

# Phonics Can Get in the Way of Reading Mastery

Bill Allen

In grades K-5, over 50% of all text is made up of abstract words and punctuation marks. *Abstract* words (e.g., I, on, where) and abstract symbols (e.g., ?, 5, m) lack concrete sensory association. In contrast, *Concrete* words (e.g., house, cat, ball) represent objects/things that can be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched; and therefore, concrete words can be easily imagined when you hear, see, or think of them.

## Preview:

- **Provide tools for how the young brain thinks**  
Sensory thinking = 3-D thinking
- **Written Material K-5 is made of more than 50% abstract words, symbols, punctuation**  
How to give meaning to abstract letters, words, punctuation, other symbols?
- **Difficulty of Phonics Training in K-5 ... and for the dyslexic**  
The enigmatic language of the Abstract Sounds of Phonemes has to be mastered before learning to read can begin.
- **Abstract Words + Symbols can be mastered while your child is learning phonemic awareness or phonics in school.**
- **Why is Writing Difficult for the Dyslexic, and for the 3-D Thinker?**  
The gap can be enormous between talking and writing about something.

## Provide 3-Dimensional Tools That Support How the Young Brain Thinks

Listen to your child read a page or paragraph of text, and on your own copy of the text underline each word that your child ...:

- hesitates to read
- inserts a word
- misreads a word
- omits a word
- replaces a word
- skips a line(s)
- Miss is a punctuation stop,

These reading behaviors are called the “**common reading disability symptoms**” that a reader may exhibit while reading out loud or silently to oneself. Fluidity and comprehension are

challenged by the occurrence of these reading behaviors because they interrupt the flow of the story that the text is telling the reader. When you listen to your child read aloud, you will usually find that your child cannot read correctly or fluidly a significant number of abstract words and symbols.

## **Why are Concrete Words Easier to Read Than Abstract Words in Grades K-5?**

Concrete words can be imagined with the senses (e.g., tree, fork, lemon), fitting the thinking style of the young brain. All children begin primarily as sensory thinkers and rely on their sensory input from the outer world to understand it. A young child touches, tastes, smells, looks at, listens to anything new that they find. As the brain matures, its thinking function begins to move its center of focus into areas that work logically instead of being dependent on sensory input for recognition.

The child begins to recognize objects they have experienced in the past and does not have to re-experience them to know what they are. When a child hears the word “toy,” a child knows what it represents. Similarly, the written word “toy” (a concrete word) is easier to learn to read than the word “the” (an abstract word). The reader can imagine “toy” and has no way to imagine “the.” Do you know what “the” looks like? Neither does a child.

The dyslexic child tends to maintain their early 3-D thinking style (sensory thinking) through the elementary grades and even into adulthood. This style of thinking can be very creative, useful, even unique, in the outer physical world. However, when this child, or any young child, is faced with learning to read 2-D (2-dimensional, flat) letters, punctuation marks, numbers, and words, the child lacks the 3-D tools needed to master recognition and comprehension of those 2-D words and symbols.

Too often a dyslexic child will be encouraged to memorize lists of words through rote practice to pass tests, thus seemingly being able to read these words. However, there has been no actual learning to read the text material if the child cannot comprehend and read fluidly every time every word. In the best case, the child may be able to correctly repeat the listed memorized words they have seen in the reading material. However, unless the child has mastered the words, both concrete and abstract, they do not know what the sentence means. In most cases, the child stumbles and misreads words from the memorized list and cannot articulate the majority of the story that they just read.

## **Tools Used to Teach a Child to Read**

Phonics and phoneme awareness methodologies are used in most schools to teach young children to read. Unfortunately, the abstract sounds and symbols of these methods provide an additional “abstract auditory/visual language” made up of lots of rules to cover the exceptions. The child must master this “language” before the child can read. The phonetic sounds and symbols are abstract, and they give no sensory clues to the intended meaning of them as a word. Have you listened to your young child work at sounding out a simple (1-5 letter) word

(bat, cart, happy) and realized that their efforts bring them no recognition of the meaning? Repeatedly, they make the sounds of the letters b... a... t..., without making the connection that they spell the word “bat”

Flat, 2-D written symbols (letters, words, numbers, punctuation marks) along with the abstract sounds and symbols used in phonics and phoneme awareness training challenge 3-D sensory-thinking children to use their least-developed learning skills.

“In my 20 years of working with the dyslexic, I have encountered less than a handful of students with any kind of marginal gift to learn to read with phonics and phonemes. I have encountered none that excelled at it.” (Bill Allen, founder of Magical I Am, Inc.)

To learn to read, a primarily 3-D sensory thinking child needs to learn the three parts of each whole word: what it **looks** like; what it **sounds** like; and what it **means**. If the word is concrete (horse, hat), recognition comes more easily than if the word is abstract (the, is, on). Every dictionary supplies information of the 3 parts of a word, with the auditory portion represented by phonetic symbols and not the “sound” of the word.

By the middle of 1<sup>st</sup> grade, if phonics and phonemic awareness are not working well for your child to learn to read, then it is critical that another vehicle for learning to read needs to be implemented.

