



# ANIMAL ANTICS

A RESEARCH-BASED SUPPLEMENTAL SHORT VOWEL AND LONG VOWEL PHONICS SERIES



# Overview

Literacy instruction plays an essential part in giving students the necessary tools to “learn to read” and later use those skills to “read to learn” new information about the world around them.

With literacy being a necessary ingredient for success in college, career, and life (Rohde 2015), solid research-based literacy instruction is critical. Building students’ reading and writing skills provides them with the essential tools required to both understand and convey knowledge. A proficient reader actively engages in critical thought, resulting in enhanced problem-solving abilities. “The effects of developing keen problem-solving skills cannot be understated. Problem-solving skills have the potential to impact individuals more immediately and often with ramifications for the future” (Murawski 2014). The foundation for these literacy skills is shaped in the kindergarten classroom—learning to read is the cornerstone of kindergarten curriculum.

It is no secret that each student is unique. Because each student learns and processes information differently, it is important to implement a mixed-method approach to learning (Bhagat, Vyas, and Singh 2015). A variety of sound and tested teaching strategies and learning styles in addition to a diverse set of curriculum resources and learning tools will enhance learning outcomes. Having access to a wide-ranging collection of educational materials allows teachers the flexibility to choose content and activities that best meet individual student needs.

Blue Star Education’s *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series uses a collection of effective and engaging standards-based materials and tools to help teachers introduce essential phonics skills and build literacy in early readers. These resources and tools are designed to enhance student learning and aid teachers and caregivers alike in motivating students to achieve their educational goals. The silly stories, lovable characters, and colorful images will motivate young students and make them want to read and learn. This series is filled with a mixture of different engaging and fun activities designed to reinforce basic literacy skills through repeated practice.



## Animal Antics Phonics Readers Kit Components:

- 3 copies of 15 full-color readers (45 books total)
- 80-page Teacher Guide
- 240-page Reproducible Student Activities Resource book
- Two book bins

# The Science of Reading: Five Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction

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It is important that kindergarten teachers create a literacy-rich environment. Mastering the alphabet, the sounds and letters that make up words, and basic sight words and high-frequency words are at the core of literacy learning at this level. These skills play a crucial role in the journey toward reading. Much research has been devoted to studying how children learn to read. One extensive study has been crucial in determining the five elements needed in an effective reading program (Learning Point Associates 2004). These five components are the foundation of the *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series.

## (1) Phonemic Awareness

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A fundamental aspect of effective reading instruction is phonemic awareness. This is “the ability to auditorily recognize and manipulate individual sounds in words” (Wasik 2001). Phonemic awareness provides children with a more advanced way of recognizing new words by establishing a link between the visual aspects of the word and its pronunciation and meaning (Learning Point Associates 2004). Learning letter sounds and letter-sound relationships is challenging and takes time; however, it is a necessary step in the reading process.

Early readers benefit greatly when they are taught phonemic awareness—they are more ready to learn to read and go on to become more successful readers as a result (Wasik 2001). The *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series provides meaningful experiences for students to develop phonemic awareness. Lessons incorporate activities in which students will blend letter sounds to name words. There are also opportunities for students to recognize and work with word families. Studying word families has been known to improve decoding skills for early readers (Johnston 1999). Furthermore, students will be working closely with vowel teams and rhyming words.

## (2) Phonics

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Phonics instruction is another essential facet of literacy learning and is most successful when it is implemented in kindergarten (or earlier) and is maintained through the first few years of elementary school (Armbruster 2001). Phonics connects the sounds that students hear with the letters that make those sounds. Students learn the most common spelling patterns that correspond to those sounds.

The *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series includes explicit phonics instruction as well as Word Work activities. These activities include practicing letter formation, spelling and blending consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words, and writing these words on a variety of different activity sheets. “Creating opportunities to write in the classroom to facilitate children’s expression in writing is an important step in making them aware of sounds in words” (Wasik 2001).

## (3) Fluency

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To help students develop fluency, rapid word recognition is a must. When students can recognize words on sight, space is freed in their memory, which can then be directed toward comprehension of the text being read (Learning Point Associates 2004). This marks the early stages of bridging students from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.”

Once students have mastered letter sounds, they can begin to apply that knowledge to decode unfamiliar printed words. As students begin to manipulate sounds and words, their confidence builds as they begin to master the language and take gradual steps toward fluency.

Practicing sight words helps students to build and expand their word banks, thereby increasing the speed and accuracy with which they can recognize words as well as increasing oral-reading fluency (Fasko and Fasko 2010). These are words that students may not be able to decode, but they occur frequently in texts. Because of their frequency, students need to be able to automatically recognize these words. As students’ word-recognition abilities grow, so too will their confidence in reading.

## (4) Vocabulary

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Students must constantly have opportunities to learn new words and practice those words in meaningful ways. Research suggests that it can take up to 17 times of being exposed to a new word to be able to correctly remember and use the word (Kamil et al. 2008). Exposure to new words may include hearing the word repeated in a text, talking about the word in class discussions, reading the word in multiple texts, and activities that include writing the word.

The *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series includes vocabulary instruction for Challenge Words. These words are likely to be new words for students. Students learn the new words through class discussions about their meanings and through drawing pictures to show the meaning of each word. Research indicates that many learners benefit from visual aids to help develop meaningful connections to new vocabulary (Moore and Calvert 2000).

## (5) Comprehension

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It is not enough for students to be able to accurately read the words in a text. In addition, they must be able to understand and make sense of what they are reading. Each lesson in the *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series includes comprehension activities to check for students’ understanding of what they have read. The Teacher Guide also includes guided questions for teachers to use to check for understanding.



