

Quick Start Guide



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I. Why I Wrote This Curriculum

For many years I taught future elementary school teachers at the collegiate level. My area of training was literacy, and so my job was to teach these future teachers how to teach children to read. Along the way my wife and I decided to homeschool our children. She too is a reading specialist, and as we became involved in the homeschool community, parents would come to us with their reading questions and concerns.

What started out as a trickle turned into a steady stream of questions and struggles from our fellow homeschoolers. Two things became apparent to us: 1) There is a sizable need in the homeschool community for help in the area of reading, and 2) There isn't a lot of quality help available. Those realizations prompted us to try to produce some simple materials that we could give to these parents. One item turned into a second, then a third. There was never an intention to go into business, but the demand has simply pulled us in that direction.

II. What is unique about these materials?

With so many materials designed to start on page one and march through page after page in systematic order, there is so much wasted time and effort covering material that has already been mastered or has nothing to do with the child's struggle. Our materials are designed to first test your child's strengths and weaknesses before any instruction begins. Once you know where instruction needs to be focused, you turn to the specific instructional activities that are designed to target those areas of need.

A second feature that makes these materials unique is the multi-sensory approach to virtually all instructional activities. There are no paper/pencil worksheet type activities used. Multi-sensory teaching is well established as the preferred method for students with learning disabilities, but are also quite beneficial to all students.

III. Are the materials research based?



About fifteen years ago Congress commissioned a blue ribbon panel to search out everything we know about reading, and the best ways to teach it. After two years of gathering and consolidating, they issued their report to Congress. Their findings have been the benchmark for reading specialists ever since. The materials produced by The Struggling Reader are anchored in this landmark report.

The instructional activities are also based on best-practices research. They are more than clever games and cute crafts. Each activity is based on tried and proven strategies for helping struggling readers master critical skills.

IV. Are the materials suitable for students with learning disabilities?

A classic teaching strategy for students with learning disabilities is the use of multi-sensory activities. When one or more the senses is compromised, it only makes sense to direct instruction through those senses that are strong. Thus a student with an auditory processing disorder benefits when instruction is presented visually. In fact, the more senses that are involved in a single activity, the more likely it is that the instruction will be fully processed and reinforced.



There are those that make unsupportable claims for their product. We trust that we are not one of those companies. There is no magic curriculum out there that will solve anyone's problems. Where struggles occur, it is often accompanied by lots of repetitive, hard work on the part of both teacher and student. Having said that, we believe that our materials do utilize multi-sensory instructional strategies in a way that is beneficial to all learners, including those with learning disabilities.

V. Where do I start?



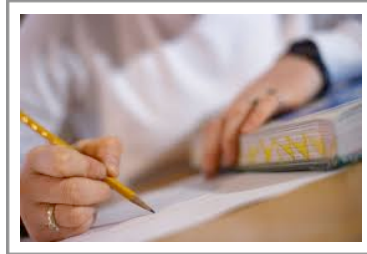
Perhaps you have looked at the materials on this website and are feeling encouraged that this might be something that will help your student. However, you might also be feeling uncertain about where to start. Do I need to buy everything? If I were to buy the pieces over a period of time, which one should I buy first? Second? Or is there a better way to think about this? Let me try to answer these questions for you.

A wide variety of people have made good use of these materials. Some had a beginning kindergartner or first-grader, while others had students moving into the middle school or high school years. It doesn't take much imagination to see that the needs of students can differ simply on the basis of their age/grade. Beyond that, every child is unique. They come from different sized families with their own peculiar schooling goals and practices. Some students struggle with learning challenges. Some parents have found direction from professionals, while others are just beginning to suspect there might be something amiss. Where to start?

If you were to bring your child to me for testing I would ask you a host of questions about your child's reading. You would explain what you are seeing in your child's attempts to read, what you have tried, what seems to have helped and what didn't. Once all of that information was gathered I would administer all of the tests I have at my disposal. I would do that if your child was 5 years old, 9, 13 or 17. At the end of the day I would want the most complete picture possible. Based on what you've told me I might guess that it is a phonics issue, or a fluency flaw, or a phonemic awareness weakness. But I wouldn't be able to say with any confidence unless I actually administered the

tests. And it wouldn't matter how old they are, the peculiar characteristics of their struggle, or any of the many variables that might affect their efforts. I would still want to use all of the tests to get the most complete picture I can.

I have tested teenagers and found phonemic awareness deficiencies, even though those are skills that are taught (if at all) in the first and second grade. I have also found phonics deficiencies in teens, in spite of the fact that we think of these skills as something taught in those early grades. I have learned to make no assumptions, and so I administer all of the tests. This often comes as a surprise to parents who are convinced that their 12 year old cannot possibly have a phonics problem or a phonemic awareness issue. Again, I have learned to assume nothing. Once all of the tests have been given, I can then lay the results out in front of me, see the big picture, and develop my strategy for targeting the weak areas revealed by the tests.



