Empowering Nebraska Educators:

Understanding why the 3-cueing system falls short and how evidence-based reading instruction can help

Summary. In 2024, the Nebraska legislature defined evidence-based reading instruction as "instruction in reading that is in alignment with scientifically based reading research and does not include the three-cueing system model of reading instruction…" (Nebraska Revised State Statute section 79-2607). The 3-cueing approach to reading instruction is ineffective for teaching students to read, yet the practice persists in many Nebraska classrooms. The Nebraska Department of Education has provided this guidance to demonstrate the negative implications of using this model for teaching reading, and why evidence-based reading instruction, often referred to as the *science of reading*, is essential for early literacy development.

What is 3-cueing? The 3-cueing model has its origins in a "balanced literacy" or "whole language" approach to reading instruction. *Balanced* is an appealing term, but in reality, this approach has yielded too little systematic instruction in foundational reading skills, including phoneme awareness, phonics, and fluent word recognition. In the 3-cueing system, children are taught to rely on context and pictures to identify printed words instead of using their knowledge of letter sounds. The practice reinforces what poor readers do and does not support the development of decoding skills. The ability to decode or "sound out" new words when they're encountered is a critical skill as grade-level texts and the vocabulary words within them become increasingly complex. And when students struggle to decode, they also struggle to read fluently, resulting in low comprehension.
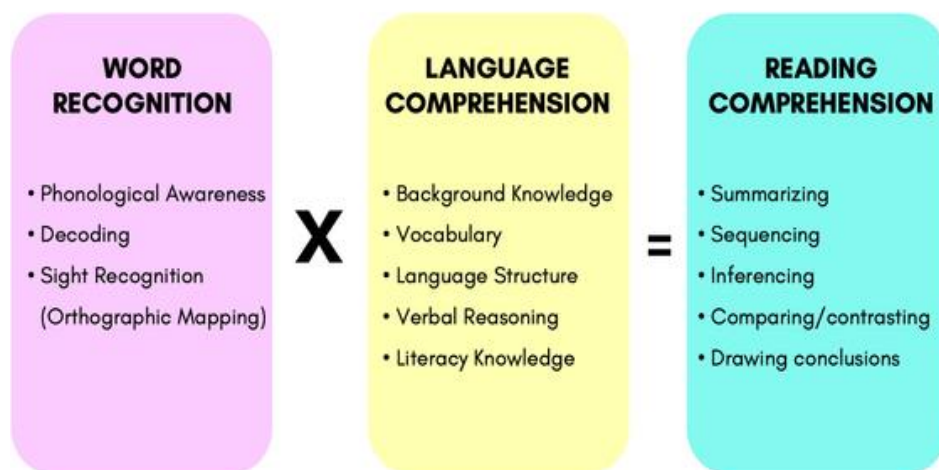
The 3-cueing model uses three types of instructional cues as students are engaging with text:

> *"In all respects, from word reading skills to language comprehension development, these approaches are not consistent with best evidence,"* (Moats, 2023).

- **Semantic**: the meaning and relationship among words, ex. *"Does that make sense?"*
- **Syntactic:** the structure of sentences (grammar, syntax, sentence organization), ex. *"Does that sound right?"*
- **Graphophonic:** the relationship of written symbols (graphemes) and their sounds (phonemes), ex. *"Does that look right?"*

In the 3-cueing approach, students are prompted by one or more of the above instructional cues as they engage with text. The result is that many students, especially striving readers, learn to depend on cues instead of using their knowledge of how print

and sound are related. Over time, students miss opportunities to hone their decoding skills. As the model below illustrates, the ability to decode language is an essential component to attaining comprehension. The *Simple View of Reading* (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) is a visualization of the two fundamental components of reading: word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension. The simple view of reading clarifies the role of decoding which is defined as "efficient word recognition" (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Decoding is not simply the ability to sound out words, but rather the fast and accurate reading of both familiar and unfamiliar words.


WORD RECOGNITION		LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION		READING COMPREHENSION
• Phonological Awareness		• Background Knowledge		• Summarizing
• Decoding	X	• Vocabulary	=	• Sequencing
• Sight Recognition		• Language Structure		• Inferencing
(Orthographic Mapping)		• Verbal Reasoning		• Comparing/contrasting
		• Literacy Knowledge		• Drawing conclusions

"Studies that compare the brain activity of struggling readers with that of accomplished readers demonstrate how difficult this decoding process is for the struggling reader," (Smartt & Glaser, 2024).

Within the 3-cueing system, teachers employ cues to analyze student reading errors, aiming to pinpoint whether they are semantic, syntactic, or graphophonic in nature. When errors are classified according to their type, the teacher then utilizes common cueing phrases that prompt students to "guess" at words instead of using decoding skills that support fluency. **Reading fluency** is sometimes depicted as the "bridge" between decoding and understanding and comprehending (see below).

