Flesch’s claim that remedial reading in Britain doesn’t exist by pointing to Fred J. Schonell’s book *Backwardness in the Basic Subjects* (1942), which indicates that around 15 per cent of British students present remedial reading and spelling problems. Roger charges that Flesch uses confusion and distortion to make his case and has ignored a major aspect of reading which is comprehension. Like other critics before and after him, Rogers advises parents to collaborate with schools to best help their struggling reader.

Unpublished Writings

“A Historical Study of the Controversy Regarding the Use of Phonics in Teaching Reading” by Robert Davidson Romer, Doctor of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, 1971 is a dissertation looking at the history and controversy surrounding the use of phonics in teaching reading. Romer notes the controversy reached a peak in the 1950s because of the best-selling book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. He also notes that the history of reading instruction helps to form the future of instruction, thus an examination of instructional techniques for the years 1930-1964 is included. Since this dissertation was written prior to Flesch’s sequel *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read*, its scope is limited. However, Romer’s work offers more insight into the specific journal articles during that period that contributed to the controversy.

Another dissertation of note is “The First Grade Studies in Retrospect” by Phyllis J. Schantz, Doctor of Philosophy, The University of Texas at Austin in 2002. The First

Grade Studies were a large federally funded cooperative research project conducted in 27 classrooms across the nation to determine the best way to teach beginning reading. This controversy was spurred by the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read* and included in the research conducted by Jeanne Chall in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. In addition to examining researcher views on the First Grade Studies in retrospect, the guiding philosophies, and perspectives of those researchers, and how researchers' questions, methods, and findings related to the context, Schantz investigates how the First Grade Studies contribute to current reading instruction.

As noted at the outset of this literature review, only that portion of the material most relevant to this study has been included. Listed in the bibliography are additional materials, also helpful in evaluating Flesch's books' significance and the impact they still have on the Reading Wars today.

If the number of articles, essays, books, and podcasts about the Reading Wars is an indication of how contentious the battle has been, then the significance of the man who ignited the war cannot be overstated. Rudolf Flesch, author of the polemical work *Why Johnny Can't Read* and its sequel, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, died in 1986, but his work is no less relevant today. He continues to have a powerful impact on Reading Wars and a thoughtful discussion on the topic cannot take place without mentioning his two books.

Chapter 3

The History Behind the Reading Wars

To fully understand the social and cultural effects of Rudolf Flesch's thoughts and writings on late 20th-century American literacy education, there needs to be an understanding of the history of literacy instruction in the United States. This will lay the foundation upon which to appreciate the magnitude of Flesch's books, not only within the educational community but within the wider scope of American society. *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955) landed like a hand grenade at the feet of the educational establishment. Flesch called into question well-respected professors/authors William S. Gray and Arthur Gates as well as mega publishing companies such as Scott Foresman. Flesch unabashedly deemed the entire whole word/look-say approach as an illogical gimmick that dupped teachers and school administrators to spend tax dollars on ineffective "reading" programs. His incendiary book has been in continuous print since its publication and in the fallout, the term "Reading Wars" was coined. The term, and the debate, remain a hot-button issue well into the 21st century as school districts try to follow guidelines laid out by the United States Congress's National Reading Panel (NRP) from the insight gained through the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

This chapter will examine the history of American literacy education starting in the 1600s and ending with Flesch's first book about the state of reading instruction in

1955. Flesch's book is a result of the cultural, political, and societal shifts that took place as a new colony established itself as a new country. Those shifts are evident in the way the nation's children are instructed in reading. Yet, Flesch's books also heavily influenced the current state of literacy education in the United States today.

Literacy Education During the 1600s

The formal instruction of reading in Colonial America dates to the 1600s with Puritans, English Protestant settlers, establishing the first schools in Massachusetts. The Protestant migration from Europe brought people to America who wanted to freely practice their religion. Reading provided an opportunity to participate in religious life, thus religion, and specifically the ability to read the Bible, were the focus of instruction. One of the most important aspects of the new Protestant religion was that everyone was solely responsible to God for his own salvation, separate from the interpretation of a priest. This required the individual to read the Bible directly and come to a personal understanding of God. Their children needed to learn to read scripture to develop a solid, pious foundation and avoid the temptation of the devil.⁶¹ The first laws regulating education were enacted during this time and addressed what was believed to be the families' negligence to educate their children at home. The Massachusetts Law of 1642, the first compulsory education law, required parents to ensure that their children knew the principles of religion and the laws of the Commonwealth. The second law, the "Old Deluder Satan Act," was passed in 1647. As the first American law requiring schools, It

⁶¹ Kevin Ryan, "Moral Education - A Brief History of Moral Education, The Return of Character Education, Current Approaches to Moral Education," *Education.stateuniversity.com*, last modified 2021, accessed July 16, 2021, <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2246/Moral-Education.html>.

stated, “It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures” and “It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction after the Lord hath increased them to fifty households shall forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read.”⁶² Since the Bible taught morals, children needed to learn to read scripture to develop a solid, pious foundation, and avoid the temptation of the devil.⁶³ The law required towns with fifty families to hire a schoolmaster to teach reading and writing and towns with one hundred families to establish grammar schools.⁶⁴ These laws, plus the establishment of Boston Latin School in 1635, made Massachusetts the leader in shaping the policies of early American schools.⁶⁵ At the same time, Dame Schools developed. An early combination of daycare and schooling, homemakers informally instructed students for pay while raising the base level of education, especially for girls, and demonstrating that women could be effective teachers.⁶⁶

The hornbook was first brought to America from England. Initially published in 1494, it was religiously based and integral to teaching the alphabet method, the earliest

⁶² E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book. The University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. 22.

⁶³ Kevin Ryan, “Moral Education - A Brief History of Moral Education, The Return Of Character Education, Current Approaches To Moral Education”, *Education.Stateuniversity.Com*, last modified 2021, accessed July 16, 2021, <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2246/Moral-Education.html>.

⁶⁴ Matthew Lynch, “Where U.S. Education Has Come from Practices of the Early Settlers,” *The Edvocate*. Last modified September 2, 2016. <https://www.theedadvocate.org/u-s-education-come-practices-early-settlers/>.

⁶⁵ Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 4th ed. Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2002. 11.

⁶⁶ “1600’s Education.” *Education In Early America*. Accessed February 4, 2023. <https://educationinearlyamerica.weebly.com/1600s-education.html>.

known reading method. The Alphabet Method taught reading through the memorization of the names of the letters, the sounds associated with the alphabet, and word lists. The teacher taught spelling and pronunciation through constant choral drills and spelling was taught before reading. This method was exclusively used until around 1820.⁶⁷ The hornbook was used, along with the Bible, for centuries for catechizing in church as well as a first introduction to reading instruction.⁶⁸ The hornbook was not a true book, but rather, a wooden paddle with an attached page. A thin slice of a cow horn was used to cover the sheet so that it would not get smudged.⁶⁹ The sheet contained the upper and lowercase alphabet, numbers 0-9, and the Lord's Prayer. Some Hornbooks also included a short section of syllables and the sign of the cross.

In addition to hornbooks, Psalters were also used for reading instruction. Psalters consisted of the Book of Psalms, the liturgical calendar, the litany of saints, and often other selections of scripture. The order of reading instruction tended to be ABCs, the hornbook, Psalter, and the Bible. Once the child was able to read the Bible, reading instruction was considered complete.

Literacy Education During the 1700s

Around 1690, *The New England Primer* was first published in Boston. As the first text designed specifically for reading instruction in the United States, it quickly became

⁶⁷ E. Jennifer Monaghan and Arlene L. Barry, Monaghan, E. Jennifer. *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America. Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. 8.

⁶⁸ Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*. 4th ed. (Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2002), 14-15.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

one of the most successful textbooks in America during the 18th century.⁷⁰ *The New England Primer*, written by Benjamin Harris, was like *the hornbook* in that it focused on religion and morals. However, the *New England Primer* was different because it was written for children, and it could be as long as seventy pages, as opposed to *the hornbook's* mere sheet. *The New England Primer* included the alphabet, syllabarium, words from two to seven syllables, the "Proper Names," the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, John Roger's biography and verses, a catechism, and other religious selections.⁷¹ *The New England Primer* was systematic in its teaching approach, starting with the alphabet, then simple syllables, then words. By progressing in complexity, *The New England Primer* built upon skills previously learned.

In the late 1700s, spelling books were introduced to the colonies, alongside the primers, though they had been used in England since the late 16th century. Used to teach reading, religion, and morality, in addition to spelling, these "spellers," as they were commonly called, were originally imported. However, "in the absence of any international copyright legislation, English spellers such as those by Thomas Dyche, Henry Dixon (in a compilation), and Thomas Dilworth were reproduced freely on American presses from 1730 on."⁷² During the Revolution, American publishers were able to break English copyright laws thus enabling them to produce books at a fraction of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18-19.

⁷¹ Ibid., 17.

⁷² E. Jennifer Monaghan and Arlene L. Barry Monaghan, E. Jennifer. *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America. Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. 11.

the cost and to increase both libraries and literacy.⁷³ “The book swept into wide popularity with Americans and succeeded in winning and holding their support as the standard textbook of reading instruction throughout the colonial period.”⁷⁴

In 1762, The first book specifically written and marketed toward children was published in Colonial America. Originally released in London in 1744 by M. F. Thwaite and John Newbery, *A Pretty Little Pocketbook*, was remarkable because its focus was amusement. This was a monumental shift in the focus of reading material and “it marked a new era in literature for the young.”⁷⁵

The American Revolution (1775-1783) brought an increased desire to sever as many ties to England as possible. Education started to focus less on religion and more on morals.⁷⁶ There was also an additional desire to unite a young nation and create a unified democracy.⁷⁷ Primers began to include nationalistic and moralistic emphasis with secular material such as fables and other moral stories alongside religious texts. Also, during this time, more educational materials began to be produced in America. As the country grew it became more important to unify and standardize education and part of that ideology required American-made, as opposed to British-made materials.

⁷³ Patrick Shannon, *Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth Century America*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1988), 150.

⁷⁴ Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*. 4th ed. (Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2002), 17.

⁷⁵ M. F. Thwaite and John Newbery, *A Little Pretty Pocketbook: A Facsimile with an Introductory Essay and Bibliography Authors*. (Edited by Oxford University Press. Oxford U.P., London, 1966), 3.

⁷⁶ Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*. 4th ed. (Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2002), 38.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

The colonies had declared independence in 1776, and within seven years, Noah Webster (1758-1843), a young Yale College graduate and Connecticut school teacher, used his own money to produce the first American speller. As an avid patriot, Webster believed that Americans should learn from American books. Published in 1783, his phonics-based book, originally a three-volume compendium entitled *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, had a dual purpose: to teach children how to read and develop American culture as something separate and distinct from British culture. Part one of Webster's compendium was a spelling book, printed in 1783; part two was a grammar book, printed in 1784. Part three, printed in 1785, was a reader which consisted of a compilation of essays and poetry for children who could already read. Spelling was taught before reading. Reading instruction relied heavily on practice drills and memorization. Webster's book also introduced a new national language that was to be pronounced and spelled differently from British English. "A national language is a band of national union."⁷⁸ For example the spelling of "color" as opposed to "colour" and "theater" as opposed to "theatre." Noah Webster's Blue Back speller used a synthetic phonics method to teach students to read. Webster's speller was also a forerunner to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* still widely used today.⁷⁹ In 1787, Webster revised the *Grammatical Institute*, retitling his best-selling speller the *American Spelling Book*, and his reader *An American Selection of Lessons*. The speller stayed in publication until the

⁷⁸ Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language*. (London, England: Scholar Press, 1969), 397.

⁷⁹ Christopher Dobbs, "Noah Webster and the Dream of a Common Language." Connecticut Humanities. <http://connecticuthistory.org/noah-webster-and-the-dream-of-a-common-language>. Accessed June 2, 2022.

1820s when it was replaced by his updated speller *The Elementary Spelling Book*.⁸⁰ By 1790, Webster's speller had replaced *The New England Primer*.

Literacy Education During the 1800s

In 1829, Webster released *The Elementary Spelling Book*, colloquially deemed the “Blue-Backed speller” because of its blue cover. “The Blue-Backed Speller was a fourteen-cent medicine that cured you of illiteracy.”⁸¹ The main difference between the New England Primer and the “Blue-Backed Speller” was that Webster incorporated phonics.⁸² He stated in the preface:

Among the defects and absurdities found in books of this kind hitherto published, we may rank the want of a thorough investigation of the Sounds in the English language, and the powers of the several letters-the promiscuous arrangement of words in the same table... In attempting to correct these faults it was necessary to begin with the elements of the language and explain the powers of the letters.

Webster explained “the power of the letters,” the forty-four sounds made by the twenty-six letters in the alphabet, otherwise known as phonics. Webster linked phonics with spelling. He also included a marking system to indicate pronunciation. Webster’s speller was larger in comparison to primers. It was also more comprehensive. The book format alternated between lists of words, sentences, and reading selections. While his speller also included twenty-nine pages of moral advice, a common inclusion during this

⁸⁰ E. Jennifer Monaghan and Arlene L. Barry. “Writing the Past: Teaching Reading in Colonial America and the United States 1640-1940.” In <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED437637.pdf> 12.

⁸¹ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1955. 46.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 45.

period, the reading of sentences did not begin until page 101.⁸³ At the time of his death in 1843, almost 3,868,000 copies of Webster's "Blue-Backed Speller" were licensed for sale and the total sales of all editions of the speller reached a conservative estimate of 70 million sold.⁸⁴

William Holmes McGuffey (1800-1873) was born in a log cabin and grew up on the frontier of Western Pennsylvania. At fourteen years old, he became a teacher in Ohio, which started his lifelong love of education. In 1835, he was commissioned through a recommendation of Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) by Truman and Smith, a small Cincinnati publisher, to write a series of four graded readers for school children. Within one year of his contract, in 1836, McGuffey had written the first two. These books became a part of a series of six books for the *Eclectic Readers* series. Commonly referred to as McGuffey Readers, the books were the first kid-friendly basal readers. The readers progressed in difficulty and had larger print and illustrations than previous primers. They also included stories about children and animals, replacing most of the religious content of previous decades.⁸⁵ McGuffey readers were the first series of readers consisting of one reader per grade level and focused on "patriotism, good citizenship, and morality."⁸⁶

⁸³ Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*. 4th ed. (Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2002), 41-42.

⁸⁴ "Noah Webster (1758–1843). - Webster's Innovations, Perfecting the Spelling Book for Reading Instruction, Other Works - American, Books, Dictionary, and Words" *Stateuniversity.com*. Accessed December 23, 2022. <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2544/Webster-Noah-1758-1843.html>.

⁸⁵ Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*. 4th ed. (Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2002), 99-101.

⁸⁶ Michael Watz, "A Historical Analysis of Character Education," *Journal of Inquiry and Action in Education* 4, no. 2 (2011): 43.

William Holmes McGuffey wrote the first four readers, and his brother Alexander Hamilton McGuffey wrote the final two. McGuffey Readers created a standardized way for students to learn and teachers to teach reading. This book worked well within the new public school system which was stretching across the country. These readers shaped the minds and morals of generations of American children. Although it used a phonics approach, McGuffey removed the prerequisite of spelling in reading instruction previously set forth by Webster. Each book was carefully planned to increase reading difficulty to help students gradually improve their reading, making them the first leveled textbooks. In his 1885 book, *The Eclectic Manual of Methods*, McGuffey explained how his readers could be used with a whole word, phonics, or a combination of the two methods. After explaining both methods, he reveals his bias against the effectiveness of both methods, stating, “While McGuffey Readers are prepared to meet the demands of each of these recognized methods, they are especially adapted to the Phonics Method and to the Combined Word and Phonics Method, which are the two methods most extensively used by successful teachers of primary reading.”⁸⁷ McGuffey Readers were popular and widely used, selling more than 120 million copies between 1836 and 1960. They are still used today as a popular choice by Christian homeschoolers.

The look-say method, made popular in the United States by Reverend Thomas H. Gallaudet was first proposed in 1791 by Professor Friedrich Gedike, a German educator

⁸⁷ William McGuffey, *The Eclectic Manual of Methods for the Assistance of Teachers*, (New York: Van Antwerp, Bagg & Co., 1885), 26.

and director of the Kalisches Gymnasium in Berlin.⁸⁸ As a follower of the Jean-Jacque Rousseau educational theories, Gedike believed a child should learn the whole word first and then break it down into its individual letters.⁸⁹ His book, *Children's Book for the First Practice and Reading Without the ABCs and Spelling*, did not explicitly teach the alphabet and the accompanying sounds; instead, the child would memorize a list of words and learn the alphabet incidentally.⁹⁰ This book, and subsequent ones like it, came in and out of favor over the decades.

In 1826, Samuel Worcester wrote the *Primer of the English Language for the Use of Families and Schools*. In it he explained the word method as an instructional technique, making him the first to do so in the United States. However, Worcester's underlying assumption was that the alphabet had already been learned at home.⁹¹ "Every child, whose parents or protectors can read should know the Alphabet before it goes to school."⁹²

The look-say method gained popularity in the United States in the 1830s through the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet (1787-1851), perhaps because of his unusual

⁸⁸ Mitford Mcleod Mathews, *Teaching to Read: Historically, Considered*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976. 45.

⁸⁹ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*, London, England: HarperCollins, 1981. 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16

⁹¹ R. R. Reeder, *The Historical Development of School Readers and of Method in Teaching Reading*, Book on Demand, 2015. 45.

⁹² Samuel Worcester, *A Primer of the English Language; Worcester's Primer, or First Book; for the Use of Families and Schools*, Boston: Brewer and Tileston, 1826. 5.

background.⁹³ As the director of the American Asylum at Hartford, a school for the deaf in Connecticut, Gallaudet had created a visual method of teaching reading which was similar to how Chinese, a pictographic language, was taught. For deaf children, a picture of the item was next to the corresponding word, but for hearing children, the spoken word was paired with a written word. It was thought that the method would be as effective for hearing children as it was for deaf children. The child was repeatedly shown words on cards until they became memorized. Also called the whole-word method, the purpose of the look-say method was to recognize words as whole pieces of language with meaning. The focus of reading then was on meaning as opposed to pronunciation and recitation. Letters were taught afterward through the analysis of the whole word. Gallaudet's book, *A Mother's Primer*, was published in 1836.

Josiah Bumstead introduced *My First School Book*, another look-say primer, in 1840. Bumstead was not a teacher. He was a Boston textbook author and businessman. He proposed that a child be taught fifteen words before being introduced to the alphabet. "Throughout the whole book, then, let it be an invariable rule to have the attention of the child first directed to the whole word. Let the first exercise, with every new page be the reading or pronouncing of the words. Never require a scholar to spell a word before he has so far learned it as to be able to read it." Bumstead seems to have blurred the lines of the whole language method. It is unclear if he suggested that whole words be used to teach the alphabet or if they should be used to teach reading.⁹⁴ Horace Mann's second

⁹³ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁴ Mitford Mathews, *Teaching to Read: Historically, Considered*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976. 67.

wife, Mary Peabody Mann, also wrote a look-say primer in 1841. “It is a beautiful book,” he wrote of her book entitled *A Primer of Reading, Spelling, and Drawing*. “It is prepared on the same general principles with those of Worcester, Gallaudet, and Bumstead; and it contains two or three reading lessons and a few cuts for drawing, in addition to a most attractive selection of words.”⁹⁵

Horace Mann (1796-1859) became the first Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts in 1837. He believed education was foundational to good citizenship and should be secular, publicly funded through property taxes, and accessible to everyone. He also brought the idea of grades by age from the Prussian school system. He used his position of secretary to establish common schools, which later became known as elementary schools. He argued against teaching phonics, reasoning that it would hinder the child’s ability to make meaning. He advocated for teaching whole words instead. In his 1838 *Second Annual Report*, Mann endorsed Gallaudet’s work and his belief that a sight vocabulary is a faster way to learn reading than letters and sounds.⁹⁶ He noted that students were bored and “death-like” at school using phonics-based readers such as Webster’s Blue Back Spellers. Mann stated, “It would be strange indeed, if the doctrines and practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, regarding the training of children, should need no modification in the nineteenth.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁹⁶ “History and Purpose.” 2013. Horace Mann League of the USA. May 4, 2013. <https://hmleague.org/welcome-to-the-horace-mann-league/>.

⁹⁷ Horace Mann, *Answer to the Rejoinder of Twenty-Nine Boston Schoolmasters; Part of the Thirty-One Who Published Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report of the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education*, 1839, reprint ed. Boston: General Books, 2012. 4.

In 1843, Mann went with his wife to Prussia to view a classroom. Mistakenly thinking that he was viewing a look-say lesson, Mann became further convinced that a whole language approach to reading was a more effective way to teach beginning readers. What he saw was a lesson using the Normal Word Method. The Normal Word Method was a “words-to-letters” way to teach the letters of the alphabet by looking at the entire word and then learning the individual letter names.⁹⁸ The difference is the Normal Word method teaches the *alphabet* through the analysis of a whole word. The teacher then proceeds to teach phonics. The look-say method attempts to teach *reading* through the memorization of a whole word. The look-say method is often referred to as the whole-word method for this reason. The confusion was that Mann thought the whole-word method to teach the alphabet was the same as the whole-word method to teach reading.⁹⁹ Shortly after returning to the United States from Prussia (part of current day Germany), Horace Mann wrote his famous Seventh Annual Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education persuasively endorsing the look-say approach.¹⁰⁰ He described the prevailing phonics method of instruction as “repulsive and soul-deadening to children” and the letters of the alphabet as “skeleton-shaped, bloodless, ghostly apparitions.”

In 1839, the first public Normal School was founded in Lexington, Massachusetts to train teachers to teach in common schools. The term *normal* was derived from the

⁹⁸ Mitford Mcleod Mathews, *Teaching to Read: Historically, Considered*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 1976. 86.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁰ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*, London, England: HarperCollins, 1981. 19.

French *ecole normale* where future teachers were taught the norms of curriculum and pedagogy. The look-say method soon became the dominant instructional method in Massachusetts since Mann had helped to establish the state-run Normal Schools.¹⁰¹

However, it quickly became apparent to the schoolmasters who worked with the students that the look-say method was not effective.

Throughout the 1840s, various experts offered their opinion on the benefits of the look-say method through lectures to school administrators and teachers. Rev. Cyrus Pierce, in a lengthy lecture in 1843, not only endorsed Mary Peabody Mann's primer but also strongly advocated for using the whole word to teach reading.¹⁰² “Children learn to talk from memory. They may learn to read for memory let them make the experiment let them try it fairly and Faithfully even were it a work of memory I believe they will succeed.”¹⁰³ In 1844, after years of bitter debate, thirty-one Boston schoolmasters wrote a lengthy reply to Horace Mann’s report citing declining literacy and urging a return to intensive, systematic phonics.¹⁰⁴ They argued that Mann did not understand that letter names and the sounds they make are two separate things, that nothing he saw in Prussia justified changing the American system of instruction, and that the look-say method had little to recommend it. They felt it was proving to be quite inferior, stating:

¹⁰¹ Samuel Blumenfeld, “The Victims of ‘Dick and Jane’ For 60 Years the ‘Look-Say’ Method of Teaching Reading Has Dominated Our Schools. Why Does It Remain Firmly Entrenched Even Though It Doesn’t Work?” Reason, October 1982. 10.

¹⁰² Mitford Mcleod Mathews, *Teaching to Read: Historically, Considered*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 1976), 70.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁴ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*. (London, England: HarperCollins. 1981), 19.

As this system is somewhat new, and has not been well tested by experiment, although its immediate adoption is earnestly recommended by high authority, it cannot be reasonably supposed that a system by which the present generation were taught to read, a system as prevalent as is the mode of alphabetical writing, and one which, from its long and uninterrupted use, has become venerable with age, will be abolished, unless good and substantial reasons can be given for such change. Indeed, change itself is undesirable. If the new system can be shown only to be equally as good of its superior advantages alone, should be considered, or, at least, the probabilities of a successful issue, should so far exceed the chances of a failure, as to amount to a good degree of certainty. As, until quite recently, the secretary has presented, rather than strongly advocated the claims of the system, his opinions, have called for nothing more than a passing consideration. But, as his personal and official influence is now exerted for its adoption, that our silence may not be construed into assent, we feel impelled to express a respectful dissent from his views. Aware that his position is to be sustained against prevailing usage, he has given his reasons for believing, ‘that no thorough reform will ever be effected in our schools until this practice [of beginning with the alphabet] is abolished.’ practice [of beginning with the alphabet] is abolished.” These reasons are drawn,

1st. —From what he conceives to be the natural order of acquisition.

2d. — From the anomalies of the alphabet.

3d. — From an impression which he has, that ‘the rapidity of acquisition will be greater if words are taught before letters.’

With us, as teachers, the main question is, whether or not we approve of the new system, and can recommend its universal adoption. In assuming the negative of the question, it is first to be shown that the arguments urged in favor of the system, fail to make it even equal in value to the old, much more superior; and, then, that there are reasons of a positive character, which are adverse to it, and serve to show it vastly inferior to the old system.¹⁰⁵

The thirty-one schoolmasters had expertly explained why the method was a failure.

Although phonics was reinstated in Boston’s schools, Mann continued to be an ardent supporter of the look-say method throughout the 1840s and 1850s.¹⁰⁶ Schools continued

¹⁰⁵ Association Of Masters of the Schools, *Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report of the Hon. Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education*, Boston, General Books, 2010. 61.

¹⁰⁶ Patrick Shannon, *Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth Century America*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1988), 8.

to use the McGuffey Readers. These readers remained the most popular reading textbooks until the 1920s when reading reform caused a massive shift in how reading instruction was delivered in the United States.

In 1881, George Farnham, the principal of the State Normal School in Nebraska, published the first teacher manual for teachers. The book was entitled *The Sentence Method for Teaching Reading, Writing, and Spelling*. The manual focused on look-say principles of reading instruction, including the incidental teaching of the alphabet. He wrote, “the first principle to be observed in teaching written language is that ‘things are cognizant as wholes.’ Language follows this law. Although it is taught by an indirect process, still, and its external characteristics it follows the law of other objects.”¹⁰⁷ Farnham advocated for reading instruction to start at the whole sentence level, not just with the whole word. The student would learn entire sentences and repeat them until they understood the meaning. The sentence would then be analyzed into words and then letters and then sounds. Farnham focused on silent reading and meaning making. Farnham’s method gained some popularity, reigniting interest in the look-say method once more.¹⁰⁸ His method also dovetailed nicely with the whole child-centered approach of the Progressive Education movement.

Toward the 10 years leading to the 19th century, a new movement known as the Progressive Movement in Education (the 1890s-1930s) started to appear based on the

¹⁰⁷ George L. Farnham, *The Sentence Method of Teaching Reading, Writing and Spelling the Sentence Method of Teaching Reading, Writing and Spelling: A Manual for Teachers (Classic Reprint)*. (London, England: Forgotten Books, 2022), 17.

¹⁰⁸ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read: A New Look at the Scandal of our Schools*. (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1981), 20.

ideas of John Dewey (1859-1952) and Francis Wayland Parker (1837-1902). Parker studied for two years in Prussia before accepting the position of superintendent of Quincy Public Schools in Massachusetts in 1875. Here he developed what became known as the “Quincy System” of education. In a radical shift from that time, Parker advocated for learning to be child-centered and enjoyable. He believed that the teacher’s role was as a facilitator of the child’s exploration and that through natural curiosity and interest, a child would develop the background knowledge and skills necessary to be a well-developed adult. Parker’s new method won many accolades and admirers, and he became nationally famous. Colleges, such as the University of Chicago and Columbia University Teachers College embraced the look-say method as many college-connected private schools, such as the Parker School in Chicago, earned acclaim as it appeared that children were acquiring reading skills with speed and enjoyment unseen with the phonics method.¹⁰⁹ Parker continued to implement his theories as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools (1880–1883) and principal of the Cook County Normal School, Chicago (1883–1899). While the principal of the Cook County Normal School, he met John Dewey.

Known as the Father of Progressive Education, Dewey was an educational reformer who joined the faculty of the newly established University of Chicago in 1894. There he established the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools where he could put into practice his and Parker’s philosophy of child-centered education. Dewey believed that the purpose of education was to prepare the student for “the future life means to give him command of himself; it means to train him that he will have the full and ready use of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 10.

all his capacities.”¹¹⁰ Dewey advocated social change and reform through education. “Education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction.”¹¹¹ John Dewey’s *Theory of Inquiry Learning* stated that students learn best by creating and testing a hypothesis. Dewey thought that when students took interest, responsibility, and ownership, their learning was more meaningful.¹¹² Dewey believed in the education of the whole child, including his/her social-emotional and physical development. He believed that school should be more welcoming, and that education should be fundamentally different from the way it had been historically.

In 1893, Joseph Mayer Rice published *The Public-School System of the United States* which was a compilation of articles he had written for *Forum Magazine* on the state of elementary education across the country. What he observed unsettled him and brought attention to the need for sweeping school reform further fueling the developing Progressive Movement. From January 7 to June 25, 1892, Rice observed more than twelve hundred classrooms in thirty-six cities, as well as twenty institutions for teacher training.¹¹³ His results categorized literacy instruction into three categories: mechanical

¹¹⁰ John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” *The School Journal* LIV, no. 3 (January 16, 1897): 78.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹¹² Diane H. Tracy and Lesley Mandel Morrow, *Lenses on Reading, Second Edition: An Introduction to Theories and Models*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Guilford Publications, 2012), 57.

¹¹³ Joseph Myer Rice, *The Public School System of the United States*, New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1893. 2.

and outdated, in transition, or new and progressive. He also examined how schools integrated students' interests to drive instruction. Rice found that 90% of schools implemented mechanical and ineffective reading instruction and that phonics led to better results in reading than the whole word method.¹¹⁴ Rice believed that the “elements that exert an influence on the condition of the schools of every city are four in number: The public at large, the board of education, the superintendent and his staff.”¹¹⁵ Rice's findings were widely accepted despite the small sample size and prompted an overhaul of the educational system. His book is regarded as one of the most influential and significant about education.¹¹⁶ In 1895, after giving spelling tests to 33,000 children throughout the United States, Rice found that the best spelling results were obtained when the student had been taught through the phonics method. Rice’s study was instrumental in pushing the Progressive education agenda. Although the survey indicated the advantages of phonics, his larger message of the child-centric schools, a Progressive ideal, overshadowed that result because rigid authoritarian teaching styles were strongly associated with the rote phonics drills of earlier centuries.

