

What Is Differentiated Phonics Instruction?

And Why It Lifts Even Students Who Are Above Grade Level

So what does differentiated phonics instruction *really* look like, for whom, and when? Throughout the book, I will provide detailed examples and sample lessons, but let me start with a quick overview. What follows are differentiated supports for a Grade 1 phonics lesson. When taken as a whole, these can feel overwhelming—so many adjustments to each part of a daily phonics lesson are needed. My recommendation is to observe these in their entirety, and then start slowly when applying them. For example, start with one instructional routine, such as blending. Incorporate the differentiated supports for several weeks to a month until they become habit. Then move on to another key phonics instructional routine. Over time, you will build your capacity to meet the needs of all your students throughout the entire phonics lesson in ways that will be immediately impactful and habit forming.

DIFFERENTIATION: ABOVE-LEVEL STUDENT SUPPORTS

Students who are reading and spelling words above grade-level expectations for phonics need both **acceleration** and **enrichment** to maximize their learning during each

week's instruction. These supports can be used during whole-group lessons to differentiate the instruction and practice or during small-group lessons. These are the students whose needs are most frequently ignored during whole-group lessons (and who rarely get much small-group support). However, we can do much to help them fully realize their learning potential through some simple lesson modifications.

Acceleration

The most effective and impactful thing you can do for above-level students is to place them along the phonics continuum at a point that best meets their instructional needs. This will maximize their learning growth potential.

- **Administer the “Comprehensive Phonics Survey” and the “Comprehensive Spelling Survey—Quick”** (see the appendix) to determine student mastery of grade-level phonics skills. Use these results to determine a starting point for one or more small groups of above-level students. Just a word of caution: Some students who are reading above grade-level expectations are not consistently and accurately spelling words with *phonics* skills that are at grade level. The results of these assessments will often show students at different points along the phonics continuum (e.g., higher in decoding/reading than encoding/spelling). These students will benefit from the grade-level encoding work done with each whole-group lesson.
- **Use the weekly lessons in your program or resource during small-group time** to teach and practice these advanced skills. Since you probably won't

have time to meet every day with above-level students, focus on key parts of the lesson such as blending, reading and writing about decodable texts, word building, and dictation.

- **Assign other portions of the lesson for independent or partner work.** Generally speaking, providing above-level students with independent, enriching reading and writing experiences linked to this small-group support is a powerful way to meet their needs.

Enrichment

So that above-level students benefit from whole-group lessons on the on-level skills you have determined they have mastered, do the following:

- **During whole-group lessons,** include additional above-level student supports provided in the samples that follow to offer enrichment for key activities (e.g., word building, dictation, reading decodable text, and writing extension, including a word bank with more complex words).
- **During small-group time,** you can also use these enrichment activities for students who are only slightly above level and can benefit from this stretching of their skills. However, acceleration (by placing students further in the scope and sequence) is the best way to maximize their learning potential.

Following are some possible ways to differentiate key components of a phonics lesson for students who are above grade-level expectations. Since most phonics curricula do not provide these supports during whole-group lessons (only during small-group lessons), you can fold these into your weekly instructional routines.

SAMPLE ABOVE-LEVEL SUPPORTS

PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
Blending	Connect the target skill with words containing that skill and with more complex skills. For example, if the skill is short <i>o</i> and you have students blend CVC words like <i>hop</i> and <i>hot</i> , add words at the end that include consonant blends and digraphs like <i>stop</i> and <i>chop</i> . This skill is found later in the scope and sequence. For other skills, add multisyllabic words, such as compound words or words with suffixes and prefixes, that you want to continue working with students on during small-group time (e.g., <i>read/reread</i> , <i>hope/hopeful</i> , <i>ball/football</i>).	Add challenge words at the end of the activity, such as multisyllabic words like <i>raining</i> and <i>playing</i> . See Chapter 5: Blending Routine
Dictation	Add more complex words as you did for blending. You might choose to use some of those “challenge” blending words during dictation. Dictate these words for students to spell <i>while</i> the other students are self-correcting their on-level dictation (that you have displayed on the board for students to check).	Add the following words and sentence after students spell the simpler words for that lesson: <i>rainbow</i> , <i>playing</i> , <i>My birthday is in May</i> . See Chapter 9: Dictation Routine
Word Building	When the word-building activity is completed, have on-level students practice reading to partners the words that you have written on the board as they are built, or provide time for students to build their own words using the letter cards. Use this time to guide above-level students to build the more complex words.	Add the following word sequence to the activity after students build the simpler words: <i>brain</i> , <i>train</i> , <i>training</i> , <i>retraining</i> .
Word Sort	Add more complex words to the word sort or replace some of the existing words with more complex ones. You might choose to use some of the words from the blending and dictation activities.	Add these longer, more complex words to the word sort, or replace some of the existing words with these: <i>raining</i> , <i>rained</i> , <i>playing</i> , <i>played</i> . See Chapter 11: Word Sort Routine

PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
Word Ladder	This can become an independent or partner activity. Students can move to another part of the room to complete it.	Have students complete the word ladder independently or with a partner.
High-Frequency Words	Include the new high-frequency words from the stories you read with students during small-group lessons.	Have students write sentences in their writer's notebooks for the high-frequency words from their phonics lesson. Include additional words for these students that are further in the scope and sequence or that are generally more difficult for students (e.g., words that begin with <i>th</i> and <i>wh</i> like <i>there/where</i> or <i>that/what</i> and irregular words like <i>they</i> and <i>does</i>). Each week, have students read their sentences from the beginning of the year to a partner.
Read Decodable Text	When rereading the week's decodable text with on-level students to build students' fluency, have above-level students reread their text from the small-group lesson or another more complex text during that same time. It's just a book switch—no need to move to a different part of the room or disrupt the flow of the lesson.	Have students read the decodable text during the initial whole-class lesson to confirm mastery of the week's phonics skill in context. When students are rereading the decodable text during subsequent whole-group lessons, have above-level students read or reread a decodable text from their accelerated phonics lesson further in the scope and sequence or read a self-selected book during this time.
Writing About Decodable Texts	Add more sophisticated vocabulary words for students to include in their writing and review the writings to work on more complex skills, such as sentence construction and variety.	Challenge students to include these two words in their writing about the decodable story: <i>explore</i> , <i>discover</i> . Put these words in a word bank on the board. Model for students how to combine sentences and select more precise vocabulary.

DIFFERENTIATION: BELOW-LEVEL STUDENT SUPPORTS

It is estimated that about 95 percent of elementary students, regardless of background, are cognitively capable of learning to read when they receive direct instruction on the foundational skills of reading.



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Students who are reading and spelling words below grade-level expectations for phonics must have access to grade-level content, but that content needs to be differentiated and scaffolded. In addition, modified expectations are needed. These

supports can be used during whole-group lessons to differentiate the instruction and practice, or during small-group lessons. **Modified expectations do NOT mean lower expectations.** Modification generally relates to the amount of content students are expected to cover in a specific time or to the supports provided for their reading and writing tasks (e.g., smaller chunk of text in the time given, sentence frames and a word bank for writing support). Although phonics instruction needs to have a clearly defined scope and sequence (with built-in review and repetition to achieve mastery), that does not mean students learn phonics skills in that predetermined sequence. We can work on learning new skills while also working on fluency with previously taught skills yet to be fully mastered.

Frontload Content

The students who are reading and spelling below grade level will need supports before, during, and after a lesson to access the content properly and solidify their learning. Keep in mind that small-group work is not something we do only after students have struggled in a lesson. As a teacher, you know which students might struggle with a specific activity or reading during a whole-group lesson. A brief small-group lesson *prior* to the whole-group lesson might be the necessary scaffold or support. Here are some examples:

- **If students are reading a decodable text in a whole-group lesson, have them listen to an audio recording** of the story during small-group time and follow along with the text prior to the whole-class reading. This will enable them to participate more fully in the lesson when reading, talking about, and writing about the story.
- **In addition, guide students through an echo read of all or a portion of the text prior to the whole-group lesson** to further prepare students for the whole-class reading. This echo reading should include a focus on the big ideas and key vocabulary in that text.

Modify Expectations

So that below-level students benefit from whole-group lessons on skills that are further in the scope and sequence from where

they are in terms of mastery and to minimize their frustration with the new content, do the following:

- **Hold students accountable for only a portion of the content.** For example, during blending work, have students practice only a subset of the words to get to mastery with them. During word sorts or word building, have them sort or build only a subset of the words. This ensures work with the new skill, but in a way that is not overwhelming.
- **Revisit the skill during small-group lessons.** Because you have given these students access during the whole-group lesson, they have a solid introduction to grade-level skills to build on when they get to that skill during small-group lessons (once they have worked on previous skills they haven't yet mastered).
- **Design instruction with the awareness that students don't learn phonics skills in a lockstep manner.** Once they understand how the system works (i.e., we have letters that, by themselves and in different combinations, can be used to stand for the sounds of English), it's a matter of us introducing them to these specific sound-spellings and giving them ample practice to master them and easily transfer them to all reading and writing situations. If we create a classroom environment in which we model and promote active observations of words, some students begin learning sound-spellings through these observations before we formally introduce them.

