

The Teaching of Reading: a Continuum from Kindergarten Through College



A Supplementary Textbook for College Education Majors
with Practical Classroom Diagnostic Tests and
Answers to the Phonics vs. Whole Language Controversy

and Especially for
College Reading Instructors
Willing to Try New Approaches to Old Problems

and for the Training of Adult Literacy Volunteer Tutors
and Parents Who Want to Homeschool Their Children

By

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Section 1 Chapter 6









Two Common Misconceptions about Dyslexia

Misconception Number 1: Dyslexics see letters backwards. They see *b*'s when they should be seeing *d*'s. Wrong! The image on a dyslexic's retina is the same as that of anybody else's. True, it is upside down. That's normal. Every human is born seeing everything upside down. But it doesn't take long for our computer brain to take its visual sensory input and make it agree with its inner sense of reality by reversing it. You can purchase a special type of goggles that will make you see everything upside down. However, if you wear them long enough, the computer brain once again forces its data into making sense, and even with the reversing vision glasses on, you see right side up. Of course, the moment you take these glasses off, now you're seeing upside down. But not to worry, the correct vision is fairly quickly restored. How did this misconception come about? It came about because people working with dyslexics noticed that their students would often read *was* for *saw* and *saw* for *was*. They would write *d*'s for *b*'s and *p*'s for *g*'s or *q*'s. The misconception came about because so many people jumped to the wrong conclusion. The misreading or miswriting came about not because the visual images the dyslexics had in their mind were somehow twisted around, but because of the way the computer brain is pre-programmed to operate.

For example, let's look at four different pictures in which the positioning of the same object makes no difference as to what the object is.

		bird b	b b
		cup c	c c
		dish d	d d
		fish f	f f

Repeated for convenience.

		bird b	b b
		cup c	c c
		dish d	d d
		fish f	f f

We have a bird, a cup, a dish and a fish. Wonderful. The idea was to have the person tutoring say to the person learning to read:

This is a bird. Say bird.









This is the letter b inside the bird.

This is the word bird. Say bird.









This is the letter b. Say b.

Although this approach can be demonstrated as an effective tool for most beginning readers, there is a built-in problem. Dyslexics won't remember which way the bird's head is pointing, which way the cup is hanging, which side of the plate the spoon is on, or which way the fish is swimming and which way its tail is pointed..

Look at the next group of pictures. Aren't they exactly the same bird, cup, dish, and fish?

f	f	f fish		
p	p	p dish		
c	c	c cup		
q	q	q bird		

Here we have a fish, dish, cup, and bird. But look again.

		t t	t	t
		q q	q	q
		c c	c	c
		p p	p	p

Here we have a bird, a cup, a dish, and a fish. What's next?

If we read left to right, the word bird still starts with a b and ends with a d. But the letter b in the letter column is a d. The p in cup is a q.

But let's look at these letters again another way.

Here we have a fish, dish, cup, and bird. But look again. We have no problem recognizing the objects. But the letters?!

Now the letter in the letter box in front of the bird is a q. The first letter in the word box in front of the dish is a p. Hmm. So let's look another way.

By now, it should become quite apparent that the *position* of objects is meaningless to the computer brain. A bird is a bird is a bird no matter what direction its tail or head is pointed. But a **p** or a **d** or a **q** can be associated with a bird's body and tail and consequently interpreted by the dylexic mind as a **b**. Because position is so important for letter recognition and because letter recognition is so important for reading and spelling, initial reading programs that use objects for letter association, can *unintentionally* create *reversal* problems for *dyslexics*.

They need a more kinesthetic¹⁴ approach to letter identification rather than purely audio-visual.

Misconception Number Two about dyslexics is that they don't hear the sounds of the letters—that they don't have phonemic awareness. That is not true. And for much the same reason that it isn't what a dyslexic sees that is the source of the problem.

The human mind tries to make sense out of what comes in through its senses. It automatically ignores the position of the head and tail of a dog for identification purposes. It judges size of objects not by the amount of space it takes up on the back of the retina but by the relationship it has to other objects within the field of vision. The television and movie special effects people use this phenomenon to create new "realities" as in the movie, *Honey, I Shrank the Kids*. This is the reason I give for three out of four reading experts in a car misreading a street sign that said KOVAL as ROYAL. It was night. It was in Las Vegas. We had just minutes before driven by Caesar's Palace. Wham. Here is a street sign. There is no word KOVAL in the English Language. The name, yes. Word, no. And because KOVAL was not a name frequently encountered by at least three of us, our minds simply construed the K as R and the V as Y.

Not only does the human mind, especially the dyslexic mind, misconstrue letters and letter order, it does the same with sounds. I have demonstrated time and time again to teachers that the ability to hear specific phonemic sounds is not essential. It's the combination of phonemes, the patterns of phonemes within the context of the intonation, the tone, volume, and phrases surrounding the phonemes that produce the translation of sound waves into words within the human mind. Sorry about the academic language. I apologize. To help you understand what I'm talking about, I'll give you something you can duplicate if you have a tape recorder. Carefully record the non-word: *sbrattle*. It might not be too easy for you to say. But if there were a word *brattle* and we said it was Pop's *sbrattle*, all you have to do is take out the pop and you have *sbrattle* left. Record the word as I have done.

What I love to do is prove to teachers that their ability to hear phonemes is predicated on their experience with words and letters, not with the sounds themselves. Even our legendary Professor Higgins would most likely fail this test. What I do is to tell my audience that I want them to spell a simple little non-word to test their ability to hear sounds. I ask them not to say, "What did you say?" or "Did you say _____?" I ask them to focus their attention on the word that I will play from the recorder at the count of three. I say, "One, two, three." SBRATTLE! The spellings: Well, the most common is *SPRATTLE*. The second most common is BRATTLE! Others are *SPRADDLE*, *STRADDLE*, and BRADDLE. After I tell them what the word was and show them the correct spelling, then and only then can they hear the S-B-R consonant blend in the word SBRATTLE. What happens is that each person's computer brain slightly adjusts what it actually hears (the jargon is processed) to fit the situation.

This is why if somebody from Boston asks me, "WAY'r kin AH pah'k muh KAH?", I understand him as saying, "Where can I park my car?" That is why you can take the words: Wants pawn tom dare worst tree bars, and if you pronounce them with the proper intonation everybody will understand what you said as being: Once upon a time there were three bears. Try it!

¹⁴ Kinesthetic refers to the muscle memory that can be activated by as simple a method as writing with a pencil or even, as Orton-Gillingham enthusiasts love to do, writing in air.