Literacy Education During the 1900s

The Progressive Education reform of the 1900s completely restructured reading instruction. This, coupled with child labor laws and mandatory schooling, saw a radical shift in education from the one-room schoolhouse to schools that are more like the ones

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁶ Mitford Mathews, *Teaching to Read: Historically, Considered*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 110.

we have today. By 1900, thirty-four states had compulsory schooling laws. Out of those thirty-four states, thirty of them required school attendance until the age of fourteen.¹¹⁷ This law did much to increase school attendance. By 1910, 72% of American children attended school and by 1930, every state required children to complete at least elementary school.¹¹⁸ In 1908, Edmund Burke Huey's book *The Pedagogy and Psychology of Reading* exemplified this shift in attitude toward the education of children. He advocated interest-based learning in a social setting. He also believed that reading instruction should center on teaching whole words, the look-say approach. "In any case, new words are best learned by hearing or seeing them used in a content that suggests their meaning, and not by focusing the attention upon their isolated form or sound or meaning."¹¹⁹

Progressive teaching became synonymous with the look-say approach which came to dominate the nation's schools. During this transitional period, reading instruction started to turn more towards a whole word/look-say approach. As this occurred, the *McGuffey Readers* were phased out by the *Beacon Readers*. In this phonics series, first published in 1912, the moral, patriotic, and nature-focus of previous readers were replaced with fairytales and supernatural events.¹²⁰ The Beacon series focused on the sound of individual letters as well as the memorization of whole words. "It should be

¹¹⁷ Patricia A. Graham, *Community and Class in American Education: 1865-1918*. (Nashville, TN: John Wiley & Sons, 1974) 187.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Edmund Burke Huey, *Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, London, England: MIT Press, 1968. 348.

¹²⁰ Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction*. 4th ed. Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2002. 130-132.

clearly understood that at first there must be two distinct lines of teaching carried on side by side: one the drill upon phonetic list for the purpose of developing phonetic power in the child: to the reading of simple lessons stories mainly by the word method until the child's power of phonetics is far enough advanced to enable him to apply in his reading.”¹²¹

In 1909, the textbook company Scott Foresman published the *Elson Readers* based on Farnham’s sentence method and focused the content on the interest of the child. Covering a variety of topics such as history, nature, science, humor, travel, and culture and incorporating folktales and Mother Goose rhymes, the Elson Readers sought to peak a child’s interest in reading. These books included attractive illustrations and focused more on comprehension as opposed to decoding. By 1929, these readers morphed into the Dick and Jane basal series.

The American Industrial Revolution (1876-1914) changed how people viewed education. Industrialization created new prosperity through mass production. Many Americans became enamored with businessmen and the wealth accrued through hard work and industry. “The overwhelming productive change and the fortunes amassed for Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan, and their like directed the public's attention to how the principles of business could be applied to social institutions and private life schools did not escape this public scrutiny.”¹²² The values and practices of industry were believed to be responsible for American prosperity and progress. As society began to change, the

¹²¹ James Hiram Fassett, *The New Beacon Primer*, New York: Ginn & Company, 1921. 121.

¹²² Patrick Shannon, *Broken Promises: Reading Instruction in Twentieth Century America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988. 16.

view of education also began to change. School administrators, superintendents, and educational leaders began to act more like businessmen rather than scholars causing a separation between administrators and educators. Administrators were now the decision-makers when it came to curriculum and instruction, and educators evolved from overseers and drillmasters to mentors. The solution to this perceived literacy crisis was to make reading instruction more bureaucratic.¹²³ Textbook companies happily stepped into this opening.

In 1921, Edward Thorndike (1874-1949), an American psychologist who worked for the Teachers College, Columbia University published *The Teacher's Word Book*. This book was a compilation of the 10,000 most frequently used words in the English language. He followed up with two more books, *A Teacher's Word Book of the Twenty Thousand Words Found Most Frequently and Widely in General Reading for Children and Young People*, 1932, and *The Teacher's Word Book of 30,000 Words*, 1944. The list of words fit nicely into a look-say approach, allowing teachers to decide which words were worth teaching, many of which became known as sight words because students needed to know the words instantly by sight.

By 1925, more schools saw the adoption of the whole language reading approach to quickly teach reading. Well-known Columbia University Teachers College professor, Dr. Arthur Gates wrote in 1927:

That it will be the part of wisdom to curtail the phonetic instructions in the first grade very greatly, is strongly implied; indeed, it is not improbable that it should be eliminated entirely. Certain forms of training commonly found in the system

¹²³ Ibid., 42.

may possibly earn a place, however, though probably not without some modification, in an improved program of training in beginning reading.¹²⁴

This was a clear directive to move away from phonics and to look-say. Given his considerable reputation around literacy many followed his lead.

In 1929, Scott Foresman worked with William S. Gray, Dean of the University of Chicago's School of Education, to revamp the Elson Readers. In 1930 Gray became coauthor, with William H. Elson, of his popular basal reading series *Elson Basic Readers*. That same year, Dr. Gates teamed up with the McMillian Publishing company to produce the *Work-Play* books, which included the Peter and Peggy readers and the Nick and Dick readers. Because major publishing companies had teamed up with the leading academics in elementary reading, the shift to whole language was swift and decisive. Phonics had been removed from most reading programs, no new phonics readers were published, and eventually, all phonics readers went out of print.¹²⁵ Reading instruction was limited to the whole word, look-say approach. The reasoning was that the purpose of reading was to construct meaning and, by memorizing by sight a handful of frequently used words and using context cues, children could more quickly grasp the meaning of a passage as opposed to doing the tedious work of decoding each letter sound and blending it into a word.

In 1936 the *Elson Readers* became the *Elson-Gray Basic Readers*. At the same time, Dr. William S. Gray developed a model of reading skills focusing on four skills:

¹²⁴ Arthur I. Gates, "Studies of Phonetic Training in Beginning Reading," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 18, no. 4 (1927): 226.

¹²⁵ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do about It*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1955. 50.

word perception, comprehension, reaction to the text, and making connections. By 1940 his model became the structure of his basal reader entitled *Basic Readers*, which featured the iconic characters, Dick, and Jane.¹²⁶ These basal readers were conceived to use child-friendly text and illustrations to practice sight words through repeated reading of high-frequency words. Sight word lists were first developed by Thorndike in 1921 and later by Edward William Dolch who published *Problems in Reading* in 1948. Like Thorndike, Dolch was a whole-word advocate. He designated one chapter in his book to what he referred to as “service words” which a reader should recognize by sight. The list included 220 common conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, and verbs.¹²⁷ Dolch purposely excluded nouns because he considered them local words, specific to a topic and he wanted his words to be the most common and universal words across subject matter.¹²⁸ Gray incorporated repeated sight words throughout the Dick and Jane series. This excerpt is taken from the first book in the series, *Fun with Dick and Jane* 1938 is a prime example of the repetitive look-say reader:

Look up
Dick said, “Look, look
Look up
Look up, up, up.”

¹²⁶ Mark Sadoski, *Conceptual Foundations of Teaching Reading*, New York, NY: Guilford Publications, 2004. 26.

¹²⁷ Dolch, E. W. “A Basic Sight Vocabulary.” *The Elementary School Journal* 36, no. 6 (1936): 456–60. <https://doi.org/10.1086/457353>.

¹²⁸ Maryellen Vogt and Brenda A. Shearer, *Reading Specialists and Literacy Coaches in the Real World*, 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson. 2010. 123.

Dick and Jane books soon became the most popular reading series in the United States from the 1930s to 1965.

Even though the look-say method had been exposed as an ineffective method of reading instruction back in 1837 when Horace Mann used Gallaudet's version in Boston Public Schools. The difference was that the look say approach was now firmly endorsed by higher education with Gray, University of Chicago, and Gates, Columbia University having authored the most popular basal reading series of the time.

In February 1929, Dr. Samuel T. Orton, a neuropathologist in Iowa, published "The Sight Reading Method of Teaching Reading as a Source of Reading Disability" in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. His study examined the causes of increased reading issues in American students. He concluded that reading problems were *caused* by the new sight method of teaching reading.¹²⁹ Orton wrote:

I think we can show, this technique is not only not adapted but often proves an actual obstacle to reading progress, and moreover, I believe that this group is one of considerable educational importance both because of its size and because here faulty teaching methods may not only prevent the acquisition of academic education by children of average capacity but may also give rise to far-reaching damage to their emotional life.¹³⁰

Rudolf Flesch recognized the problem with these readers and in his straightforward manner, he decimated the look-say approach in his best-selling book *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It*. Known as one of the most

¹²⁹ Ibid., 135–143.

¹³⁰ Samuel T. Orton, "The 'Sight Reading' Method of Teaching Reading, as a Source of Reading Disability." *Journal of educational psychology* 20, no. 2 (1929): 135.

important books in education, Flesch's book has been in continuous print since it was published in 1955. He urgently calls for parents to take matters into their own hands and teach their child to read. “Memorizing or guessing the meaning of whole words is not reading; on the contrary, it is an acquired bad habit that stands in the way of your child’s ever learning to read properly. My advice is, teach your child yourself how to read.”¹³¹

He designated about one-third of his book to how to do just that. Flesch’s book ignited the Reading Wars, a battle between the whole word and phonics first approach to reading. This is a battle that has been fought since Horace Mann’s time, but the term was coined in the aftermath of Flesch’s first book. This war continues to reign today as the science of reading backed Structured Literacy (a bottom-up approach that starts with sounds and letters and builds into words and reading) comes up against the well-established Balanced Literacy (a top-down approach that starts with words and uses cues and context to break them down into letters and sounds).

Rudolf Flesch is inseparable from the Reading Wars and no discussion of the Reading Wars is complete without his mention. But who Flesch is, what makes him an expert, and how he became the face of the never-ending battle will be addressed in the next chapter.

¹³¹ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do About It*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1955. 5.

Chapter 4

The Man Behind the Reading Wars

How can a man who was born outside of the United States, without a background in elementary education, become one of the most famous critics of how to teach reading in American public schools? By developing a reliable, valid readability formula, authoring more than a dozen language and style guides, and working for the United States Government and Associated Press, fundamentally changing the way Americans write, speak, and think, Rudolf Flesch did that.

Biography

Rudolph Flesch was born on May 8, 1911, in Vienna, Austria. The son of Hugo and Helene Basch Flesch, he was a man of many occupations including author, teacher, editor, and writing consultant, but each involved the effective use of communication. He earned his Doctor of Laws degree in 1933 from the University of Vienna. He practiced law in Vienna until fleeing the Nazi occupation in 1938. He moved to the United States and lived in New York City. He received a refugee scholarship in 1939 and earned a bachelor's degree with honors from Columbia University in library science in 1940. He became an assistant to American educator Lyman Bryson (1888-1959) of Columbia Teachers College Readability Lab. Established in 1936 to investigate readability for adults, the lab was the result of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and an increased interest of adults in reading. While studying at Columbia University, Flesch met Elizabeth Terpenning, and the two married in 1941. The following year he received a master's degree in adult education. The two later moved to Dobbs Ferry, New York, and

lived there most of their lives with their six children, Anne, Hugo, Gillian, Katrina, Abigail, and Janet. They had four grandchildren.

In 1943, Flesch completed a Ph.D. in library science at Columbia University. A year later he became a United States citizen. Soon after World War II, Flesch became a freelance writer, lecturer, and editorial consultant, including time consulting for The Associated Press.¹³² He was a staunch supporter of the Plain English Movement which advocated for clear, concise writing void of unnecessary jargon and his work focused on text complexity. He worked for many years with banks and insurance companies simplifying loan notes and policies. He worked as a consultant to the United States Federal Trade Commission helping to write federal regulations in Plain English. He was also a guiding faculty member of the Famous Writers School in Westport Connecticut, which closed due to scandal and bankruptcy in 1972.¹³³

His dissertation, *Marks of a Readable Style*, provided a mathematical formula to predict the “comprehension difficulty of a given text, using the weighted factors of sentence length, frequency of affixed morphemes, and frequency of personal references.”¹³⁴ This study set Flesch’s career path and firmly established Flesch’s reputation as a readability expert. What made Flesch’s formula different from those proceeding it was that it could quickly be applied, it did not rely on word lists, and it was

¹³² Eric Pace, “Dr. Rudolf Flesch, 75, Authority on Literacy,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 1986.

¹³³ Jessica Mitford, “Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1, 1970.

¹³⁴ Rudolf Flesch, “Marks of Readable Style; a Study in Adult Education,” (Doctorial diss., Columbia University, 1943), ix–69.

specific to adults.¹³⁵ Between 1933 and 1942, many programs of the New Deal focused on adult education. The programs were successful in hiring unemployed teachers as adult educators, but also establishing adult education as a practice while teaching large numbers of illiterate adults to read.¹³⁶

Books About Readability and Writing

Flesch published his first book, *The Art of Plain Talk*, in 1946.¹³⁷ This would be the first of fifteen books on language and style he would write throughout his career. He would also write the best-selling *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at The Scandal of Our Schools*. In the preface, he states that his dissertation was successful “as dissertations go” and that his formula was being used in many government agencies and organizations.¹³⁸ *The Art of Plain Talk* was the result of Flesch’s desire to make his dissertation more readable¹³⁹ and targeted textbooks, legal briefs, tax laws, and other expository works. Focusing on grammar and usage, Flesch advocates that writers try to write as they speak, clearly, to the point, and in a manner that can be easily understood. He wanted an end to the obscure language and unnecessary jargon used in these types of books, which served only to

¹³⁵ Nancy Ann Vieth, “Mathematics in Composition: A Defense of Flesch’s Readability Formula,” (master’s Thesis, Iowa State University, 1998), 30.

¹³⁶ Randal Ice and Bob Nolan, “Adult Education Programs of the New Deal: The Case of Oklahoma, 1933-1942,” *Adult Education Research Conf*, 1998. Abstract.

¹³⁷ “DR. RUDOLF FLESCH, 75, AUTHORITY ON LITERACY” New York Times n.d., <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/07/obituaries/dr-rudolf-flesch-75-authority-on-literacy.html>.

¹³⁸ Rudolf Flesch, *Art of Plain Talk*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1946. xii.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

separate the reader from the author's message. Flesch gives this example of what he calls "federalese":

Sick leave shall be granted to employees when they are incapacitated for the performance of their duties by sickness, injury, or pregnancy and confinement, or for medical, dental or optical examination or treatment, or when a member of the immediate family of the employee is affected with a contagious disease and requires the care and attendance of the employee, or when, through exposure to contagious disease, the presence of the employee at his post of duty with jeopardize the health of others.¹⁴⁰

Flesch advises that this sentence be condensed to the much more straightforward,

Employees shall be granted sick leave for these four reasons:

1. They cannot work because of sickness, injury, or pregnancy, and confinement;
2. They need medical, dental, or optical treatment;
3. A member of their immediate family is affected with a contagious disease and needs their care and attendance;
4. Their presence at their post of Duty would jeopardize the health of others through exposure to contagious disease.¹⁴¹

By utilizing his readability formula, the author can more clearly state his ideas.

Newspaper and magazine publishers also saw the value of applying Flesch's formula to articles as readership increased by 40 to 60 percent.¹⁴² Flesch's formula was so effective that it "penetrated schools of journalism, advertising agencies, textbooks on business writing, and many other places. Gradually they contributed to a tremendous change in news writing, business writing, and practical writing in general, so that today's average newspaper or business letter is measurably different from what it was 14 years ago. What

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹⁴¹ Rudolf Flesch, *Art of Plain Talk*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1946. 37.

¹⁴² William H. DuBay, "The Principles of Readability," *ResearchGate.Net*, 2004, 20.

was a novel approach in 1946 has become the accepted practice among professional writers.”¹⁴³ After the publication of this book, many new editors began to apply Flesch’s advice to articles. As a result, shorter, snappier sentences were encouraged, and news articles became less long-winded and easier to comprehend. As a consultant for the Associated Press, Flesch helped to bring down the reading level of front-page news stories from the 16th (senior in college level) to the 11th grade, where they remain today.¹⁴⁴

Throughout *The Art of Plain Talk*, Flesch advocates for two main principles: the elimination of unnecessary words and syllables and the subject-predicate-object order when communicating.¹⁴⁵ With those principles in mind, communication becomes clear, concrete, and relatable. This book became a best seller and was considered a classic in the field of communication.

In 1947 he co-authored *The Classic Guide to Better Writing: Step-by-Step Techniques and Exercises to Write Simply, Clearly and Correctly*, (1996) originally entitled *The Way to Write* with Abraham H. Lass (1907-2001), writer, educator, and well-respected principal of Abraham Lincoln High School in Brighton Beach, New York.¹⁴⁶ Well-organized and easy to follow, the book provides a simple guide for the

¹⁴³ Rudolf Flesch, *How to Write, Speak and Think More Effectively*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1960. ix-x.

¹⁴⁴ William H. DuBay, “The Principles of Readability,” *ResearchGate.Net*, 2004, 20–22.

¹⁴⁵ Rudolf Flesch, *Art of Plain Talk*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1946. 19.

¹⁴⁶ Robert D. McFadden, “Abraham H. Lass, 93, Educator, Writer and Passionate Principal,” *The New York Times*. March 19, 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/19/nyregion/abraham-h-lass-93-educator-writer-and-passionate-principal.html>.

beginning writer to write clearer, more effective text. Flesch and Lass are addressing high school students and acknowledge the feedback of teachers which helped to improve the second edition of the book, released in 1955. Each step of the writing process, from the planning stage to the construction of sentences and paragraphs and choice of vocabulary words and editing is addressed. There are also over 2000 drills and exercises to fine-tune skills in chapters that detail vocabulary, usage, punctuation, grammar, and correct spelling. The exercises come at the end of each chapter, driving home the point discussed therein. The cartoons in the original edition added levity to the topic, and because Flesch is one of the authors of the book, it is easily readable and understandable by most readers.

Flesch introduced a simplified version of his original readability formula in 1948. The Flesch Reading Ease Formula incorporated two separate elements. The first was the overall ease with which one can read a piece of writing. His new formula dropped the use of affixes and focused instead on the number of syllables and sentences in a 100-word sample, assigning a number from 0 to 100 to a text allowing the reader to know how difficult a text will be before reading and setting a grade equivalency. The higher the score, the easier the text is to read with the general scoring cutoffs indicating whether something is extremely easy (100), relatively easy (65), difficult (30), or extremely difficult (0) to read. The Flesch Reading Ease formula provides a number between 0-100 through the following calculation:

$$206.835 - 1.015 * (\text{total words} / \text{total sentences}) - 84.6 * (\text{total syllables} / \text{total words})$$

The result is put into a chart to render a grade-level equivalency.

Flesch's 1949 book *The Art of Readable Writing* focused on making writing more accessible and direct, deleting unnecessary wordiness. He discusses principles of style which include understanding your audience and addressing your work directly to them, supplying readers with concrete examples of a specific topic, incorporating an anecdote to illustrate the example, and writing as simply and directly as one speaks. He gives examples of why some books are easy to read and others are not by offering the Flesch Readability formula. Flesch included the table below to illustrate the grade equivalents estimated by his formula.¹⁴⁷ He defines a literate person as one who can read above a fourth-grade level.¹⁴⁸

Table 1. *Flesch Readability Formula Focusing on Reading Ease* (Flesch, 1949. 177)

Description of style	Average sentence length	Average No. of Syll. per 100 words	Reading Ease Score	Estimated Reading Grade	Estimated Percent of U.S. Adults
Very Easy	8 or less	123 or less	90 to 100	5th grade	93
Easy	11	131	80 to 90	6th grade	91
Fairly Easy	14	139	70 to 80	7th grade	88
Standard	17	147	60 to 70	8th and 9th grade	83
Fairly Difficult	21	155	50 to 60	10th to 12th grade (high school)	54
Difficult	25	167	30 to 50	13th to 16th grade (college)	33

¹⁴⁷ Rudolf Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1949. 177.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 225.

Very Difficult	29 or more	192 or more	0 to 30	College graduate	4.5
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The second aspect of his updated formula predicts the degree of human interest by counting the number of personal pronouns and proper nouns and personal sentences, such as quotes and exclamatory sentences.¹⁴⁹

Table 2. *Flesch Readability Formula Focusing on Reading Interest* (Flesch, 1949. 179)

Description of Style	Percent of “personal words”	Percent of “personal sent.”	Human Interest Score	Typical Magazine	Estimated Percent of U.S. Adults
Dull	2 or less	0	0 to 10	Scientific	4.5
Mildly Interesting	4	5	10 to 20	Trade	33
Interesting	7	15	20 to 40	Digests	54
Highly Interesting	10	43	40 to 60	New Yorker	83
Dramatic	17 or more	58 or more	60 to 100	Fiction	88

The Flesch Reading Ease Formula remains one of the most accurate, reliable, and valid formulas to date and it has been in continuous use since its publication. It is still used by the United States Department of Defense as well as many other United States Government Agencies.

Flesch not only established himself as a readability expert, but also established himself as an expert in communication. He wrote *The Art of Clear Thinking* in 1951. In the first line of the book, before the acknowledgments, Flesch writes, “It would be

¹⁴⁹ Rudolf Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 1949. 151.

imprudent to tell intelligent, grown-up people how to think. All I have tried to do here is to assemble certain known facts about the human mind and put them in plain English.”¹⁵⁰

In his typical, straightforward manner, Flesch proceeds to do that by synthesizing data and research results in the fields of education, psychology, history, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and neurology and showing people how to apply those findings to thinking and problem-solving. He cautions the reader that all thoughts are rooted in a weak foundation because thoughts are based on one’s memory of an experience, and memories can vary in accuracy. He compares the reasoning methods of Aristotle, Plato, Archimedes, and Socrates, and compares their ways of reasoning to more recently developed methods.¹⁵¹

To clarify thinking, Flesch advises asking “Twenty Questions.” These questions help to frame the issue and organize one’s thoughts. Flesch includes a four-step approach to creative thinking and problem-solving: gathering information, incubating ideas, identifying solutions, and fine-tuning solutions. Flesch supplies useful suggestions such as how to take notes and solve math problems more quickly and how to solve puzzles¹⁵²

Flesch authored *How to Test Readability* in 1951. This short book with only 56 pages was designed as a handy manual for the writer who wanted to ensure their writing was readable. The book had three simple goals: to teach the reader how to apply Flesch’s readability test, to offer ways to increase readability, and to answer 44 questions

¹⁵⁰ Rudolf Flesch, *Art of Clear Thinking*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951. ix.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 59-61.

¹⁵² Ibid., 102-110.

surrounding readability such as “Can you apply this to legal documents?” and “Do metaphors make writing more readable or less readable?”¹⁵³

Flesch’s *How to Make Sense* was written in 1954. The subtitles *How Improvement in Speaking, Reading, and Writing Can be a Means of a Better Way of Life for You* speaks to the aim of all Flesch’s books, which is to improve the lives of the reader through clear and direct written communication. He focuses on refining verb choice, incorporating more precise vocabulary, and using words more effectively to improve speaking, writing, comprehension, and communication.

In 1955, he wrote the bestselling book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read, and What You Can Do About It*. This book had far-reaching implications as it spoke directly to parents, providing them with the means to correct the illiteracy that resulted from the look-say method. Flesch, a significant proponent of phonics first instruction, set off a controversy that was to become known as the “Reading Wars.” This book and its 1981 follow-up, *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read: A New Look at the Scandal in Our Schools*, will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

While some of his critics asked questions about what made Flesch an expert on reading instruction when he was not a teacher, his entire career centered on ease of reading and comprehension. He was a noted adult reading specialist with a doctorate in education. In the first chapter of *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, Flesch mentions that he became interested in beginning reading instruction as a result of tutoring a friend’s child, who was of average intelligence and capability but who struggled to read. This inspired

¹⁵³ Flesch, Rudolf, *How to Test Readability*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1951. 48.

him to investigate reading instruction methods. As a parent who taught his own children how to read at home, he was an advocate of parent-driven instruction to compensate for school failure.

In 1957, he compiled *The Book of Unusual Quotations*. This slender volume contained over 6000 brief quotations with the sole aim of helping the reader discover new things to say and a new way to say them. Flesch arranged the quotes alphabetically by subject headings to provide things to consider from a variety of sources across the globe and ranging from 600 BC to the time of publication. Unlike other books of quotes, Flesch's books wanted to provide the reader not only with the correct words but with words that would motivate, inspire, and stimulate deep thought. This book once more demonstrated Flesch's love for language and his deep understanding of the power of words.

The ideas contained in his popular books *The Art of Plain Talk*, *The Art of Readable Writing*, *The Art of Clear Thinking*, *How to Test Readability* (1951), and *A New Way to Better English* (1958) as well as countless magazine articles were compiled together to create *How to Write, Speak and Think More Effectively* (1960). This book offered a complete step-by-step guide to improving all aspects of communication: writing, speaking, and thinking. By providing the reader with dozens of examples, exercises, summaries, and tests, as well as instructions on how to use the Flesch Readability formula, this book was his most detailed and thorough examination of effective communication, written in Flesch's compulsively readable style.

Flesch's 1962 book, *How to be Brief: An Index to Simple Writing* focuses on the words, sentences, and style that make writing clearer and reading easier. The book is to

be used as a reference guide and so it is laid out alphabetically so answers can be quickly located. The entries include synonyms for overused words, simple rules for writing, and tips for making writing more accessible. At a mere 114 pages, it adds another example of Flesch's expertise around communication. His 1964 book *The ABC of Style: A guide to Plain English* does so as well. An expansion of *How to be Brief*, it is also laid out in alphabetical order and is intended to be used as a reference guide to "offer a word diet to those who are verbally overweight."¹⁵⁴ Both books provide the reader with a handy reference to enhance writing without overburdening the reader with unnecessary verbiage.

His 1965 *The Book of Surprises* was a slight departure from his nonfiction work. *The Book of Surprises* was an anthology of 48 stories and articles both fiction and nonfiction that Flesch compiled and edited and was "surprising, unexpected, unusual, astonishing, extraordinary, or shocking." This book was different from his others in that its goal was simply to entertain and delight, rather than educate and enlighten. It also began to establish Flesch as an avid reader as well.

In 1966, he updated his previous work, *The Book of Unusual Quotations*, with *The New Book of Unusual Quotations*. This book offered 8000 "seeds of thought" in the form of quotations and aphorisms arranged alphabetically for easy access. This book could not only be used to inspire writing and speaking but could also be used to add interest to existing writing and speech. Once more Flesch demonstrates that he is an

¹⁵⁴ Flesch, Rudolf, *The ABC of Style: A Guide to Plain English*, 1st ed. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1964. vii.

expert in the communication of the English language whether it be in speaking, writing, or reading.

Throughout the 1970s Flesch continued to write books with the goal of helping writers' express ideas as simply, clearly, and as easily as possible. He wrote *Rudolf Flesch on Business Communications: How to Say What You Mean in Plain English* in 1972. This book was geared towards businesspeople, secretaries, junior executives, and others who wanted to write straightforward letters, memos, and reports. He criticized the form letter as stilted, impersonal, and called for "talking on paper" to effective and human communication. He suggested 10 basic principles on the emotional aspects of a business letter, 8 points to remember on explanations, and 7 ground rules to keep in mind when communicating in business.

In 1975, Flesch worked with J. Peter Kincaid and his team under contract with the United States Navy to produce the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level readability test. The Flesch-Kincaid test was designed to assist the military in determining the difficulty of training manuals. Like the Flesch Reading Ease test, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level examined sentence length and word length. The general idea is that shorter sentences with simpler words are easier to read. However, each test has a different weighing scale offering different readability scores. What made it different from the Flesch Reading Ease test was that it assigned a grade level based on the United States educational system. The Flesch Reading Ease system, which gives a number between 0-100, requires that a score be converted into a table to generate a grade level, but the Flesch-Kincaid test provides a grade level score through the following calculation:

$$0.39 (\text{total words total sentences}) + 11.8 (\text{total syllables total words}) - 15.59.$$

As a result, the results of the two tests have an inverse correlation, the higher the score on the Flesch Reading Ease test, the lower the grade level on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test, thus the easier the text is to read. Many states adopted the policy that legal documents, such as insurance policies, needed to be written at a reading level no higher than ninth grade, as measured by the Flesch-Kincaid formula.¹⁵⁵

Flesch's readability formula has proven invaluable for many types of writers, whether in business, law, government, media, or education. His impact on each of those sectors continues to the present. Both the computer operating system Microsoft 365 uses readability tests to provide a readability score for documents. A writer using Microsoft Word can not only check spelling, grammar, and errors corrected, but the writer can also choose to display information about the reading level of the document, including readability scores according to the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test and Flesch Reading Ease test.¹⁵⁶

Flesch wrote the reference book *Look It Up: A Deskbook of American Spelling and Style* (1977), as a quick and easy guide to remedy common spelling and style writing problems. There are over 18000 entries arranged alphabetically. Using 33 different dictionaries and style manuals, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, the *Unabridged Merriam Webster Dictionary*, and the *United States Government Office of Printing Style Manual*,

¹⁵⁵ Joseph Kimble, "Plain English: A Charter for Clear Writing," *Thomas M. Cooley Law Review* 9, no. 1(1992): 1–58.

¹⁵⁶ Microsoft.com. "Get Your Document's Readability and Level Statistics." Accessed April 2, 2023. <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/get-your-document-s-readability-and-level-statistics-85b4969e-e80a-4777-8dd3-f7fc3c8b3fd2>.