## Why Teach Short Vowel Sounds?

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As with learning most new concepts, the order in which the concepts are taught has great significance. The same is true about teaching early readers to recognize and understand short-vowel sounds and their spellings before focusing on long-vowel sounds. The *Short Vowel Phonics Readers* is the place to begin.

While instructors of early readers will teach all vowel sounds, research shows that short-vowel sounds follow more predictable patterns for students to read and spell (Treiman et al. 2013). Whereas the long *a* sound can be spelled multiple ways (including *a*, *ai*, and *ay*), the short *a* sound is usually spelled *a*. There are hundreds of words with CVC spelling patterns. As students learn these compact and common words, they also learn the individual consonant sounds and short-vowel sounds in each word. This helps students differentiate between consonants and vowel sounds and isolate each sound.

## Why Teach Long Vowel Sounds?

Once students have mastered the five short vowels and can read and write CVC words, they are ready for more. Teaching long vowel sounds is the next step. It provides students with an understanding of patterns that will help them decode more challenging words. Learning long vowel patterns improves fluency, accuracy, and spelling because “learners must understand that spelling does not always work in a strictly left-to-right fashion. In order to understand how the ‘silent e’ works in words such as *make*, learners must skip to the end of the word and think in a right-to-left fashion” (Templeton 1998). Long vowels help students understand that different spelling patterns can make the same sounds. Skilled readers tend to process all of the letters in words that they read instead of trying to predict the word. Awareness of long vowel patterns facilitates learning more than mere memorization of rules (Moats 1998).

The *Long Vowel Phonics Readers* build upon what students have already mastered in the short vowels and introduces them to vowel teams. Students will focus on recognizing long vowel patterns and learning how to blend and decode words on their own. This allows them to begin to read books in a story format and eventually progress to understanding more complex story elements, such as plot, setting, characters, and conflict.

## The Importance of Decodable Readers

Decodable readers offer students the chance to practice blending sounds to read words quickly and independently, unlike predictable text or leveled readers. Students can feel confident in their reading skills as they sound out what they already know rather than try to guess the words by looking at the pictures.

In a 2005 study conducted by Mesmer, all participants were given the same 14-day phonics instruction. Then, they were given either highly decodable text or less decodable text to read. Students with the highly decodable text were able to apply the letter/sound knowledge that they learned and could read independently and with accuracy more than the other group (Mesmer 2005). Another study found that “decodability is a critical characteristic of early reading text as it increases the likelihood that students will use a decoding strategy and results in immediate benefits, particularly with regard to accuracy” (Cheatham & Allor 2012). Additionally, phonics instruction paired with decodable text offered higher long-term retention in EFL students and improved their reading skills (Chu & Chen 2014).

Decodable Books	Leveled Readers
Include phonetically decodable text that is familiar to students	Text may not match student’s phonics skills
Text requires students to sound out the words	Predictable text (reading strategy is guessing, not decoding)
Includes few non-phonetic words	Many non-decodable and high-frequency words
Illustrations provide additional text support but not individual word support	Illustrations and pictures reveal the story and words
Focus is on developing accurate decoding skills	Focus is on reading comprehension
Used in conjunction with explicit phonics instruction	Used once students have mastered decoding

The *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* provide students with engaging, high-interest text that is simple to decode. The CVC words and word family practice provide students with the opportunity to sound out, recognize, and decode the words with ease. As students sound out words successfully, they will feel confident in their literacy skills. Confident readers are more likely to become lifelong readers who choose to read for enjoyment.

## Using Audiobooks to Enhance Literacy

The *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series includes audiobooks for each title in the kit. The use of audio files supports early readers as they hear the correct pronunciation of words, and readers are “not held back by the demands in attention, reading skills, and time that are presented by engagement with a physical book” (Best 2020).

Listening to audio of a text also models correct fluency, intonation, and expression for young readers. “Since the reading process develops through our experiences with oral language, audiobooks simply provide another opportunity to increase the understanding and appreciation of the written word. Audiobooks can model reading, teach critical listening, build on prior knowledge, improve vocabulary, encourage oral language usage, and increase comprehension. Essentially, reading audiobooks supports the development of all four language systems: phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic” (Wolfson 2008).





## Opportunities for Formative Assessment

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Decades of research has shown that formative assessment is a highly effective way to gauge students' understanding, modify teaching, and ultimately increase student learning (Black and William 1998). Listening to students decode words provides teachers with the opportunity to see and hear how students are engaging with sounds and letters. This allows teachers to understand the individual strengths and weaknesses in students' decoding skills and adjust their pedagogical approach accordingly.

The *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series offers a variety of activity sheets and assessments in phonics and reading comprehension as well as guided questions for teachers to use to check for understanding.

## Conclusion

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Literacy is a complex system to master, yet it is an essential life skill. Studies prove that teaching phonics will build strong readers. Skilled readers can use written information to reach their goals, build their self-esteem, improve their communication skills, and improve their overall quality of life.

While learning how to read is essential, all students learn differently. Blue Star Education's *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* series uses a collection of effective materials and tools to help teachers introduce essential phonics skills and build literacy in all early readers. This series is aligned with state and national literacy standards and is designed to follow proven best practices for early-reading phonics instruction.

Teaching short and long vowels through decodable, high-interest text is the key. *Animal Antics Phonics Readers* includes lively and imaginative books that will make reading fun and enjoyable for students while providing beginning readers with everything they need to master the essential components of reading.

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