

# ***THE LOVE OF LITERACY*** ***MISSOURI COACHES' NEWSLETTER***



## **WINTER 2024**

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## **WELCOME!**

We hope to use this as a place to help you stay current on research, classroom application, and resources related to the topics covered in LETRS and beyond. Please be sure to reach out to your coaches (see the last page) if you have questions or ideas of what to include!



## ***IN THIS ISSUE:***

### **THE READING BRAIN**

How can we connect literacy and language by simply considering how the brain processes these things?

### **VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE**

So many words, so little time! How can we be sure we are providing our students with the best vocabulary instruction possible?

### **STORIES OF IMPACT**

Hear the story of Tara Jackson, a Kindergarten teacher in the Blue Springs School District, and how her classroom has benefitted from her own LETRS learning.

### **RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT**

Speaking of vocabulary, check out this helpful website to get you on the right track.

Plus, a must-read article from Louisa Moats.

# UNLOCKING THE READING BRAIN: Connecting Language and Literacy

**“Informed  
teachers are our  
best insurance  
against reading  
failure.”**

**LOUISA MOATS**

**T**his quote is a great reminder of just how powerful our knowledge and skills are when it comes to helping our students learn to read. In LETRS Unit 1, we dig into the science behind reading and how our brains process language and text. Understanding this can really change the way we teach and give us the tools we need to support every reader in our classrooms.

Unlike spoken language, which kids pick up naturally, reading is something our brains have to be taught—it's not hardwired. The process involves building new neural connections that link sounds to letters, a job that activates different parts of the brain responsible for recognizing sounds, decoding words, and making sense of what we read. When we understand how this works, it helps us be more intentional about the strategies we use, making sure they match what our students' brains need to learn to read successfully.

This is where assessments come in. They're like a flashlight, showing us where things are going well and where there might be gaps. Maybe a student is struggling to hear and manipulate sounds in words—that's a clue we need to focus on phonemic awareness. Or if a student has a hard time understanding or using new vocabulary, we know that's an area to work on. Assessments help us figure out where to put our energy for the biggest impact.

Once we have that information, we can make our teaching even more effective. We might use targeted phonics lessons to help students who are having trouble decoding, or weave in more conversations and rich language experiences to boost comprehension. The science of reading gives us a roadmap to follow, so we can be confident that our instruction is setting our students up for success.

As you reflect on Unit 1, think about how this brain-based understanding of reading might change your approach. Are there ways to add more hands-on, multi-sensory activities? Can you scaffold your lessons to build language skills step by step? Even small shifts can make a big difference. Remember, teaching reading is about so much more than academics. It's about empowering our students to become confident, capable readers who can access everything the world of written language has to offer. And as informed teachers, we have the power to make that happen!

# CHOOSING VOCABULARY WORDS: So Many Words, So Little Time!

“...knowledge of word meanings accounts for as much as 50-60% of the variance in reading comprehension.”

ADOLF & PERFETTI, 2014;  
STAHL & NAGY, 2006

**A**nyone else feel the pressure behind that statement?

Vocabulary knowledge is crucial for reading and writing, but there are so many words and so little time! How do I know which words to teach? Are all words deserving of the same level of instructional time?

Researchers Isabel L Beck, Linda Kucan, and Margaret G. McKeown have written about this dilemma. They suggest teachers use the Three Tiers of Vocabulary model taught in LETRS to identify words from Tier 2 for in-depth instruction. Tier 2 words, often called “academic vocabulary,” are frequently used in print materials across the curriculum but are often unfamiliar to students without instruction. Many teachers like using the Three Tiers of Vocabulary model to select words to teach, but others find it difficult to determine which tier a word falls into.

Dr. Molly Ness takes a slightly different approach to choosing words in her book, “Read Alouds for All Learners.” She recommends that teachers sort unknown words from read aloud books into two categories: words to teach and words to explain.

## WORDS TO TEACH ARE:

- Neither too easy or too difficult but are slightly more sophisticated than students’ speech
- Repeated more than once in the text
- Related to something students already know
- Useful to students, being relevant to their lives and interests
- Likely for students to use in their everyday speaking and writing

These words are the words Ness says should be taught in depth so that students begin to incorporate them into their working lexicons, but there are also important, unknown words in texts that would not meet the above criteria. These are the words to explain.

*(continued on page 4)*

# CHOOSING VOCABULARY WORDS: So Many Words, So Little Time! (continued)

Words to explain should not be ignored completely, but they can be dealt with quickly while reading the text. For these words, a brief explanation or synonym is enough to maintain the meaning of the text even though the word is not likely to be highly useful or relevant to the students currently.

