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[Home](#) > Structured Literacy: Setting the Stage for Student Literacy Success

Structured Literacy: Setting the Stage for Student Literacy Success

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The explicit and systematic instructional approach of Structured Literacy ensures students build their skills in each component area of literacy.



Nearly a century has passed since Samuel Orton conducted his pioneering work with children with language disorders who were bright, but could not read. We

have known for years how to teach dyslexic children to read, spell, and write; yet countless students still struggle in school to learn these basic skills. These students require an explicit and systematic instructional approach, now aptly called *Structured Literacy (SL)* by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA). According to IDA Board President Hal Malchow (July, 2014), the goal is to have a common term that represents all of the effective programs, referred to by such names as the Orton-Gillingham approach, multi-sensory learning, and explicit phonics, that conform to the IDA's *Knowledge and Practice Standards* for reading instruction.

Effective reading instruction focuses on teaching the specific areas of language that undergird learning to read, spell, and write—phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and discourse, as well as sound-symbol association (i.e., phonics). The explicit and systematic instruction of SL ensures students build their skills in each component area of literacy. Phonology refers to the sound system of language and difficulties with phonological awareness,

phonological memory, and/or rapid automatic naming are key indicators of dyslexia. SL teaches students to appreciate phonological (sound) units, such as syllables and phonemes, the smallest sound units, when they hear them orally in words. In concert with strengthening phonological and phonemic awareness skills, the SL approach espouses teaching students to map the sounds of our language onto letters and letter combinations. For example, students learn that the word “sleigh” has three sounds— /s/, /l/, and /long a/; and then, they learn that we need to represent that /long a/ sound when spelling using four letters— “eigh.”

SL instruction goes beyond teaching students the basic phonograms (e.g., -at, -am, -ed, -in) and, for example, includes teaching the six syllable types of English orthography, which makes reading and spelling longer words more manageable. Understanding morphology is another key component to the teaching of reading and spelling. Initially, students are taught inflectional morphemes, such as the verb tense endings -ing and -ed. And then, because around the 4th grade 60% of unknown words are morphologically complex, it becomes critical to teach derivational roots, prefixes, and suffixes, such as those of Latin and Greek origin. SL also focuses on syntax (e.g., word order, complex sentence structure), semantics (e.g., word meaning), and discourse (e.g., narrative versus expository text) to help students better understand the text they read and express themselves in writing.

SL instruction systematically guides students through these components and more. The goal is to integrate newly learned skills into a smooth and automatic reading experience in order to facilitate comprehension—in other words—learning. The beauty of this explicit, systematic, and cumulative approach is that instruction can, and should be, individualized to each student’s needs in order to achieve success. For example, as a clinician, when I begin working with a client who is in the 5th grade and who does not have basic decoding skills, I begin with the basics—teaching phonemic awareness and letter-sound combinations. But, at the same time, I may also teach the six syllable types and introduce some Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes. I can’t belabor teaching the phonograms (e.g., cat, fat, mat; man, fan, ran), which are critically important, because the 5th grade curriculum is now full of multisyllabic words that he needs to be able to read (e.g., amendments, condensation, evaporation, unconstitutional). The SL approach ensures that I begin with and solidify the basics, but that I also know to incorporate advanced word study into my instructional plan as quickly as possible for these older students.

Because SL systematically incorporates all aspects of spoken language into the teaching of reading, spelling and writing, from the awareness of individual sounds to the meaning of entire sentences, the approach helps the student, whether dyslexic or just learning to read, to develop a full and refined understanding of the structures of language that set the stage for successful and solidified reading, spelling, and writing habits. Understanding and incorporating the tenets and practices of *Structured Literacy* is a win for teachers, clinicians, and tutors, but most importantly, it is life-changing for the students whose literacy skills we want to improve.

Read more about Structured Literacy [here](#) [1].

Dr. Pierson wishes to thank [Fran Sobolak](#) for an initial draft and her colleague [Dr. Lauren Katz](#) for her review of this piece.

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[1] <https://dyslexiaida.org/what-is-structured-literacy/>