Flesch combined information in a handy reference guide designed to provide quick answers while writing. Explanations are kept short, encouraging the avoidance of “pompous, bureaucratic words.”¹⁵⁷

It may be surprising that Flesch, who was a lawyer in Vienna before moving to the United States, waited until 1979 to write *How to Write Plain English: A Book for Lawyers and Consumers*. With his extensive background knowledge in law, readability, and the work he did throughout the decades for various government agencies, this book should have been written much sooner. However, the book was written while Flesch was working for the United States Federal Trade Commission and dealing daily with the need to make laws, regulations, and contracts reader-friendly so that the average person could understand. Also, the Plain English Movement did not officially begin until March 23, 1978, when then-President Carter signed an Executive Order that federal officials must ensure that regulations were “written in plain English and understandable to those who must comply with it.”¹⁵⁸

Flesch gives the reader of legal documents the ability to understand what is presented in front of them. He first explains how to use the Flesch Reading Ease formula and encourages the writer to aim for a score of 80 with a minimum score of 60.¹⁵⁹ He then offers plenty of examples of legal passages improved through simpler word choice, the use of the word *you*, and the elimination of ambiguous words and double negatives.

¹⁵⁷ Rudolf Flesch, *Look It Up: A Desktop Book of American Language and Style*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977. x.

¹⁵⁸ Rudolf Flesch, *How to Write Plain English: A Book for Lawyers and Consumers*, HarperCollins, 1979. 1.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

By calling for Plain English across the legal sector, Flesch advocated for the average person, empowering them to understand what they were signing before they signed it. The last line of the book states the goal clearly:

One day before too long, a customer will walk into a bank and ask for a loan. He will be given a new, Plain English loan note to sign. He'll sit down, take out his glasses and read the whole note from A to Z. At several places he'll ask questions and get explanations. He'll read about the bank reaching into his checking account, selling his car without telling him, and charging 20 percent of the unpaid loan for a letter on the lawyer's stationery. When he's through, he'll take off his glasses and put them back in his pocket. then he'll say, "I won't sign this," and walk out.¹⁶⁰

Flesch offers this example as proof positive that Plain English empowers the reader to understand what he is signing before he puts pen to paper. Without the legalese causing confusion, the reader will know without a doubt how unfair this loan note is. Armed with this knowledge, the customer will leave the bank and look for another option.

In 1983, Flesch published his final book entitled *Lite English: Popular Words That Are OK to Use No Matter What William Safire, John Simon, Edwin Newman, and the Other Purists Say!*¹⁶¹ This also was an alphabetized list of 250 words that are considered slang but Flesch states can be used in professional writing. He probes this by offering the name and date when reputable newspapers publish articles using slang words. For example, his entry under "blahs":

On February 9, 1983, the New York Times got the blahs.
It happened in a headline, which said:
For Winter Blahs: Party on Sunday Afternoon

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 123.

¹⁶¹ "Marks Of Readable Style: A Study in Adult Education - Goodreads" n.d., <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4623719-marks-of-readable-style>.

What are the winter blahs? A little research yielded the following answers.¹⁶²

Flesch then goes on to offer four different definitions of the word *blah* and its plural *blahs*, citing *The New Yorker*, *Webster's Third Unabridged Dictionary*, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, and the *American Heritage Dictionary*.¹⁶³ Like all his style books, Flesch uses humor and examples to illuminate his point. His easy-to-read style encourages the would-be writer to be more relaxed in their writing to ensure that it is more conversational. This will naturally lead to writing that is easier to comprehend, Flesch's goal.

Reading Expert

It is clear from his many books and articles, as well as his years of service to the Associated Press and the United States Government, that Rudolf Flesch did more than any other person to promote Plain English and the overall quality of communication in the United States.¹⁶⁴ With a career spanning decades solely focused on written expression and reading comprehension, Flesch became an expert critic of reading instruction offered in the public school system. There is little point in championing clear writing if the population at large cannot read. Flesch recognized this massive problem. According to

¹⁶² Rudolf Flesch, *Lite English: Popular Words That Are OK to Use No Matter What William Safire, John Simon, Edwin Newman, and the Other Purists Say!* New York, NY: Crown Publications, 1981. 15-16.

¹⁶³ Rudolf Flesch, *Lite English: Popular Words That Are OK to Use No Matter What William Safire, John Simon, Edwin Newman, and the Other Purists Say!* New York, NY: Crown Publications, 1981. 15-16.

¹⁶⁴ Karen A. Schriver, "Plain Language in the US Gains Momentum: 1940–2015," *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 60, no. 4 (2017): 343–83. <https://doi.org/10.1109/tpc.2017.2765118>.

Flesch, the American public school system had failed by not providing explicit, evidence-based instruction in systematic phonics.¹⁶⁵

Throughout his life, Flesch demonstrated his expertise in the art of communication, focusing on making speaking, reading, writing, and thinking as clear and effective as possible. He was a true believer in simplicity. Since reading and writing go hand in hand, it is not surprising that Flesch would take on how reading is taught in the average American classroom. He died of congestive heart failure at the Dobbs Ferry Hospital on October 5, 1986. He was 75 years old. Yet his influence continues more than three decades later, not only because of his extensive writings surrounding language and style, , but also because of his two most famous books, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at The Scandal of Our Schools*, that will be examined in depth in the next chapter.

¹⁶⁵ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do about It*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1955.

Chapter 5

The Book That Ignited the Reading Wars

In 1955, Rudolph Flesch wrote the controversial book, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955). This critically acclaimed book took a reproofing look at reading instruction in the United States which centered around the look-say method of teaching reading used in the extremely popular Dick and Jane books and other basal reader series. Flesch skewered this instructional method as ineffective because it required children to memorize each word and ignore the fact that English is a phonetically based language, not a pictographic language like Chinese.

Flesch wrote that the only logical method to teach reading was by using a phonics-first approach. The look-say method relies on rote memorization with no evidence of effectiveness. Also, by teaching through repetition, the student never learns how to approach an unknown word, dissect it into its letters, and sound it out. Flesch advocated for the direct instruction of phonic skills. This means the explicit instruction of the phonemic code, "...a code, which consists of fewer than 200 letters and letter groups, each standing for one or more of the 44 sounds in English. Once a child has learned this code, he can read."¹⁶⁶ Flesch's ability to write in plain English cuts directly to the center of the issue. Children were not reading fluently, and he provided a clear solution: phonics-first instruction.

It is not surprising that *Why Johnny Can't Read* spent thirty-seven weeks on the best-seller list. The book is easy to read, straightforward, and offers an actionable

¹⁶⁶ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1955), vii.

solution. What is surprising is that Flesch's campaign to have students taught phonics first was not completely successful. He wrote the books to parents and stated not only what they should look for in their child's reading instruction, but also named the phonics-focused programs that he felt were best suited to teach reading in the classroom.

By the time he wrote *Why Johnny Can't Read*, Flesch had already created his remarkable readability formula and had authored five books as well as several journal articles on readability, writing, and thinking. All his endeavors added to his extensive list of credentials in the field of communications. Flesch set the goal for his book in the preface, stating: "Just as war is 'too serious a matter to be left to the generals,' so, I think, the teaching of reading is too important to be left to the educators. This book, therefore, is not addressed to teachers and teachers' college professors but to fathers and mothers. I tried, to the best of my ability, to write a book they can use to help their children read."¹⁶⁷ To do this, he divides the book into two sections. The first is a "Little compendium of arguments against our current system of teaching reading." This is the *Why Johnny Can't Read* section of the book. The second is a simple "home primer," which amounts to the *What You Can Do About It* section. Flesch's aim is simple: address the book to the parents, explain what the problem is within the school system, and provide a solution for the parents to remedy the problem at home.

Chapters 1-4

Chapter One begins with a letter to Johnny's mother, Mary. In this fictitious letter, Flesch outlines a scenario whereby he is working with 12-year-old Johnny, a student who

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., xiii.

was kept back in school because he was unable to read and couldn't keep up with the demands of junior high school.¹⁶⁸ Flesch mentions that he has worked with Johnny for six months and in that time Johnny has made impressive progress. Flesch assures Johnny's mother that within a few months, he will be completely caught up with his peers and will go on to college, becoming a lawyer, doctor, or engineer.¹⁶⁹ What prevented Johnny from being able to read was that he simply had not been taught properly. Flesch had found while reading books and articles on the subject as well as visiting schools, that Johnny was simply a victim of the American school system which never taught him *how* to read.

Flesch explains in his letter that remedial reading classes only began to exist in the United States around 1925 when the reading instruction shifted to a look-say approach. He mentions a 1953 *Elementary School Journal* article by Dr. Ralph C. Preston where the author notes that German school children could read anything in print, without regard to comprehension, by the second grade.¹⁷⁰ Flesch uses this example to illustrate the effectiveness of a phonics-first versus a look-say reading approach. He explains the illogic of look-say by using the example of learning shorthand. To learn shorthand, one must understand what each symbol represents and how to write it. In this way, one has learned both how to read and how to write in shorthand.¹⁷¹ This is the same way one can learn how to read and write in English. By starting with the alphabet and learning to

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 3.

recognize and write the letter names and sounds one can learn how to read. Flesch explains that this is how people have learned to read since the alphabet was invented in 1500 BC.¹⁷²

The major flaw with the American educational system is that Johnny is being taught to memorize the entire word by focusing on its meaning as opposed to looking at the individual letters and using his knowledge of the sounds they make to form the word and then learning the meaning. “This is not miraculous, it’s the only natural system of learning how to read.”¹⁷³ Yet, in the United States, a decision was made to throw away common sense and instead act as if English is a language like Chinese.¹⁷⁴ To have a vocabulary of 10,000 or 20,000 words requires the memorization of that many individual words.¹⁷⁵ And while this makes no sense at all, one only has to spend some time in Johnny’s classroom during reading to see:

... those series of horrible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers, the stuff and guff about Dick and Jane or Alice and Jerry visiting the farm and having birthday parties and seeing animals in the zoo and going through dozens and dozens of totally unexciting, middle class, middle income, middle I.Q. children's activities that offer opportunities for reading, “Look, look” or “Yes, yes” or “Come, come” or “See the funny, funny animal.” During the past half year, I read a good deal of this material and I don't wish that experience on anyone.¹⁷⁶

Flesch explains to Mary that the textbook companies in America make the most of their

¹⁷² Ibid., 4.

¹⁷³ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1955), 5.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 6-7.

profit through elementary school readers. Lots of money is invested in the publication and publicizing of these readers. To beat out the heavy competition amongst other publishers, a senior author is employed.¹⁷⁷ This person lends a certain gravitas to the publication so he must be “... someone with a national reputation who teaches how to teach reading at one of the major universities.”¹⁷⁸ Students who have been taught the look-say method can only read books written with a limited number of words memorized through the look-say method. This necessitates the additional purchase of more look-say basal readers. Whereas, if the school simply used a basic primer, the student could be taught the code and then apply it to any book, but that of course would not be as profitable to the publishers nor the senior authors/college professors.¹⁷⁹

Because of the symbiotic relationship between the publishing companies and the college professors, the commitment to the look-say/word method is firm. “Mention the alphabetic method or phonetics or “phonics” and you immediately arouse derision, furious hostility, or icy silence.”¹⁸⁰ When others such as Monsignor Elwell, superintendent of schools for the Cleveland Diocese who wrote in the May 1952 issue of *Catholic Educator* of the unmitigated success his schools witnessed through the teaching of phonics or when Dr. Leonard Bloomfield, a respected linguistic professor at Yale University, mentioned in his book *Language* (1933) that “nothing could be more discouraging than to read our ‘educationalist’s’ treatises on methods of teaching children

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

to read,” they were largely ignored.

“After his death, in 1949 his literary executor offered the manuscript to every single elementary textbook publisher in the United States. Not one of them considered it. As I am writing, the book is still unpublished.”¹⁸¹ Yet, Flesch did consider it and he explains to Mary how he sought out Bloomfield’s alphabetic-phonetic primer which was based on his vast knowledge of linguistics. When the introduction to Bloomfield’s primer was published in the April/May 1942 edition of the *Elementary English Review*, Flesch used the ideas presented to teach his daughter how to read at the age of 5.¹⁸²

Flesch explains that while doing research for *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, he wrote letters to both the National Council of Teachers and the US Office of Education. What he received in response from both was a “violently anti-phonics” pamphlet entitled, “What About Phonics” by Dr. Alvina T. Barrows of New York University and recommendations to examine the work of whole word advocates Dr. Paul Witty of Northwestern University and Dr. Edward W. Dolch of the University of Illinois.¹⁸³ Through his research, Flesch figured out exactly how Johnny has been put in his current situation of being held back a year in school and requiring reading remediation.

Now that I have gone through dozens and dozens of books on reading, I know how well it all fits together.... for every teacher’s college gives at least one course on how to teach reading; every course and how to teach reading is based on a textbook; every one of those textbooks is written by one of the high priests of the word method. In the old days it was impossible to keep a good teacher from following her own common sense and practical knowledge; today the phonetic system of teaching reading is kept out of our schools as effectively as if we had a

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 11.

dictatorship with an all-powerful Ministry of Education.¹⁸⁴

Flesch is not coy when offering a reason why reading instruction had gone so far away from a commonsense approach. He addresses the reason most often used by whole-word advocates, such as Dr. Witty, to justify their approach. Witty and others claimed that “English is essentially an unphonetic language.”¹⁸⁵ Flesch states that this is laughable because all alphabetic systems are phonetic, but he does acknowledge that English is more irregular than other languages, just not as much as whole-word reading experts led the public to believe.¹⁸⁶ Flesch ends this introductory chapter by giving several examples of pro-whole word college professors advocating the abandonment of alphabet knowledge and phonetic analysis in favor of word guessing and memorization.¹⁸⁷ According to Flesch, the difference between Johnny and the student who learned how to read is luck. “Just lucky enough to find out in time that learning to read means learning to sound out words.”¹⁸⁸

Flesch begins Chapter Two by answering the question, what is phonics? After making the distinction between phonetics: the scientific study of speech sounds including studying the phonetic alphabet, diacritical marks, technical terms, and many other scientific tools and techniques, and phonics: sounds and the written letters that represent those sounds to create words and sentences, he explains how in perfectly phonetic

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 14-21.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 21.

languages learning to read is easy.¹⁸⁹ English is more complicated because there are only 26 letters used to make 44 sounds, but it still is phonetic. A common myth whole word advocates like to spread is that English is illogical, with too many rule exceptions to be taught effectively through phonics. Flesch openly acknowledges that reading English is “a highly imperfect system, to be sure, but a system that can be explained and taught without throwing up your hands into spare and going back to Chinese word learning.”¹⁹⁰ He quickly lists five steps for the natural sequence of any phonics method and then describes each in more depth. The first step is to teach the five short vowels and all consonants spelled by single letters. The second step is to teach consonants and consonant combinations spelled with two or three letters. The third step is to teach vowel and vowel combinations spelled with two or three letters. The fourth step is to teach long vowels and the fifth step is to teach irregular spellings.¹⁹¹ Flesch spends a total of 5 pages explaining in greater detail exactly how to teach each step. He ends the chapter that while it has been argued that it is too complicated to teach reading using phonics, he disagrees. It is a guaranteed system that teaches every child to read whereas millions of children taught through the look-say method cannot do so.¹⁹²

Chapter Three is aptly titled *Why Johnny Can't Spell* and begins with an explanation of how reading and spelling are intricately linked. “The only way to teach

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹² Ibid., 32.

reading is to teach spelling at the same time.”¹⁹³ Before Noah Webster, spelling was most often taught before reading. Webster linked phonics with spelling. In 1836 William Holmes McGuffey removed the prerequisite of spelling in reading instruction previously set forth by Webster in his incredibly popular readers. From that point on reading and spelling became two separate subjects. This was a mistake according to Flesch who argues “that attitude is all wrong. Reading and spelling are two sides of the same thing, and the trouble starts when you separate the two.”¹⁹⁴ Flesch contends that illiteracy can be overcome simply with letter-sound knowledge. The issue is that children taught using the look-say approach have not been allowed to learn the individual sounds in each word, thus when a parent says to spell the word the way it sounds the child has no idea that every letter in the word is doing a job. Flesch briefly outlines the history of spelling. Before 1600, spelling correctness was of no concern. Writers spelled every word as it sounded regardless of the spelling; thus the word misfortune could be spelled a myriad of ways: mysse-fourttune, or mysseforten.¹⁹⁵ The invention of the printing press in the 15th century formalized English spelling, but it wasn’t until Noah Webster’s dictionary standardized American English that the free spelling of the past was fully put to rest.¹⁹⁶ Yet, once the method of teaching reading became look-say, the ability to spell a word as it sounded became impossible for many. Fletch explains that the method for teaching

¹⁹³ Ibid., 33.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 37.

spelling in a whole-word classroom could be an opportunity to finally teach some phonics, but alas that doesn't happen.¹⁹⁷ Instead, the accepted method of teaching reading in a whole word classroom is to teach the meaning of the word first, then its pronunciation. Strong emphasis is put on the way a word looks as opposed to how it sounds.¹⁹⁸ This increases the chances that the word *kid* would be read as *kind* or the word *razzing* would be read as *realizing*.¹⁹⁹ And while Johnny may not want to be guessing at words, without having a grasp of phonics, he is left with little choice. Flesch explains that this is not the experience of German or Austrian students because, unlike Johnny, they have been taught phonics. The American student has been told to focus on meaning and pronunciation, not sound. As a result, he cannot read or spell.

But why was such a system, which makes little sense, developed? In Chapter Four, entitled, *A Cow and Consequences*, Flesch outlines the history of the word method. He begins by quickly outlining the history of reading instruction:

Well, in the beginning, school children were taught first the alphabet, then little syllables like *ab*, *ac*, *ad*, and then words, going from the simple to the more complex. Then they started reading the Bible and that was that.

In colonial times in America, the system was incorporated in the famous New England Primer, the first American “best seller.”

Then came Noah Webster. Webster, who was one of his country's great geniuses, made up his mind to replace the New England primer with something better. In 1873, when he was 25 years old, he published his famous *Blue-Backed Speller*, which went into innumerable editions and was the universally used American primer for almost 100 years...

What was the difference between the New England primer and Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller*? The difference was essential that Webster was the first man

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 38.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 39-40.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 18.

who realized that an English primer has to be based on phonetics.²⁰⁰

After describing the benefits of Webster's primer, Flesch introduces the origin of the word method. Flesch based this history on the work of Nila Barton Smith who wrote the esteemed American *Reading Instruction*, originally printed in 1934, as an extension of her Ph.D. dissertation.²⁰¹ According to Smith, in 1846, John Russel Webb published *The New Word Method*, a whole word primer which widely introduced the look-say approach into American reading instruction.²⁰² The story was originally printed in an 1855 reprint of the book. According to the publisher, Webb's nephew explained that the inspiration behind his uncle's method was a cow. In 1846, a twenty-one-year-old Webb was reading the newspaper in the boarding house he lived in.²⁰³ A four or five-year-old girl who also lived there climbed into his lap and they discussed her father who was yard milking a cow. The word cow happened to be written in the newspaper, so Webb, who was also a teacher, pointed out the word to the girl and asked her to name the animal her father was milking. The girl stated cow and with pride showed her mother that the word on the paper was *cow*, the animal her father was milking in the yard.²⁰⁴ At that moment, Webb had an idea. He began teaching his students at school the same way he taught the little girl at the boarding house. Using the blackboard and at times "pages or hand cards,"

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 44-45.

²⁰¹ Nila B. Smith, *American Reading Instruction* (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 2002), xiii.

²⁰² Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1955), 46.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 47.

Webb's new teaching style piqued enough interest that he was invited to lecture about his new method at a Teachers' Institute that fall in Watertown, New York. After hearing about his exciting new method that appeared to have students reading quickly without the drills of phonics, it was resolved that his method should be published and taught in all the schools in Watertown. A local bookseller, John Greene, was present and offered to publish, at his own expense, the primer, originally entitled *John's First Book* or *The Children's First Reader*.²⁰⁵ As a result, the first successful whole-word method primer was created:

And as soon as it started, trouble started too - the kind of trouble that is still with us more than 100 years later. Parents complained, the children didn't know the letters, and young Mr. Webb was exposed to some abuse. But he persisted - unfortunately - and *Webb's Normal Reader* was on its way - the first successful primer based on the whole word method.²⁰⁶

Although Webb's primer did not overtake Webster's Blue-Backed Spellers in the mid to late 1800s nor did it steal popularity from McGuffey Readers, it did help the word method to establish credibility among experiment-minded teachers.²⁰⁷ "Even those books and systems that favored the word method offered instruction and phonics too."²⁰⁸ From 1910 through the 1920s the leading reading system was the phonics-based Beacon Readers, but by the end of the 1920s, "*all* phonic readers went out of print."²⁰⁹ Flesch explains that the reason this massive shift happened was that psychologists provided

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 48.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 49.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 50.

“proof” that the word method was superior to the phonics approach. The 1952 book, *The Psychology of Teaching Reading*, by Irving H Anderson and Walter F. Dearborn, details the 1885 landmark study of the psychology of reading conducted by Cattell. This study is cited often and repeatedly as the complete justification of the effectiveness of the word method. The study consisted of the procedure in which:

Using the tachistoscope or short exposure technique, Cattell found that the adult reader could, in 10 minutes of exposure time, apprehend equally well three or four unrelated letters, two unrelated words (up to about 12 letters), or a short sentence of four words (or approximately 24 letters if in words). If the limit for unrelated letters was only three or four, the words obviously were not perceived in terms of letters. The experiment proved that we do not ordinarily read by letters but by whole word units.

Cattell's results were confirmed by Erdman and Dodge in 1898. These workers found that the span for unrelated letters was only about four or five when a very brief exposure was used. 6 or 7 letters were off and reported correctly when a longer exposure time was used, but that was about the limit for unrelated letters. whereas familiar words containing 12 to 20 letters, we're easily read during an exposure time of a hundred milliseconds.

These findings of Cattell and Erdman and Dodge delivered a damaging blow to the alphabet method and gave support to the movement already underway to revolutionize methods of teaching reading. The older notion had been that words are read by compounding the letters. That this is not the case was clearly demonstrated by finding that words can be read when there was not time to grasp all the letters. words must, therefore, be perceived in some other way. Cattell believed that the cue for recognition was the “total word picture,” while Erdman and Dodge use the expression “general word shape.”²¹⁰

Flesch explains that the reason he quoted the above passage in its entirety is that it is imperative to understand the very shaky footing that the whole word method has as its foundation. “Mind you, this is the sum total of the scientific basis for the word method as offered in the latest and most comprehensive book on the psychology of teaching

²¹⁰ Ibid., 50-51.

reading.”²¹¹ There are many flaws with this study and Flesch points them out. The first is that the study was conducted in 1885, sixty-seven years before the publication of *The Psychology of Teaching Reading*, yet no other studies were available to back the whole word method. Another issue with Cattell’s study is that the study examines adult readers, not children or non-readers. The study declared that because adults could read letters that form words faster than letters that did not form words it was “obvious” and “clearly demonstrated” that readers don’t read individual letters and thus must “perceive words some other way.”²¹² This makes little sense as the only rationale for not teaching the names and sounds of letters and phonics. Flesch explains that just because an adult has automated reading words does not mean that a child should be taught an entire word at once without regard to each letter’s individual sound. Flesch did not have research to indisputably prove himself. He relied on common sense. This opened the opportunity for criticism that he could not decisively dispute. It was not until MRI imaging in 2000 provided undeniable proof that the sight word method is ineffective.²¹³

While Cattell’s study, and others like it, were used widely and often to justify the whole teaching method, it was not the main reason there was a shift in reading instruction. The shift, according to Flesch, was the result of Edmund Burke Huey’s 1908 book *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*. Huey was a staunch advocate of

²¹¹ Ibid., 51.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Cohen, L., S. Dehaene, L. Naccache, S. Lehericy, G. Dehaene-Lambertz, M. A. Hénaff, and F. Michel. “The Visual Word Form Area: Spatial and Temporal Characterization of an Initial Stage of Reading in Normal Subjects and Posterior Split-Brain Patients.” *Brain: A Journal of Neurology* 123 (Pt 2) (2000): 291–307.

meaning-based reading. He believed that reading should be taught in the same way the oral language is taught by whole words at a time dealing with topics of interest.²¹⁴ Such was Huey's belief that meaning should be at the forefront that he stated:

The shock that such a statement will give to many a practical teacher reading is but an accurate measure of the hold that a false ideal has taken of us this that to read is to say just what is on the page instead of to think each in his own way the meaning that the page suggests...Both the inner utterance and reading aloud are natural in the early years and are to be encouraged, but only when left thus free, to be dominated only by the purpose of getting and expressing meanings; and until the Insidious thought of reading as word pronouncing is well worked out of our heads, It is Well to place the emphasis strongly where it really belongs, on reading as thought getting, independently of expression.²¹⁵

Huey's book was the first compendium of reading research; thus, his ideas began to be discussed at teachers' colleges. His ideas also worked well with the Progressive Education Movement. Huey was a great supporter of John Dewey and the teaching of reading for meaning over drill for skill.²¹⁶ Flesch refers to Huey as a whole word "apostle who seriously suggested that phonics should be discarded altogether."²¹⁷

The final piece that was required for the look-say method to overtake phonics instruction in the United States was the research conducted and reported in *New Methods of Primary Reading* (1928) by Arthur I. Gates at the Teachers' College of Columbia University. An ardent supporter of the whole word/look-say method, Gates proposed that phonics drills should be eradicated and replaced with incidental phonics, the learning of

²¹⁴ Edmund Burke Huey, *Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (London, England: MIT Press, 1968), 306.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Israel, Susan E., and E. Jennifer Monaghan, eds., *Shaping the Reading Field: The Impact of Early Reading Pioneers, Scientific Research, and Progressive Ideas* (Newark, NJ: International Reading Association, 2007), 164.

²¹⁷ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1955), 53.

the letter sounds through meaningful interaction with words. Thus, a child would learn that *S* says /s/ incidentally as they saw a series of words that start with *S* like snake, sand, sun, soda, etc., and made the connection themselves. Gates conducted an experiment whereby one first-grade class is taught his new “incidental phonics” and the other, the control group, is taught with standard, systematic phonics drills. Not surprisingly, Gate’s experiment demonstrated his method as superior. That those findings were not repeated did not slow the transition from systematic phonics to incidental phonics.²¹⁸ Flesch points out the various flaws with the experiment itself. One flaw was that the students were tested after months of instruction as opposed to years.

Another issue was that the teacher of the incidental phonics class was aware that her phonics instruction was being evaluated, thus she was more likely to pay attention to the depth and rigor of her instruction. Another issue was that the test was timed. Students were asked to read a list of words. A child reading by systematic phonics needs more waiting time to discriminate between each sound that composes a word. The incidental phonics child has memorized by sight a handful of words that he can “read” quickly. Whether he guessed the word correctly didn’t matter because he had more opportunities to score points as opposed to the child who was trying for accuracy.²¹⁹ Because Gates was such an influential leader in the field of reading instruction, and taught at one of the most prestigious teachers’ colleges, his message of whole word over phonics drills became *the* method for reading instruction. This meant that not only were textbook

²¹⁸ Ibid., 54.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 54-55.

companies focusing on shifting from systematic phonics to incidental phonics, but also that teachers were not being taught *how* to teach phonics at all.²²⁰ “The vast majority of our school children today have never heard of the difference between a long and a short vowel, but there are by now also thousands and thousands of elementary-school *teachers* who couldn't tell you the difference either.”²²¹

To read, the child needs to rely on a cueing system. He needs to look at the shape of the word, see if it shares a similarity with a known word, and use pictures and/or context cues. Looking at the actual letters and counting out the word becomes the last option.²²² For a child who has not been taught phonics, this would be the last option because he doesn't know anything about vowel teams, digraphs, diphthongs, etc. He may know the names and sounds of the letters in the alphabet, but the rest is unknown. This soon becomes a problem, because by solely relying on memorization of words, the number of words a child can read is severely limited.

Chapter 5-8

In Chapter Five, Flesch marvels at the lack of evidence supporting the whole word method. “In every single research study ever made phonics was shown to be superior to the word method; there is not a single research study that shows the word method superior to phonics.”²²³ If this is so, and Flesch assures the reader that it is as he was exhaustive in his research, then how could this unsupported method succeed a

²²⁰ Ibid., 57.

²²¹ Ibid., 57.

²²² Ibid., 56.

²²³ Ibid., 60.

proven, logical, and well-established one? He then proceeds to list, in chronological order, the studies that examine phonics versus non-phonics. Flesch begins by citing the 1913 study conducted by Professor C. W. Valentine of the University of St Andrews in Scotland and ends with the 1943 study conducted by Dr. David H Russell reported in the *Journal of educational research*. Flesch outlines the many studies that were conducted in between by the researchers Cattell, Winch, Sexton and Heron, Mosher and Newell, Brahmin, Garrison and Herd, Tate, Browne, Agnew, and Russell. Every study involved some version of two groups of students, one taught phonics, and one not taught. In every single one of these studies, phonics was found to be superior. Flesch mentions that it is likely that the reader would suspect that he would next recite all the evidence in favor of the word method, however, there was none to be found.²²⁴

Chapter Six is entitled *Two Years Wasted*. In this chapter, Flesch addresses the many excuses school systems have produced to explain why children are not reading. One of the biggest excuses is reading readiness. Schools argue that the child simply is not ready to read. To attempt to understand, Flesch looks at Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), "the book that is the basis for all modern theories of education."²²⁵ In *Emile*, Rousseau explains that learning is most effective when there is strong motivation to learn. Flesch wholeheartedly agrees with this point but believes that lack of motivation should not be the reason a first grader is only taught a handful of words by sight as opposed to systematic phonics. "A normal child is ready and eager to learn to read because it's

²²⁴ Ibid. 61-68.

