

# Reading: Unlocking the mystery

*A guide for parents*



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# Understanding Literacy

A guide for parents.

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Introduction:

## Unlock The Mystery of Reading Challenges:

### **The Importance of Learning To Read**

Reading is one of the most fundamental skills a child or person will ever learn. It is the gateway to all other learning, shaping the way we interact with the world and opening doors with opportunities for success. Without strong reading skills, we face significant challenges in school, work, and life. In short, reading is the foundation for communication. Skills related directly to learning to read include building critical thinking and imagination, improving communication skills, enhancing emotional and social development, fostering a love of learning and empowering independence and confidence.

Struggling readers experience a lack of confidence in a communication-rich world, avoid additional education and create anger and frustration at a foundational level.

### **Who Should Read This Book?**

This book is for parents looking for an introduction to identifying literacy weaknesses and learning how to address a weakness with your child.

## Part 1

# The Foundations of Reading

## Understanding How the Brain Learns to Read Text

### Reading is a cognitive process

Reading is one of the most complex skills the human brain can develop. Unlike speaking, which is a natural ability, reading requires the brain to form new neural connections, linking sounds, symbols, and meaning together in a seamless process. Understanding how the brain learns to read can help parents and educators provide the right support, ensuring that children develop strong reading skills from the start.



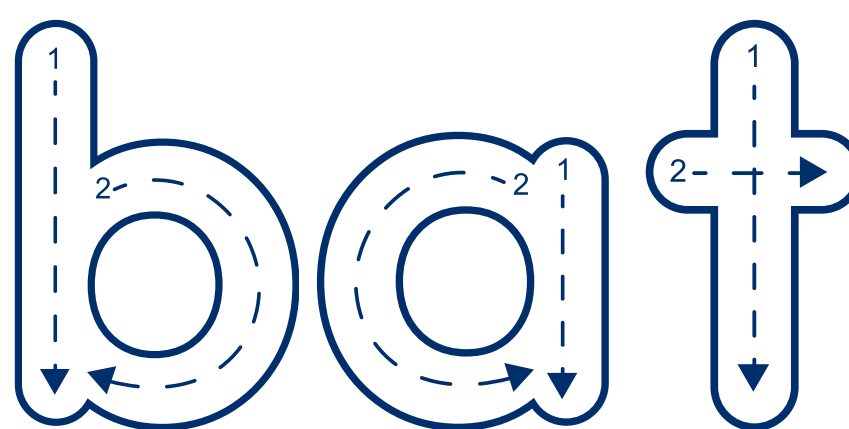
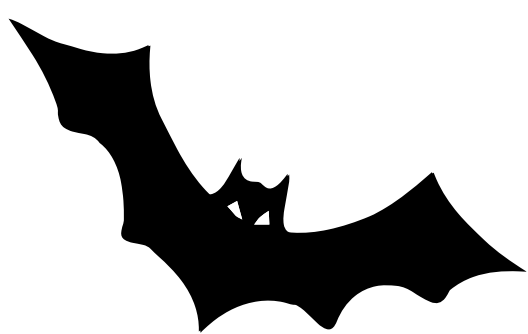
The process of learning to read relies on three essential cognitive functions:

- phonemic awareness
- symbol imagery
- concept imagery

### Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in words. This is a foundational skill because the brain must recognize that spoken words are made up of smaller sound units before it can connect those sounds to letters.

**For example:** b.. a... t should be identified as a b, a, t and the sounds of those letters identified and blended together to say bat.