Identifying 3-cueing. A clear sign of the 3-cueing practice in instructional materials is the presence of strategies for guessing words, skipping unfamiliar words, or relying on pictures for meaning. A commonly seen example is cue cards that encourage students to have an *"Eagle Eye: Look at the pictures,"* or be a *"Tryin' Lion: Try a word that might fit."*

Decoding → Fluency → Comprehension
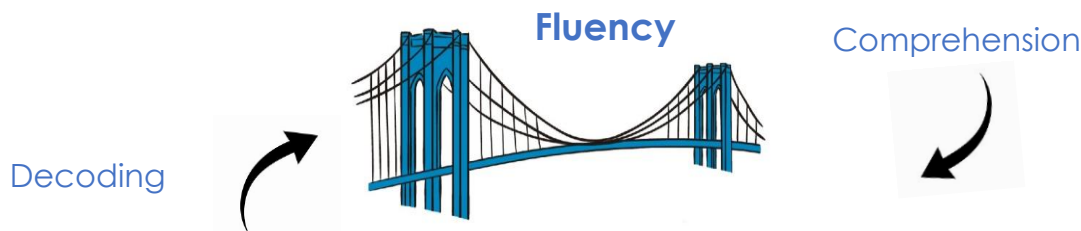
Evidence-based Reading Instruction

To foster effective reading skills, educators must adopt instructional practices grounded in the evidence base. The body of research known as the *science of reading* does not prescribe a specific program but rather highlights a set of evidence-based approaches that are essential for all students to become proficient readers. This includes systematic and explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding skills. Although the *science of reading* is not a single program, there are locally and nationally sourced materials, curricula, and interventions that align to reading science.

Nebraska Instructional Materials Collaborative	The Reading League Curriculum Navigation Report	Nebraska MTSS Program Comparison Tool	Nebraska IES Practice Guide Summaries	Structured Literacy Early Reading Skills Toolkit
Resources for the selection and implementation of high-quality instructional materials	*Evaluations of curriculum components based on evidence-aligned practices*	*Guidance for selection of programs and interventions according to their evidence base.*	*Collection of evidence-based, actionable recommendations for high-quality literacy instruction*	*Practical resources for the development of early literacy proficiency*

Click on the corresponding book icons to access each resource. For additional resources, please visit https://www.education.ne.gov/nebraskareads/.

What is *structured* literacy?

Structured literacy is an explicit, systematic approach to teaching foundational literacy. Structured literacy acknowledges that reading is not an innate ability, and that children must receive carefully sequenced instruction to learn how to read. Grounded in the science of reading, structured literacy provides a framework that includes both **how** reading should be taught and **what** should be taught.

Structured literacy emphasizes the structure of language—**phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, sound-symbol association, syllables**, and **orthography**.

- **Phonology**: a language's inventory of phonemes and the rules for their combination
- **Morphology**: the study of words, how they are formed, and how they relate to one another
- **Syntax**: how words are put together to form phrases, clauses, or sentences
- **Semantics**: the study of meaning in a language

- **Sound-symbol association**: the process of learning how to map the sounds of spoken language to the symbols or letters of written language
- **Syllable**: a unit of sound in a word
- **Orthography**: the study of letters and how they are used to express sounds and form words; how a language is expressed in written form

Models of Reading

The framework is beneficial for all students but essential for multilingual learners or those who struggle with specific language structures. Instruction is tailored to unique student needs, as determined by regular screening and progress monitoring. A structured literacy approach ensures students receive individualized, appropriate levels of support to develop their language and literacy skills.
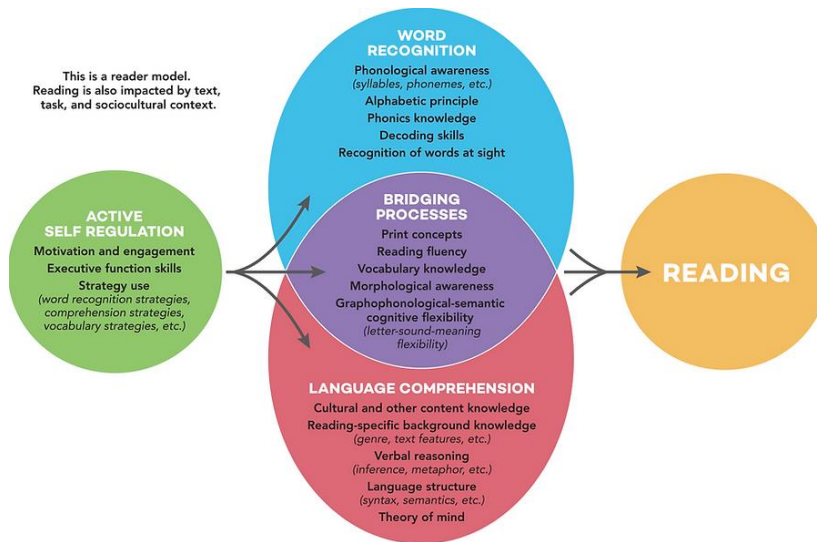
Understanding how children learn to read, and why some students struggle, is essential for planning effective instruction. Several models that depict how reading develops have emerged from the vast, interdisciplinary body of research commonly known as the science of reading. Researchers have developed these models to expand upon the Simple View of Reading and visually surface what is most important for instruction.