²²⁵ Ibid., 70.

mankind's most fascinating game.”²²⁶ Flesch also states that even after reading a popular book dedicated solely to the topic of reading readiness, he was unable to find an actual definition.²²⁷

There is, however, in every book Flesch encountered on the subject, a piece of research cited that points to phonics readiness occurring around “the mental age of seven.” Edward W. Dolch of the University of Illinois and graduate student Maurine Bloomster conducted the research and reported it in the November 1937 *Elementary School Journal* under the title “Phonic Readiness.” Flesch blasted the study, calling it flawed from the onset. Students who attended a typical elementary first-grade class were shown a list of words such as “cap cape tap tape” and asked to distinguish between words. The first graders, who were in elementary school in the 1930s would have received little if any phonics instruction did not fare well. The second graders in the same school were tested in the same way and fared slightly better. The conclusion was that children with a mental age of seven were more ready to receive reading instruction than first-grade, six-year-olds. Dolch and Bloomster concluded, “Children with a mental age below seven made only chance scores; that is, as far as this experiment indicates, a mental age of 7 years seems to be the lowest at which a child can be expected to use phonics.”²²⁸

To Flesch, this is completely illogical²²⁹ The American child misses the

²²⁶ Ibid., 74.

²²⁷ Ibid. 69.

²²⁸ Ibid., 73.

²²⁹ Ibid., 75-76.

opportunity to learn the game of reading. The British student who is learning the same language as the American child is now two years ahead. His country decided to begin instruction at five years old, Flesch surmises because English is a more difficult language to decode than other European languages, thus starting sooner just makes sense.²³⁰ A child, who is naturally intuitive, wants to take things apart, see how they work, and put them back together.²³¹ Teaching a child phonics allows him to do so as he learns the rules of an alphabetic language. Having him memorize a list of words by focusing on their shape and meaning takes the adventure out of it. It deadens reading, making it boring. He writes:

Start a child with letters and sounds, make him understand the basic principles underlying all alphabetic writing and reading - and pretty soon he will be on his way, having discovered that reading is fun. But start a child for a year, two years, three years with the senseless, stultifying activity of staring at a collection of letters, memorizing that it means “chicken” or “funny” or “walked,” and he’ll never develop the slightest interest in reading. Why should he? The fun and reading lies and the great game of deciphering a hidden meaning - just as the fun in writing lies basically in the game of encoding a message.²³²

Whole word method is argued from an adult point of view.²³³ Where adults see the drill and repetition of systematic instruction as mind-numbing, the child seeks out opportunities to repeat activities to mastery. A student who is expected to memorize lists of words, as opposed to teaching them the skills to decode the word, is set up to fail. He is limited to the number of words he has memorized and thus limits his book choices. He

²³⁰ Ibid., 76-77.

²³¹ Ibid., 74.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid., 75.

cannot read whatever he chooses, he can only read what he has been able to memorize.

This leads to Flesch's next chapter, entitled, "*Oh, Oh! Come, Come! Look, Look!*"

Flesch begins Chapter Seven with a story of a parent who asked the school librarian why her sons, in first and second grade respectively, never brought home books from the library that they could read independently. The librarian stated that Publishers simply did not make books simple enough for young readers.²³⁴ This is proof positive to Flesch that first and second-grade students in the United States are simply not being taught to read. One might wonder, what are they reading in school then? Flesch explains that the readers of the 1955 classroom are not the readers of thirty years ago. They are little more than sight word lists. What Flesch did not realize when he wrote these words was that his acknowledgment of a gap in the market would be fulfilled when William Spaulding, the director of Houghton Mifflin's education division asked Theodor Geisel, writing as Dr. Seuss, to write a book six to seven-year-olds could read independently.²³⁵ *The Cat in the Hat* was published for the first time in 1957. Because students were being taught to memorize words over systematic phonics, they needed countless exposure to "high frequency" words to know them by sight. These are words that are seen most often in books, such as the, one was, of, our, yours, etc. To do this, an expert writes up a predetermined list of words the student should know by the end of a certain grade. The child is then repeatedly exposed to the words until he knows them automatically. The child continues to learn more words by sight as he "reads" through the classroom readers.

²³⁴ Ibid., 79.

²³⁵ Anne O'Brien, "An Educational Innovation: The Cat in the Hat." *Learning First Alliance*, March 2, 2011. <http://www.learningfirst.org/educational-innovation-cat-hat>.

The result of this is a stilted, torturous reading experience that:

has no resemblance anymore to normal English. It is a word-method-reader idiom, a language to be found solely and exclusively in the book manufactured for use with and on American school children. It is not the language used in telling a story, making a narrative interesting, or conveying information intelligently. No normal writer ever wrote a book like that, no poet ever wrote such a poem, and no mother ever told such a bedtime story. Our literature is composed in English, not in “Oh, Oh! Come, Come! Look, Look! language.”²³⁶

Flesch points out that writing in such a style is not only limiting the vocabulary of students but is also boring to read. To emphasize his point, he used the example of “The Three Little Pigs.” One version, written in the whole word approved manner, contained a total of 1243 words 63% of which were repeated words. The other version was from the classic Beacon Readers and contained a clearer and more straightforward 583 total words, and a repetition rate of only 31%²³⁷ Another interesting fact Flesch notes is that the word method story was to be read at the end of the second grade whereas the phonics-based story was to be read in first grade. Students are missing the opportunity to fall in love with reading because they are no longer reading stories that read like regular English. Reading the same words over and again becomes tedious and destroys the motivation to read for pleasure. The joy has been completely wrung from the story. Another consequence of this is that students are exposed to such limited vocabulary that they are unable to read in the content areas (science, social studies, history).²³⁸ Publishing companies then must water down the textbooks so students can read them. The result is a nation that is significantly behind European countries and even behind the education

²³⁶ Ibid., 84-85.

²³⁷ Ibid., 86.

²³⁸ Ibid., 88.

standards of the past.

Chapter Eight addresses *How Not to Teach Reading*. Flesch takes the reader inside a typical public-school classroom to see how a reading lesson is “taught.” There are 25 or so students who have been divided into three reading groups based on level. Each group sits in a circle around the teacher and reads from the “reader” in front of him/her. They each take turns reading the same repetitive story, continuing from where they left off the day before. Each word is slowly and painfully read aloud one word at a time. When the child comes to an unknown word, he often just stops and waits for the teacher to supply the word. The teacher may tell him to look at the picture or she may remind him that this was the word they learned last week or last month and does he remember it?²³⁹

Flesch looks into another first grade and third grade, and the structure is the same. The only difference is that in third grade the gaps between the groups are wider, with the lowest students using a remedial reader. The students never have a chance to choose a storybook, read it cover to cover, and establish an interest in reading. Instead, they spend their days in “the three groups, and ‘Let's start at the top of page 53,’ and the chant.”²⁴⁰

Flesch describes the “complacency” with which Gates details how children taught the word method tend to look merely at the length of a word or some other detail such as the dot on *i* in the word *pig* or the shape of the letter *x* in *box*.²⁴¹ Edward Dolch noted that

²³⁹ Ibid., 89-92.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 94.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 95.

children tend to look at the pictures as clues to what the text is saying.²⁴² The fact that none of the children simply decode the words based on the alphabetic principle is stunning to Flesch. So how does one solve the problem of boring books the children cannot even read? Experiential Charts. With the teacher acting as a scribe (because of course the students cannot spell) the children compose a story about an experience they've had. They then read the story altogether as a class.²⁴³ Although whole-word advocates enthusiastically embrace this technique, Flesch points out three key issues. First, it is not a reading lesson since the children simply repeat the words the teacher just read aloud to them. Second, it is not a writing lesson since the students simply copy what the teacher wrote on the board into notebooks. Third, it is not a spelling lesson since the teacher wrote for the children, preventing them from having the task of sounding out words.²⁴⁴ Three opportunities to learn how to read, write and spell were all wasted in this typical whole classroom.

Chapters 9-11

In Chapter Nine Flesch offers a personal look at teaching with phonics. After extensive research, he came across the book, *Reading with Phonics*, written by Julie Hay and Charles E. Wingo. Hay was a teacher in Chicago before her passing and Wingo was the superintendent of the Argo-Summit-Bedford Park school district during Flesch's visit. Flesch had an additional reason to visit the area since some schools within the Chicago

²⁴² Ibid., 96.

²⁴³ Ibid., 97.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 99.

Archdioceses were using a phonetic method developed by Leonard Bloomfield.²⁴⁵ On March 25, 1954, Flesch visited the first-grade classroom at the W.W. Walker School in Bedford Park. The class consisted of twenty-three children divided into three reading groups. The top group had twelve students, the middle had six, and the bottom group had five. In this classroom, the teacher asked the children to write about things that had happened the day before. Rather than the students dictating to the teacher, the children wrote about their experiences themselves. While all the spelling was not perfect, the teacher was able to remind them of phonetic rules so that they could fix their mistakes.²⁴⁶ Flesch himself also asked random students to read aloud sentences from the newspaper. Once more, it was not perfect reading, one child had difficulty pronouncing Egypt and another put the accent on the wrong syllable in the word atomic, but each child demonstrated skills with decoding.²⁴⁷ First-grade students are only 6 or 7 years old so their comprehension of the newspaper was likely limited but their ability to read was aided by a strong knowledge of letter/sound correspondence. However, when they were next asked to read an unfamiliar story from their classroom primer, they were able to successfully do so:

They did not chant the words, one by one, laborious, and insecurely, in a monotonous, one word after another singsong. Instead, they did something that I had seen done in no other classroom. *They read the story!* They went through the pages, at a pretty fast clip, with completely natural intonation, laughing spontaneously at one place, expressing surprise at another, following the thread of the story with animated suspense.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 101.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 103.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 104.

These children had been taught with the Hay-Wingo primer during the first half of the year. Flesch found that the other classrooms in this school were equally successful in reading, with most students reading at or above grade level.²⁴⁹ Flesch noted that the results of a recent achievement test put the Bedford Park sixth-grade students at an average of 7.5-grade level across all subjects, putting them more on par with students from Europe.²⁵⁰

Flesch was impressed with the students' academic achievement and with their ability to comprehend and discuss what they had read. He then went to Argo where the school was more diverse and economically disadvantaged. While Flesch found that these children were not as high as the students in Bedford Park, they were still more capable readers than the ones in a typical word method school.²⁵¹ Flesch then spoke with Superintendent Wingo who stated that his primer was used in the district's four elementary schools with similar success: the students' general achievement was about a year ahead of the national average and the only non-readers were special education students.²⁵² Such success was the direct result of the phonics method being taught systematically.

Next, Flesch visited St. Roman, one of the eight parochial schools of the Chicago

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 105.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 105.

²⁵² Ibid., 106.

Archdioceses run by the Sisters of St. Joseph.²⁵³ Each one of these schools was using the Bloomfield system (the same one Flesch used to teach his own child to read). St. Roman consisted mostly of blue-collar workers of Polish descent. Flesch visited the first, second, third, and sixth grades. The difference between these classrooms and the ones he had seen at Argo was “striking” in that these children were more formal and focused on slow, methodical drilling of skills.²⁵⁴ Yet, like Argo, the children were able to read above grade level and with solid comprehension. Both groups also appeared to enjoy reading and had books for pleasure inside their desks.²⁵⁵ When Flesch spoke with Fr. Stoga, Assistant Superintendent of Chicago Catholic Schools, stated that the students were also a year above the national norm and that students were able to rely on decoding skills when they came across an unknown word. Once the word was decoded, comprehension naturally followed. The value of Flesch personally reviewing the schools was threefold:

1. If you teach reading with phonics (regardless of the particular method used), student achievement in all subjects will be on average one grade higher than the national norm.
2. If you teach reading with phonics, you will have no case of “non-readers.”
3. If you teach reading with phonics, you will produce students with a habit of wide reading.²⁵⁶

Flesch concludes by challenging the reader to understand that if one is looking to find fault with phonics then no amount of data, experiments, or statistics will satisfy, but if

²⁵³ Ibid., 107.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 106-107.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 108-109.

one is like him, seeing students reading above grade level and enjoying what they read was proof positive.²⁵⁷

Chapter Ten begins by restating the point of the book. It is not to bash educational doctrine, rather, it is to explain that a child's "trouble in reading comes solely from the fact that in school he has been taught word guessing instead of reading-and by reading I mean getting the meaning of words formed by letters on a printed page, and nothing else."²⁵⁸ Flesch stresses that memorizing whole words or guessing at words is not reading, rather it is a bad habit that prevents a child from ever reading properly. Most schools have embraced the whole word method so the only solution to this problem is that the parents must teach their child to read at home. Flesch believes the best time to begin is at age five, the same age British children are taught.²⁵⁹

Flesch then explains that there is no reason a parent cannot teach their child at home. The pioneers did it and it is the American way to do the work necessary to get things done. Just as someone would paint a room in their home or lay tile in the bathroom, there is no reason a literate person cannot teach their own child to read.

Flesch recommends starting slowly with the letter names and sounds until each is mastered. Then follow the sequence he outlines in the second part of the book. He advises patience, not moving ahead until the lesson is mastered, and not skipping any steps. He also suggests making sure the child has quality books to read, such as easy fairy

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 109.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 110.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

tales, nursery tales, and animal fables.²⁶⁰ Reading stories will reinforce the phonics lessons and motivate the child to continue learning. Most likely the child will learn in less than a year how to read because he is receiving one-on-one attention. Once the child can read, the biggest problem the parent will have is keeping him in books. The library is the solution to that issue.²⁶¹

To teach the child at home Flesch surprisingly does not recommend his own book, though he states, “I tried to write this book so that in a pinch it could be used for that purpose.”²⁶² Instead, Flesch recommends *Reading with Phonics* by Julie Hay and Charles E Wingo. A child who has this background will enter school at age six already reading and thus impervious to the guessing habit that plagues the whole-word method students. The same plan will work if a child is already in the first, second, or third grade. The plan is different if the child is in the fourth grade or beyond because the guessing habit has become entrenched. Over the summer, when he is separated from the influence of the word guessing that goes on at school, teach him to read with phonic lessons. Flesch recommends either his book or *Remedial Reading Drills* by Thorleif G. Hegge, Samuel A. Kirk, and Winifred D. Kirk, going through the lessons sequentially until they are mastered. No other reading should take place until he has learned these phonic skills. Once they have been, introduce the child to *The American Adventure Series* edited by Dr. Emmett A. Wheeler.²⁶³ These books are what would be today called high-low books:

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 112.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 113.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid., 115.

high-interest, low-readability books. This will give the child a chance to apply his phonic skills while reading a story all the way through. Once he has done this a new world of literature will open and he will be able to read whatever suits his interest.

All the excuses used by the word method experts to explain Johnny's inability to read: from emotional problems, letter reversals, incorrect eye movements, etc., can be cured by phonics. "Phonics is the key."²⁶⁴ Flesch then explains away each one of these issues. It is understandable that a child who cannot read in school may have some issues with self-esteem, and behavior as a direct result of feeling incompetent. Teach him to read and that will disappear. A child who has been taught to look at the whole word may read *was* for *saw* and *nip* for *pin*.²⁶⁵ This is hardly surprising since they may have looked right to left instead of left to right, no one has taught him the difference. If the child is taught phonics from the start, he understands that every letter in the word has a job to do and a reason they are in the order they are in. He will always read left to right and decode the word correctly, with no guessing, with no reversals.²⁶⁶

Children taught the word method have been taught to scan the text for cues to an unknown word. The child looks at the picture and at the surrounding words. If he is taught phonics, he rapidly decodes each letter sound to form a word. The more skilled reader does this more quickly. "The eyes of slow, poor readers stop for too long and take into little."²⁶⁷ Instead, a child needs to spend more time on each letter until the habit of

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 117.

decoding letter by letter becomes automatic. If the parent finds that they also need to improve their reading, instead of taking a trendy speed-reading course that focuses on trying to take more whole words off the page at one time (the exact opposite of what Flesch is suggesting), they should stop all reading and learn to read through his book or the Hay-Wingo book. In fact, the parent could do the exercises alongside the child, strengthening everyone's reading.²⁶⁸

Flesch ends part one of his book with Chapter Eleven, entitled *A Letter to Johnny's Teacher*. In this chapter, Flesch addresses Johnny's teacher stating that although he has written the book for parents it is important for the teacher to understand that the phonics that are taught in school are not the same kind of phonics, he is encouraging parents to teach at home. The phonics Flesch is describing "a complete, systematic subject--the sum total of information about phonetic rules by which English is spelled."²⁶⁹ What schools are teaching is piecemeal, haphazard, and random. This is the difference between systematic phonics and unsystematic phonics and "unsystematic phonics is nothing--an occasional excursion into something that has nothing whatsoever to do with the method used to fix words in the child's mind."²⁷⁰ Systematic phonics provides a clear beginning and ending to the subject of reading. A child can learn to read through a process that teaches a finite number of rules. Once the child has mastered the rules, he is a reader. The word method cannot offer that same guarantee. It requires the memorization of a certain number of words, yet it is impossible to memorize every word

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 118-119.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 121.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

in the English language. “No job in the world could be more heartbreakingly hopeless than learning to read word by word... he wants nothing more than to break out of this never-ending daily routine; and so, at one point or another, he gives up. If it is early – in first or second grade – he becomes a “non-reader” (it's your jargon, not mine); if he does it later on, he becomes an ordinary typical American.”²⁷¹

Flesch assures the teacher he understands why she believes the word method is the way to teach reading. This is what she has been taught in teachers’ college. “As far as your profession goes, phonics is out of date, unscientific, ineffective, hopelessly defeated and disproven.”²⁷² Flesch states that he understands why it might be a challenge for a teacher, who has been taught that phonics is inferior to the word method, to take his word for it. Authorities such as Gates, Gray, Witty, etc. have repeatedly stated the opposite. But the fact remains that the only true authorities of reading are linguists and psychologists. According to Flesch, all linguists agree that the word method is “an inefficient way to learn to read and spell.”²⁷³ When referring to psychologists, Flesch is including only “scholars whose main work is the study of the human mind.”²⁷⁴ He makes it clear he is not talking about educators or teachers’ college professors associated with the American Psychological Association. Flesch then unravels the common misconception that Gestalt psychology supports the word method. “Learning, to a Gestalt psychologist, is not a matter of memorizing the different elements of the thing to be

²⁷¹ Ibid., 123.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid., 124.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

learned but grasping the whole thing at once.”²⁷⁵ Phonics allows the student to have the ability to grasp each rule governing the decoding of English and be able to apply it to any word. “The key to Gestalt psychology is the sudden moment of insight, the flash, the click, the psychological experience of having everything fall into place.”²⁷⁶ A student trained in phonics can read any word because he can call forth his letter-sound knowledge and then the word clicks in his head. He can do this with any word, not limited to the few he was able to memorize. According to Flesch, the word method is more like Pavlov’s conditioned reflex whereby the children are shown *chicken* and say chicken without any understanding of why. They do not know that the digraphs *ch* and *ck* say /ch/ and /k/ respectively, the *i* and *e* are short and the *n* says /n/. In this way, students are treated “as if they were dogs. It is not a method of teaching at all; it is clearly a method of animal training. it's the most inhuman, mean, stupid way of fostering something in a child's mind.”²⁷⁷

Flesch is not against Progressive Education. He has a sincere admiration of John Dewey and believes education should be “Democratic, free of senseless formalism and drill, based on interest and meaningful experience, and inseparately joined to the real life that goes on around a child.”²⁷⁸ Phonics should not be excluded as a teaching method simply because one believes in progressive education. This unfolded because of the mistaken belief by people such as Horace Mann who believed that phonics was boring to

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 124.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 125.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 126.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 127.

children and that word reading was joyful. Yet, if a child cannot read because he lacks the skills needed to do so, how happy will he be? How interesting are stories that have their vocabulary so limited that they are repetitious and inane? How motivated can a child be when he can't read and what he is offered to read is boring? According to Flesch the controlled text stories prove his point that the word method is flawed because a reader should be able to read regardless of the text.

In the past, many learned with nothing more than the Bible, hardly a controlled text. Flesch illustrates this point by mentioning that Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Jackson taught themselves to read with little more than a rudimentary knowledge of phonics. Flesch mentions these great leaders to remind the reader of the connection between literacy and democracy. "There's a connection between phonics and democracy - a fundamental connection. equal opportunity for all is one of the inalienable rights, and the word method interferes with that right."²⁷⁹ When a child is denied an education in reading, he is at a disadvantage. A child with a family who can offer him tutoring or can teach him themselves at home will likely catch up, but not all students are as lucky. The word method is creating a group of children who will be unable to avail themselves of the same opportunities as their reading peers.

I say, therefore, that the word method is gradually destroying democracy in this country; it returns to the upper middle class the privileges that public education was supposed to distribute evenly among the people. The American dream is, essentially, equal opportunity through free education for all. This dream is beginning to vanish in a country where the public schools are falling down on the job.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 130.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 132.

An education in systematic phonics is the best way to ensure that all students can read and have an equal opportunity to live out the American dream. The word method is an ineffective method that has “done untold harm to our younger generation.”²⁸¹ Flesch advises that the time for arguing and blaming is over. It is now time to do better so every American child can read.²⁸² In part two of *Why Johnny Can't Read* he provides the instructions to do just that.

The Exercises

The second part of *Why Johnny Can't Read* consists of seventy-two lessons. Out of those seventy-two lessons, twenty-two are review lessons so that there are many opportunities to ensure mastery before moving on. There are two pages of instructions, numbered 1-7 that begin with teaching the alphabetic principle of letter-sound correspondence. The lessons are simple, systematic, and sequential, each building on the previous. Flesch addresses vowels, digraphs, ending blends, beginning blends, two-syllable words, vowel teams, r-controlled vowels, diphthongs, three-syllable words, long vowels, suffixes, y as a vowel and consonant, hard and soft c and g, the two sounds of th, silent letters, the five spellings of sh (ch, sh, ci, si, ti), onset and rime, and ends with four-syllable words. Flesch's first instruction is to start with the sounds of the letters. He provides a chart with each letter shown as uppercase and lowercase in print and in cursive, and two pictures.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Ibid., 133.

²⁸² Ibid., 134.

²⁸³ Ibid., 139.

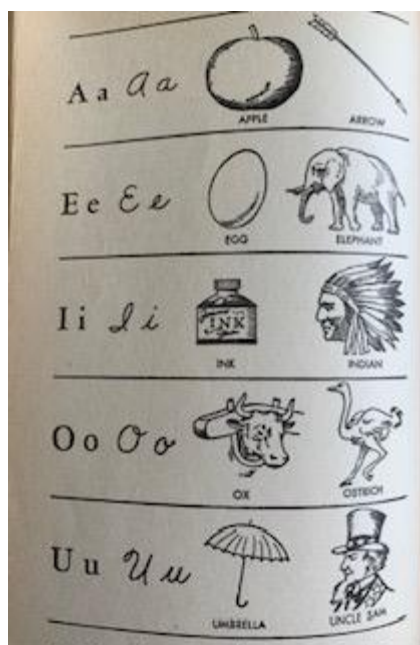


Figure 4. *Alphabet Chart*. Image by Rudolf Flesch. *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1955), 142.

Flesch recommends spending the time ensuring that the child has mastered letter-sound correspondence before moving on to lesson one. His second instruction is that when the child is stumped by a word, encourage him to sound it out, referring back to the alphabet chart if necessary.²⁸⁴ The third directive is to teach the difference between upper and lowercase letters, but focus mainly on lowercase since they are most often seen in text. Flesch encourages the instruction of writing and spelling in conjunction with reading as all are equally important. It is important not only to complete each of the review activities but also to repeat any lesson as many times as necessary to ensure mastery, switching up the order of the words but never the lessons. Each lesson should be done in its specific order. This is what makes it systematic and sequential phonics as opposed to incidental phonics. The order is paramount. Finally, make sure the child is not guessing,

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

remind him to sound out the word using the alphabet chart as a reminder for the sounds if necessary.

What follows next is simply a list of words on a page that act as examples of the phonics rule being taught.

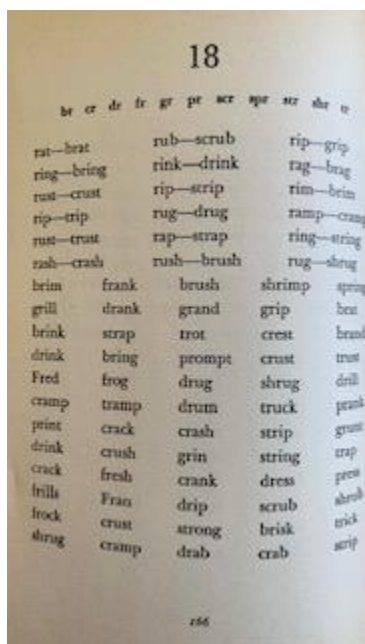


Figure 5. Lesson 18. Rudolf Flesch. *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1955), 166.

By working through the seventy-two lessons offered in the second half of his book, Flesch provides a roadmap for Johnny's parents to get him on the path of reading success. But no book is without its critics and the strength of *Why Johnny Can't Read* was also its downfall. By writing in his Plain English manner and addressing mostly parents, Flesch opened the door to a wealth of criticism. So much so that he needed to write a sequel, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, in an attempt to put some of those criticisms to rest.

Chapter 6

The Reading Wars Continued

In 1981, Rudolf Flesch took on the challenge of revisiting the controversial topic of reading once more. This was an attempt to alleviate the criticisms launched at the original book on the subject, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955). *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Crisis of Our Schools*, was released a few years before Flesch died in 1986. In his typical no-nonsense style, Flesch lists all the common excuses used to justify the whole word failure to teach reading. Each chapter offers research and reasons for how those excuses are wrong.

Chapters 1-5

Flesch begins his sequel with a simple question at the beginning of Chapter One: “Are you worrying about your child’s education? You should be. There’s an 85 percent chance that your Johnny or Mary will never learn to read properly.”²⁸⁵ He goes on quickly to explain that there are two methods of reading instruction: phonics-first and look-and-say. To illustrate his point, Flesch uses the analogy of learning to drive a car with the new driver learning each step in the process, starting with the rules of the road and the mechanics of the car. The new driver then learns how to use the foot pedals to increase or lower speed, and how to break, signal, and park.²⁸⁶ A phonics-first approach is similar in that the student learns about the alphabet and the sounds they represent and

²⁸⁵ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (London, England: HarperCollins, 1981), 1.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

how the English language works before being expected to read a book. The look-and-say approach to reading would be akin to just driving a familiar route over and again. Yes,

the driver may have learned how to drive that one route, but they have not learned the rules of the road so when the road becomes a highway, they are lost. The look-and-say reading approach teaches individual words as a whole, without explaining why the word sounds as it does. Because the student is never taught the rules of English, they cannot go beyond those that they have learned in isolation, they simply do not have the skill set to decode an unknown word. This limits what the student can read and thus limits every aspect of the student's education.

Flesch states that in his original *Johnny* book, he recommended phonics first as the superior approach, though, at the time, look-and-say was the more popular method at the time. However, his advice “fell upon deaf ears,” and the results have been devastating to the country.²⁸⁷ In a 1977 report to the Secretary of Labor to explain the lowering of Standardized Achievement Test (SAT) scores, educational researcher Jeanne Chall explained that there was a direct relationship between the lower test scores and the popular look-and-say reading programs used 10 years earlier in first grade.²⁸⁸ Yet, Flesch acknowledges that his first book did have some impact, though not as much as he'd like. “Today they all offer some phonics. Not that they've gone over to the phonics-first camp, but since millions of parents now clamor for phonics, they give them a minimum of phonics served up in a look-and-say sauce of “context cues” and guesswork.”²⁸⁹ Unfortunately, this “window dressing” is not enough since it teaches phonics as if it is a

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 1.

²⁸⁸ Gene Maeroff, “Scores on Scholastic Aptitude Tests Continue to Drop,” *New York Times*, October 5, 1980, 29.

²⁸⁹ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 5.

separate subject from reading, randomly teaching a phonics rule through a word but never connecting it to text.²⁹⁰ Flesch gives the following example to illustrate this point:

In the Ginn 720 series, page 36 of the first-grade reader is wholly devoted to teaching the word *this*. The phonetic “explanation” of the word is given one-and-a-half years later, in second grade. How is it done? By asking the children to circle a word to complete the sentence “I like (bath this) car best.” Phonics window dressing taught by look-and-say “context clue.”²⁹¹

So, while it looks as if phonic skills are being taught, they are not being taught in an effective or even connected way. This is not systematic nor explicit, thus it is completely ineffective. Flesch outlines more examples from basal readers which offer the same type of disconnected reading instruction, all relying on guessing and context cues. These cues include asking the student, does it look right, does it sound right, and does it make sense?²⁹² If the student has phonic skills, they do not need any cues, they can sound out the word for themselves.

Flesch ends Chapter One by offering a list of what he considers to be the “Phonics Five.” This is a list of the reading textbooks that Flesch recommends be used in schools to teach reading in a phonics-first manner. He encourages parents to look at their child’s reading textbook to check if it is on the approved list or if it falls on his “Dismal Dozen” list, which includes popular look-and-say textbooks. If your child is lucky enough to be taught with one of the books on the “Phonics Five” list, Flesch assures parents that Johnny or Mary will learn to read successfully. However, if the child’s reader is on the

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid. 6.

²⁹² Ibid., 7.

“Dismal Dozen,” the parent needs to take matters into their own hands and teach the child to read.²⁹³ “Don’t tell me you can’t do it. It’s only the look-and-say educators who have blown this thing out of all proportion and have made the teaching of reading seem like they are going to the moon. Actually, it’s quite simple.”²⁹⁴ Flesch states that the look-and-say method has failed to the point that all aspects of the child’s public education have been oversimplified. The only solution is to remove the child from that school in favor of one that uses phonics. If this is not possible, Flesch advises going to the school board and demanding that the “Dismal Dozen” books be replaced with the “Phonics Five.” The difference in the child’s education because of direct phonics instruction cannot be overstated according to Flesch.

