

What does Shanahan advise with regard to phonics teaching

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August 2026

THE NATIONAL READING PANEL

The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) was commissioned, in part, to evaluate whether systematic phonics instruction produces better reading outcomes than unsystematic or no phonics instruction, and more broadly to review and evaluate the scientific research on how children learn to read and which instructional methods are most effective.

HOW TO READ THIS DOCUMENT

Blue panels provide direct quotations from the NRP (2000) and Shanahan. The plain text provides a summary of the NRP (2000) findings, and Shanahan's position and advice. Pink panels provide additional information provided by the author of this document.

• What the NRP (2000) actually found

The NRP (2000) found that systematic phonics teaching within the beginning reading programme is better than incidental phonics teaching or no phonics teaching. It must be noted that the research supporting systematic phonics teaching does not relate specifically to systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). The important factor is that teaching is systematic whether it be a synthetic, analytic or a miscellaneous phonics approach.

'The analysis showed that effect sizes for the three categories of programs were all significantly greater than zero and did not differ statistically from each other'

NATIONAL READING PANEL, 2000, PP. 2-132; EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AT PAGE 2-93

ADDED ILLUSTRATION — THE DISTINCTION DESCRIBED ABOVE

SYSTEMATIC PHONICS

Synthetic

SSP programmes

Analytic

Word-analogy teaching

Miscellaneous

Effect sizes for all three did not differ statistically from each other.

• Systematic and synthetic are not the same thing

Unfortunately, many teachers think that synthetic phonics and systematic phonics are one and the same because systematic phonics research is quoted when synthetic phonics is being promoted. Shanahan (2005) flags this conflation explicitly

“Although systematic and synthetic are very different concepts, some observers have interchanged them, which has resulted in some confusing and misleading interpretations of the National Reading Panel findings.”

SHANAHAN (2005), PAGE 11

ARE YOU SECURE IN YOUR UNDERSTANDING?

Shanahan (2005) is referenced on page 86 DE (2025) Strong foundations: A Literacy Framework for Primary Schools’, and although this conflation is not explained in the Literacy Framework document, it is important that teachers understand that systematic and synthetic refer to different concepts and should not be treated as the same thing.

• This conflation of the research evidence continues

For example:

THE GUARDIAN, JANUARY 2022

At the end of an article in the Guardian (January 2022) a Department for Education (DfE England) spokesperson said systematic phonics teaching had been proven the world over to be the most effective method for teaching children to read.

TES, 15 FEBRUARY 2022

The minister for school standards Robin Walker in the TES (15 February 2022) claimed that research from UCL ignores the robust evidence from the UK and abroad, which consistently shows that systematic phonics is the best-evidenced way to teach children how to decode – for both younger and older pupils alike.

Both the DfE spokesperson and Robin Walker did not use the term ‘systematic synthetic phonics’ because there is no valid research evidence to support it. When this research is quoted it should be made clear that the research evidence has not found that systematic synthetic phonics is better than systematic analytic phonics.

Existing studies are limited by methodological flaws that undermine the validity of their claims, therefore, there is currently no robust research evidence that has found that systematic synthetic phonics is better than systematic analytic phonics. After 20 years of SSP there is still no research evidence to show that it outperforms any other form of systematic phonics teaching, and no research evidence to support systematic synthetic phonics as the sole or primary approach to teaching reading.

● Phonics should not be the dominant component

The NRP (2000) report is unambiguous and makes it clear that phonics should not be the sole approach to teaching reading.

‘Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached.’

NRP (2000), EXECUTIVE SUMMARY P. 2-97, AND MAIN BODY P. 2-136

Children in mainstream classes vary in how they learn because they have different strengths and weaknesses in the cognitive processes required for learning to read. Synthetic phonics fails to teach children the range of strategies needed to develop all of these cognitive processes leaving a significant amount to implicit learning from reading experience. It is not that synthetic phonics is not an important element of an effective phonics strategy, it is that phonics teaching should be broader.

LINKS TO PRACTICE

McMurray et al, (2026) discuss the difficulties experienced by children referred to the Education Authority (EA) for assessment of their literacy difficulties.

● Shanahan (2005): teachers should be able to deliver both

A broader approach to phonics teaching is supported by Shanahan (2005) who was a member of the National Reading Panel subcommittee (2000). This subcommittee reviewed and evaluated research studies comparing the different approaches to teaching phonics. Shanahan advises that the practical recommendation is that teachers should be able to deliver both: explicit single-sound (synthetic) teaching as it helps children who struggle to hear sounds inside whole words, while word-analogy (analytic) teaching helps children who struggle to blend isolated phonemes without distorting them (Shanahan, 2005).

● Shanahan's blog (2018, updated 2021)

More recently in his blog (2018 updated in 2021) 'What is best analytic or synthetic phonics' found at this link —

<https://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/blog/which-is-best-analytic-or-synthetic-phonics>

Shanahan, in relation to the difficulties children have blending phonemes together in SSP programmes, states that,

'The point is that one of the major problems of synthetic phonics can be addressed successfully through instruction, but it is not clear that this adjustment is sufficient to make synthetic phonics better than analytic. Though folks have argued over this for over 50 years at this point, there is still not a direct experimental comparison. In other words, despite the new study, the advice given here still appears to be sound'

SHANAHAN, BLOG (2018, UPDATED 2021)

The new (2021) study referred to by Shanahan demonstrates the importance of no break between phonemes when blending. However, even with no break between phonemes, there are still difficulties blending words that are 3-6 phonemes long due to the working memory capacity of 5-7 years old children. Alloway (2011) identified that the average 5 year old can hold one item in working memory and the average 7 year old 2 items. This makes blending phonemes in words with more than two phonemes beyond the working memory capacity of the majority of 5-7 year old children.

ADDED ILLUSTRATION — THE WORKING MEMORY CAPACITY DESCRIBED ABOVE

Average 5 year old  1 item held in working memory

Average 7 year old  2 items held in working memory

Words can be up to 6 phonemes long



Added illustration of the figures given in the text above.

In the final statement in his blog Shanahan reaffirms that 'The idea of combining synthetic and analytic phonics instruction violates no research, and if done well, may help more kids to succeed.'

● Shanahan (2026)

Shanahan (2026) in his response to a query from a teacher who had been told that decoding is the most important thing and to emphasise decoding, states —

'Is there really any reason to believe that teaching phonics first or that only teaching phonics for a year or two is a good idea? If you have phonics stuff to sell, it probably seems like it is. But if you have any interest in the science of reading (that is, you want to base your actions on data rather than sales talks and unintentional media hyperbole), then it's clear those scorched earth approaches are bad pedagogy.'

SHANAHAN (2026)

Shanahan's (2026) full response, and the supporting research he references, can be found at

<https://www.nomanis.com.au/blog/what-do-you-think-of-phonics-first-or-phonics-only-in-the-primary-grades>

IN CONCLUSION

The predominance of DfE validated SSP programmes and decodable books is not supported by the science of reading because they aim to ensure children learn to rely on phonics at phoneme-to-grapheme level only.

● References

The National Reading Panel report was issued in two volumes. Page references in this document are to the *Reports of the Subgroups*.

Alloway, T. P. (2011). *Improving working memory: Supporting children's learning*. London: SAGE.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). U.S. Government Printing Office.
<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/smallbook>

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