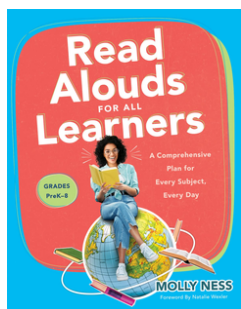
## WORDS TO EXPLAIN ARE:

- Not worth a great deal of instructional time or attention
- Unknown and might impede students' comprehension of the text
- Easy to explain and continue reading

Let's consider an example from "The Very Impatient Caterpillar" by Ross Burach. In the story, the main character is excited to learn that he can become a butterfly, but he becomes very frustrated waiting for the change to happen. The word impatient is a critical word to the story. It is repeated throughout the text, and it is relevant to the lives of young children. It is a word children could use in everyday life. This could be a word to teach.

The author also uses the words chrysalis and metamorphosize in the text. These words are likely unknown to students and might impede their understanding of the story if they do not know the meanings, but they are not as relevant to their own lives. These words could quickly be explained as the teacher reads the text so that students understand the story. They are not likely to be useful to students in their everyday lives, though, so they probably aren't words worth taking instructional time to teach in depth.

So if you find yourself getting mired down in the muddy waters of the Three Tiers model, you might find Molly Ness's categories to be more helpful. At the end of the day, you can rest easy knowing that whichever words you chose to teach helped to build the vocabulary knowledge of your students. And that was time well spent!



**PD PAIRING:**  
[Read Alouds for All Learners](#)



[The Joy of Reading Aloud](#)  
[Amplify Science of Reading Podcast S8 E2](#)

# STORIES OF IMPACT:

## Tara Jackson, Kindergarten, Blue Springs SD



I had a little girl in class this year that had totally stumped me for the first part of the school year. She already wrote her name beautifully, participated and followed along in class like a champ, but when we did letter and sound testing, I was shocked to learn she couldn't name a single letter or sound. I decided to focus on the letters in her name in addition to the letters we introduced for the week. After four weeks, she still

couldn't tell me the letters in her name, despite us working on them daily! My first thought was that I would need to establish some working memory strategies with her.

Then I noticed when we were playing the “quiet person” game, where she had to pick another quiet student to replace her as the “quiet person,” that she only pointed to other students instead of using their names to call on them. She didn't seem to know the names of any of her classmates—including the ones she plays with daily! This made me start to realize that she might have a difficulty with expressive language.

Using what I learned from LETRS, I decided to test her differently—using a receptive language approach instead of expressive. I put all the letters in her name out and mixed them up. I asked her to point to the letters as I said the letter name. She got every single one correct! I put out the 12 letters we have learned so far, and she pointed to every single one! She was able to point to all her classmates in a picture when I gave her their name! I was dreading talking to the parents at conferences. BUT, now I know she knows everything! She is just having a hard time expressing it.

I would like to think that I was smart enough to have figured this out on my own before the LETRS training, but I can honestly say, I look at things a little differently now that I am going through this training. I find myself analyzing each student and the errors they make to help them achieve more success. I feel very lucky to be going through the LETRS training right now.

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[Are you interested in LETRS Training? Let us know!](#)

Lexia  
**LETRS**<sup>™</sup>

# RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT: Vocabulary Tools

**D**o you ever think you know a word until you try to figure out how to explain that word to your students? Maybe you look up the word in a dictionary, only to find a definition so complex you have to look up another word given in the definition to even understand it. Perhaps you can't quite figure out how the pronunciation symbols work and start to doubt if you even know how to say the word aloud at all.

Collins Dictionary is your ultimate resource for preparing to introduce a new word. In one place, you can find:

- student-friendly definitions
- part of speech and conjugations
- example sentences
- pronunciation videos
- synonyms
- word origin and usage over time information
- the word in other languages



With this resource, you can confidently prepare vocabulary instruction that not only explores word meaning, but also begins to build a network of associations around multiple dimensions of word knowledge.

## RECOMMENDED READING:

Teaching Reading is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and be Able to Do



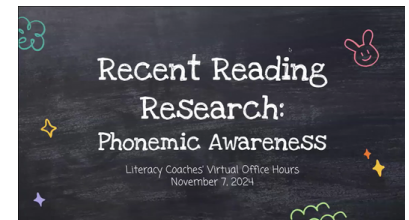
In this white paper published by the American Federation of Teachers, Louisa Moats lays out the research to help us all understand why reading is so hard and why teaching it **is** like rocket science.

## UPCOMING EVENTS & INFORMATION

UPCOMING COACHES' OFFICE HOURS:

- January 9: Phonics
- February 6: Read Alouds
- March 6: Fluency

Did you miss  
November's Office  
Hours? Catch Up Here:



CONNECT WITH YOUR REGIONS' COACHES!

- Southeast
- Heart of Missouri
- Kansas City
- Northeast
- Northwest
- South Central
- Springfield (ATLL)
- St. Louis (EdPlus)
- Central
- Southwest Center