He witnessed it firsthand on a trip to P.S. 251, a public elementary school in New York City where “some 10 years ago the city school principals were at long last giving a free hand and allowed to escape from the deadly grip of look and say. A few of them chose phonics first and almost overnight made the desert bloom with educational “miracles.”²⁹⁵ The students of P.S. 251 used one of the textbooks found on the “Phonics Five” list and prepared for reading in kindergarten. Regardless of the classroom Flesch visited, he found children who were able to decode whatever he asked them to read. “My daughter Abby went with me on my trip to P.S. 251 and can testify under oath that these miracles actually happened.”²⁹⁶ The miracle of reading was made possible using

²⁹³ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

systematic phonics instructions, exactly as Flesch had advised in the first Johnny book twenty-five years earlier.

Flesch starts Chapter Two by acknowledging a mistake in the original *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Flesch had stated that the look-say method dated back to 1846 and a cow. However, in his sequel, he explains that Mitford Mathew's book, *Teaching to Read: Historically, Considered*, revealed that the word method was first introduced in 1791 by German Professor Friedrich Gedike (1754–1803). As an avid follower of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Gedike believed that learning to read should be a process as natural as speaking. People speak in whole words thus students should be taught whole words instead of individual sounds. A student could then deconstruct the whole into its parts (word to letters) naturally.

In the preface of his book, *Kinderbuch zur ersten Übung im Lesen ohne ABC und Buchstabieren* (*Children's Book for the First Practice in Reading without the ABC's and Spelling*), Gedike states, "One should not think that the child by this method knows only the words he has actually learned... No! Through the mysterious sense of analogy, he will increasingly find words on his own or, if you will, *learn to guess*. At the same time, he will sense, even more mysteriously, why it must be this word and no other."²⁹⁷ Flesch points out that this is nothing more than a gimmick aimed at middle-class parents who didn't want the laborious task of teaching their child letter sounds and syllables, although

²⁹⁷ Friedrich Gedike. *Kinderbuch Zur Ersten Übung Im Lesen Ohne ABC Und Buchstabieren* (*Children's Book for the First Practice in Reading without the ABC's and Spelling*). Berlin, Germany: A. Duckner, 1791.

boring, it is the most effective way. The expectation was that by learning a series of words, the child would learn the letters and sounds of the alphabet incidentally, through the natural analysis of whole to parts. Flesch sums it up:

There you have it. In the world's first look-and-say book, the method is already exposed as a gimmick. No more torturous learning of the alphabet, no more boring syllable drills, simply teach the child a list of words and he'll "mysteriously" catch on to the sounds the letters stand for and learn to read on his own. Parents, save yourself and your child from unpleasantness and buy my book.²⁹⁸

Gedike's book ceased publication after three editions due to the popularity of the author rather than the method.²⁹⁹

Flesch describes the next whole word influencer who thirty years later, in 1823, made an impact on reading instruction. French child prodigy Jean Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840) won acclaim when he wrote *Universal Instruction*.³⁰⁰ Part of his book was aimed at teaching "Flemish-speaking university students how to speak and read French."³⁰¹ Jacotot split the page in half, with one side containing the French novel, *Les Aventures de Telemaque* and the other having its Flemish translation. The students thus learned to read French. This method was then applied to teaching children to read. The teacher was to read *Les Aventures de Telemaque* to the children as often as necessary until they

²⁹⁸ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 16.

²⁹⁹ Heinrich, Fechner. *Grundriss Der Geschichte Der Wichtigsten Leselehrarten (Outline of the History of the Most Important Types of Reading Teaching)*. Berlin, Germany: Wiegandt und Grieben, 1884. 44.

³⁰⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 17.

³⁰¹ Mitford Mcleod Mathews. *Teaching to Read: Historically, Considered*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976. 43.

completely understood the novel. The teacher would then go back to the beginning, read the first sentence of the novel, and analyze it word by word and then letter by letter. This was to be done with every sentence in the book. By the end of this lengthy process, the children would have learned how to read incidentally.³⁰²

The German educators who tried this method found it burdensome. They believed it could be shortened to one sentence as opposed to an entire novel. In 1830 Friedrich Weingart wrote a German primer in the Jacotot style using one long sentence. Other German educators thought the sentence was too long, so they shortened it repeatedly until it was just single words which were taught along with “what each letter in each word stood for.”³⁰³ In English, this was called the “Normal Word Method.” Yet by learning the sounds of each letter in a word, the children were being taught via phonics.³⁰⁴

Throughout the 1800s various educators reintroduced the word method as detailed in Chapter Three. By the mid-1930s the look-and-say approach was the principal method used for reading instruction. William S. Gray (1885–1960) was the foremost leader of this method as an acclaimed education professor at the University of Chicago and lead author of the Dick and Jane series. In 1955 the International Reading Association (IRA) was established. William S. Gray was named the first head.³⁰⁵ Although Flesch does not

³⁰² Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 17.

³⁰³ Mathews, *Teaching to Read*, 47.

³⁰⁴ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 17.

³⁰⁵ Jennifer A. Stevenson. *William S. Gray: Teacher, Scholar, Leader*. (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1985). 2.

reference the date as significant in *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, it must be noted that the IRA was created the same year as the release of his first *Johnny* book and acted as a “defense league” of the look-and-say, whole-word method.³⁰⁶

The whole-word method continued to be defended despite the acclaim and impact of Flesch's first *Johnny* book throughout the 1960s. The verbiage around look-and-say changed slightly to the more scientific-sounding “psycholinguistics.” Married professors Kenneth and Yetta Goodman became the founding educators of the Whole Language Approach. This approach kept the focus on learning the whole word as opposed to the sounds contained within but also put more focus on the teacher's ability to interpret student mistakes. Mistakes were called miscues and there were three ways to categorize them either syntactic (function of word in a sentence), semantic (word meanings), or graphophonic (how letters looked and sounded).

Kenneth Goodman followed in Gray's footsteps as the Scott Foreman senior author. Goodman is credited with keeping the whole word method in school systems in the United States throughout the 1990s.³⁰⁷ He was also noted as calling reading a ‘psycholinguistic guessing game.’ “For the look-and-say educators, reading is now a matter of ‘guessing,’ ‘cues,’ ‘strategies,’ –never simply looking at what's on the page and, if necessary, sounding out the words.”³⁰⁸ Reading through this lens is all about meaning

³⁰⁶ Samuel L. Blumenfeld, *The Victims of Dick and Jane and Other Essays*. Chalcedon, 2003. 19.

³⁰⁷ Kenneth S. Goodman, “Why Whole Language Is Today's Agenda in Education,” *Language Arts* 69, no. 5 (1992). 356.

³⁰⁸ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 25.

and accuracy doesn't matter. This ideology became well known when Goodman wrote his often-quoted 1967 article "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game" in the *Journal of the Reading Specialist*. In this article, Goodman takes the strong stand that the main purpose of reading is to make meaning:

Simply stated, the commonsense notion I seek here to refute is this: "Reading is a precise process. It involves exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns, and large language units" ... In place of this misconception, I offer this: Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as the reading progresses. More simply stated reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game. It involves an interaction between thought and language. Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time. The ability to anticipate that which has not been seen, of course, is vital in reading, just as the ability to anticipate what has not yet been heard is vital in listening.³⁰⁹

Yet, Flesch finds this preposterous, stating, "what Professor Goodman apparently didn't know is that the *Merck Manual*, the standard reference source for doctors, lists as one of the symptoms of dyslexia—also called 'congenital word blindness' or 'primary reading disability' – the 'tendency to substitute words for those he cannot read.'"³¹⁰ Flesch makes it clear that he believes that whole-word reading instruction is to blame for the literacy crisis for this exact reason. When meaning matters more than accuracy, guessing becomes the norm rather than letter-sound knowledge. The student learns to guess but never learns the necessary skills to decode a word.

³⁰⁹ Kenneth S. Goodman, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game." *The Journal of the Reading Specialist* 6, no. 4 (1967): 126–35.

³¹⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 26.

The chapter ends with Flesch focusing on another very influential whole-word advocate, Frank Smith, a psycholinguistic professor. At the time of Flesch's publication, Smith had authored three books all detailing the benefit of a whole language approach to reading. Flesch argues that Smith's popularity led to more fanciful and less researched books. In particular, Flesch notes Smith's widely popular 1979 book *Reading Without Nonsense* in which he discusses "The Fallacy of Phonics.":

The issue concerns the number in nature of the correspondence between the letters of the written language and the sounds of speech. There would be a perfect one-to-one correspondence between the two aspects of language if every letter stood for just one sound in every sound was represented by just one letter. Then we might help children to read by getting them to learn the rules of spelling to sound correspondences. and the same mechanical way we could also employ computers to convey written language into speech to the great advantage of the blind... the reason phonics does not work for children or for computers is that the links between the letters and sounds cannot be specified... They are too complex.³¹¹

Unfortunately for Smith, Flesch accurately points out that in 1976 Kurzweil's Reading Machine demonstrated that the link between letters and sounds can be specified.³¹² English is logical and teaching an alphabetic language through phonics makes sense. It works for computers and for children.

Flesch entitles Chapter 3 Look-and-Say Exposed. In this chapter he goes even deeper into the flaws of the whole-word approach and why it is an ineffective and even dangerous method of reading instruction. He starts with a quote from Mitford Mathew's *Teaching to Read* which details the lack of evidential support for the whole word method. Not that there haven't been studies conducted, just that in the 124 studies conducted

³¹¹ Frank Smith. *Reading without Nonsense*. 1st ed. (New York, NY: Teachers' College Press, 1979). 55.

³¹² Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 27.

between 1911 and 1981 when *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* was published, not one proved that the whole word was superior to phonics-first.³¹³ When Flesch wrote the original Johnny, there had only been only 11 studies at that point. After his book was published, more studies were conducted including the well-known study conducted by Jeanne Chall of Harvard University. In her book, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, the highly respected researcher Chall examined classroom studies, laboratory and clinical studies, and any research that compared phonics first with look-and-say. The result of her extensive research was clear:

My review of the research from the laboratory, the classroom, and the clinic points to the need for a correction in beginning reading instructional methods. Most school children in the United States are taught to read by what I have termed a meaning-emphasis method. Yet, the research from 1912 to 1965 indicates that a code-emphasis method— i.e., one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasizes learning of the printed code for the spoken language— produces better results at least up to the point where significant evidence seems to be available, the end of third grade.³¹⁴

Other notable studies demonstrating the superiority of phonics to look-and-say were conducted in 1958 and 1973. The 1953 study conducted by Barbara Kelly entitled “The Economy Method Versus The Scott Foresman Method in Teaching Second-Grade Reading in The Murphysboro Public Schools found “a significant difference in favor of phonics-trained children.”³¹⁵ The 1973 study which was a review of fifty-nine studies

³¹³ Ibid., 28.

³¹⁴ Jeanne S. Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. 2nd Ed. (Maidenhead, England: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 1983). 306.

³¹⁵ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 31.

found “that children get off to a faster start in reading if they are given early direct systematic instruction in the alphabetic code.”³¹⁶

Altogether, 124 studies were conducted comparing phonics-first and whole-word reading methods. “Most of the 124 studies followed a simple pattern. The researcher compared two groups of children. One was trained by look-and-say, the other by phonics-first. At the end of the year, both groups were tested to find out which had progressed further in word recognition and comprehension... the results invariably favored phonics.”³¹⁷

Despite this overwhelming evidence, whole-word advocates referred back to a study conducted in 1885 by James McKeen Cattell, an American psychologist (1860-1944) to validate a standard teaching practice of the whole-word method. Using a tachistoscope, an instrument used to test visual perception, he noted that adult readers could perceive whole words faster than individual letters.³¹⁸ It was believed that words were recognized through their outline or shape. Cattell stated, “I find it takes about twice as long to read...words which have no connection as words which make sentences, and letters which have no connections as letters which make words. When the words make sentences and the letters words, not only do the processes of seeing and naming overlap,

³¹⁶ Charles C. Walcutt, J. Lamport, and G. McCracken, *Teaching Reading: Chapters on Research and Evaluation* by Robert Dykstra, (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 397.

³¹⁷ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 31.

³¹⁸ James McKeen Cattell, “The Time It Takes to See and Name Objects.” *Mind; a Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*, 11, no. 41 (1886): 64.

but by one mental effort the subject can recognize a whole group of words or letters.”³¹⁹ This finding was later called the word superiority effect wherein people are more quickly able to recognize letters within a word rather than in isolation. Cattell’s often-cited study was flawed because it consisted mainly of literate adults, not beginning readers.³²⁰

Flesch notes that Cattell’s findings were not challenged until 1965 when Cornell professors Gabrielle Marchbank and Harry Levin gave one hundred kindergarten and first-grade students the task of finding a nonsense word like the one displayed. Most students chose to match the words based on the first letter. They did so by the last letter less often and rarely by the shape of the entire word.³²¹ This finding was replicated in 1970 by Henry G. Timko who tested 40 first graders and found that “there was no significant main effect for shape, nor were there differences due to shape at any of the identical letter dimension levels.”³²²

Also, in 1970, Joanna P. Williams and Ellen L. Blumberg tested kindergarteners, first graders, and adults. They came to the same conclusion stating, “It is worth noting that the most widely used reading method over the past 30 years has stressed the identification of words based on configuration.”³²³ Flesch explains that he believes that the above studies prove that Cattell’s word configuration, a major teaching technique in

³¹⁹ Cattell, “Time to See and Name Objects,” 64.

³²⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 32.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³²² Henry G. Timko, “Configuration as a Cue in the Word Recognition of Beginning Readers.” *Journal of Experimental Education* 39, no. 2 (1970): 69.

³²³ Joanna P. Williams, Ellen L. Blumberg, and David V. Williams, “Cues Used in Visual Word Recognition.” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 61, no. 4, Pt.1 (1970): 315.

whole-word instruction, was wrong. At the same time, researchers were working on why phonics-first worked and look-and-say didn't.³²⁴

In 1964, Cornell graduate student Carol H. Bishop conducted an experiment where a small group of college freshmen and sophomores were divided into two groups. One group was taught the sounds of twelve Arabic letters and the other was taught the sounds of eight Arabic words. All the students were asked to read eight different Arabic words containing the same eight Arabic letters.³²⁵ Those who had been taught the individual letters performed better than those taught whole words. “The reason for the overall inferiority of word training was either that it did not direct as many subjects to learn grapheme-phoneme correspondences, or that not all subjects were capable of picking out these relationships when embedded in words.”³²⁶

Beginning readers would arguably have difficulty recognizing the relationship of letters within words. In 1967, UCLA Jeffrey and Samuels conducted a similar experiment with sixty kindergarteners and arrived at the same result noting, “The letter-training group was superior to the word-training group on the initial transfer trial as well as on a learning performance measure.”³²⁷

³²⁴ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 33.

³²⁵ Carol H. Bishop, “Transfer Effects of Word and Letter Training in Reading,” *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 3, no. 3 (June 1964): 215–21, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371\(64\)80044-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(64)80044-X).

³²⁶ Bishop, “Transfer Effects in Reading,” 221.

³²⁸ W.E. Jeffrey and S.J. Samuels, “Effect of Method of Reading Training on Initial Learning and Transfer,” *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 6, no. 3 (June 1967): 358, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371\(67\)80124-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-5371(67)80124-5).

Flesch contends that these experiments prove his point that students taught with the look-and-say method are at a major disadvantage because they cannot distinguish between different spelling patterns. That critical aspect was left out of their instruction focusing instead on shape and configuration rather than sound-symbol connection.³²⁸

Flesch continues to detail other studies and experiments that demonstrate the superiority of the phonics-first method over look-and-say. He also includes a reference bibliography by chapter and page at the back of the book, something, unfortunately, missing from his first Johnny book. This makes his sequel particularly important because it explicitly contains the information proving his point.

If it was apparent in the 1950s that the previous 30 years of instruction were ineffective, why was Flesch still able to write a book in 1981 about these same widely used practices? Flesch ends the chapter and answers this question by quoting University of Oregon professor Barbara Bateman who stated, “Near failure-proof methods for teaching all children to read are already available. Continued failure of schools to employ these [phonics-first] programs is at best negligent and at worst malicious.”³²⁹ Why then, one might ask, are these practices being used in schools across the country?

Flesch’s answer to this is outlined in Chapter 4 entitled, The Great Coverup. In his typical no-holds-barred style, Flesch begins by stating that look-and-say advocates conducted a “vigilant and ceaseless coverup campaign.”³³⁰ The history of the purported

³²⁸ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 33.

³²⁹ Barbara Bateman, “Teaching Reading to Dyslexics and Other Hard-to-Teach Children,” in *Theory and Practice of Early Reading*, vol. 3 (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1979), 247.

³³⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 40.

cover-up began, according to Flesch, in 1928 when Authur Gates, Teachers College, Columbia University professor, began developing his first look-and-say series for the MacMillian Publishers company. Gates conducted an experiment using four first-grade classrooms in New York City. He published his results in a book entitled, *New Methods in Primary Reading* (1928). Unsurprisingly he found the word method to have many advantages over the phonetic method.

Flesch explains that Gates was able to obtain his results because the tests were timed, giving students who have memorized words and know how to guess the advantage over those who need to sound them out. Also, the teachers, aware of the point of the study, were more likely to be invested in teaching incidental phonics in a less incidental manner.³³¹

Jeanne Chall also mentioned the above issues and how they could explain Gates' favorable results in her book, *Learning to Read, The Great Debate*. In a footnote in her book, she noted that in correspondence with Gates regarding his first-grade study he stated that his "Intrinsic phonics materials were extremely well programmed, teaching the alphabet along with the words. thus, both groups receive similar amounts of decoding practice."³³² To Flesch, this is a clear demonstration of the manipulation of results.

The next event, in the great coverup according to Flesch, was shortly after the first Johnny book came out. He received backlash from the whole education community:

³³¹ Ibid., 41.

³³³ Jeanne S. Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, Updated ed (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 112.

The educational journals answered in full cry, attacking me as an ignoramus, a propagandist— they never said for whom or what— a crank, a menace to the cause of good education. In December 1955, half a year after the publication of my book, *The Reading Teacher* came out with a special issue on phonics. It was filled with anti-Flesch outbursts, including a lengthy piece elaborately analyzing the propaganda techniques I had supposedly used in my book.³³³

While it was difficult for whole word advocates to refute the eleven studies Flesch had presented as proof in the first book, William Gray, *Dick, and Jane* senior author, came out of retirement to respond with a 1922 study on eye movements conducted by the University of Chicago associate professor Guy Buswell. The point of that study, however, was not to evaluate instruction methods, but rather to examine eye movement as an indicator of reading maturity.³³⁴

The other study Gray referenced to refute Flesch's 1955 claims was one he conducted in 1915 which compared a look-and-say method to a diluted phonics method called the Word Method. Unfortunately for Gray's cause, his results revealed that there was a minor difference in the methods by third grade.³³⁵ Whole word advocates needed to cast doubt on Flesch's book as it made its way, and then stayed at the top of the best sellers list for 37 weeks. Publishing companies had a personal stake in keeping look-and-say as the main teaching method and established the International Reading Association with William Gray as the first president.

In 1961 the Carnegie Corporation commissioned renowned Harvard University researcher Jeanne Chall to further investigate the conflict. After three years of careful

³³³ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 41.

³³⁴ Guy T. Buswell, *Fundamental Reading Habits: A Study of Their Development*, vol. 21 (University of Chicago Press, 1922), <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/455313>.

³³⁵ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 42.

research, analyzing decades of reading studies, visiting hundreds of classrooms, examining textbooks, as well as interviewing textbook authors, reading specialists, and teachers, Chall published her book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* in 1967. Her research led her to claim phonics was the superior instructional method for beginning readers. “The evidence indicates that better results in terms of reading for meaning are achieved with the programs that emphasize code right at the start”³³⁶

Flesch offered many examples taken from college textbooks on reading instruction refuting Chall’s work by nitpicking her research. In *Reading in the Elementary Schools* by George and Evelyn Spache the author write, “Many reviewers of this book did not feel Chall had proved her theory, particularly when she depended so strongly upon studies over a long period of time from a wide variety of sources which often differ in their instruction practices from Chall’s definition.”³³⁷ Flesch points out how whole word advocates used Chall’s thoroughness against her.³³⁸

In the 1970s, many publishing companies were updating their basal readers by offering a smattering of what Flesch calls “token phonic window dressing.” He cautions readers that this window dressing should not be confused with the phonics-first approach found in his recommended ‘Phonic Five’ because the “token phonic window dressing” typically only amounts to less than 12% of the instructional material presented.³³⁹ Not

³³⁶ Chall, *The Great Debate*, 43.

³³⁷ George Daniel Spache and Evelyn B. Spache, *Reading in the Elementary School*, 5th ed (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1986), 365.

³³⁸ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 43.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

only is this amount far too small to create fluent readers, but it is also doing little to address the “guessing from context” training look-and-say students are exposed to. Students will not learn the alphabetic code in this manner nor is this the instructional practice supported by Flesch (1955), Chall (1967), or Dykstra’s (1973) research.

Flesch ends the chapter by explaining how look-and-say advocates have ignored scientific evidence of phonics superiority by “turning the competition for textbook sales to the schools into an annual beauty contest. Every other year, each of the competitors comes out with ‘new, improved models, renamed, refurbished, and, if possible, newly and more gaudily illustrated.’”³⁴⁰ Ironically, Flesch notes, S. Jay Samuels’s summarized his and nineteen colleagues’ findings that illustrations distract from the students’ ability to read and comprehend unknown words.³⁴¹

Chapter 5 outlines The Ten Alibis used by educators in general, but more specifically, by the people who wrote angry letters to Flesch upon the release of the first chapter of *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read*, which came out as an article in Family Circle magazine on November 1, 1979. While he received praise from parents who recognized their child in Flesch’s work and praised him for his advocacy, many were from irate educators.³⁴² Flesch collected the letters and then sorted them by “alibis” or arguments for the look-and-say approach. “I went through the whole stack of letters and sorted out the ten favorite alibis. They were:

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 47.

³⁴¹ S. Jay Samuels, “Effects of Pictures on Learning to Read, Comprehension and Attitudes,” *Review of Educational Research* 40, no. 3 (June 1970): 397–407, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543040003397> cited by Flesch, 47.

³⁴² Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 48.

1. “Everything Is Hunky-Dory”
2. “We Do Teach Phonics”
3. “No One Method Is Best”
4. “English Isn’t Phonetic”
5. “Word Calling Isn’t Reading”
6. “Your Child Isn’t Ready”
7. “Your Child Is Disabled”
8. “It’s The Parents’ Fault”
9. “Too Much TV”
10. “We Now Teach *All* Children”

Flesch goes on to explain each alibi and quotes from some of the letters he received. For the first alibi, the main message from each of the letters that fall under this category is that the schools are doing a fine job of educating students and they are reading better than ever at younger ages.³⁴³ The second alibi, “We Do Teach Phonics” is mostly a defense of the “Dirty Dozen” that Flesch called out for being look-and-say primers lacking systematic phonics instruction. Teachers wrote letters to him in a similar vein: “I am using one of your ‘dirty dozen’...and it is anything but a look-and-say series.”³⁴⁴

The next alibi, “No One Method Is Best” is often used to explain why systematic phonics is not the go-to method for reading instruction despite its long and well-researched benefits. The main point writers with this point of view made to Flesch is “All of us are individuals, and we learn in diverse ways. To assume that one way of teaching is the answer for all ignores this particularly important fact. simple answers to complex problems very seldom, if ever, exist.”³⁴⁵ The irony in this excuse is that it ignores the 127 studies conducted that undeniably prove the exact opposite.

³⁴³ Ibid., 49-50.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 50.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 51.

The fourth alibi, “English Isn’t Phonetic” is equally silly, though many teachers wrote to Flesch stating that English was phonetically irregular with many exceptions to the rules. This excuse lacks a general understanding that although a deep orthography, English is phonetic and teaching students the rules of English is always preferable to teaching them to guess.

The next alibi, “Word Calling Isn’t Reading” is another tactic by look-and-say advocates to muddy the waters by stating that reading is all about meaning-making as if a child who can decode a word successfully has no idea what the word means. Flesch sums up this alibi by stating, “This is so ridiculous that it's hard to discuss it with a straight face. *Of course* a child will understand a word that is in his speaking listening vocabulary when he reads it off the page. But he has to get it off the page first by pronouncing the letters before he can apply his knowledge of vocabulary.”³⁴⁶ What this alibi does is take the focus off the fact that while a phonics-trained child may be able to decode the word *catastrophe* and not know the meaning, a look-and-say child would not be able to read the word *catastrophe* at all.³⁴⁷

The sixth alibi, “Your Child Isn’t Ready,” is simply an excuse to put off the parent who wants to know what the school is doing to teach the child to read. Flesch received letters stating that there is a myriad of reasons why Johnny can’t read including the child isn’t mature enough, he lacks background knowledge and experience, he is a

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 52.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 54.

“late bloomer,” and so forth. All this boils down to a stalling tactic used by the school to answer the pestering parent.³⁴⁸

The next alibi, “Your Child Is Disabled,” is to put on the child the school’s inability to teach reading in a way that is accessible to every child. It must be that the child has a learning disability rather than the school has a teaching disability. Flesch acknowledges that some students do have true disabilities, but the increase in those diagnosed with dyslexia seems disproportionate.³⁴⁹

Another alibi, “It’s The Parents’ Fault” is never said directly to the parent but implies that the parents’ lack of interest, lack of reading material, and lack of investment in the child’s ability to read is the cause of reading difficulty. “If all parents were willing to work as hard to teach their children as you suggest, most of our children would not have reading problems to begin with.”³⁵⁰

The next alibi, “Too Much TV” is a variation of “It’s The Parents’ Fault.” Children are spending too much time watching TV and thus are not reading. Flesch points out that watching TV is preferable to trying to read but failing.³⁵¹ The final alibi, “We Now Teach All Children to Read” is racist, implying that reading failure is, as one reading teacher put it to Flesch, the fault of “innumerable combinations of genetic factors and experiential backgrounds.”³⁵²

Flesch notes that a statement released by the International Reading Association’s board of directors in response to his *Family Circle* article “showed admirable restraint” using only alibis 3, 5, and 8 instead of all ten. Flesch ends the chapter by including

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 55.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 56.

³⁵² Ibid., 57.

excerpts from the three letters of grateful parents who thanked him for the article as it opened their eyes to why their child was struggling. As one writer put it, “I have been using your original book to help an 8-year-old girl with her reading for the past five months. She has progressed from “scholastically retarded” to excellent reading at grade three level, so thank you from both of us.” Flesch was having an impact.

Chapters 6-10

From Chapter 6 on, Flesch addresses each alibi in detail. He starts with “Everything Is Hunky-Dory.” Harold Howe II, Vice President for Education and Research of the Ford Foundation offered the perfect example of this alibi when in 1979 he stated, “The significance of the much reported decline of learning in American schools is exaggerated and is not as serious a matter as the popularization of it suggests.”³⁵³ Yet Flesch points to the 1975 *Adult Performance Level* study in which 7500 American adults were interviewed and asked to read and answer simple questions. Unfortunately, the study revealed that 21.7% of adults between 18-65 were functionally illiterate, despite the majority having had at least four years of schooling.³⁵⁴ Flesch also noted the 1975 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that 35% of the nation's fourth graders could not read. Of eighth graders, 37% could not read. Of the 12th graders, 23% could not read.³⁵⁵ Flesch explains that these statistics may be inflated since only children

³⁵³ Howard Howe, “Testimony before the Subcommittees on Education, Art, and Humanities,” February 13, 1979.

³⁵⁴ American College Testing Program, “Final Report on the Adult Performance Level Study” (University of Texas at Austin, 1975).

³⁵⁵ National Assessment of Educational Progress, “Reading in America: A Perspective on Two Assessments,” Reading (Denver, Colorado, October 1976).

who were in school were evaluated, not accounting for student dropouts, resulting in a higher illiteracy rate than reported.³⁵⁶

Flesch continues to make his case by illustrating with two letters he received from “victims of look-and-say” who explain how difficult it has been for them to not be able to read and spell fluently. These are people who graduated high school but still struggle to read. One asked for his help to fix her problem. The letter itself demonstrates her difficulties with grammar and spelling.³⁵⁷

The other longer letter detailed a woman who had difficulty reading in English but had no problem when being taught a second. Though she attended Barnard College [use full names of colleges and universities] it was difficult to read the college textbooks. She did fine in other languages, but English remained a struggle. It was not until her child began to have difficulty reading did, she started to realize her resistance could have something to do with how she had been taught. Her son’s teacher mentioned that she read *Why Johnny Can’t Read* and was using one of the books recommended by Flesch.³⁵⁸ She decided to read it herself and discovered that “English phonics was only slightly more complicated than French...”³⁵⁹ With dogged determination, she set out to relearn how to read, no longer guessing at the words, but by using phonics to decode each word by its sounds. In three weeks, she stated that she was able to read smoothly and decided to catch up on all the reading she had wanted to do but put aside. To her delight, she discovered

³⁵⁶ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 62.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 67-68.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 68-70.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 70-71.

that reading was now less time-consuming and more enjoyable. She also realized that she was not to blame for her previous reading difficulties. It was “the fault of those who introduced the word method.”³⁶⁰

Chapter 7, attacks the alibi, “We Do Teach Phonics,” by defining phonics as not an approach, aid, or strategy, but as a method.³⁶¹ Flesch makes this distinction to combat the many look-and-say educators such as A. Sterl Artley who insisted in his “disdainful” 1975 *Language Arts* article “Phonics Revisited” that “phonic cues are only aids to word identification and not a method to teach reading.”³⁶² This is a massive disconnect between phonic-first educators who understand that phonics is not only a method to teach reading but is *the* method best suited to teach reading; not an aid nor a strategy, a method. Whole word advocates often state that phonics is boring, repetitive, and joyless. It robs children of the love of reading. This is the same sentiment that Horace Mann had back in the 1800s. What this neglects is that a child cannot learn to love reading if they are never able to read in the first place.

Flesch enumerates other whole word advocates who state variations of the same excuse, like Authur Heilman who wrote in *Principals of Practices of Teaching Reading* (1977) that “applying letter-sound analysis should be held to a minimum”³⁶³ and Martha Dallman who wrote in *The Teaching of Reading* (1978) that “the fact...suggests that

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 71.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 72.

