



Thank you for downloading this article. I know some of you may be very skeptical about what you think you may or may not find within these pages. Others may be wondering why I chose such a controversial topic to write about.

How to Let Go of Letter of the Week in 5 Easy Steps

I chose this topic because it is one I feel very strongly about. I have seen the benefits of embracing best practices and current research in my own classroom, and I want to share that success with others so that they can have the same experience. Giving young children the skills and knowledge—the right tools if you will—to be successful in your classroom and far beyond is a wonderful gift for both you, the teacher, and for your students.

Let me assure you that my only hope is that you read the words on these pages with an open mind and do not feel threatened in any way. If you are currently using the Letter of the Week method in your school, classroom, or with your own children, please know that this does not make you any less capable as a parent or teacher. We are all in this journey as professional educators and caregivers together, and being judgmental will not help us reach our destination more quickly.

My goal is to provide you with factual information that will help inform your instructional methods, and hopefully encourage you to embrace current best practices in teaching and learning.

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

Maya Angelou

Step 1: Learn the Facts

It used to be that cigarettes and soda were thought to be good for you; they were endorsed by medical professionals, and claims were made that they helped with everything from fatigue, headaches, weight loss and more. Products containing cocaine and morphine were once sold to relieve teething pain! Those claims seem ridiculous to us today and we can't even begin to understand how people were able to believe such outlandish claims.

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Similar advances/changes in thinking have occurred in early childhood education. It used to be common practice throughout the U.S. to teach a Letter of the Week in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. It made sense to start teaching the alphabet with the first letter and end with the last letter. It was a nice, orderly method that teachers and parents alike believed to be the best way to teach the alphabet to young children.

Modern scientific research has proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that cigarettes and soda are unhealthy. Now, far fewer people indulge in cigarettes and soda than did in the past.

Scientists have also made breakthrough discoveries in the field of child development in recent years, specifically with regard to how a child's brain develops and how children learn to read. This research has proven that what was once considered to be standard practice, Letter of the Week, does not fit with these new discoveries of how children develop and learn.

“Letter of the week” suggests that letters are learned first (and in sequence) and then children learn to read, when in reality all of this learning is taking place at the same time. The more connections children make between the multiple understandings required to read, the faster they learn (letters).”

Fountas and Pinnell

Traditionally, letter of the week introduces children to one letter per week in sequential order starting with A and ending with Z. The activities each week are centered around one single letter; such as the letter “P.” Children might be asked to glue popcorn or other things that start with the letter “P” to an outline of the letter on paper. The books read during the week might have characters that start with the letter P such as pigs and

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children may be invited to taste foods that start with that particular letter. All of this sounds very inviting and perfectly logical until we look at the research.

We now know that children don't learn letters in sequential order during a 26 week period. In fact, some children may struggle to remember the letters taught in the beginning of the cycle because each letter has been isolated and removed from its meaningful context. Then there are those children who "catch on" to the idea of letters really quickly, say at the 6 week point in the 26 week sequence and may begin to act out if they become bored or frustrated by the slow pace.

Children begin to develop a deeper understanding of how print works and the meaning it holds when connections are made to the letters in their names and the print they see daily in the world around them. Once this concept of attaching meaning to shapes and associating those shapes with letter names begins to take hold in a child's brain the more quickly the child will begin to learn the alphabet- much more quickly than 26 weeks.

Children also need frequent practice learning to distinguish the differences and similarities in letters. If only one letter is being taught at a time, it is less likely that they will be able to develop the visual discrimination skills they need to accurately identify letters, especially those that are similar such as M and W.

Research also tells us that children learn concepts through repeated exposure. It may take a typical four year old child 50 exposures to the letter L for that particular child to retain the letter in his or her long term memory. However, not all students are typical; others may need 75, 100, or 150 exposures to the same letter for it to "stick."

All of this information indicates that teaching letters in isolation, during one brief time period is not as effective as teaching letters in context on a daily basis.

A list of citations can be found on the last page of this document.

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Step 2: Identify Opportunities

Research has shown that the following factors determine future literacy success:

- ✓ Alphabet Knowledge
- ✓ Phonological Awareness
- ✓ Concepts of Print
- ✓ Oral Language

All of the aforementioned skills play an important role in the early literacy process. A strong foundation for future literacy success is created when activities are planned intentionally, with careful thought given to how these skills will be incorporated.