One such model, *Scarborough's Reading Rope* (Scarborough, 2001), provides a more detailed, nuanced analogy of early language development than the Simple View. The Reading Rope consists of upper and lower strands that, when woven together over time, represent skilled and proficient reading. The word-recognition strands— phonological awareness, decoding, and sight word recognition work together as the emerging reader develops accuracy, fluency, and automaticity when reading text. The model illustrates that individual strands do not develop independently, nor without explicit instruction and opportunities to practice. Rather, growth in one strand positively affects growth in others. For example, acquiring background knowledge usually introduces new vocabulary words, and improving decoding skills enables readers to expand their vocabularies.

The Reading Rope
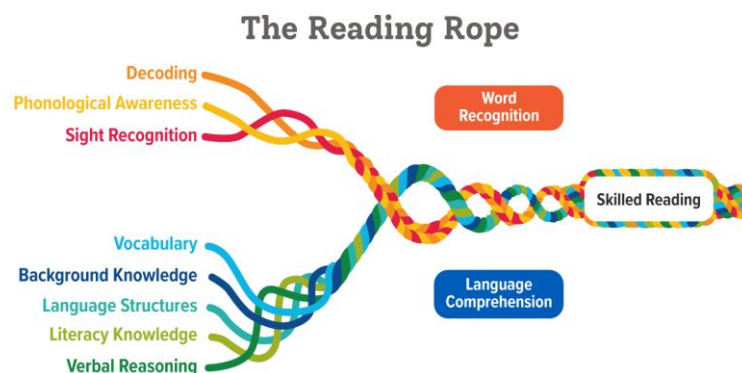
Modified from Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), Handbook for research in early literacy. New York, NY: Guilford Press

This is a reader model. Reading is also impacted by text, task, and sociocultural context.

ACTIVE SELF REGULATION
Motivation and engagement
Executive function skills
Strategy use
(word recognition strategies, comprehension strategies, vocabulary strategies, etc.)

WORD RECOGNITION
Phonological awareness *(syllables, phonemes, etc.)*
Alphabetic principle
Phonics knowledge
Decoding skills
Recognition of words at sight

BRIDGING PROCESSES
Print concepts
Reading fluency
Vocabulary knowledge
Morphological awareness
Graphophonological-semantic cognitive flexibility *(letter-sound-meaning flexibility)*

LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION
Cultural and other content knowledge
Reading-specific background knowledge *(genre, text features, etc.)*
Verbal reasoning *(inference, metaphor, etc.)*
Language structure *(syntax, semantics, etc.)*
Theory of mind

READING

The ***Active View of Reading*** considers the roles of self-regulation and the use of reading strategies. Some researchers have proposed that not all reading problems can be attributed to decoding or language comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). The Active View of Reading model expands the Simple View of Reading and includes a bridge between decoding and language comprehension. In addition, it includes the idea of "self-regulation," or the cognitive skills readers use to monitor and their own reading and comprehension.

Reading models in practice. Each reading model provides a useful illustration for how reading develops. Besides helping educators understand the complexities of reading development, the models can serve as tools for planning instruction, assessing progress, and selecting interventions. The models can also be used to:

- ground conversations about reading and the ultimate goal of comprehension;
- help teachers and instructional leaders evaluate literacy curriculum, materials, and intervention programs;
- identify where struggling readers may need more support;
- make adjustments to instruction, or provide enrichment;
- ask questions while examining student data;
- and communicate with families and caregivers to reinforce early literacy skills outside of school.

"Reading aloud with children is known to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills they will eventually require for learning to read."

– Marilyn Jager Adams

References

Moats, L. (2023, June 22). *Of "hard words" and straw men: Let's understand what reading science is really about*. Voyager Sopris Learning. https://www.voyagersopris.com/blog/edview360/lets-understand-what-reading-science-is-really-about

Smartt, S. M., & Glaser, D. R. (2024). Phonics: Decoding, Encoding, and Word Recognition. In *Next Steps in Literacy Instruction* (2nd ed., pp. 83). essay, Paul H. Brooks Publishing.

Additional Resources

- ExcelinEd_FactSheet_ThreeCueingDoesNotTeachChildrenToRead.pdf
- Response to the Reading Recovery Press Release from The Reading League - The Reading League
- What is the Science of Reading - The Reading League
- Models of Reading | Reading Rockets
- Evidence-Based Reading Instruction | The Science of Reading (zaner-bloser.com)
- Selection Process – Nebraska Instructional Materials Collaborative (nematerialsmatter.org)
- Curriculum Decision Makers - The Reading League

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NebraskaREADS – Nebraska Department of Education