³⁶² A. Sterl Artley, “Phonics Revisited,” *Language Arts* 54, no. 2 (February 1977): 124.

³⁶³ Arthur W. Heilman, *Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading*, 4th ed. (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1977), 227.

misuse of phonics is detrimental to the speed of reading.”³⁶⁴ Since many parents were demanding phonics after the first Johnny book, a minimum amount was added to look-and-say readers. Flesch reveals that the amount included was completely arbitrary.

Theodore Clymer, a senior author for Ginn & Company, a look-and-say publisher, wrote an article in the January 1963 *Reading Teacher*, “The Utility of Phonics Generalizations in the Primary Grades.” The article details how Clymer examined four of the most common look-and-say readers and determined 121 phonics rules collectively. From that list of those rules, he arbitrarily produced 45.³⁶⁵ Next, he looked at the total number of words found in the readers for kindergarten through grade three. There were 2600. He put his forty-five rules up against the 2600 words and determined a “reasonable degree of utility” of 75%. This was also arbitrary. He determined that only 18 phonic rules were useful against his 75%.³⁶⁶ This resulted in many phonics rules not being important enough to teach, such as the silent letters k and w, -tion, -ture, etc.³⁶⁷

Many other whole-word advocates like Fry (1964), Bailey (1965), Emans (1966), and Burmeister (1966 & 1968) wrote articles further whittling the number of “useful” phonics rules down.³⁶⁸ It is important to note that these articles debunking the need for systematic phonics came out after *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. So, while some phonics were

³⁶⁴ Martha Dallmann and John James, De Boer, *The Teaching of Reading* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), 208. Cited by Flesch 73.

³⁶⁵ Theodore Clymer and R. G. S., “The Utility of Phonic Generalizations in the Primary Grades [with Comment],” *The Reading Teacher* 16, no. 4 (1963): 252–58. Cited by Flesch, 74.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, 257.

³⁶⁸ Flesch, *Johnny Still Can’t Read*, 75.

added to look-and-say readers, it was done in such a way as to be of minimal value. In this way, publishers were able to state that their readers did contain phonics, but still preserved the whole word approach. It was easier for these companies to add to what they had rather than completely revamp their programs.³⁶⁹

To add insult to injury, Flesch notes, “They don’t teach it. They mention the phonic items and then go right teaching the words by look-and-say.”³⁷⁰ When teaching systematic phonics, the child is taught the alphabetic code, sounding out words, blending them, and working through the process step by step, with plenty of time for repetition and practice with the rules of English. The whole-word approach teaches phonics by putting a word in context, which is not truly teaching phonics at all.³⁷¹

Further, because context-based phonics is little more than guessing what the word is based on what would make sense, the nuances of reading are missed. “A child taught by look-and-say will go through life and miss all the interesting and unexpected stuff in print he's been trained to assume that what comes next is always the expected word and therefore never discovers the fact that, as often as not, printed matter takes surprising turns.”³⁷² The inability to read accurately diminishes the joy of reading, despite the claims of whole-word advocates that phonics crushes the joy of reading.

³⁶⁹ “The Science of Reading Resource Hub,” accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.zaner-bloser.com/science-of-reading-resource-hub.php>.

³⁷⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 75.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 80.

Chapter 8 entitled, “No One Method is Best” addresses the often-repeated phrase that some children learn better with a phonics method and others with the look-and-say approach. The argument is that children who are visual learners are more likely to have success with look-and-say and children who are auditory learners will be more successful learning to read through phonics. This has been an alibi employed by Progressive educators who believe teaching should be child-centered rather than method centered.³⁷³

Flesch notes the irony since this is an excuse used by look-and-say advocates to justify not teaching phonics. However, schools do not teach through “modality matching,” an idea proposed in 1964 by Joseph Wepman, co-author of Scott Foreman Readers. Children are in school taught through the district-provided curriculum. Teachers are teaching students to read with the instructional material they’ve been told to use, which is often the whole word. The teachers themselves often do not have the knowledge or the tools needed to teach systematic phonics. While not all children require phonics instruction, because they will learn to read regardless of the method, those with dyslexia will require systematic phonics to become fluent readers.

Subsequent experiments to confirm Wepman’s modality matching were conducted by Barbara Bateman in 1967 and Helen M. Robinson in 1972. Reluctantly they not only found that modality matching was not effective, but they also found that phonics-trained students performed better in reading tests than look-and-say students.³⁷⁴ “There was no effect of modality matching whatever and the children in the phonics-first

³⁷³ Ibid., 85.

³⁷⁴ Helen M. Robinson, “Visual and Auditory Modalities Related to Methods for Beginning Reading,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1972): 7–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/746978>.

classes, whatever their auditory or visual capacities, had outperformed those by [look-and-say classes].”³⁷⁵

Flesch reveals that despite these two conclusive studies, another thirteen were conducted trying to prove the effectiveness of modality matching, a no one method works for every child linchpin. According to Flesch, twelve of those had the same results as Bateman and Robinson. The one that came to a different conclusion used older students and allowed them to read and listen to the text, thus calling the validity of the results into question.³⁷⁶

The major issue noted by Flesch is that despite its ineffectiveness, look-and-say continues to be a mode of reading instruction. “This solid bit of scientific fact has been ignored like all the other solid scientific facts that have proved that look-and-say is a pernicious, phony method that should have been abandoned long ago ... the same stubborn resistance to scientific proof, the same total and willingness to pay attention whatever to scientific findings persist.”³⁷⁷ Look-and-say as a method of teaching reading has been repeatedly disproven to be effective. Yet since the era of Horace Mann, the war continues, arguably to the detriment of millions of American children. The next chapter will detail why this happened.

³⁷⁵ Barbara Bateman. “The Efficacy of an Auditory and Visual Method of First Grade Reading Instruction with Auditory and Visual Learners.” *University of Oregon Curriculum Bulletin* 23, no. 278 (May 1967): 14.

³⁷⁶ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 90.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

Another common alibi, “English Isn’t Phonetic” is addressed in Chapter 9. After Flesch released a selection of *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read* in *Family Circle* magazine, the look-and-say publisher, Ginn & Company released a statement stating that:

Mr. Flesch paints an unrealistic picture of the English language. While the basal reader has words in it which are approximately 80% decodable by a phonics process, the real-world language is not as regular. Therefore, care must be taken to teach children to decode words in other ways than phonics-first so that they have other strategies to use when phonics fails them.³⁷⁸

This is a statement repeated once and again as another excuse not to teach phonics but rather the whole word. The problem is that English is phonetic. Flesch pointed out that in the first Johnny, he stated that English was 87.5% phonetic. He got that statistic from Hay and Wingo’s *Reading with Phonics*.³⁷⁹

Yet, in 1963, researchers Hanna, Hanna, Hodges, and Rudorf, programmed a computer with the rules of English. They then input 17000 words from the *Teachers’ Word Book of 30000* and the *New Collegiate Dictionary*. This information was then alphabetized and put in book format by Margaret Bishop. Her book *The ABCs and All Their Tricks* includes information about root words, syllabication, morphology, and the aspects of English that make it a deep orthography. Flesch used her book to calculate the percentage of words that can be read using phonics as 97.4% of the words that were inputted.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁸ Ginn & Company, “Fact Sheet” (Ginn & Company, 1955), cited by Flesch, 94.

³⁷⁹ Julie Hay and Charles Enos Wingo, *Reading with Phonics* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott Co, 1948), 19, <http://archive.org/details/readingwithphoni00hayj>.

³⁸⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 95.

For Flesch, this is more confirmation of the value of phonics and the nonsense of teaching look-and-say. Why teach countless miscue strategies, when teaching phonics from the beginning will allow a student to read 97.4% of all the words he encounters? “The sum total of these misdirected energies boggles the mind.”³⁸¹ Flesch points out that if a child is taught phonics first, there will be no need for the “controlled vocabulary” present in look-and-say readers. The text Flesch berated in the first *Johnny* as “totally unexciting, middle class, middle income, middle I.Q. children's activities that offer opportunities for reading, “Look, look” or “Yes, yes” or “Come, come” or “See the funny, funny animal.”³⁸²

Whole word advocates are quick to point out “sight words” such as *was*, *come*, *have*, *the*, *said*, *etc.*, are not phonetic and what is wrong with teaching students to memorize them by sight? The issue according to Flesch is that after the rules of English are systematically taught, the child can read. “As soon as you interrupt your teaching to tell the children some words are irregular like some, one, are, or was, you’ve started the poor child down the path to confusion and the scheme falls apart.”³⁸³ He contends that it is illogical to systematically teach a child phonics and then tell them it isn’t a phonetic language.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 99.

³⁸² Ibid., 6-7.

³⁸³ Ibid., 97

Flesch points out that he addressed sight words in the first *Johnny*. A child who can read will be able to read the word as *wuz* because he knows that there are times when *a* makes a schwa sound and *s* sometimes makes the *z* sound. The issue of sight words only comes up as part of the look-and-say excuse, alibi, or justification for not teaching phonics. “And for that ridiculously short list, we should teach our children to read English like Chinese, despite the fact it is 97.4% decodable?”³⁸⁴ Flesch’s frustration comes from the fact that this ineffective method continues to be used in schools.

Flesch points to Kenneth Goodman, known as the founding father of the whole language, who gained national fame for his miscue analysis. Goodman and other whole word advocates have written many articles and books about various techniques a child can use to guess a word. Yet, if the child is simply taught the rules of their spoken language there is no need to guess at all. Phonics makes 97.4% of English words decodable according to Flesch.

Chapter 10 entitled “Word Calling Isn’t Reading” is another alibi, according to Flesch, given by whole word advocates that justifies the controlled vocabulary used in look-and-say readers. Flesch begins this chapter by presenting the findings of Robert Seashore in 1940. Seashore found that the average six-year-old enters school with a vocabulary of 24000 words and that the average growth of vocabulary is 5000 words a

³⁸⁴ Ibid, 99.

year from first through twelfth grade.³⁸⁵ This finding has a huge impact on the look-and-say method because it requires a controlled vocabulary that affords the child the opportunity to read only 500 words a year.³⁸⁶ Seashore does not stop there. He points out the various sources of misinformation that led whole word advocates to believe children could only acquire a limited number of words. Most damning, he states, “We are holding back the progress of our students by employing instructional methods and materials which are based upon a limited vocabulary representing only a fraction of the potential learning abilities of the students.”³⁸⁷

Flesch points out that the look-and-say establishment was, as ever, quick with their rebuke of Seashore’s findings. E. W. Dolch, well-known for the Dolch word list which is a whole word staple of high-frequency words every child should be able to read by sight, wrote a six-page rejoinder to the work of Seashore entitled, “Implications of the Seashore Vocabulary Report.” Dolch questions whether the average child could learn an average of ten words a day as suggested by Seashore’s findings:

Prof. Dolch implies that the result of the experiment was largely to add confusion, and indicates that even aside from the variations in findings from, one grade to another, the whole idea of a school child learning any such average number of

³⁸⁵ Robert H. Seashore and Lois D. Eckerson, “The Measurement of Individual Differences in General English Vocabularies,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 31, no. 1 (January 1940): 14–38, cited by Flesch, 100.

³⁸⁶ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 100.

³⁸⁷ Robert H. Seashore and Lois D. Eckerson, “The Measurement of Individual Differences in General English Vocabularies,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 31, no. 1 (January 1940): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0053494>.

words as ten per day is preposterous to parents and teachers who have observed children's learning of words.³⁸⁸

Professor Dolch does not believe that is possible, yet he does not provide any evidence that it is not so other than in discussions with teachers and parents.³⁸⁹

Flesch contends that other researchers, such as Schulman and Havighurst (1947), Colvin (1951), Bryan (1952), Templin (1957), and Shibbes (1959) confirmed Seashore's findings.³⁹⁰ In her 1967 book *The Great Debate*, Jeanne Chall stated, "The average first grader can probably use accurately and/or understand about 4000 different words."³⁹¹ This was such a different number from Seashore's that Flesch investigated her findings and discovered that Chall's lower number was the result of removing from the vocabulary list proper nouns for people and place, word parts, synonyms, and duplicate spellings (gage and gauge). This brought the total down to 14160. She then eliminated *easy* words such as how, so, and run.³⁹² With the high-frequency words gone as well as "a totally unexplained subtraction for 'fauna and flora'."³⁹³ Yet, even with Chall's massive reduction of vocabulary words, the teaching of only 500 words a year is still illogical given that phonics allows for an unlimited number of words once decoded.

Flesch sums it up best when he states:

³⁸⁸ E. W. Dolch, "Implications of the Seahorse Vocabulary Report," *Elementary English*, Vol 26, No 7. (November 1949), p. 407-413.

³⁸⁹ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 102.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 102-103.

³⁹¹ Jeanne Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, 203.

³⁹² Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 104.

³⁹³ Ibid., 105.

Please note that this isn't just an amusing numbers game, but extremely serious. If a child knows only 4000 words, there's some smidgen of a justification for teaching him 350 words a year to read. If he knows 24000, the whole look-and-say system stands naked before the world as an out-and-out intolerable sham, a device to destroy the education of a great nation's children.³⁹⁴

Regardless of the number of vocabulary words a child can learn in a year, phonics is still a more effective method to teach children how to read. Yet, look-and-say advocates continue with alternate studies, conflicting research, and countless excuses to keep their failing approach in the school system.

Chapters 11-15

Flesch sets forth to debunk another common response from look-and-say educators in Chapter 11, "Your Child Isn't Ready." He begins by describing a letter that was sent to him by a mother of a child who was struggling to read with the look-and-say approach. In first grade, the child struggled so he was placed in remedial reading in second grade. When she asked the teacher what could be done to help her child, the mother was told that her son just wasn't ready to read. Flesch advised the mother to teach her son to read through phonics. Flesch reports that after the mother's intervention, the son not only caught up but was the top speller in his third-grade class.³⁹⁵

Flesch relates the history of the common excuse of child readiness to a 1931 *Elementary School Journal* article by Morphett and Washburn entitled, "When Should Children Begin to Read?" Washburn, the superintendent of the Winnetka schools in Illinois had developed and implemented his look-and-say system which taught thirty-

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 107-108.

seven sight words in the first half of first grade and 102 in the second half.³⁹⁶ Washburn assessed 141 children in February and found 25 students had not mastered the 37 sight words. Yet, by the end of the year, all the first graders knew the full list of words.

Washburn deduced that “these children’s mental ages on entering the first grade were so low that discouragement had resulted from their first attempts to learn to read.”³⁹⁷ Morphett and Washburne’s study was influential in setting the age for reading instruction at six and a half. This theory held fast until the mid-1960s, backed up by researchers like Louise Bates who wrote three books on the subject: *Is Your Child in the Right Grade?* (1966), *Stop School Failure* (1972), and *Don’t Push Your Preschooler* (1974), each of which encouraged a delay in reading instruction.³⁹⁸

Hirsch, Janky, and Langford agreed with the delay in their book, *Predicting Reading Failure*. These and many other teacher training books suggested that the inability to read was the result of a lack of readiness.³⁹⁹

In 1966, Dolores Durkin released the results of two longitudinal studies in her book *Children Who Read Early*, where she found there was no set age for when a child should be instructed in reading. Durkin found that the average achievement for children who read before school began was higher than those who had not learned before school. However, Durkin takes pains not to mention phonics as a method for preschool reading

³⁹⁶ Mabel Vogel Morphett and Carleton Washburne, “When Should Children Begin to Read,” *The Elementary School Journal* 31, no. 7 (March 1931): 496-503, <https://doi.org/10.1086/456609>.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 499.

³⁹⁸ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 110.

³⁹⁹ Michael. R. Sampson, & L. D. Briggs, “What Does Research Say About Beginning Reading?” *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 21 (2). 1981. 114.

instruction, yet the case histories used in both longitudinal studies seem to suggest the children were taught through letter-sound correspondences. She states in the December 1978 issue of *Educational Leadership*:

Known words can be used to help children understand the alphabetic nature of our writing system. However, *only if children demonstrate the ability to understand and remember letter-sound relationships* should phonics and destruction be pursued. To do otherwise is to Foster negative attitudes toward reading and perhaps toward school itself.⁴⁰⁰

For Flesch, this is more proof that the look-and-say establishment found a way to push their “anti-phonics manifesto” forward regardless of proof to the contrary.⁴⁰¹

Flesch details the work done by Carol Chomsky who found that children who knew the alphabet could produce invented spelling. These children tended to have few issues with learning to read once in school, suggesting that writing could precede reading.⁴⁰² He notes that Maria Montessori also believed that “writing paves the way to reading.”⁴⁰³ Montessori believed in and was able to teach countless disadvantaged children to read and write between the ages of four and six. So, while the question of *which age* is best to teach reading may still be open for debate, it seems that *how* to teach reading is not.

Chapter 12, entitled “Your Child Is Disabled” is perhaps the most contentious. Flesch begins this chapter with the sensational words of N. Dale Bryant who wrote an article in

⁴⁰⁰ Dolores Durkin, “Pre-First Grade Starts in Reading: Where Do We Stand?” *Educational Leadership*, December 1978, 176, cited by Flesch, 112.

⁴⁰¹ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 112.

⁴⁰² Carol Chomsky, “Write First, Read Later,” *Childhood Education* 47, no. 6 (March 1971): 296–99, cited by Flesch, 116.

⁴⁰³ Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method* (New York: Schocket Books, 1964), 287 cited by Flesch, 120.

the February 1974 *Teachers' College Record* entitled "Learning Disabilities: A Report on the State of the Art." In the article, Byrant stated, "It is possible that the disability is specific to the methods that have been used in teaching. Cases of reading disabilities and classes using the whole-word approach might be different if the class had been taught with the phonic or linguistic approach."⁴⁰⁴

This is not the first time a researcher suggested that whole-word reading was *causing* disabilities. In 1896, Morgan and Kerr individually discovered "congenital word blindness."⁴⁰⁵ Congenital word blindness is also known as dyslexia. Flesch outlines the definition of dyslexia using the *Merck Manual* (13th ed.) to include a child of normal intelligence with no vision, sensory or neurological issues who is two or more years behind in reading ability and has letter reversals, difficulty seeing and sometimes hearing similarities and differences in words and letters and difficulty figuring out unknown words.⁴⁰⁶

Yet these children are often on-grade level for math and other subjects. In 1929, Samuel T. Orton suggested that whole word reading instruction was causing reading difficulties in children in his article "The Sight Reading Method of Teaching Reading as

⁴⁰⁴ N. Dale Bryant, "Learning Disabilities: A Report on the State of the Art," *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 75, no. 3 (January 1974): 7, cited by Flesch, 123.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Robert Berkow and Merck Sharp & Dohme, *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy: 13th Edition* (Rahway, N.J.: Merck Sharpe & Dohme Research Laboratories, 1977), 1061, <http://archive.org/details/merckmanualofdia00berk>. cited by Flesch, 124.

a Source of Reading Disability” for the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.⁴⁰⁷ He further explained his findings in his 1937 book *Reading, Writing and Speech Problems in Children*. Flesch lists the three important points that Orton outlines in his text:

1. True dyslexia is extremely rare.
2. Patients can almost always be helped and can learn to read and write normally, using a strict phonetic teaching method.
3. Most patients are of superior intelligence and have excellent career potential.⁴⁰⁸

Orton insists that a phonics-first approach is *the* method to both remediate and prevent dyslexia. “... where the sight word method for teaching was exclusively used, the number of reading disability cases was increased by three times that found in schools which used phonetic training for those children who did not rapidly progress by the flashcard method.”⁴⁰⁹

Orton believed that teaching reading through phonics was the best method for all students. He and Anna Gillingham are widely known for their multisensory reading instruction which teaches reading, writing, and spelling simultaneously. The Orton-Gillingham Method continues to grow in popularity because it is so successful. As the number of children diagnosed as dyslexic continued to climb in from the 1930s onward, more researchers found that Orton was correct in his estimation of the look-and-say approach. Leon Eisenberg (1966), S. Jay Samuels (1970), Bruce Balow (1971), S Alan Cohen (1973), N Dale Bryant (1974), and Barbara Bateman (1974) each called into

⁴⁰⁷ Samuel T. Orton, “The ‘Sight Reading’ Method of Teaching Reading, as a Source of Reading Disability,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 20, no. 2 (February 1929): 135–43, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0072112>.

⁴⁰⁸ Samuel T Orton, *Reading, Writing and Speech Problems in Children* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937).

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

question the whole word method and whether a diagnosis of dyslexia is accurate when the reading instruction is inadequate.⁴¹⁰

Flesch goes on to list more researchers who began to believe that instead of a learning disability the student is struggling as a result of a teaching disability.⁴¹¹ To provide more evidence that Flesch and these researchers were correct, Flesch interviewed a well-known reading expert and Associate professor of Psychiatry at New York Medical College, Hilde Mosse, to discover if the look-and-say approach could cause dyslexia. Mosse stated that “No system of training, however bad it may be, can produce an impairment or disorder of the brain ... so look and say can't give a child dyslexia, but it can and does give a splendid imitation of it.”⁴¹²

Flesch continues the interview by asking how anyone can tell the difference between a true dyslexic and a student who presents as a dyslexic as a result of look-and-say instruction. Mosse stated that it is truly a matter of time. The child who could benefit from better instruction will learn to read quicker with fewer drills:

“The difference between a true dyslexic and a look-and-say victim is simply a question of time. With a true dyslexic you will have to work and drill and exercise for months and months—sometimes two or three years. They will eventually learn to read and write but it takes an awfully long time - plus a lot of patience, plus strong motivation. It can be done, with excellent results. I cannot remember a single case that didn't respond.”⁴¹³

⁴¹⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, 129-130.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 130.

⁴¹² Hilde Mosse and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at New York Medical College, in-person, 1980, cited in Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 132-133.

⁴¹³ Mosse, cited in Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 134.

If a dyslexic child requires phonics to learn to read and a non-dyslexic child can learn to read with phonics, there is little reason to continue with the look-and-say approach. And yet it continues with its myriad of excuses for when it fails.

Flesch advises parents who have been told that their child is learning disabled to write a letter to the school insisting that their child be taught phonics first through any program endorsed by the Reading Reform Foundation. He includes the letter template with fillable space for names and suggests that the parents attend the meeting with both a reading expert and a lawyer.⁴¹⁴ Flesch encourages the parents not to be shy in advocating for their child. He reminds the reader that the school system is receiving federal dollars for the child's education and thus entitled to the best education available, which is phonics-first.

Chapter 13 addresses the alibi, "It's The Parents' Fault." Flesch begins by discussing Edmund Burke Huey's 1908 book *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in which Huey advocates for reading to be taught at home in the natural way.⁴¹⁵ The natural way consists of the child tracking print of repeated reading of a storybook by the parent. Flesch notes that Huey also mentions that phonics should be taught in school but is dangerous if done so before the child is nine.⁴¹⁶

Flesch points out that while Huey's advice was given in the early 1900s many schools still believe it is the parents' responsibility to teach the child. Yet how is the

⁴¹⁴ Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 147.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

parent supposed to do this? Certainly not through phonics, but rather by asking questions about the story before reading, interrupting the reading to check for understanding, interrupting the reading to repeat text, and retelling the story when the reading is complete.⁴¹⁷

Other look-and-say researchers encourage the parent to repeatedly point out words until the child can read them on their own,⁴¹⁸ or to praise the child each time they read a word correctly and supply unknown words to the child.⁴¹⁹ Instead, Flesch advises that parents teach their child to read at home before they start school through the use of his, or any other phonics-first program.⁴²⁰ He also recommends pointing out letters and the sounds they make when reading aloud to the child, buying alphabet blocks and books, letting them sound out small words like *fig* or *pet*, and playing letter and rhyming games.⁴²¹ This can be done as young as four like Montessori did with underprivileged children. Flesch argues: “Send your child to kindergarten or first-grade immune to reading trouble and you'll have done wonders for his or her education.”⁴²²

According to Flesch, another excuse used by whole word experts is “Too Much TV.” Flesch begins Chapter 14 by detailing the case study conducted by Jane Torrey, a

⁴¹⁷ James E. Flood, “Parental Styles in Reading Episodes with Young Children,” *Reading Teacher*, May 1977. 864-867.

⁴¹⁸ C. Thomas Pickering. *Helping Children Learn to Read*. New York, Chesford, Inc., 1977.

⁴¹⁹ Kenneth Huskisson, Thomas Sherman, and Linda L. Smith, “Assisted Reading and Parent Involvement,” *Reading Teacher*, April 1974. 710-714.

⁴²⁰ Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, 147.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 156.

psychology professor from Connecticut College who spent four months observing John, a four-year-old boy with an average IQ from a lower-middle-class family who could read yet had no instruction. After a thorough investigation of the parents and siblings revealed that they had not taught him to read, Torrey deduced that his reading was the result of repeatedly watching television commercials.⁴²³

Flesch points out “The use of voice over spoken messages synchronized with a printed word on the screen seems to be the key. It’s the ideal way to show a child that our way of writing is based on the matching of spelling and sound.”⁴²⁴ He also contends that it is not surprising that children who have not been successful at learning to read through the look-and-say approach would prefer to watch tv over reading.⁴²⁵ Flesch feels that TV is not the evil entity look-and-say advocates would lead one to believe. Flesch states that TV broadens the knowledge and vocabulary of those watching it, specifically shows such as *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* help raise the IQ of young children.⁴²⁶ Flesch believes that “TV has enormous potential for teaching beginners to read.”⁴²⁷

The concluding chapter in *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read* is entitled “We Now Teach *All* Children.” Flesch does not shy away from addressing the racist excuses used to explain lower test scores in reading. In the April 1979 issue of the *Reading Teacher*, Mary Rhodes Hoover described in detail the racist reasons teachers offered to explain

⁴²³ Ibid., 157-160.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 161.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

“why minorities can’t read.” Despite these despicable excuses, Hoover outlined fifteen schools with a majority Black population, most of whom were reading at or above grade level. All fifteen used a phonics-first program for reading instruction.⁴²⁸

Flesch describes his in-person visit to several first and second-grade classes in a public school in Queens in New York City where the children used the phonics-first program Open Court. The children were eager, engaged, and reading. He then went to schools using the Distar Program, also phonics-first, in Mount Vernon where he had a similar experience. Both schools had mostly Black students. Finally, he went to visit the Fortune Society in New York City where ex-offenders learn to read through phonics-first programs. “The job usually takes about a year – using a phonics first system, of course – and gives new hope to seemingly hopeless victims of look-and-say.”⁴²⁹

Flesch ends the chapter and his book by wondering why look-and-say continues to be taught despite all the evidence against its effectiveness. He admits not knowing yet that he cannot help but to quote William K. Durr, senior author of the Houghton Mifflin look-and-say series to caution Americans, “The emphasis in the Soviet Union is on learning individual letter-sound associations. No words are taught by the sight method.”⁴³⁰ The implication is that communists use phonics.

Flesch presents a compelling and thorough case against look-and-say in favor of phonics-first, but is it as simple as it seems? According to Flesch critics, it is not. Alibis

⁴²⁸ Mary Rhodes Hoover, “Characteristics of Black Schools at Grade Level: A Description,” *Reading Teacher* 31, no. 7 (April 1978): 760 cited in Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read*, Ibid., 166.

⁴²⁹ Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can’t Read*, 167.

⁴³⁰ William K Durr, “Reading Instruction in Soviet Schools: Methods and Materials,” *Reading Teacher* 28, no. 2 (November 1974): 139.

and excuses aside, the next chapter will delve into the critiques Flesch faced. Chapter Seven will also discuss the current state of literacy education in the United States. This discussion will include the factors that reignited the Reading Wars, specifically journalist Emily Hanford's 2019 article, "At a Loss for Words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers," where she categorizes the look-say method (known today as the whole word method, whole language, or balanced literacy) as a "flawed theory about how reading works, a theory that was debunked decades ago by cognitive scientists, yet remains deeply embedded in teaching practices and curriculum materials."¹⁶

This chapter will also address Hanford's podcast, *Sold A Story* (2023), where she once more investigates the debunked theory of reading instruction and the outside influences that affect reading instruction, specifically four reading experts and the company that published their work.

Chapter 7

The Consequences of the Reading Wars

Every war has its consequences, and the Reading Wars is no exception. When Rudolf Flesch wrote his first book *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* in 1955, he may have believed that educators would see their mistake, go back to using a phonics-first approach, and students would begin to learn English logically: as an alphabetic language, not a pictographic one. Instead, he found that reading experts united and used everything in their arsenal against him.⁴³¹

The Reading Wars: Early Years

Time magazine reported in its January 9, 1956, issue:

U.S. educators-closed ranks against Flesch, and when they were not denouncing the “Devil in the Flesch,” they were damning the “Flesch peddlers.” Nevertheless, though Johnny was marred by flagrant exaggerations, it stayed on the bestseller list for 39 weeks, and thousands of parents—and teachers—found in Flesch the angrily dramatic spokesman they had been waiting for.⁴³²

In the February 4, 1955, edition of *The Saturday Review*, reading specialist Frank G. Jennings called into question those who criticize the American education system without considering reading material, levels of reading comprehension, and levels of literacy. His article entitled, “That Johnny May Read” states boldly that the American family is not doing enough to teach their child to read. He, and other critics argue that Flesch’s book did not adequately address the needs of students from diverse linguistic and cultural

⁴³¹ Samuel L. Blumenfeld, *The Victims of “Dick and Jane” and Other Essays*, 1st ed (Vallecito, Calif: Chalcedon, 2003), 229.

⁴³² “Education: THE FIRST R,” *Time*, January 9, 1956,
<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,866725,00.html>.

backgrounds, and that his one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction was not suitable for all learners.

Jennings further states that parents want their child to read, but often stop reading to them as soon as they start school. Jennings writes that the “American family has been playing the school for a sucker for the last thirty years. The school has been made into the anonymous babysitter par excellence.”⁴³³ Jennings claims that the issue of reading is a complex one without simple answers since the role of reading is dependent on time, place, and person. Yet for parents to blame the schools without considering their role is to ignore their inherent responsibility.