By grade 4, which is known as the “watershed year,” the young reader is expected to have learned how to read and is now expected to “read to learn.” If the 4<sup>th</sup> grader is dyslexic, or has not been able to master phonics, phonemes, and reading abstract words and symbols, then they are unlikely to be able to read well enough to keep up with their peers. This child started out as a bright, confident, eager student to learn. Now, failure to read like their peers has deflated the child’s confidence, causing self-doubt, feelings of “inferiority,” and a mindset of “I can’t learn to read, I don’t like to read, therefore I hate to read.” This is a life-altering experience.

## How Do You Teach a Dyslexic Child, or a 3-D Learner, To Read Abstract Words and Symbols?

Based on over 25 years of experience in teaching dyslexic children and adults, the Magical I Am team has developed a digital edutainment app that uses tools and methods that directly address the learning style of the *3-D Sensory Thinker*. A variety of experiences provide sensory practice to engage and teach children what 300 abstract words and symbols **look** like, **sound** like, and **mean**. The child learns to read these words and symbols in the context of an engaging story resulting in the comprehension of the storyline.

The more senses that can be stimulated when providing a “meaning” for abstract words (me, his, why) or symbols (!, “ 1), while at the same time the sight and sound of it is heard and learned, the more the brain has the input it needs to link these together in a “meaningful” experience. For this kind of mastery to be possible, the “Mind’s Eye” perceptions of words and symbols must become stable and consistent. In order to facilitate this mastery, the Sky Village –

Trail of Spells app has adopted and adapted the concept of the "Go to The Spot" an imaginary point for integrating multiple viewpoints.

## Why is the Importance of Learning to Read Abstract Words and Symbols Overlooked?

Reading disability symptoms tend to occur inconsistently. One day your child can read "the" and yet another day your child misreads "the" as "one," or "a," or hesitates," or omits when meeting the word. *Although often not noticed by the parent or teacher*, this inconsistency brings up questions of its source, which over 90% of the time are *abstract words or symbols*.

We have looked at the difficulty of learning to read abstract words and symbols due to their flat, 2-D nature and lack of inherent meaning. Another aspect of learning is how stress is handled by the child.

We have established that confusion can arise when abstract words and symbols are encountered. If not resolved, then frustration is likely to follow as no meaning or recognition can be achieved. The increasing failure to read increases the damage to the child's self-image, resulting in the loss of confidence.

This child wants to read and to learn, and yet, failed experiences eventually lead to the belief that they are a failure and will never learn to read. Along with the buildup of confusion and frustration, comes the desire to leave the unpleasant task and results in behaviors that give the child "a "vacation" from the exercise. "Vacation" breaks can develop into behaviors such as ADHD, daydreaming, irritability, aversion to lessons, and an overall disdain of reading and school in general.

Children who have the 3-D tools that help them learn to read successfully are more apt to push through the confusion and "stick to" the job of learning to read than children who lack the necessary guidance that matches their style of learning. The stresses of learning to read, especially the pressure of reading out loud before teachers, affect every child differently. These stresses are magnified in the dyslexic or reading challenged student. These stresses can manifest themselves throughout the learning experience and beyond.

The *confusion* that can be caused by reading abstract words and symbols can become an *interruption* in the thinking process of the child. Even if the child can read most of the concrete words, constant interruptions in knowing what a word means can cause the reader to lose the storyline.

Once a child has learned how to master reading all the 300 abstract words and symbols, the child has tools that will help them learn to benefit from learning how to use phonics and phonemes to enlarge their vocabulary. On average, by the time a student graduates from high school, they have a vocabulary of 18,000 words.

## Bill Allen's Personal Story

My personal story is typical of the dyslexic 3-D learner. In 1<sup>st</sup> grade there were three reading circles ranging from advanced readers or those who exhibited some type of learning aptitude to those who were struggling with learning. I started off in the advanced reading circle, however, within a matter of weeks I had been demoted to the struggling reader group. I remember distinctly that I could not get the word "it." No matter how hard I tried, I just could not make sense of "it" or read "it." "It" was the beginning of my awareness that I could not read like everyone else.

By the way, up until the time before I started to embrace my "GIFT" of dyslexia, I still struggled with words I didn't know by sight. And, sounding out words still doesn't work for me, and it doesn't work for most dyslexics.

In 1990, in a group sales presentation, I read the word "façade" as "fakaid." After the presentation, the creative director wanted me fired since I had embarrassed all those who were present. Fortunately for me, the regional director said "we will keep him... he can sell. We just will not have him read anything in presentations again," which was fine by me!

One final thought: Reading isn't the hardest skill for the dyslexic to learn. Writing is.

It seems amazing that it takes a dyslexic (me) to figure out what educators are seemingly clueless to. The reason why writing is so difficult is because when the author (whether they be dyslexic or not) writes, a choice has to be made with every word that is put down on paper or typed on a computer.

A godsend for the dyslexic is digital software for voice dictation. For some reason, unbeknownst to me, the dyslexic, if stereotyped, has the ability to talk up a "blue streak" and use "itty-bitty" filler words (those abstract words again) without any problem. It's just when trying to "think" with them while writing a sentence that chaos or usually gibberish evolves.

*Learn to Read, so you can Read to Learn.™*