Address Previous Skill Needs During Small-Group Time

So that students who are below grade level benefit from phonics instruction, focus during small-group time on skills you have determined they have not mastered.

- **Make sure the pacing is robust during these lessons** (e.g., not too slow that students can't catch up), and you focus on high-impact activities like blending, word building, dictation, and reading and writing about decodable texts.

SAMPLE BELOW-LEVEL SUPPORTS

PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLE
Blending	Modify expectations by reducing the number of words you hold students accountable for. In this way, they learn a subset of the words with the new skill, and you minimize their frustration (cognitive load).	Have students focus on only some of the words in the blending exercise. Hold them accountable for only a small set of words (e.g., the first two rows of words or the first two words in each row plus the review words). See Chapter 5: Blending Routines
Dictation	Include words with review skills in the dictation. If you can provide minimal contrasts, such as dictating <i>ran</i> (lower level) and then dictating <i>rain</i> (on level), this contrasting will help make the new learning easier to grasp and will allow students to connect it to known (or previously taught but perhaps not yet mastered) skills.	Make sure words that can be decoded with previously taught skills are also included in the dictation activity. In addition, do more dictation focusing on these previously taught skills during small-group time.
Word Building	Modify expectations by reducing the number of words you have students build with the new skill. Make sure simpler words are at the beginning of the word-building activity. Then have students read, build, and write simpler words on their own that you write on the board while you continue the activity with the rest of the students.	Guide students to build only the first two to three words, and then write a list of words on the board using previous skills for them to build and read with partners using letter cards while you continue the whole-class activity. You can also involve students in the entire whole-group lesson, but circulate and offer support for harder words (e.g., write words or difficult spellings for students to trace), and then do word building during small-group time using simpler skills yet to be mastered.
Word Sort	Modify expectations by reducing the number or complexity of words you hold students accountable for sorting. Select a few high-utility words. In this way, students learn a subset of the words with the new skill, and you minimize their frustration.	Select a subset of the words from the word sort (e.g., four to five words for students to sort). Holding students accountable for only some of the on-level words will reduce the cognitive load. As an alternative, have students sort half of the on-level words in the word sort and replace the other half with simpler words (e.g., contrasting long a and short a spellings). See Chapter 11: Word Sort Routine

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PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLE
Word Ladder	Frontload the activity by completing it in small groups and then repeating it during the whole-group lesson. You might wish to complete only a portion of the ladder during small-group time.	Guide students to complete the word ladder during small-group time, with support from you, prior to the whole-group lesson (a revisit of the activity). This provides a preview of the word meanings (vocabulary support) and another opportunity to practice spelling the words.
High-Frequency Words	Provide word banks, sentence frames, and sentence starters for support.	Have students write sentences in their writer's notebooks using the high-frequency words from their phonics lesson. Provide sentence frames or starters as needed. Each week, have them read their sentences from the beginning of the year to a partner. Include words from previous lessons they are still working on.
Read Decodable Text	Frontload the reading of the decodable text during independent time (listening to an e-version) and small-group time (echo reading and discussing all or a portion of the book). So when students read the book during whole-group time, it will be their second or third exposure to the book. When students reread the book on subsequent days, have them reread only a portion of the text to minimize frustration.	Have students follow along while listening to an e-book version of the decodable text (if available) before reading it with the whole class. Also, meet with students during small-group time to echo read and discuss all or a portion of the text prior to reading it with the whole class. Focus on vocabulary and key ideas.
Writing About Decodable Texts	Provide sentence stems and frames (including summary paragraph frames for reluctant writers) to scaffold the writing.	Provide sentence stems and frames (including summary paragraph frames) to scaffold the writing. Prompt students to complete the stems or frames, and THEN have them continue writing beyond that scaffold. In addition, provide a few words in a word bank for students to include, such as a couple of decodable words and one or two target high-frequency words.

- **Level up where possible during small-group lessons.** For example, if students are still working on short vowel CVC words (e.g., *top*, *sell*), include those words in the blending, dictation, and word-building exercises but also include a few words with skills later in the sequence that you have introduced during whole-group time, such as a consonant blend (e.g., go from *top* to *stop* and *sell* to *smell*). The focus of the lesson is on the earlier skills, but the connection to newer skills is also made and reinforced in a simple and scaffolded manner.

DIFFERENTIATION: MULTILINGUAL LEARNER SUPPORTS



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Today's phonics instruction for multilingual learners takes an asset-based approach.