Flesch responds to this criticism and addresses the issue of parental involvement in Chapter 13 of *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*. Research has shown that students who are read to and who learn basic reading skills before kindergarten tend to like books more and do better academically once they are fully literate.⁴³⁴ Parents play a role in educating their child and reading aloud can strengthen pre-reading skills. Babies, and toddlers in particular, can improve literacy skills such as phonological awareness, blending sounds, as well as language comprehension, and word production through exposure to books.⁴³⁵ However, Flesch asserts that it is the school's job to ensure that all students know how to read with both fluency and comprehension. Jennings's article was one of many that

⁴³³ Frank G. Jennings, “That Johnny May Read,” *Saturday Review*, February 4, 1955, 39, http://archive.org/details/sim_saturday-review_1956-02-04_39_5.

⁴³⁴ Jana M. Mason, “When Do Children Begin to Read: An Exploration of Four-Year-Old Children's Letter and Word Reading Competencies,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1980): 205.

⁴³⁵ Melike Yumus and Figen Turan, “The Impact of Parent Training Intervention in Early Years: Language and Literacy Development,” *International Journal of Early Years Education* 30, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 710, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1933918>.

criticized Flesch and offered alternate reasons why students were struggling to read.

In the April 1955 edition of *The Reading Teacher*, A. Sterl Artley, a professor at the University of Missouri, called out Flesch, not in name but by description:

Within the last year, in several popular magazines, have appeared articles extolling the merits of the phonics approach to reading instruction. One of the writers contends that the teaching of reading is simple. Since reading means getting meaning from certain combinations of letters all the teacher needs to do is to teach the child what each letter stands for and he will be able to read. He adds that this is the “natural system” of learning to read and that the “ancient Egyptians... the Romans . . . Germans . . . Estonians . . . and Abyssinians” learned to read that way.⁴³⁶

Yet, Artley, president of the International Reading Association 1959-1960 and the last surviving author of the *Dick and Jane* series, contends that these are “broad and sweeping generalizations accepted by those who wish to return the past. Instead, he looks to reputable reading experts like Gates, Gray, Witty, Durrell, Betts, and others who believe that phonics is “merely one of several methods that the child may use to unlock words.”⁴³⁷ He states that his view is based on research as well as the fact that “functional phonics” are used in many commercial programs. He ends his article by emphasizing the role of comprehension in reading. “As I have already pointed out, there is a place for phonics as well as other procedures for word perception, but they should not take precedence over the primary function of reading, which is to create meaning.”⁴³⁸ Artley, and other whole word advocates argue that Flesch’s book unfairly portrayed their teaching methods as ineffective.

⁴³⁶ A. Sterl Artley, “Controversial Issues Relating to Word Perception,” *The Reading Teacher* 8, no. 4 (1955): 197.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 199.

By obfuscating the definition of reading, whole-word advocates confuse the issue, calling students who read through phonics, ‘word callers.’ This diminishes the truly miraculous skill they are acquiring. It also allows whole-word advocates to continue to ignore the value of phonics in the reading acquisition process. A person can read without comprehending, but they cannot comprehend without being able to read. Reading is decoding initially and then, once one can decode it becomes about vocabulary and meaning making. However, without being able to decode, one can never comprehend. Phonics (including phonemic awareness which Flesch left out) is the foundation upon which all other reading skills are built.

Nila Barton Smith responded to Flesch in *The Elementary School Journal* April 1955 article, “What Research Tells Us about Word Recognition.” She states the summary of the consensus of reading experts:

1. It cannot be assumed that all children need phonics.
2. Phonics is effective with children who need word recognition help, but its greatest effectiveness is attained when it is taught functionally and is related to children's reading needs.
3. It is advisable to delay intensive phonics instruction until a child has attained a mental age of seven years.
4. Phonics instruction is most valuable at the second and third-grade levels.⁴³⁹

Barton Smith and others argue that Flesch’s book did not adequately address the needs of diverse learners, that his prescription for teaching reading was too narrow, and that his one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction was not suitable for all learners.

Flesch believed that all children should be taught phonics without delay, that word recognition will come because of phonics instruction, not memorization, and that

⁴³⁹ Nila Barton Smith, “What Research Tells Us about Word Recognition,” *The Elementary School Journal* 55, no. 8 (1955): 445.

phonics is valuable at all levels. He states this in both books but is more detailed in *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, devoting specific chapters to each of the above.

Reading expert Emmett Albert Betts psychology professor at Temple University wrote in the July 30, 1955, edition of *The Saturday Review* that Flesch is a “master of histrionics.”⁴⁴⁰ According to Betts:

Flesch has introduced confusion regarding what reading is. He quotes a dictionary definition, to ‘get the meaning of writing or printing.’ He twists this definition by insisting that ‘reading means getting meaning from combinations of letters.’ He tells a native of Prague that he could not ‘understand a word’ of the Czech newspaper— ‘I can only read it.’⁴⁴¹

Betts calls into question the effectiveness of phonics to produce comprehension. But

Flesch made clear from the beginning of his book that his definition of reading was “getting the meaning of words formed by letters on a printed page, and nothing else.”⁴⁴²

The basis for all reading is the ability to decode the individual sounds to produce the whole word. This bottom-up approach is the required skill to determine an unknown word.

Lois M. Rettie takes an even more direct shot at Flesch in her article, “The Devil, According to Flesch” in the June 13, 1955, edition of the *New Republic*. She asserts that Flesch, being “a master in the art of controversy” ignores the fact that in most schools’ phonetic analysis is used extensively after the child has developed a basic sight-reading vocabulary. While Flesch states that if a parent wants their child to learn to read, they need to teach them at home, Rettie writes that “the methods Flesch insists upon have been

⁴⁴⁰ Emmett Albert Betts, “Teaching Johnny to Read,” *The Saturday Review*, 1955, 21.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do about It* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 110.

weighed in the balance of classroom experience and found wanting.” She claims that educators have learned through experience to delay the use of phonics to a later stage in reading development. She then warns parents against Flesch’s “bold statements.” Rettie claims that these statements, which include reading never was a problem until the United States switched to look-and-say, if reading was taught as they do in Germany, American schools would have perfect readers at the end of second grade, and phonics was shown to be superior to the word method in every research study ever made, are complete nonsense.

Rather, Rettie claims that there is no such thing as perfect reading, regardless of country or language, perfection in reading for every child has never been attainable by the end of the second grade, and there are scores of research studies that reveal the weaknesses phonics-first for children who are not ready. “Flesch exposes his utter failure to understand the difference between reading in the true sense . . . and the uttering of a mere sequence of sounds.”⁴⁴³ To prove how difficult reading is simply with phonics, she encourages the reader to re-read Flesch’s bold statements without the use of a sight vocabulary. She claims it is slow and painstaking.

She also mentions that the Chicago students Flesch observed successfully reading the newspaper were not truly reading since they lacked comprehension of what they read. Rettie ends her critique by questioning whether Johnny was real or merely a literary device. If he was indeed real, what was the basis of his reading struggle? What were the results of his tutoring? Has a trained and objective person or agency assessed Johnny to

⁴⁴³ Lois M. Rettie, “The Devil, According to Flesch,” *New Republic* 132, no. 24 (June 13, 1955): 22.

accurately judge the effectiveness of his tutoring? More importantly, had Flesch ever used the included instructional program in a classroom of students? Rettie ends her article by calling out the overall tone of the book as well as the trouble it will likely cause.

The unfortunate feature of this Flesch book is that it is full of extremely dogmatic and unfounded criticism of our schools. It sows the seeds of unjustified distrust in the minds of parents who, for any reason, good or poor, are worried about their child's reading. This book provides no real help in such case. All it does is provide a handy dub for angry and misguided denunciation of the schools. Why Johnny Can't Read is likely to prove to be a piece of unintended mischief.⁴⁴⁴

Rettie foresees Flesch's book igniting a war, not only because it called into question educators' professionalism, but also because it set up an "us against them" mentality with parents on one side and educators on the other, creating a contentious situation from the beginning.

In a less aggressive article entitled "Can Johnny Read? And If Not, Why Not?" writer Fred Hechinger from *The Reporter* in May 1955, argues that Flesch's insinuation of conspiracy by publishing companies is unfounded. He believes that it would be more profitable for textbook companies to change methods and corner the market and if educator-author were so sinister they'd find more profitable work in another business. Hechinger also contends that neither Flesch nor whole-word advocates are right, rather there is a value to both methods for beginning readers. "This is a heresy for which both Mr. Flesch and the educators he attacks will probably join forces and have me tarred and feathered and pronounced wrong from A to Zebra."⁴⁴⁵ The American tendency to deal with absolutes is the real issue, he claims, with both sides holding fast to one method to

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Fred Hechinger, "Can Johnny Read? And If Not, Why Not?" *The Reporter*, May 5, 1955, 43.

the detriment of the students. Hechinger states that the classrooms he has observed understand the need to do what is right for the student, regardless of the way the pedagogical pendulum swings.

On August 15, 1955, *Time* magazine published an article commenting on the sweeping popularity of *Why Johnny Can't Read*, which had already sold more than 60,000 copies. According to the author, Flesch was “bald and exaggerated” in his comments and, while phonics was not to be completely dismissed, a mix of both approaches was best.⁴⁴⁶ This excuse was addressed by Flesch in his subsequent book, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* in Chapter 3 entitled “No One Method is Best.”

Helen M. Robinson wrote a review of *Why Johnny Can't Read* for *The Elementary School Journal* in October 1955. She quickly outlines that book's dual purpose: one, to outline the issues around the current system of reading instruction in schools and two, as a how-to manual for parents to teach their child to read at home. Robinson states that although Flesch's personal study of classroom instruction was “filled with inaccurate descriptions of current methods of teaching reading.”⁴⁴⁷ Robinson calls into question Flesch's definition of reading. She believes that reading without comprehension is nothing more than word calling. She also takes issue with Flesch's conspiracy theory between publishers and textbook companies to keep educators from

⁴⁴⁶ Alice Payne Hackett. *70 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1964*. New York: RR Bowker, 1967.

⁴⁴⁷ Helen M. Robinson, review of *Review of Why Johnny Can't Read-And What You Can Do About It*, by Rudolf Flesch, *The Elementary School Journal* 56, no. 2 (1955): 91, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/999438>.

“any information about how to teach children anything about letters and sounds.”⁴⁴⁸ This is a ridiculous statement according to Robinson and speaks to Flesch’s oversimplification of the reading process.

Robinson further points out that Flesch overlooked that children must develop satisfactory auditory discrimination before learning letter sounds, which she claims can take until age 8 in some children. She also mentions the emotional appeal of Flesch’s “angry book” (noted by Robinson as being taken from the book’s jacket) will comfort parents whose children are making slow reading progress “because of the dogmatic statements the author has made.”⁴⁴⁹ Robinson ends by stating that Flesch’s book has some value in that it has peaked parents’ interest in reading and their child’s schooling and has also encouraged more research to improve practice. Helen Robinson was a professor at Chicago University working under William S. Gray. She later became the lead writer of the *Dick and Jane* series of readers after he died in 1960, and she remained there until the late 1970s.

In December 1955, a special issue of *The Reading Teacher* was published with guest editor Emmett Betts, “a very outstanding authority on the teaching of reading and a person in whom the American teachers have utmost respect and esteem, both personally and professionally,”⁴⁵⁰ to clarify the “unfounded and unsubstantiated statements which

⁴⁴⁸ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do about It* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 12.

⁴⁴⁹ Robinson, review of *Review of Why Johnny Can’t Read*, 13.

⁴⁵⁰ J. Allen Figurel, “The Battle of Phonics,” *The Reading Teacher* 9, no. 2 (1955): 66.

have been made by the “so-called experts.”⁴⁵¹ In the ten-article edition, various reading expert authors defend whole-word reading instruction and systematically criticize elements of *Why Johnny Can’t Read*:

Each of the ten writers is a specialist in the segment of instruction in phonics represented in his or her article. We feel what they have to say will do much to clarify the understanding of the proper place of Phonics and reading instruction, and how it should be taught. Eleanor and Johnson site-specific ways to help the beginning teacher, Nila B Smith, relates the history of instruction of phonics and gives reasons for today’s practices. Ana de Cortez discusses the need for instruction in phonetics to understand phonics. Frank B Robinson explains in detail both terms in relation to basic characteristics of sound. J Kendall Hoggard lists specific ways of using phonics correctly in the classroom and Ralph C Staiger writes about this for parents. Our own Dr. Gray, usually referred to as the dean of American reading instruction, lists the merits of phonics and other methods of teaching reading and concludes by saying the problem is not. Shall we teach phonics, but rather when and how should this be done along with other methods of word recognition Bjorn Karlsson shows that other countries have reading disabilities, many of which are caused by phonetic elements and languages you must not miss reading F Dwayne Lamkin’s article on propaganda techniques used why Johnny can’t read, he will discover some of the reasons why the book is the best seller.⁴⁵²

Guest editor Betts is particularly biting when he states, “Over the years, zealots and charlatans have sold stupid and inane programs of phonics to parents and some teachers as a cure-all for reading ills.”⁴⁵³ Smith,⁴⁵⁴ Staiger,⁴⁵⁵ and Hoggard⁴⁵⁶ insist that students

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Emmett A. Betts, “And Now... The Guest Editor’s Introduction: A First Essential: Phonics,” *The Reading Teacher* 9, no. 2 (1955): 68.

⁴⁵⁴ Nila Banton Smith, “Phonics in Beginning Reading: Review and Evaluation,” *The Reading Teacher* 9, no. 2 (1955): 73–80.

⁴⁵⁵ Ralph C. Staiger, “Your Child Learns Phonics,” *The Reading Teacher* 9, no. 2 (1955): 95–99.

⁴⁵⁶ J. Kendall Hoggard, “Phonics in Directed Reading Activities,” *The Reading Teacher* 9, no. 2 (1955): 89–94.

are taught phonics in schools and Gray adds that it is important to remember reading is all about comprehension of the written word.⁴⁵⁷

Flesch had put the reading experts on the defensive, and many responded on January 1, 1956, with the formation of the International Reading Association (later renamed the International Literacy Association). William S. Gray became the organization's first president. Gray was the senior author of the look-and-say readers, Dick and Jane. He, and others in the educational establishment, had a personal stake in keeping the whole-word approach to reading alive and well. Publishing companies had intelligently enlisted the help of education professors to author beginning readers for elementary schools. These same professors then taught teacher candidates the instructional methods for which their readers were written. This created a teaching population who knew nothing about phonics or how to teach them. They only knew how to teach children to guess and memorize words.⁴⁵⁸ The goal of the IRA, announced at the first annual meeting held in Chicago in May 1956, was "to define the nature of the progress made thus far in developing efficient readers and . . . consider the challenging problems and controversial issues still faced."⁴⁵⁹

Why Johnny Can't Read continued in its popularity despite this effort. The book

⁴⁵⁷ William S. Gray, "Phonic versus Other Methods of Teaching Reading," *The Reading Teacher* 9, no. 2 (1955): 102–106.

⁴⁵⁸ Diane McGuinness, *Why Our Children Can't Read, and What We Can Do about It: A Scientific Revolution in Reading* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 74.

⁴⁵⁹ Helen M. Robinson, "Educational News and Editorial Comment," *The Elementary School Journal* 56, no. 6 (1956): 248.

was serialized in 120 newspapers and continued to be a topic of discussion nationwide.⁴⁶⁰ One of the most influential arguments against Flesch that did gain traction was the scathing review by Harvard University's John Carroll in the March 1956 article entitled "The Case of Dr. Flesch." In the article, Carroll argues that Flesch distorted the results in favor of phonics because he had not explained the type of phonics used in the 11 studies cited in *Why Johnny Can't Read*.⁴⁶¹ "Flesch has distorted and misrepresented the research evidence concerning the teaching of reading, particularly the research on the role which 'phonics' should play in this teaching and that his accusations have needlessly distracted and embarrassed American educators at a time when the schools have their full share of real, rather than fancied problems."⁴⁶²

Each study, of which phonics was found to be superior to the whole word, had outlined the phonics used so Flesch likely did not think he needed to do so in his book. But Carroll was able to insert doubt around the validity of the sources Flesch cited. He was not alone as other educational researchers and academics in the field of education criticized Flesch's work for what they saw as a lack of empirical evidence and for oversimplifying the complexities of reading instruction. They challenged his claims regarding the ineffectiveness of whole-word methods and his advocacy for phonics.

Another criticism Carroll mentions is that Flesch does not provide enough of an example of tested phonics instruction. Yet Flesch did outline tested programs that improved

⁴⁶⁰ Life, "A Big Row Over Reading," *Life Magazine*, October 31, 1955, 57.

⁴⁶¹ John B. Carroll, "The Case of Dr. Flesch," *American Psychologist* 11, no. 3 (March 1956): 158–63, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0047872>.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 158.

reading instruction in the Catholic schools that used the Bloomfield method and the schools in Illinois that used the Hay-Wingo method, two tested programs.

Carroll's article also increased skepticism that phonics could be superior when it was not being utilized by most school systems. The assumption is that the school system should know what works best for most children. Carroll inserts doubt by citing the differences in results for reading taught through word reading and comprehension, thus making it appear that although studies indicate an advantage for phonics instruction, its overall efficacy was questionable. Carroll is credited as the primary influencer of the academic authorities' dismissal of Flesch.⁴⁶³

Noted linguist Robert A. Hall, Jr. criticized Flesch's analysis of language and reading, contending that it oversimplified the nature of language and reading acquisition. Specifically, Hall addresses Flesch's failure to address the importance of phonemes and graphemes and the role they play in reading in his review of *Why Johnny Can't Read* published in *Language* in April 1956. Hall praises Flesch for bringing to the forefront linguistics, especially linguistics based upon Leonard Bloomfield's book *Language*, "which no sounder foundation could be desired."⁴⁶⁴ And is impressed with Flesch's ability to have a 37-week-long bestseller that deals with linguistics.

However, Hall, who along with Bloomfield, is the only linguist specifically mentioned in Flesch's book, states that Flesch did not go far enough with his analysis. Hall would have liked Flesch to explain to the reader what phonemes (smallest unit of

⁴⁶³ Sibyl Terman and Charles Walcutt, *Reading: Chaos and Cure* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1958), 121.

⁴⁶⁴ Robert A. Hall and Rudolf Flesch, "Why Johnny Can't Read-And What You Can Do About It," *Language* 32, no. 2 (April 1956): 312, <https://doi.org/10.2307/411011>.

sound that conveys meaning) and graphemes (written symbol that conveys sound; letters) are and the relationship between sounds and writing. While Hall notes a more in-depth discussion of the actual workings of graphemic systems in their relation to phonemic, morphophonemic, and morphological structure, would have quieted critics and given readers a better standpoint to evaluate his arguments, he also wonders if doing so would have prevented the book from gaining its best-seller status.

Instead, Flesch lumps it all under the phonics umbrella. Unfortunately, phonics as a term has developed multiple meanings, “most of which include a (psychologically and educationally indefensible) emphasis on having learners repeat sounds in isolation while they look at or write letters in isolation, and some of which even involve attempting to teach six-year-olds the sounds of their language, which they have already known and used unreflectingly for several years.”⁴⁶⁵ Hall noted that Flesch does advocate the use of 'systematic phonics' over the ad hoc 'phonics' taught in most schools. However, Flesch's failure to go beyond the idea of “phonics-first” leads to his equal approval of both Bloomfield's and Hay and Wingo's beginning readers, yet Hall claims that Bloomfield's is far superior.

Hall asserts that Flesch is right when he states that reading is best instructed through a systematic phonics method, however, Flesch “has used a bludgeon, instead of a broadsword provided with the sharp cutting edge that scientific linguistics would have afforded.”⁴⁶⁶ So while Hall states that while Flesch started a war, he could have finished

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

it as well had he simply “presented a more thorough and convincing linguistic foundation for his argument.” Instead, he has heightened educator resistance and anxiety. Hall further remarks that Flesch’s book opened the door for linguists to provide the arguments and implementation tools to improve reading instruction.

Hall may have been among the first to mention the lack of phonemic awareness as an issue with Flesch’s phonics-only approach, but he certainly wasn’t the last. Diane McGuinness wrote *Why Our Children Can’t Read* in 1997. She asserts that the second half of Flesch’s book, the instructional manual for phonics, “was accurate in the important sense that he understood how an alphabetic writing system works, that sounds in the language are the basis for the code, and that English has 42 sounds or phonemes. However, Flesch had no access to modern data, which shows that a large proportion of children can’t hear phonemes in words.”⁴⁶⁷

McGuinness states that the Reading Wars have led people to believe that there are only two ways to teach reading, either whole word or phonics, but she believes the real focus should be on teaching reading through hearing sounds in language correctly and understanding the spelling code of which letters (or letter combinations) go with which sounds.

Flesch called out publishing companies in *Why Johnny Can’t Read* for “. . . those series of horrible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers.”⁴⁶⁸ One of them

⁴⁶⁷ Diane McGuinness, *Why Our Children Can’t Read, and What We Can Do about It: A Scientific Revolution in Reading* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 73.

⁴⁶⁸ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can’t Read: And What You Can Do about It* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 6.

listened to his call for more exciting reading opportunities. William Spaulding, a Houghton Mifflin education publishing executive, commissioned Theodore Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, to “write me a story that first graders can't put down.”⁴⁶⁹ He gave Geisel a list of words that experts claimed could be read by beginning readers. The resulting book was published on March 12, 1957. The famous *Cat in the Hat* was marketed to parents who had read Flesch’s book and were at a loss finding engaging text that their children could read independently.⁴⁷⁰ When interviewed in 1981 by Arizona Magazine about *The Cat in the Hat*, Geisel stated:

They think I did it in twenty minutes. That d — ned *Cat in the Hat* took nine months until I was satisfied. I did it for a textbook house and they sent me a word list. That was due to the Dewey revolt in the Twenties in which they threw out phonic reading and went to word recognition, as if you're reading Chinese pictographs instead of blending sounds of different letters. I think killing phonics was one of the greatest causes of illiteracy in the country. Anyway, they had it all worked out that a healthy child at the age of four can learn so many words in a week and that's all. So, there were two hundred and twenty-three words to use in this book. I read the list three times and I almost went out of my head. I said, I'll read it once more, and if I can find two words that rhyme that'll be the title of my book. (That's genius at work.) I found “cat” and “hat” and I said, “The title will be *The Cat in the Hat*.”⁴⁷¹

Flesch’s book had inspired Geisel. Yet he could not avoid the criticism he received for not writing more academically, as opposed to the readable style for which he is known. Educators and researchers questioned the scientific rigor of Flesch's claims,

⁴⁶⁹ Handy, Bruce. *Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children's Literature as an Adult*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018. 125-127.

⁴⁷⁰ Rebekah Fitzsimmons, “Creating and Marketing Early Reader Picture Books,” in *The Early Reader in Children's Literature and Culture* (Routledge, 2015), 121.

⁴⁷¹ Sam Blumenfeld, “Dr. Seuss and Dyslexia,” *The New American*, June 29, 2011, <https://thenewamerican.com/opinion/dr-seuss-and-dyslexia/>.

arguing that his research methodology was not sound or that he had selectively used data to support his arguments.

The Reading Wars: Latter Years

Parents were Flesch's intended audience which might explain why he did not include a bibliography for the sources in his book. This opened the door for critics to question the validity of Flesch's statements regarding the superiority of phonics over whole words. It also flies in the face of the recommendations he gave in his book *The Art of Clear Thinking*, where he emphasizes the full use of statistical techniques.⁴⁷²

Academic books tend to have a different audience, which can prevent them from becoming mainstream. Such is the case with Jeanne Chall's 1967 *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. Chall, a researcher from Harvard University and the head of the Harvard Reading Laboratory was commissioned through a Carnegie grant to end the reading debate for the last time. She was an ideal choice since a common criticism of Flesch's book was that it was not based on a substantial body of research or empirical evidence and Chall was well-respected for the thoroughness of her research. Educational reforms are typically more successful when they are supported by research and when there is a consensus among experts. Chall did years' worth of research to answer the question:

What is the great debate all about? It is about many facets of the process of teaching children how to read some theoretical, some very concrete. What makes children interested in learning to read? When should they start? What material should we give them to read? Should they read it silently or orally? What, after all, is reading at the beginning— is it naming or sounding letters or is it comprehending and reacting to stories? And so, on and on and on. Nevertheless, if we consider the approaches independently of historical patterns, we see them as

⁴⁷² Mildred C. Letton, "Educational News and Editorial Comment," *The Elementary School Journal* 56, no. 4 (1955): 143.

falling roughly into two groups. Stated as simply as possible, the distinction between the two is this: One group (let us call it the “code-emphasis” group) believes that the initial stage in reading instruction should emphasize teaching children to master a code— the alphabetic code. The other (the “meaning emphasis” group) believes that children should, and do, learn to read best when meaning is emphasized from the start.⁴⁷³

Having outlined the research question, Chall spent years conducting a meta-analysis of decades of reading research and visiting hundreds of classrooms, examining textbooks, studying instructional reading methods, as well as interviewing textbook authors, reading specialists, and teachers. She also addressed the controversy Flesch had ignited and while she challenged his statement that phonics was not being taught in schools with evidence to the contrary, she agreed that basal readers are repetitive and dull because of the strictly controlled vocabulary. However, she notes an increase in phonics emphasis from 1956-1962.⁴⁷⁴ The increase is due to Flesch’s influence.

After her exhaustive research, Chall concluded:

My review of the research from the laboratory, the classroom, and the clinic points to the need for a correction in beginning reading instructional methods. Most schoolchildren in the United States are taught to read by what I have termed a meaning-emphasis method. Yet the research from 1912 to 1965 indicates that a code-emphasis method— i.e., one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasizes learning of the printed code for the spoken language— produces better results, at least up to the point where sufficient evidence seems to be available, the end of the third grade.⁴⁷⁵

Chall found that phonics had a greater effect on student success in early literacy instruction. This further evidence should have put pressure on educational leaders to

⁴⁷³ Jeanne S. Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate; An Inquiry into the Science, Art, and Ideology of Old and New Methods of Teaching Children to Read*. The Carnegie Series in American Education (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 75.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, 132.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, 307.

rethink the effectiveness of the whole-word approach, yet despite Chall's findings, the whole word method of instruction continued to be the norm in classrooms. It also found a new champion in Wayne State University (and later University of Arizona) Professor Kenneth Goodman (1927-2020).

Goodman, a proponent of the psycholinguistic model of reading, believed that if children interact with high-quality literature, they will acquire reading skills naturally by actively making meaning. He theorized that reading acquisition is similar to language acquisition and aligned his theory with Chomsky's 1965 model of oral sentence production which results in precise encoding of speech being sampled and approximated when the message is decoded.⁴⁷⁶ Readers use their knowledge of language and the world around them to predict what the text will say.⁴⁷⁷ Goodman asserts that children use cues such as syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic cues to read. They look at words as wholes not as the sum of their parts. He developed a miscue analysis to help teachers understand students' thinking while reading the text and address the areas of need. He wrote his highly influential article, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game" the same year as Chall's *Learning to Read*. Goodman's article was a direct challenge to Chall. According to Goodman:

Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input based on the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as the reading progresses. More simply stated, reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game. It involves an interaction between

⁴⁷⁶ Kenneth S. Goodman, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," *Journal of the Reading Specialist* 6, no. 4 (May 1967): 127.

⁴⁷⁷ Curt Dudley-Marling and Sharon Murphy, "Editors' Pages," *Language Arts* 74, no. 8 (1997): 592, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41482919>.

thought and language. Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time.⁴⁷⁸

Goodman's article was widely cited and spurred additional research. For Goodman, mistakes in reading are not negative, they are vital to helping the student figure out the meaning of the text. Meaning is more important than accuracy. In a 1969 article in *Reading Research Quarterly*, Goodman continued to criticize "recent attempts by Chall and others to justify the separation of codebreaking from reading for meaning,"⁴⁷⁹

Goodman claims that whole texts were easier to read than pages, paragraphs, and sentences because they contained more meaning. Letters and graphemes were the most difficult to read because they contained the least amount of meaning and thus the most irrelevant.⁴⁸⁰

While the work of Chall and Flesch, coupled with the more entertaining books of Dr. Seuss' led to the eventual abandonment of look-say readers, the replacement of the whole word approach for phonics did not happen. Instead, Goodman and other whole-word advocates developed the Whole Language approach and continue to promote meaning-making and strategy-based reading instruction. This approach assumes that reading ability develops naturally as students pursue their interests. Whole Language differs from look-and-say because it replaces stilted Dick and Jane stories with real

⁴⁷⁸ Kenneth S. Goodman, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," *Journal of the Reading Specialist* 6, no. 4 (May 1967): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388076709556976>.

⁴⁷⁹ Kenneth S. Goodman, "Analysis of Oral Reading Miscues: Applied Psycholinguistics," *Reading Research Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1969): 9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/747158>.

⁴⁸⁰ Kenneth Goodman and Yetta Goodman, "Twenty Questions about Teaching Language," *Educational Leadership* 38, no. 6 (March 1981): 441.

children's books, which are read aloud by the teacher. Phonics are taught incidentally because according to Goodman, "matching letters with sounds is a flat earth view of the world, since it rejects modern science about reading and writing and how they develop."