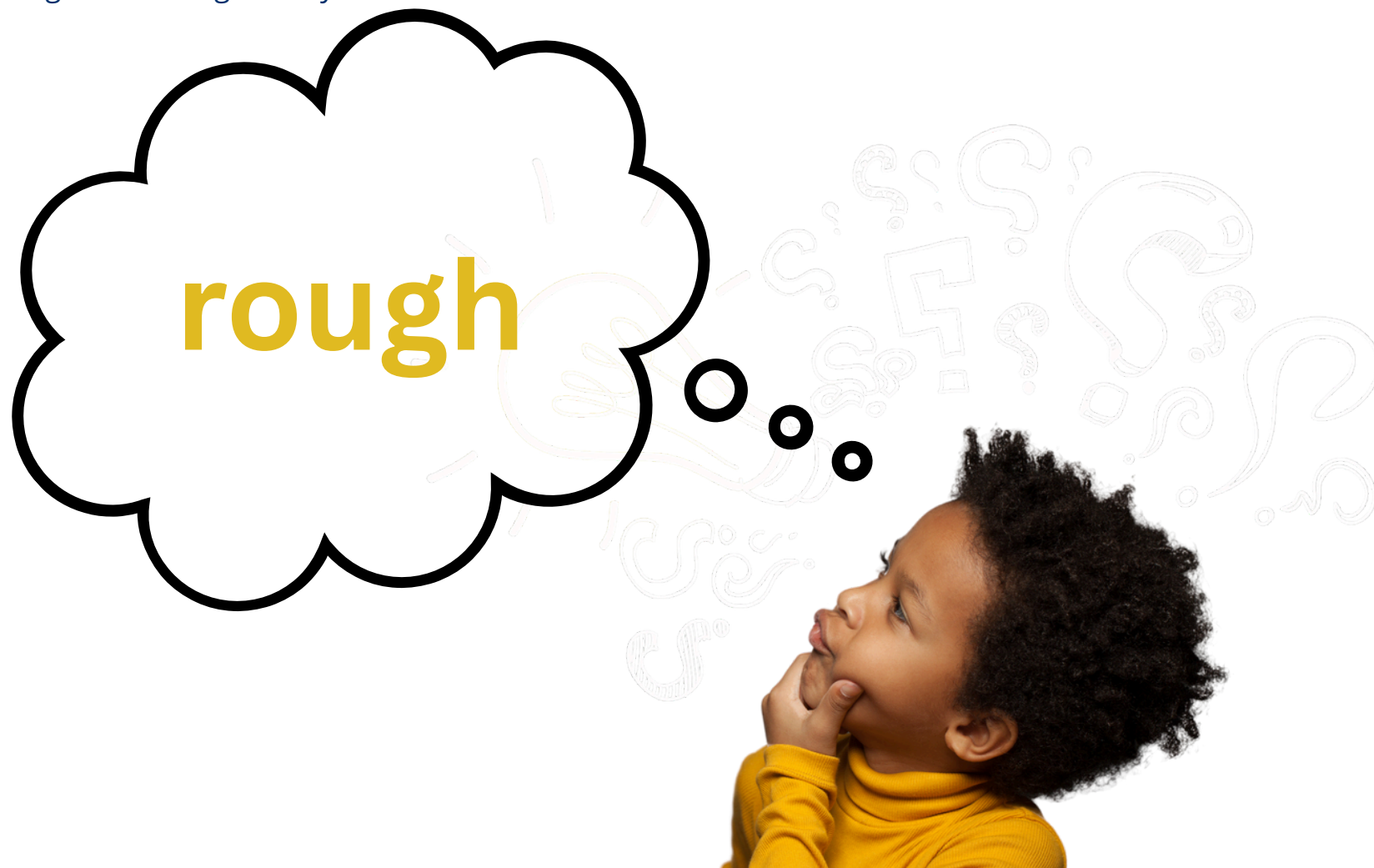
*Without strong phonemic awareness, children may struggle with decoding, spelling, and fluency.*

## Symbol imagery

Symbol imagery refers to the brain's ability to mentally visualize or see letters and words, essential for decoding, spelling, and fluent reading. You can picture the word bus in your mind. When you can picture it, you can read it fluently as it has become a sight word. Words that play fair can also be sounded out. However, many words can not be sounded out and do not play by any rules. For example, rough is a word you would just need to know. Fluency requires a huge sight word base of words in your orthographic memory. Can you imagine sounding out every word you were reading?

When children struggle with symbol imagery, they may:

- Have difficulty remembering sight words.
- Confuse similar-looking letters or words.
- Struggle with spelling and reading fluency.



## Concept Imagery

Understanding what we read goes beyond recognizing words; it involves creating mental images that give meaning to the words we read. Concept imagery is the ability to visualize an entire passage, story, or idea while reading. For example, you can say or read the word bus, and you can picture a bus. It is the movie you create in your mind when you read or listen to oral language.

- Children with weak concept imagery may be able to read words fluently but struggle to understand the meaning of sentences and passages. They may also struggle with understanding oral directions and passing tests.



*Children who struggle with reading often have weaknesses in one or more of these cognitive processes. By identifying and addressing these areas, parents and educators can help them overcome reading difficulties and build a strong foundation for lifelong literacy.*

## Part 2

# How these Cognitive Skills Work Together

**How do these sensory cognitive functions work together to create a reader who can read and comprehend what they are reading?**

**Step 1: Decoding – Recognizing and Reading Words**

The brain begins by breaking down words into phonemes, linking sounds to letters (phonemic awareness) and recalling previously learned sight words (symbol imagery). A child must decode words accurately before they can read fluently.

**Step 2: Fluency – Reading with Accuracy and Speed**

Once decoding becomes automatic, the brain shifts to processing words more efficiently, allowing a child to read with speed and expression. Strong symbol imagery helps with quick word recognition, reducing the need to sound out every word.

**Step 3: Comprehension – Understanding and Retaining Information**

Fluent reading frees up cognitive resources for comprehension. The brain uses concept imagery to visualize or see and understand the meaning behind words, sentences, and entire texts. This stage allows children to engage in deeper thinking, make inferences, and apply what they have read to real-life situations.