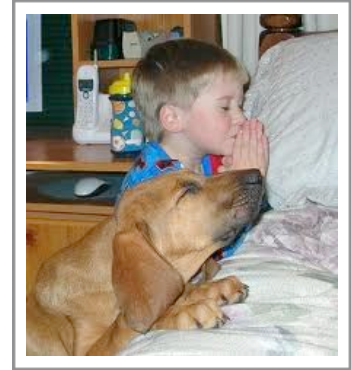
That is my approach to older kids. But what about the young ones? Do I really expect comprehension abilities, or fluency skills from a beginning reader? The answer is yes. Of course we must have age-appropriate expectations. A first-grade child will not read as fluently as a student in fifth-grade, and that fifth-grader will not read as fluently as the junior in high school. Nevertheless, there are reasonable expectations at every level. The same is true of comprehension, phonics, and all the rest. And so, even for the younger students I administer all of the tests.

The testing is a means for assessing where a student is performing, relative to a reasonable, research-based expectation for where he should be. With this in mind, the place to start is to administer all of the tests. This gives you the most complete picture of your child's struggles. Having said that, I would acknowledge that there is a natural progression to reading instruction, with certain things emphasized at different stages along the way.

We learn the alphabet. Then we learn the sounds those letters represent. We put two or three of those letters together, with the sounds they represent, to form very basic words. Those early experiences rely heavily on phonemic awareness skills, and then move to the world of phonics. For children in the early grades, a lot of instructional time is spent on these things. And so some have approached these materials on the basis of the age of their child. They see the emphasis on phonemic awareness and phonics, and start there. This has some measure of logic to this approach, in spite of what was pointed out above about having age-appropriate expectations in all reading components for even young students.

We get another common question related to the one about where to start. If you administer all of the tests, and find deficiencies in all areas, where do you start? Do you concentrate on phonemic awareness and fix that before you move to, say, phonics? In other words, do you finish one area before you should move to another? The simple

answer to that is no. While I would probably focus first on phonemic awareness because it is so foundational, that does not mean that I can't also be working on phonics, or comprehension-building activities, or any other area at the same time. This is how reading instruction has occurred for decades. Even as a young student is struggling to decode sentences like, "Bob had a dog," we are likely asking our reader comprehension questions like, "What did Bob have?" While we discuss and test these reading components as if they are separate, independent areas, in reality they are all inter-related. Thus, when you strengthen phonics & decoding abilities, that normally results in a more fluid reader. Fluent readers have a better shot at comprehension. It is worth noting that when you remediate one area, other areas of reading may improve. I personally begin with phonemic awareness and phonics because that is where reading instruction typically begins with young children, but I do not treat them as rigid categories that must be mastered before I attend to anything else.



VI. Is there a particular order to follow?

If your child shows weaknesses in three or four different categories, it is NOT necessary to master one before moving on to another. In fact, it is recommended that you work on more than one at a time. This is because the categories are interactive. For example, when your student struggles with decoding, laboring to pronounce each word, it is easy to see why fluency would be lacking. Comprehension would probably suffer too, because the reader is expending all of their mental energy just sounding out the words. And so you can help comprehension, and fluency, by strengthening decoding.

This does not have to mean hours spent trying to cover two or three areas at a time. The activities are designed to be as brief or as lengthy as seems appropriate to you.

VII. How much time should I spend each day?

There is no special answer to that question. Much will depend on the age of the child, their ability to stay focused, and a host of other factors. Activities can take 5 or 10 minutes, or can be stretched out for as long as you like. They are designed to be multi-sensory and kid-friendly, and so you may find your child actually wanting to continue a particular activity. You might do a phonemic awareness activity for 10 minutes and then add a comprehension activity for another 10 minutes. They do not necessarily have to be back-to-back. You can make them fit your school day in any way that works for you. Many activities

VIII. How flexible are the activities?

The activities are meant to be very flexible, and easily adjustable for different ages. If an activity seems too juvenile for your older student, simply modify it in a way that makes it more age-appropriate. We have talked to many parents who have taken the core of an activity, tweaked it, and created a “better” way to engage their student.



Some activities are listed as individual activities, while others are labeled as group activities. Indeed there are some that require a genuine group of students, but many only need another person to roll the dice with, etc. That can be a sibling or the teacher. Again, with a little thought most group or individual activities can be turned into an activity that is usable in your setting. Many activities, especially in our Reading Comprehension materials can be used in other subject areas.

IX. Can I use this as my reading program, or is it just a supplement?



Yes, you can use these materials as your total reading program. However, you have to understand that this curriculum does not tell you what to do from one day to the next, as some “complete programs” do. Nevertheless, we have had a number of parents purchase the materials thinking they were going to supplement their existing reading program, only to find themselves using these materials more and more exclusively.

As an example, some “complete” programs come with graded readers; books written for your first grader, second grader, etc. We do not offer those books, believing that they can be readily found at libraries or on-line. Some parents feel confident enough to put their daily reading instruction together themselves, while others feel they need a teacher’s manual to tell them what they should be doing from one day to the next. We understand, and respect both positions. And so, if you feel you need the guidance of a teacher’s manual that tells you what to do each step of the way, you may feel more comfortable using our materials to supplement. For others, you will find our materials to be all that you need to put together a successful reading plan.

The Struggling Reader
E-mail: TheStrugglingReader@gmail.com

www.TheStrugglingReader.com