



What Is Phonics?

H ave you ever approached the sink in an airport restroom only to freeze in confusion as you searched high and low for the water faucet? Perhaps, to the amusement of fellow travelers, you artfully waved your hands around, above, and below the sink in vain hope of locating the latest technological advance in triggering mechanisms. It was only when you stepped back in consternation, accidentally stumbling over a button located on the floor, that water finally gushed forth—if only for a few seconds. Now imagine that, worldwide, each water-dispensing device in sink, tub and shower were unique. Think of the time and frustration involved in learning and memorizing the operation of each individual device that one might encounter over a lifetime. How much time and frustration is saved by familiarity with a few variations of a standardized faucet!

Perhaps this seems an odd way to introduce a comparison between whole-language and phonics approaches to reading. However, the parallel is not such a stretch as it might seem. “Whole-language,” or the “look-and-guess” system of reading, requires the reader to memorize thousands of individual words before he can begin to approach literacy. Since he lacks the decoding tools that phonics provides, each word he chances upon is a frustrating unknown. On the other hand, the student of phonics learns word-attack skills that enable him quickly to decipher virtually any word he may encounter.

What is phonics? Simply put, phonics is an approach to reading that begins by teaching letter sounds, then progresses to the blending of those letter sounds to form syllables and words. The English language is comprised of 45 sounds, 21 of which are vowel sounds. Consonant and short vowel sounds are taught first, and can be learned by most children with about three month’s instruction. A child who can identify and blend only these sounds already has the word-attack skills to read well in excess of 1,200 words.

In contrast, with the “look-and-guess” or “whole language” approach, the average child memorizes about 300–400 words per year. Since minimal or no instructional time is given to teaching letter sounds or sound blending, the child lacks the skills to decode any word outside his memorized list. By the time the “whole language” student reaches fourth grade, he will be able to identify approximately 1,500 words. Meanwhile, the phonics student will long since have mastered the remaining consonant and vowel blends, gaining the capability of reading more than 24,000 words.

The failure of the “whole language” method extends beyond reading to encompass spelling and nearly every other subject, for virtually all academics are based in some way upon reading. The child who has learned letter sounds and blends has a head start not only in spelling, but also in writing, history, science, math, and religion. 

How Is Little Stories for Little Folks Different from Other Phonics Programs?

Little Stories for Little Folks was developed by Nancy Nicholson, who drew on courses in linguistics from her major in Secondary Education—English and comparative studies of phonics programs by Monica Foltzer, M.Ed., Edward Fry, Ph.D., Marion Hull, Ph.D., and others. While appreciating the work done by these prominent educators, Nancy Nicholson knew that the average child does not need a course in linguistics in order to learn how to read, and that the average parent does not need (nor have time for) a course in linguistics in order to teach her child how to read. Motivated by this realization, the author set out to develop a phonics program that would:

- maximize ease-of-use for busy parents;
- be interesting and enjoyable for young readers;
- instill a love for our Lord, develop character, and promote Catholic family life.

Nancy Nicholson's approach to phonics is similar to Rosetta Stone's approach to teaching foreign languages. That is, as infants we didn't learn speech by conjugating endless columns of verbs. Rather, we learned verbs within the context of speech. Similarly, instead of requiring the child (and parent) to memorize abstract lists of phonograms and phonics rules, *Little Stories for Little Folks* teaches phonics patterns within the context of word families. Instead of relying on technical terminology ("phoneme," "grapheme," "phonogram"), *Little Stories for Little Folks* utilizes more familiar vocabulary, instructing the child, for example, to be aware of "silent" letters, and letters or sounds that he can "hear."

Teaching phonics-based word families, the author believes, is the most gratifying way for children to discover quickly that there are patterns to words and that they can read a LOT of words even when they are just beginning. Phonics drill can seem so pointless and dry to youngsters that it is almost self-defeating. They

want to READ! In *Little Stories for Little Folks*, students are quickly launched into reading interesting, phonics-based short stories, and children discover with the very first story that they can actually read a "whole book"! This early success quickly breeds more success, producing eager readers with excellent word-attack skills.

The testimony of countless homeschooling families confirms the efficacy of Nancy Nicholson's approach. One mother writes: "I LOVE the *Little Stories for Little Folks* phonics program. I had looked at several phonics programs and was reduced to tears due to the complexity/cost of them. Nancy Nicholson's curriculum is easy to read and understand and is affordable!" 