*Becoming a global reader requires the integration of phonemic awareness, symbol imagery and concept imagery as the sensory cognitive functions that assist our brain in processing language.*

## Part 3

# Determining your child's needs in "Phonemic Awareness"

Identifying your child's specific weakness is essential to knowing which strategies to work with your child. Here are some identifying factors for identifying phonemic awareness, symbol imagery and concept imagery weaknesses in your child.

### IDENTIFYING PHONEMIC AWARENESS WEAKNESS

A child with weak phonemic awareness may show difficulties in the following areas:

Children with phonemic awareness difficulties often exhibit one or more of the following signs:

#### Early Signs (Ages 3-5)

- ▶ Struggles to recognize or produce rhyming words (cat, hat, bat)
- ▶ Has difficulty clapping syllables in words (but-ter-fly)
- ▶ Cannot identify the first sound in a word (What sound does sun start with?)
- ▶ Has trouble playing with words or making silly sound substitutions (say bat but change /b/ to /c/ → cat)

#### Signs in Beginning Readers (Ages 5-7)

- ▶ Has difficulty sounding out simple words (map, dog, sit)
- ▶ Confuses similar sounds (b/d, p/q, f/v)
- ▶ Struggles to blend sounds together to form a word (/s/ /a/ /t/ → sat)
- ▶ Relies on guessing words rather than decoding them

#### Signs in Older Struggling Readers (Ages 7 and Up)

- ▶ Reads slowly and inaccurately
- ▶ Struggles with spelling due to poor sound-symbol correspondence
- ▶ Has trouble with multisyllabic words (fantastic, incredible)
- ▶ Avoids reading aloud or lacks confidence when reading

#### Quick At-Home Phonemic Awareness Check

- ✓ Rhyme Recognition: Do these words rhyme? (cat, hat – correct response: yes)
- ✓ First Sound Isolation: What sound does 'dog' start with? (correct response: /d/)
- ✓ Blending Sounds: What word is this? /s/ /u/ /n/ (correct response: sun)
- ✓ Segmenting Sounds: What letters do you picture in "cup"? (Correct response: /k/ /u/ /p/)
- ✓ Sound Manipulation: Picture the letters for 'bat'; now change the first letter to an /m/ (correct response: mat)

*If your child displays several of these signs, they may have weak phonemic awareness and need additional practice to strengthen this foundational skill*

# Determining your child's needs In "Symbol Imagery"

## IDENTIFYING SYMBOL IMAGERY WEAKNESS

### Early Signs (Ages 4–6)

- ▶ Struggles to recognize letters consistently
- ▶ Confuses similar-looking letters (b/d, p/q, m/w)
- ▶ Has difficulty remembering letter names or sounds after learning them
- ▶ Takes longer than peers to identify familiar words

### Signs in Beginning Readers (Ages 6–8)

- ▶ Reads words correctly on one page but forgets them on the next
- ▶ Has difficulty remembering sight words (the, was, said, from)
- ▶ Struggles with spelling, often reversing letters or omitting sounds (gril instead of girl)
- ▶ Reads slowly, sounding out words that should be familiar

### Signs in Older Struggling Readers (Ages 8 and Up)

- ▶ Misreads small function words (of, for, from, with)
- ▶ Struggles to recognize multisyllabic words quickly
- ▶ Guesses at words instead of recognizing them automatically
- ▶ Writes words inconsistently (becus for because, then beacuz later)
- ▶ Lacks fluency, reading in a choppy or robotic manner

#### At-Home Symbol Imagery Check

- ✓ Letter Recall – Show your child a letter for a few seconds, then hide it and ask them to name it and describe what it looks like.
- ✓ Word Recognition – Write a familiar word on a card, show it for five seconds, then cover it and ask your child to spell it aloud from memory.
- ✓ Sight Word Recall – Choose common sight words and see if your child can recognize them instantly without sounding them out.
- ✓ Spelling from Memory – Say a short word and ask your child to write it without looking at a reference. If they struggle, they may have weak symbol imagery.