Writing is especially important in the Whole language approach and is taught alongside reading, but because the students lack phonics instruction, they rely on "invented spelling." Also, because reading is a natural process to the whole language advocate, students will sense letter/sound relationships as they read and write about things of interest. When the student comes across an unknown word, they should use visual and context cues to guess, if that fails, they can ask the teacher.⁴⁸¹

Frank Smith was another influential whole language advocate who believed that reading is a meaning-making process, and that focusing on phonics instruction was counterproductive. His book *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read* (1971) addresses the cognitive and psycholinguistic processes involved in reading. He focuses on the cognitive and linguistic processes that occur in the mind of the child during the act of reading and explores how readers construct meaning from text, emphasizing the role of natural language acquisition processes in reading. To Smith, like Goodman, reading is a natural process like language acquisition. He argues that children learn to read like they learn to speak—through immersion in a literacy-rich environment and by making sense of written language in a meaningful context. Smith views reading as a top-down process where readers activate prior knowledge and use context to make predictions and inferences while reading. He

⁴⁸¹ Kenneth S. Goodman, *What's Whole in Whole Language? A Parent/Teacher Guide to Children's Learning* (Heinemann Educational Books, Inc, 1986), 37.

argues that readers do not merely decode words, but actively engage in comprehension through interaction with the text. *Understanding Reading* was a whole language approach in direct contrast to the phonics-based methods promoted by Rudolf Flesch in “Why Johnny Can't Read.”

From the 1970s on, other researchers, like Yetta Goodman, Dorothy Watkins and Marie Clay followed in Goodman's footsteps spreading Whole Language throughout the United States despite its flawed research. Once more Rudolf Flesch enters the fray. His book, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* (1981) addresses the continued issues surrounding a top-down approach to reading that despite being disproved remains in the public school system. In this book Flesch attempted to take on, chapter by chapter, the criticisms he received because of the first *Johnny* book. Unfortunately, this book did not have the impact of the first *Johnny*, nor did it end the proliferation of whole word reading instruction.

Flesch's final word on the subject marked the 30th anniversary of *Why Johnny Can't Read*. On June 12, 1985, Rudolf Flesch authored an article for *Education Week* entitled “Why Can't Johnny Read? We Taught Him Incorrectly.” In it, he summarizes *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* and explains how the whole word method was introduced around 1927 to the United States causing reading problems. He also takes a softer tone towards teachers than in the book stating, “Enemies of public education have been quick to say that all this amounts to an indictment of our public schools. But that is a simplistic judgment. Decades of painstaking research have shown that neither our schools nor our

teachers are to blame.”⁴⁸² Instead, he recommends systematic phonics, a method introduced in the 1940s by Robert H. Seashore of Northwestern University, who stated that an English-speaking student enters first grade with a speaking and listening vocabulary of about 24,000 words. This student simply needs to be taught the sounds and symbols for the forty-four sounds of English and the 26 letters of the alphabet that represent those sounds, as well as “a little over 100 letter groups such as *ch*, *igh*, *ng*, *oy*, and *wr*.”⁴⁸³

Flesch mentions the 124 studies he had outlined in *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* and states that they have been further collaborated by two successive research reviews: *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, by Jeanne S. Chall of Harvard University, and *Research in Reading*, by Robert Dykstra of the University of Minnesota. Once more phonics was found to be superior yet the whole word method reigns in schools. Flesch offers more support for his claim that phonics is best by mentioning other research findings as well as the 1983 NIE sponsored Commission on Reading in which nine researchers found that the best way to teach reading was through systematic phonics instruction.

Writing such a polemic book about a deeply controversial subject had distinct consequences. *Why Johnny Can't Read* caused a shift in reading instruction towards

⁴⁸² Rudolf Flesch, “Why Can’t Johnny Read? We Taught Him Incorrectly,” *Education Week*, June 12, 1985, sec. Education, <https://www.edweek.org/education/opinion-why-cant-johnny-read-we-taught-him-incorrectly/1985/06>.

⁴⁸³ Flesch, “Why Can’t Johnny Read? We Taught Him Incorrectly,” *Education Week*, June 12, 1985, sec. Education, <https://www.edweek.org/education/opinion-why-cant-johnny-read-we-taught-him-incorrectly/1985/06>.

phonics with commercial publishers adding in some phonics to their reading curriculums. While it was not the phonics-first approach Flesch advocated, a move towards phonics was a powerful result of his book.

Another impactful consequence of Flesch's book was parental influence. Parents, concerned about their children's reading abilities, began to take a more active role in their education. The book's popularity encouraged parents to advocate for effective reading instruction in schools and promote phonics-based approaches. Critics contended that Flesch oversimplified the complexity of reading instruction and attributed all reading problems to the teaching method.

They argued that other factors, such as socioeconomic background and individual learning differences, played a significant role in a child's ability to read. They further argued that Flesch did not consider the broader educational and social context in which reading instruction occurred and did not adequately address the needs of diverse learners, and that his prescription for teaching reading was too narrow. They claimed that educational policy, teacher training, and parental involvement also had a substantial impact on children's reading abilities. Critics questioned Flesch's qualifications and motives, suggesting that he had a personal agenda or financial interest in promoting phonics-based reading programs.

Despite these criticisms, Flesch's book had a significant impact on the debate surrounding reading instruction in the United States. It contributed to a renewed interest in phonics-based methods, and over time, there has been a shift towards more phonics-based strategies in instructional reading programs. *Why Johnny Can't Read* sparked ideological debates about education, with some viewing Flesch as a conservative who

opposed progressive educational methods and advocated for a more traditional approach. This led to polarization and often hindered constructive dialogue about effective reading instruction.

The Reading Wars may have quieted between the 1980s and 2000s, but they were certainly far from over. The next chapter will explore the factors that reignited the Reading Wars, specifically journalist Emily Hanford's influential 2019 article, “At a Loss for Words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers” as well as her podcast, “Sold A Story” (2023). Both pieces address the impact a discredited theory of reading instruction has had on educational practices, policies, and literacy in the United States.

Chapter 8

The Reading Wars Reignited

Throughout the 1980s and 2000s, the Reading Wars continued to rage. In 2000, Congress stepped into the fray, convening a National Reading Panel. The panel reviewed reading research and released a report stating that explicit, systematic teaching of the letter/sound relationship improves reading achievement. They also determined that there was no evidence in support of the effectiveness of the whole language approach. Whole language advocates had no choice but to acknowledge the value of phonics.

Rather than disregarding whole word instruction completely, publishers added incidental phonics. Thus, the Whole Language Approach gave way to Balanced Literacy. This method added phonics to whole word teaching to create a “balance” between reading for meaning and incidental phonics instruction. According to Mark Seidenberg, a psychology professor and specialist in psycholinguistics, focusing specifically on the cognitive and neurological bases of language and reading at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, “Balanced literacy was a way to defuse the wars over reading. It succeeded in keeping the science at bay and it allowed things to continue as before.”⁴⁸⁴

Hard Words

On September 10, 2018, education journalist and audio producer Emily Hanford’s American Public Media (AMP) documentary, “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being

⁴⁸⁴ Emily Hanford. “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being Taught to Read?” Accessed October 23, 2023. <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2018/09/10/hard-words-why-american-kids-arent-being-taught-to-read>.

Taught to Read?” began to fan the flame of the Reading Wars even higher. The documentary and accompanying written report investigated the science of reading and

why many children struggle to learn how to read. It also examined the impact of teacher training and curriculum choices on reading outcomes.

Hanford's article and podcast addressed the problem the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania school district was facing in 2015: only 56 percent of third graders were scoring proficient on the state reading test. While poorer children fared worse, many students, regardless of socioeconomic background, were struggling. Bethlehem was a balanced literacy district. When a student came across an unknown word, they were told to look at the picture and guess, meaning was the most important aspect of reading. But when the books no longer had pictures, the students were at a loss. The Bethlehem School District realized the importance of teaching phonics in early literacy education. As Jodi Frankelli, a member of the Bethlehem School District stated, "We never looked at brain research. Never."⁴⁸⁵

Hanford explains that brain research focusing on the reading process began in earnest in the 1990s and it was determined that learning to read is not a natural process like learning to speak. The brain is wired to read, it is wired to talk. This is in exact contrast to the assumption behind look-say, whole language, and balanced literacy. More than simply having access to quality literature and reading topics of interest is required to teach reading. Brain research demonstrates the importance of an evidence-based, systematic approach to phonics instruction.

According to Hanford, prioritizing phonics is essential for improving reading outcomes and preventing reading difficulties in children. Her argument is like the one

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

Rudolf Flesch made in 1955, but Hanford has brain research on her side, something that was lacking in Flesch's argument.

She ends the article with a critical take on the lack of teacher preparation courses to prepare teachers to teach reading in an explicit and systematic way. The main issue is that teachers don't know how to teach students how to read as well as the disconnect between research to practice gap. In addition, according to Hanford, "Education as a practice has placed a much higher value on observation and hands-on experience than on scientific evidence."⁴⁸⁶ The key for improving reading instruction is to change the way teachers are taught so that they can teach every student how to read.

At A Loss For Words

Hanford restates this argument in the article, "At A Loss for Words: How a Flawed Idea is Teaching Millions of Kids to be Poor Readers" which was released on August 22, 2019. This piece raised significant concerns about the look-say method and its persistence in American education. Hanford asserted that this method, under different names like whole language or balanced literacy, had been debunked by cognitive scientists as ineffective. She argued that its dominance had led to a crisis in literacy, causing many students to struggle with reading.

Hanford begins by discussing the three-cueing system, first proposed in 1967 by education professor Kenneth Goodman who believed that "efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

the first time.”⁴⁸⁷ Instead, he argued for a system that would help readers make predictions about the text through three cues: graphic cues, syntactic cues, and semantic cues.⁴⁸⁸ By following the whole language method outlined by Goodman, schools are teaching the flawed strategies that poor readers use to figure out a word since they don’t have the skill to decode a word using phonics.

Marie Clay, an educational researcher, and whole language advocate in New Zealand, developed her own three cueing system called MSV (meaning, sentence structure, and visual information) independent of Goodman, but both constructed their models by observing beginning readers and noting their mistakes. With this observational data, they attempted to identify the area in which the child struggled with reading, but both focused on reading comprehension so if a student read the word incorrectly but maintained the meaning, accurate decoding was not as important.

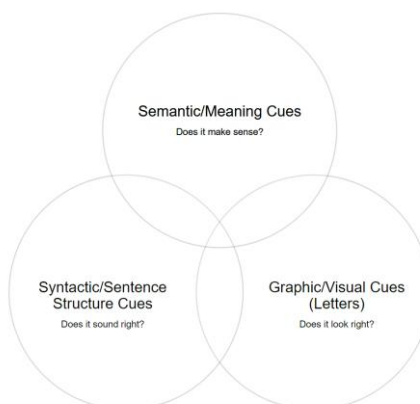


Figure 6. *Venn diagram of the three-cueing system*. Image by Marie Emmitt, David Hornsby, and Lorraine Wilson. *The Place of Phonics in Learning to Read and Write*, (Victoria, Australia: ALEA, 2013), 9.

⁴⁸⁷ Kenneth S. Goodman, “Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game,” *Journal of the Reading Specialist* 6, no. 4 (May 1967): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19388076709556976>.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

Hanford discusses how Clay incorporated her cueing techniques into an educational program designed to assist first-graders who were facing reading difficulties. This program, known as Reading Recovery, was introduced in New Zealand during the 1980s and eventually gained global recognition as one of the most extensively employed reading intervention programs. Yet, the three-cueing system in any form was shown to be an ineffective reading strategy.⁴⁸⁹

The three cueing system makes learning to read more challenging thus struggling readers fall further behind causing a decrease in the acquisition of vocabulary, comprehension, and content area knowledge. There are additional studies conducted by multiple researchers, including Charles Perfetti, Tom Nicholson, Philip Gough, William Tunmer, and Keith Rayner, demonstrating the ineffectiveness of the three cursing system.⁴⁹⁰ Yet, the three cueing system continues to be used and has been incorporated into the commercial reading program Units of Study authored by Lucy Calkins and Fountas and Pinnell Literacy created by educators Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell.

In addition, “reading failure is most likely a cause, not just a correlate, for the frustration that can and does result in delinquent behavior.” A disproportionate number of individuals with poor reading skills eventually quit high school and find themselves involved with the criminal justice system.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁹ Keith E. Stanovich, “Romance and Reality,” *The Reading Teacher* 47, no. 4 (December 1993): 280–91.

⁴⁹⁰ Emily Hanford. “Hard Words: Why Aren’t Kids Being Taught to Read?”

⁴⁹¹ Michael S. Brunner, “Reduced Recidivism and Increased Employment Opportunity Through Research-Based Reading Instruction,” January 1993, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/141324NCJRS.pdf>.

Hanford argues that as long as this flawed method stays in American school systems, many students will remain struggling readers, affecting every aspect of their life. This is completely unnecessary because one of the most consistent and professionally researched areas of reading has found that skilled readers do not rely on context cues in order to read.⁴⁹² Skilled readers decode words with phonics and possess a thorough understanding of the relationships between sounds and their corresponding spellings. This has been proven using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI).⁴⁹³ Using fMRI technology, researchers are able to see that strong left hemisphere engagement during early word recognition is a hallmark of skilled readers and is characteristically lacking in children and adults who are struggling with reading.⁴⁹⁴

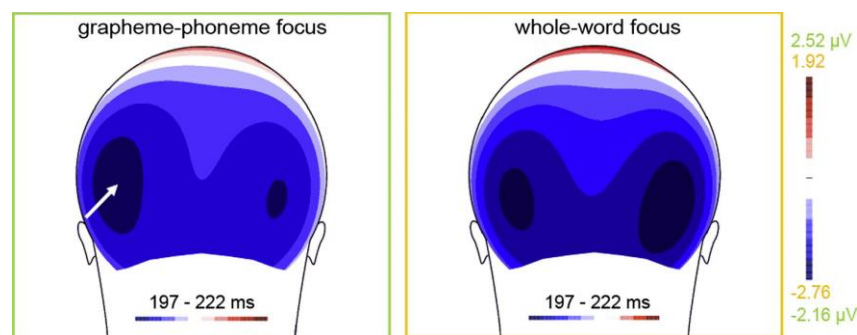


Figure 7. *Decoding effects in visual word ERPs.* Image by Yuliya N. Yoncheva, Jessica Wise, and Bruce McCandliss, “Hemispheric Specialization for Visual Words Is Shaped by Attention to Sublexical Units during Initial Learning,” *Brain and Language*, 145.

⁴⁹² Keith E. Stanovich, “Romance and Reality,” 280–91.

⁴⁹³ Joanne Taylor, Matthew Davis, and Kathleen Rastle, “Comparing and Validating Methods of Reading Instruction Using Behavioural and Neural Findings in an Artificial Orthography,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 146, no. 6 (June 2017): 851.

⁴⁹⁴ Yuliya N. Yoncheva, Jessica Wise, and Bruce McCandliss, “Hemispheric Specialization for Visual Words Is Shaped by Attention to Sublexical Units during Initial Learning,” *Brain and Language* 145–146 (June 2015): 23–33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandl.2015.04.001>.

This is the same argument Flesch made in 1955, but without fMRI imaging, he was left little more than a philosophy of how to teach reading based and mostly observational studies. Skilled readers can identify words quicker than objects as a result of orthographic mapping. Orthographic mapping requires an understanding of the relationship between sounds and the letters that make the sound. Unskilled readers use the three-cueing system. When teachers teach the three cueing system, they not only teach the habits of poor readers, they are also impeding on the process of orthographic mapping.⁴⁹⁵

Hanford ends the article by discussing the impact of teacher training and curriculum choices on reading outcomes. This is the same issue that Flesch addressed in *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* where he acknowledged that teachers were not at fault for not teaching phonics if they themselves were not taught how to do so.⁴⁹⁶ Hanford notes that three cueing and phonics don't mix, which means balanced literacy is not the method that should be used. Rather, Hanford, like Flesch, recommends the explicit and systematic instruction of phonics. She, like Flesch, is hopeful that the gap between research and practice will close as more teachers and educators are made aware of the science of reading.

Sold A Story

The most recent, and hopefully the last, salvo in the Reading Wars was launched on October 20, 2023, by Emily Hanford in her six-part podcast “Sold A Story.” Across

⁴⁹⁵ David A. Kilpatrick, *Essentials of Assessing, Preventing, and Overcoming Reading Difficulties*, *Essentials of Psychological Assessment* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2015), 143.

⁴⁹⁶ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*, 1st ed (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 92.

the six episodes, each ranging in time from 32 to 53 minutes long, Hanford discusses how the teaching of reading went wrong, the authors and publishing companies that promote poor reading habits and the consequence of an unproven method. Hanford began her investigation five years prior, initially delving into the challenges faced by dyslexic children in accessing support within the educational system. Her initial investigation led to the creation of several documentaries and articles focused on reading instruction, including “Hard Words” and “At A Loss for Words.”

In the first episode of “Sold A Story” entitled *The Problem* a parent watches her child’s Zoom reading class during Covid and realizes he can’t read. Hanford explains that a staggering 65% of fourth-grade students in the United States fall short of proficiency in reading. To become proficient readers, children require the acquisition of specific skills, and unfortunately, many schools are not providing instruction in these critical areas. How did this problem come to be?

The second episode entitled *The Idea*, Hanford delves into the significant role played by Marie Clay in promoting this flawed idea. Marie Clay, a reading teacher, and researcher from New Zealand, introduced a program for struggling readers known as Reading Recovery in the 1970s. This program operated on the premise that proficient readers resort to sounding out words as a last resort, first relying on other “cues” such as context and sentence structure. After Clay’s work caught the attention of certain professors at Ohio State, the program rapidly gained widespread adoption in the United States and continues to be widely utilized. The podcast features a revealing excerpt from a 1978 interview with Clay, who passed away in 2007. In the interview, she mentions the uncertainty surrounding our understanding of what transpires in the brain when children

read, adding that it's improbable that we will ever fully comprehend it. However, as Hanford elaborates, we have since made significant strides in our understanding of this process, and what we now know contradicts Clay's theories. Unfortunately, this updated information has been slow to permeate the field of education and the development of instructional materials aimed at teaching children to read.

Episode three aptly called *The Battle*, outlines the fight that resulted from President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative. Schools that used reading programs supported by scientific research would be given money to ensure student success. However, proponents of Marie Clay's cueing concept perceived Bush's Reading First initiative as a challenge to their ideas. Hanford begins the episode outlining the problem that California faced as a state that wholeheartedly embraced the whole language approach in the 1980s saw test scores so low that by the mid-1990s something drastic had to be done. The superintendent of California schools at that time was Bill Honig, who had been a firm supporter of whole language until test scores and science convinced him otherwise. But he was optimistic that once teachers and the public were made aware of the science backing phonics instruction things could be quickly changed for the benefit of all students.

George W. Bush made literacy a major focus of his campaign and once elected he began to put the Reading First Initiative into effect which would put billions of dollars behind effective, science-based, reading instruction. Marie Clay wanted to have her Reading Recovery program qualify for a portion of the substantial federal funding allocated for the president's Reading First initiative. Bob Sweet was the congressional staffer responsible for drafting the associated legislation. Clay met with him to find out if

Reading Recovery would qualify for the initiative. He initially told her no because her program was not backed by science. She informed him that she would modify the description of the program to comply with the initiative and be eligible for funding. She was not alone. Other whole word advocates like Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell followed suit and added in some phonics to a whole language, three curing approach but not abandoning it altogether even though it was proven to be detrimental to struggling readers.

Whole language advocates also fought back. Hanford explains that in August 2005, the Reading Recovery Council of North America lodged a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Inspector General, alleging that the Department of Education was endorsing a “misinformation campaign” against Reading Recovery. Two additional vendors, who felt that their programs were falling out of favor under the Reading First initiative, also submitted comparable complaints. Subsequently, the Inspector General investigated, and it was revealed that some consultants assessing the Reading First Initiative grant proposals had affiliations with commercial reading programs. The conflict of interest caused Congress to reduce the budget for Reading First by over 60 percent by 2007, and to eliminate it entirely by 2009.⁴⁹⁷

Episode four of “Sold A Story” deals with the personalities surrounding whole language. This is like when Flesch spoke of William S Gray and Arthur Gates. Entitled *The Superstar*, Hanford examines Lucy Calkins, who is currently one of the most prominent elementary educators in the United States.

⁴⁹⁷ Emily Hanford, “Transcript of ‘Sold A Story’ E3: The Battle,” accessed November 5, 2023, <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/10/27/sold-a-story-e3-the-battle>.

Hanford explains that in the early 1980s, Calkins established the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University with a primary focus on writing instruction. Calkins Writer's Workshop "was to writing instruction what the whole language movement was to reading instruction. The basic idea was that if kids are motivated to learn, they will."⁴⁹⁸ Also, like a whole language approach, Writers Workshop functioned under the assumption that learning to write occurred naturally as a result of writing. There was little need to focus on spelling, grammar or writing mechanics, rather, students will learn to write by writing.

Calkins expanded into reading instruction in the late 1990s, but since writing was her area of expertise, she invited the Ohio State professor Gay Su Pinnell and Marie Clay to collaborate with her. All these educators were authors for the same publishing company, which is the topic of the fifth episode of the podcast.

Entitled *The Company*, episode five discusses the British educational publishing company Heinemann which specialized in professional development books for teachers. Hanford explains that by publishing books by Marie Clay, Lucy Calkins and the expensive reading system, Leveled Literacy Intervention and Benchmark Assessment System, developed by Fountas and Pinnell, Heinemann became a multimillion-dollar company. Hanford makes an argument like the one Flesch made against publishing companies like MacMillan who had a personal stake in keeping the whole word method as the main teaching method. Heinemann not only published teacher development books but also books about the politics surrounding reading instruction, especially aimed at

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

Bush's Reading First Initiative. The primary message in those books, Hanford states, is a hands-off approach in schools. The books asserted that teachers were professionals who know what is required to effectively educate students, without the interference of politicians and scientists dictating their methods. This was the same message Flesch received in some of the pieces written after *Why Johnny Can't Read* was published.

The final episode of the podcast is called *The Reckoning*. It addresses the consequence of Hanford's reporting. It bears a striking resemblance to the fallout from *Why Johnny Can't Read*. Hanford discusses how parents have started to notice that not only can their child not read, but they are also being taught how to read. That nationwide curriculums like Calkins, Fountas and Pinnell's, and Clay's lack the necessary components to teach reading. Part of the reason was that parents got to see first-hand how teachers were instructing their children as well as Hanford's reporting of the situation.

With so much pressure from parents, school districts and social media, as well as the states such as Arkansas, California, and Colorado rejecting her Units of Study, Calkins was forced to release a statement declaring her intention to release an updated curriculum that embraced the science of reading. Hanford interviewed Calkins for the episode and asked her to explain the thinking behind her Units of Study because research from the 1970s and 1980s had proven the need for phonics in reading instruction.

Calkins cannot not give a succinct answer but does state that she was coming from a mindset that reading instruction needed to be “exciting, and poignant and beautiful, and, you know, getting kids on fire as readers and writers.”⁴⁹⁹ Hanford states

⁴⁹⁹ Emily Hanford, “Transcript of ‘Sold A Story’ E6: The Reckoning,” accessed November 11, 2023, <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2022/11/17/sold-a-story-e6-the-reckoning>.

that the belief that phonics is boring is likely what has kept the whole word in schools for so long despite its ineffectiveness. Flesch shared in both Johnny books that Horace Mann referred to phonics as boring, but Flesch contented that nothing was more boring than the controlled readers required of the whole word approach. “Naturally, the children are bored — just as bored as you are yourself, reading their books with them day after day. The only way to give them some happiness and joy of achievement is to teach them phonics...”⁵⁰⁰

Hanford contends that what is boring for parents is not boring for children. She also contends that reading instruction aligned to science can be beautiful and exciting. Calkins must agree since she decided to rethink her curriculum to align it more with the science of reading. Her peers, Fountas and Pinnell, however, have remained steadfast in their devotion to Marie Clay’s three curing system. Hanford was unable to question the president of Heinemann about his now conflicting authors, but he released a statement prior to the release of the podcast stating that Fountas and Pinnell would be reworking their curriculum to focus more on foundational skills and decoding.

The problem, as Hanford sees, is that whole word advocates believe that reading is solely about meaning making and while that is the goal, to get there beginning readers need to be able to consistently read the word as it is written and the only way to do this is through phonics. The shift towards science and the increased realization that the whole word approach was harmful to beginning readers has many teachers feeling guilty. Hanford mentions that while many have found her reporting eye opening and life

⁵⁰⁰ Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do about It* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 129.

changing for their instruction others have criticized her. Not surprisingly she faces the same criticism as Flesch with whole word advocates stating that she is causing controversy, misunderstanding the cueing method, and attacking teachers.

There are many similarities between Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* and Hanford's "Sold A Story". The irony is that Hanford's reporting would have been completely unnecessary had Flesch been able to win his argument. With Heinmann announcing its plans to have authors revamp their work to incorporate the science behind reading instruction, the pendulum will swing in Flesch favor after all, even if it took 68 years after the release of *Why Johnny Can't Read* to do so.

This chapter outlined the podcast "Sold A Story" by Emily Hanford. In doing so it looked at the similarities in her argument for phonics to those made by Flesch in 1955 and 1981. The concluding chapter will address what the goal of this dissertation was and why it matters.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the social and cultural effects of Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* (1955) and *Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools* (1981). Through a qualitative study, an understanding and articulation of the cultural and educational ramifications of Rudolph Flesch's books was addressed as were various aspects of the ideological and pedagogical debate his books sparked.

Why Johnny Can't Read remains an influential work that sparked a national debate on reading instruction in the United States. Flesch's book critiqued the prevailing teaching methods of the look-say method over phonics-first instruction. In the post-World War II era, educational reform was on the rise with a focus on modernizing curricula. However, reading instruction in many American schools was characterized by a shift away from a phonics-based method in favor of a whole word approach. Flesch argued that this shift was detrimental to children's literacy skills. He believed that the whole word method's failure to teach phonics was the cause of reading difficulties for American children.

Why Johnny Can't Read sparked a major controversy regarding reading instruction. Flesch's criticism of the whole word method gained widespread attention. Many educators and policymakers began to reconsider the value of phonics instruction in early reading education. Flesch's book played a significant role in promoting the importance of phonics-based instruction. Advocates for phonics argued that it provided a more systematic approach to teaching reading, emphasizing the relationship between letters and sounds, which improved reading fluency and comprehension. This led to the

resurgence of phonics-based teaching in many classrooms, though not as much as Flesch advocated.

Flesch's book also had an impact on educational policies. In the decades following publication, there were efforts to develop and implement reading curricula with a stronger emphasis on phonics instruction. These programs, like George Bush's Reading First Initiative, aimed to address Flesch's concerns and improve overall reading proficiency in the United States. Flesch's book also underscored the need for better teacher training in reading instruction. Teachers needed to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach phonics.

Flesch's book ignited Reading Wars, an ongoing debate about the best methods for teaching reading. The divide between proponents of phonics and advocates of whole word methods continues to shape reading instruction in schools today. This debate has implications for curriculum development, teacher preparation, and student educational outcomes. Flesch's work also had an impact on the family level. Parents, concerned about their children's reading abilities, began to take a more active role in their education. The book's popularity encouraged parents to advocate for effective reading instruction in schools and promote phonics-based approaches.

Flesch's critique of the whole word method prompted a shift towards phonics-based teaching, influenced educational policies, and initiated a longstanding debate among educators and policymakers. Yet, while his book was a best-seller that prompted important conversation and consideration, the academic community rejected it. He may have won over parents, but he alienated teachers.

The readable style that he was known for did not lend itself to the academic writing required to prove his point. In addition, *Why Johnny Can't Read* was written before there were fMRI scans to prove him correct. Thus, critics were able to cast doubt over the validity and reliability of the studies he cited demonstrating phonics superiority. He was accused of distorting research findings and failing to demonstrate effective phonics techniques. Flesch's confrontational style and insinuation of a conspiracy between professors and publishers further diminished his influence. Flesch acknowledges in *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* that while his first book helped to increase parental involvement and the inclusion of some phonics in reading programs, it did not bring the anticipated change.

Beyond the scope of this study but not to be overlooked is the political implications of Flesch's books. Flesch linked reading to patriotism describing the founding fathers learning to read at home through phonics. He cautions against a method that would teach English as if it were a pictographic language such as Chinese. He also boldly states that the word reading is destroying democracy since public education is failing to teach all children to read. This was particularly alarming to parents in a post-World War II Cold War era. The fear was that other countries, like Russia, would come into power because American children could not keep up academically.

Flesch's work continues to be a significant reference point in discussions about how best to teach children to read. The consequences of *Why Johnny Can't Read* extend beyond Flesch's time, continuing to shape the way children are taught to read and the role of parents, teachers, and policymakers in the process.

In the words of George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past history are condemned to repeat it.” The Reading Wars have demonstrated this to be true. Reading instruction in the United States has undergone vast changes in educational philosophy, methods, and policies over the centuries.

In the 1600s the main goal of reading instruction focused on religious instruction and occurred in the home or small community schools. This led to the creation and wide use of McGuffey readers which focused on religion, virtues, and morals during the 1800s. The late 1800s saw the move towards compulsory education, more formalized instruction, and Horace Mann’s failed introduction of the whole word method into schools. Although his attempt fizzled, it did not die completely, leading to its reemergence in the 1930s with the *Dick and Jane* and other look-say readers. As a result of Flesch’s 1955 book, look-say morphed into Whole Language and later Balanced Literacy during the 1960s-1980s.

As science improved, the truth of Flesch’s words began to be affirmed with other researchers citing the damage caused by unproven methods of reading instruction. Once more the pendulum has swung back to phonics instruction but with an additional understanding of the value of phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Reading is a complicated task, one for which the brain was not intrinsically created. It is thus of utmost importance that reading instruction utilize effective, systematic, and evidence-based practices.

The goal of this dissertation was to examine the social and cultural effect Rudolph Flesch had on reading instruction in the United States. Additional study of value would be to examine the history of reading instruction in other English-speaking countries, such

as England, Australia, or Canada and how that has shaped that country's current educational practice. Another valuable contribution to the discussion would be a thorough comparison of instructional practices between English speaking countries and the synthesizing of best practices. Finally, a comprehensive examination of the impact of Flesch's work in England where it was read by England's Schools' Minister Nick Gibb (2018) who was able to implement a nationwide policy promoting early phonics instruction. The goal of any dissertation is to move research forward and gain a better understanding of the topic at hand. It is the author's hope that this dissertation has done just that for reading instruction.

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