What should be the focus during phonics for English learners? This question is one I encounter often in my work in schools around the country. Many supports can and should be provided for multilingual learners during the literacy block and beyond. When it comes to phonics instruction, however, there are three main areas of support that have the biggest impact on student learning.

1. **Sound Transfer and Articulation:** Provide information on which sounds do and do not transfer in

various languages, such as Spanish and multiple Asian languages. This is important for several reasons:

- It can alert you to the need for articulation support in which you model and help the student focus on the position of the mouth (tongue, lips) and whether or not the sound is voiced (throat vibration) or unvoiced (no throat vibration) to help students feel and say the sound.
- In addition, if students have some literacy learning in their primary language, knowing the sounds and (especially) the spellings that transfer can accelerate English learning.
- If you are teaching in a dual-language setting, knowing which sounds and spellings transfer can help you better focus your instructional time (e.g., not repeating transferrable skills and focusing on the nontransferable skills).

2. Vocabulary: Even though most of the words in early phonics instruction are Tier 1 words commonly used or understood by students when speaking or listening, for English learners, some of these words might be unfamiliar. In addition, the words get progressively more difficult as students move up the scope and sequence. The goal of phonics instruction must be both the decoding of words with the newly taught phonics skill *and* knowing the meanings of these words. The activities are not word-calling endeavors; we are building foundational skills in multiple areas of language. This requires you to pull out words from the week's instruction and do additional vocabulary work during small-group lessons to support these students. These words need to be

- addressed in concrete ways (e.g., showing a picture, acting out, demonstrating),
- connected to a student's prior knowledge (e.g., saying the word in the student's primary language), and
- connected to other known words (e.g., through a webbing of related words, discussing synonyms and antonyms, and so on).

You can reinforce these word meanings while reading.

3. **Build on Students' Primary Language:** The best instruction for multilingual learners takes an additive, asset-based approach and values what these learners bring from their primary language to the learning of English. This might be vocabulary (e.g., Spanish-English cognates), knowledge of a writing system (e.g., sharing some or most of the same printed letters), and so on. Simple modifications, such as allowing students to discuss their understanding of a story in their primary language before guiding them to express these ideas in English, can go a long way to honoring their existing language skills.

SAMPLE MULTILINGUAL LEARNER SUPPORTS

PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
Introduce Sound-Spelling Sound Transfer and Articulation Support	Focus on the articulation of sounds that do not transfer from English to the students' primary languages. If articulation videos and sound wall cards are available, use these resources.	In Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Hmong, there is only an approximate transfer for the long a sound. Focus on articulation. Model correct mouth position. Contrast /a/ and /ā/. Have children make each sound to feel the difference. If handheld mirrors are available, use them for support.
Vocabulary Focus Blending Lines and Decodable Texts	Introduce words for all pictured items. Also, select a set of words from the decodable texts, blending activities, and other words to preteach. You might need to focus on a few each day during a small-group lesson. Even though the words in decodable texts are often basic, Tier I words, some words in these books might be unknown to our multilingual learners who are learning	Preteach the name of each pictured items on all activity pages. Also, identify key objects, places, and people in the decodable text illustrations.

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PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
Blending Lines and Decodable Texts (continued)	<p>English as an additional language; they might also be unknown to our native English-speaking students with limited literacy backgrounds. For example, words like <i>log, tad, sip, cap, vet, zap</i>, and others might be unknown to some students.</p> <p>Select a set of these words each week and teach them during small-group time. The goal is for students to be able to both read and define them by the end of the week.</p> <p>To really know a word, we need to focus on its meaning, sounds and spelling, and the context in which it is used. For example, for the word <i>bat</i>, we would discuss the word's multiple meanings (a flying animal and something used in a baseball game to hit the ball). For the word <i>rain</i>, we might discuss what it is, what we wear on a rainy day, and what time of year it usually rains. So during these targeted vocabulary lessons, do the following vocabulary routine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read aloud the word in English and in the student's primary language. You can use a translation app on your phone for students to hear the word in their primary language. Have students say the word, and address any pronunciation or articulation needs. • Provide a brief definition using simple, kid-friendly language. Demonstrate, act out, or pantomime the word. • Connect the word to known words. Start with synonyms and antonyms. For example, connect the word <i>cap</i> to the more familiar word <i>hat</i>. Or connect the word <i>sad</i> to its opposite—<i>happy</i>. 	<p>Preteach other words students will encounter in the weekly texts and activities: <i>plain, stray, sail, brain, raise, trip, train, museum</i>.</p>  <p>Image Source: iStock.com/Yayasya</p>

PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display a photo or create a simple drawing to illustrate the word. For example, words like <i>bug</i>, <i>log</i>, and <i>hut</i> can be easily shown. However, illustrations are sometimes not available. • Have students say the word three times at the end of the lesson to increase the number of times they have said and heard the word. 	
<p>Read Decodable Text</p> <p>Preview the Text</p>	<p>Frontload the reading of the book prior to the whole-group lesson so students can participate successfully in that lesson.</p>	<p>Use the following preview routine for any decodable books or passages in your reading program or set of materials.</p> <p>Introduction: Introduce the story by reading aloud the title and explaining that students will be reading this story to (1) practice their skill in sounding out words and (2) check their understanding of what they read. Remind them that we also read stories for fun and to learn new things. Praise students for their efforts and remind them that you are there to help with any challenges.</p> <p>First Read: Have students follow along while listening to the audio recording (e-book version, if available) during independent work time prior to the whole-class reading.</p> <p>Second Read: Guide students through an echo reading during small-group time before the whole-group lesson. Focus on vocabulary and general understanding.</p> <p>Third Read: Have students read the book during the whole-group lesson with their peers. This careful scaffolding should enable them to have a more successful whole-group reading experience.</p>

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PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
Writing About Decodable Texts	Provide sentence frames and sentence starters at various levels of language acquisition to aid students in writing. Create frames and starters for each week of instruction.	Provide sentence frames and sentence starters to scaffold the writing. Then prompt students to write more (not simply stopping when the frames are completed). Examples: Spain is _____. Spain has _____ and _____. In Spain, _____.
High-Frequency Words	Include activities during small-group instruction to frontload (or review) the key words, such as the Read, Build, Write routine or activities with two-sided flashcards.	Read, Build, Write Routine Select the target high-frequency words from the decodable text and any others that students struggle with and engage them in the Read, Build, Write activity. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Write the word. Have students read it aloud. • Build Have students build the word with letter cards. • Write Have students write the word on paper or a dry-erase board. Prompt them to say each letter name as they write the word. <p>When these tasks are completed, guide students to orally segment the sounds in the word. Then review the written parts of the word students already know (e.g., in the word <i>said</i> students might know the /s/ sound spelled <i>s</i> and the /d/ sound spelled <i>d</i>).</p>

PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
<p>High-Frequency Words (continued)</p>		<p>Guide students to draw a circle or box around the part(s) of the word that are irregular (e.g., <i>ai</i> in the word <i>said</i>) or unknown based on the phonics skills previously taught. They can also put a heart above these irregular spellings because this is the part they have to remember “by heart.”</p> <p>Students can write sentences during independent work for each of these words. To scaffold the exercise, offer sentence starters (e.g., <i>We have _____</i>). Prompt students to write sentences about a specific topic or story they recently read to make the exercise more impactful.</p> <p>Two-Sided Flashcards</p> <p>Have students write the words on one side of an index card, one word per card. You can do this during the “Write” portion of the Read, Build, Write, Extend routine. Then co-construct a simple sentence that students can write on the back of each card, using the word. You can write the sentence for students to copy. Students then practice reading the words in isolation and in context using the flash cards. These two-sided cards offer students additional exposures to these words both in isolation and in context.</p>

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PHONICS FOCUS: LONG A SPELLED AI AND AY		
PHONICS ROUTINE	SUPPORTS	EXAMPLES
Additive, Asset-Based Approach	Use students' home language for support.	Allow students time to discuss stories and answers to questions in their primary language before sharing answers in English, so they can process their understanding fully as you build their oral English skills. For Spanish speakers, highlight cognates where appropriate. For students speaking an English variant or dialect, allow them to use the speech patterns in their variation of mainstream English and then, when appropriate, engage them in translation drills to go back and forth between mainstream English and their variation of English (e.g., African American English, Chicano English).
Other General Support	Frontload vocabulary and reinforce it during and after lessons.	Throughout most phonics programs, there are student activity pages with many pictured items. Preview the names of these items for students before they complete the activities.



FIVE KEY TAKE-AWAYS

1. Students above grade-level expectations need both enrichment during whole-group lessons and challenge lessons and activities during small-group lessons.
2. Students below grade-level expectations need scaffolds and supports before and during whole-group lessons, as well as content-load modifications to minimize frustrations.
3. Students below grade-level expectations need small-group lessons to address previous skills not yet mastered while also receiving grade-level whole-group lessons.
4. Students meeting grade-level expectations might need small-group support at different points in the phonics scope and sequence based on increased challenges.
5. Students who are multilingual learners can benefit from support with articulation, a focus on sounds and spellings that do not transfer from their language into English, additional vocabulary support, and use of their primary language in an asset-based way.

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