

Reading Across the Curriculum: High School Phonics Instruction

Our class met once a week on campus. The first case, which was relatively complicated, unfolded over the course of four weeks:

- Week 1: Brief Introduction to Phonics, Phonology, and the Science of Reading (both linguistics research and recent legislative actions across the country)
- Week 2: Case Discussion (again, this is graded and requires significant preparation—see rubric below)
- Week 3: Drafting/Peer Review
- Week 4: Case Report (final drafts/individual conferences)

Case #1: Reading Across the Curriculum: High School Phonics Instruction

Do you remember learning to read? Do you remember any books you liked to read when you were in third grade? Perhaps a parent or guardian remembers (ask if you have a chance)? Even if you don't remember any particular books, the fact that you are in graduate school today suggests that by the time you were in third grade you were considered a proficient or excellent reader because it turns out that what you were doing in third grade matters a whole lot!

It's important for students to read at grade level by third grade because reading is a foundational skill that is necessary for academic success in all subjects. Students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are at a higher risk of falling behind and struggling in school (e.g. Duncan, et al. 2007 and Rabiner et al. 2016). Additionally, research has shown that students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are also more likely to drop out of high school (Hernandez, 2012). In general, phonological awareness is central to knowing how to make both spoken and written language work!

This is one of the reasons why people pay so much attention to NAEP scores when they are released. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card, has been administered since 1969 and “is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what students in public and private schools in the United States know and are able to do in various subjects” (NAEP Overview, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/>). Nationwide assessment of Reading and Math typically occur once every four years. The most recent scores were released in 2022. While a majority of states showed a decline in Reading test scores between 2019 and 2022 in part due to the pandemic, certain states and school districts evidenced a significantly sharper drop than others.

[This file is supplemental material to Joanne Addison, *Building Relevancy and Engagement through Case-Based Learning in English Studies*, prompt 10.1 (2026), doi: 10.31719/pjaw.v10i1.183]

In Tennessee, lawmakers were alarmed by the lack of reading proficiency even before the release of the latest NAEP scores, but those scores heightened their concern. This resulted in the Legislature and Governor instituting measures designed to improve the training of teachers and accountability of Educational Program Providers (EEP's). Tennessee is one of many states instituting what are referred to as “science of reading” laws,¹ which often single out phonics instruction as a significant part of the solution and focus on students in elementary school.

There is ample evidence of the effectiveness of phonics at the lower levels—for example see this research. One of the most influential researchers in this area is Mark Seidenberg—for a sampling of his work take a look at all 3 blog posts from March 2022. And keep in mind that the question of what to do with students who are not reading at grade level by third grade is very controversial.

Tennessee's largest school district, Memphis-Shelby County Schools, experienced some of the biggest drops in test scores in the country.² Because a majority of the students are Black and from low-income families and only 25% are currently proficient in reading³ this drop is especially troubling. At Oakhaven High School in particular, reading proficiency hovers around 15% and the most recent ACT average score was 14.8. But this school is generating headlines with its new approach to improving reading proficiency. Oakhaven High School as implemented a phonics/phonology across the curriculum approach to improving reading proficiency, a move expected to improve proficiency in all disciplines given that reading is a foundational skill for educational success.

Considering the complexity of this issue, has the principal of Oakhaven High School made the right decision? Is this decision likely to improve reading proficiency, and by extension proficiency in all disciplines, at Oakhaven High School? What should happen if reading proficiency doesn't improve?

¹ Chalkbeat Tennessee. (2021, January 21). Tennessee legislature strengthens third-grade retention requirements. Retrieved from <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2021/1/21/22243450/tennessee-legislature-strengthens-third-grade-retention-requirements>

² National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) - Reading: Districts - Scores. Retrieved from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/districts/scores/?grade=8>

³ Chalkbeat Tennessee. (2022, October 23). NAEP scores show declines in math and reading for Memphis and Shelby County Schools during the pandemic. Retrieved from <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2022/10/23/23417260/naep-memphis-shelby-county-schools-covid-pandemic-math-reading-scores-nations-report-card>

Case Report Outline*

Most of the cases you will consider this semester require you to evaluate a complicated situation and/or decision. In this case you may use any of the material included in the case itself as well as foundational material as provided via lecture, and the sources shared by your classmates. Specialized language and concepts specific to this case should be appropriately employed. Case reports that are evaluative in nature typically focus on 5 matters:

1. Your overall evaluation (in other words, a position statement);
2. The evaluative criteria you are applying to this situation and/or decision;
3. The evidence provided to support your evaluation;
4. An explanation of any major contingencies or counterarguments;
5. An action plan.

Overall Evaluation

Your overall evaluation is typically brief (a paragraph or two) and stakes a position. However, because of the complexity of the cases and the messiness of real life, the position statement is seldom absolute but rather one that considers the intricacies at play. Be sure to outline important aspects of the context under study. ***You should write your position statement after completing the rest of your report.***

Evaluative Criteria

The criteria upon which you base your evaluation are the heart of your report. You'll develop the criteria based on the material presented as part of the case, relevant frameworks and concepts included in case material as well as additional instructional material provided (e.g., the introductions to phonology and phonetics in Module 2). Professional experience may be referenced when relevant and concrete—although this should be limited. In brief, you need to articulate to yourself and your readers the criteria that you are using to make your evaluation and why.

Evidence and Analysis

Establishing meaningful and defensible criteria is crucial because it requires your evaluation to be rooted in evidence. Establish your criteria before searching for evidence and then use the criteria to follow the evidence where it leads. Do not try to force the evidence to fit the criteria—it's likely it will be easily refuted.

Proving your overall evaluation is usually the longest part of your report. Use your criteria to organize this section, providing the most important evidence related to each criterion to support your evaluation, while also acknowledging counterarguments.

Counterarguments and Contingencies

In the next to last section, you'll consider credible counterarguments as well as contingencies. Your goal is not to consider all counterarguments, just those that are most credible and likely to have an impact on your overall evaluation. Contingencies are different from counterarguments. When considering contingencies, you are considering changing

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conditions that you can't accurately predict but that would likely impact your evaluation (e.g., a pandemic or economic recession or new Governor, etc.).

Action Plan

Finally, you'll present an action plan. Your action plan should aim to improve the situation described in the case. You should consider both short and long-term actions (and perhaps medium-term actions). Short term actions should be more urgent and long-term actions ones that are dependent on the short-term actions. You should elaborate not only the action but also who should be responsible for the action, accountable for the action, consulted before taking the action, and informed about the action. Don't forget to consider the resources needed for each action.

*If you'd like to learn more about analyzing, discussing, and writing case studies please look at The Case Study Handbook by William Ellet (2018) from which this material was drawn.