

Whole language, phonics or both?



What is the difference between Whole Language and Phonics?

Whole Language focuses on the flow and meaning of the text. It encourages reading for meaning and using language in ways that relate to many areas of a student's life. Its goal is to allow for better understanding of the *entire* text in an interesting and creative way. While phonics may be included in instruction it is not the focus. Students learning this approach do not work on breaking words apart and putting them back together.

A phonetic approach breaks down reading into its smallest parts, and then sequentially and gradually adds on larger pieces or parts to form words. The student learns letter-sound relationships and is taught word attack skills in order to decode unfamiliar words, as well as spelling rules and generalizations of the language.

The sounding out of words, or the breaking apart of words into sounds and then joining them into words, is not practiced in Whole Language. Children are taught to decode and understand words through larger context and other cues.

While a phonetic method strengthens word attack skills, pronunciation and spelling, it may not be effective in relaying the full or complete meaning of a text. Phonics critics fear that reading will become laborious or a chore to children who learn to read only with a phonetic approach. This criticism is more a reflection of how phonics is taught than its effectiveness.

More educators are seeing the value of *both* reading approaches in the classroom. It has been shown that early phonetic instruction benefits most children. Students who are taught phonics have a better start in learning to read than students who are not instructed using a phonetic method. However, students also need reading experiences that reveal the meaning and wonder involved in reading. Students need the skills to be able to read *and* excitement and interest in what is being read.

Where can I learn more?



LDA of Minnesota at www.ldaminnesota.org or 952-922-8374.

Curtis, Jenny. 1997. *Phonics vs. Whole Language, Which is Better?*
June 5, 2003, from SuperKids Software Review, www.superkids.com.

Holdren, John. 1995. Not “either or” but “both/and”: Phonics and Whole Language.
Common Knowledge, Volume 8, No. 3.

Vail, Priscilla. *Common Ground: Whole Language and Phonics Working Together*.
Rosemont, N. J.: Modern Learning Press, 1991.

LDA of Minnesota

For more than 36 years, **Learning Disabilities Association of Minnesota** has been serving the needs of people of all ages at risk for learning disabilities or related learning difficulties by maximizing their potential so that they may lead more productive and fulfilled lives. Services include educational assessments, one-to-one and small group tutoring, consultations, family literacy activities, school-to-work transition programming, professional training, public education, and high-quality educational products.

LDA of Minnesota is the state affiliate of LDA of America, a non-profit organization of volunteers dedicated to identifying causes, promoting prevention of learning disabilities, and enhancing the quality of life for all individuals with learning disabilities and their families by encouraging effective identification and intervention, fostering research, and protecting their rights under law.