*If your child exhibits several of these signs, they may have weak symbol imagery and need targeted intervention to strengthen their ability to visualize letters and words.*

# Determining your child's needs in "Concept Imagery"

## IDENTIFYING CONCEPT IMAGERY WEAKNESS

### EARLY SIGNS (AGES 4–6)

- ▶ Struggles to follow multi-step directions (Go to your room, get your book, and bring it here)
- ▶ Has difficulty recalling details from stories read aloud
- ▶ Gives one-word or vague responses to questions about stories (What was the story about? → A dog.)
- ▶ Struggles to retell familiar events in a logical sequence

### SIGNS IN BEGINNING READERS (AGES 6–8)

- ▶ Can read words fluently but doesn't remember what they just read
- ▶ Struggles to answer comprehension questions beyond surface-level details
- ▶ Has difficulty visualizing descriptions of people, places, or events in books
- ▶ Shows limited engagement with stories, often saying, I don't know when asked to explain

### SIGNS IN OLDER STRUGGLING READERS (AGES 8 AND UP)

- ▶ Reads but has trouble summarizing the main idea
- ▶ Struggles to infer meaning or make predictions based on text
- ▶ Forgets information quickly after reading or hearing it
- ▶ Struggles with written expression due to lack of mental imagery
- ▶ Has difficulty understanding abstract or figurative language

#### At-Home Concept Imagery Check

- ✔ Picture Description – Show your child a picture and ask them to describe it in detail. Weak concept imagery may result in vague descriptions (It's a dog instead of It's a fluffy brown dog sitting in the grass).
- ✔ Story Retelling – Read a short story and ask your child to retell it. Children with weak concept imagery may recall only a few words rather than describing events vividly.
- ✔ Listening Comprehension – Tell your child a short story without showing pictures, then ask questions like, What did you picture happening? If they struggle to answer, they may have trouble forming mental images.
- ✔ Predicting Outcomes – Ask your child, What do you think will happen next in the story? Weak concept imagery often makes it difficult for children to anticipate logical outcomes.



*If your child struggles with these tasks, they may need targeted strategies to develop concept imagery.*

## Part 4

# Part 4: Strategies for Home

Now that you have identified a possible weakness, having strategies to work with are important. Here are some ideas for assisting your child in strengthening their weaknesses and making them strengths.

### STRENGTHENING PHONEMIC AWARENESS AT HOME

If your child has weaknesses in phonemic awareness, here's how you can help:

- ◆ Engage in Oral Wordplay – Play rhyming games, sing songs, and read books with alliteration (She sells seashells by the seashore).
- ◆ Practice Sound Manipulation – Change beginning, middle, or ending sounds in words (say 'cat,' now change the /k/ to /h/—what's the new word?).
- ◆ Use Multisensory Methods – Have your child tap, clap, or use objects to represent each sound in a word.
- ◆ Follow a Structured Program – Programs that provide explicit, research-based instruction in phonemic awareness.
- ◆ Read Aloud Daily – Choose books with rhyming patterns and repetitive sounds to reinforce phonemic awareness naturally.

#### CONCLUSION

**Phonemic awareness is a critical building block for reading success. Identifying weaknesses early and providing targeted support can help your child develop the skills needed to read fluently and confidently. With fun, engaging activities and structured practice, every child can strengthen their phonemic awareness and become a successful reader.**

#### CONCLUSION

**Symbol imagery is essential for reading fluency, word recognition, and spelling. Identifying weaknesses early allows parents to provide effective support, helping children strengthen their ability to mentally visualize words and become confident, fluent readers. By using structured strategies parents can help children develop the skills needed for lifelong reading success.**

### STRENGTHENING SYMBOL IMAGERY AT HOME

If your child has weaknesses in symbol imagery, here are strategies to help:

- ◆ Use Mental Imagery – Ask your child to "see" a letter or word in their mind and describe its shape, size, and sequence.
- ◆ Practice Air Writing – Have your child write letters and words in the air while saying the letters aloud to reinforce mental imagery.
- ◆ Use Sand or Textured Surfaces – Let your child trace letters in sand, shaving cream, or other tactile materials to strengthen memory.
- ◆ Play Word Flash Games – Show a word for a few seconds, then cover it and ask your child to spell it aloud or write it down from memory.

### STRENGTHENING CONCEPT IMAGERY AT HOME

If your child has weaknesses in concept imagery, here are strategies to help:

- ◆ Use the 'Picture This' Method – After reading a sentence or passage, ask your child, What do you see in your mind? Encourage them to describe it in detail.
- ◆ Ask 'What Else?' Questions – If your child gives a vague answer, prompt them with What else do you see? What colors, shapes, or actions are there?
- ◆ Use Descriptive Language – Engage in conversations that encourage visualization, such as describing daily activities or favorite memories in rich detail.
- ◆ Encourage Drawing or Acting Out Stories – Have your child sketch scenes from a book or act out parts of a story to reinforce mental imagery.
- ◆ Ask Guided Comprehension Questions – Instead of simple yes/no questions, ask open-ended questions like:
  - What did you imagine when you heard that part of the story?
  - Can you describe the setting in your own words?
  - How do you think the character is feeling? Why?

#### CONCLUSION

**Concept imagery is the foundation of comprehension, allowing children to create mental pictures and understand what they read or hear. Identifying weaknesses early and using targeted strategies can help children develop strong comprehension skills, making reading a meaningful and enjoyable experience.**