To start moving away from Letter of the Week, first carefully examine your daily schedule and determine where you can integrate literacy skills. Instead of focusing on the skills individually during different portions of the day, weaving the skills throughout your daily routine will be more effective.

Look at which activities you already have in your schedule that support each of the skills. Do you read books aloud to your children? Many of the skills on the list could be addressed through the reading of a book. Do your kids play with blocks? Adding props such as small people to the block center can facilitate meaningful conversations and support the development of oral language skills.

Step 3: Incorporate Literacy Skills

Now that you know what skills to focus on, let's start incorporating them into your daily routine.

Alphabet Knowledge: Do your students have names? Great! There is nothing more meaningful to a child than his or her name. Use this natural interest to discover and

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explore the letters of the alphabet on a daily basis. Play games using [children's names](#) and pictures, write children's names on sentence strips and place them in different areas of the classroom (cubby, name wall, attendance or sign-in, etc.) and create [class books](#) that include children's names and pictures.

Phonological Awareness: Because many popular children's books rhyme, incorporating rhyming into your daily schedule is a snap. Call attention to the rhyming words in the story, such as in the classic *Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom*, by saying things like "I like the way that sounded! Did you hear that? Let's say that part together again. Did you hear the words 'boom' and 'room'? Those are called rhyming words, they sound a lot alike at the end. Let's keep reading and see if we hear any other words that sound alike at the end."

Do the words in the books you read to children have syllables? Of course! Call attention to words in the books you read aloud and emphasize the parts of the word you hear. For example, using *Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom* again, "Coconut, let's say that word together. What do you hear when you say that word? Let's say it slowly. I hear three parts..." Teacher claps the word, co/co/nut, and invites students to do the same.

There are many more components of phonological awareness, but hopefully the examples given here will illustrate how easy it is to incorporate these important, auditory skills into your daily read-aloud experiences.

Concepts of Print: Do you read books aloud to your students daily? Perfect! There are many opportunities during a read-aloud to address concepts of print, such as pointing to the words on the page, talking about the cover of the book, introducing the title, and identifying the author and illustrator and their roles. Pointing to the print in the book as you read reinforces the concept of left to right directionality and return sweep (returning to the line below and starting again on the left side of the page).

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Oral Language: Do your kids talk? Excellent! Provide opportunities daily for both teacher-directed and peer-to-peer conversations. Teacher-directed conversations include open-ended questions like “Why do you think that happened?” Or “What makes you think that?” During teacher-directed conversations, the teacher can scaffold and support the conversation.

Peer-to-peer conversations take place in informal settings such as the playground; block center, or dramatic play center. Let your children play and interact with others and they will have more opportunities for spontaneous, meaningful conversations that will enrich and support the development of their oral language and literacy skills.

“Fluent letter recognition is one of the (if not THE) predictors of reading success”

Adams

Step 4: Focus on Fluency

Fluency is the ability to process visual information quickly and accurately. Have you ever asked a young child to identify a letter and noticed him or her giving it some thought before blurting out a random letter? This is a child who is not yet able to fluently recognize that particular letter.

Fluently identifying letters of the alphabet doesn’t happen overnight; it takes a great deal of time, practice, and patience. If you moved to Italy, it would take you some time to become fluent in Italian. The same is true of young children learning to identify letters fluently.

Effortless, or fluent, letter recognition, can be attained through repeated, meaningful exposure and hands-on practice.

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Have you ever watched a good athlete play and wondered how they became so good at their chosen sport? Good athletes develop muscle memory through repeated practice. They practice so often that their muscles begin to remember how it feels to successfully throw or hit the ball.

Muscle memory also applies to young children who are learning to identify letters through [hands-on activities](#). Using activities that invite children to touch and feel the shapes of the letters will help build fluency through muscle memory. The more children touch and manipulate letters, the more information they will retain. Adding movements such as sign language can also be highly effective for helping children retain information—such as letters—in their long term memory.

Meaningful exposure takes place when attention is called to letters in many different contexts. Letters appear on signs and in our names, and are in the world around us all the time. When children begin to understand that letters carry meaning, and begin to notice them in their everyday lives, it becomes easy to call attention to them.

“Children who are taught letters in isolation have difficulty placing that information into literacy activities.”

Wood and McLeMore

Step 5: Maximize Exposure

Have you ever felt that there are not enough hours in the day? That’s because when it comes to little children, there aren’t! Learning does not stop when they leave the classroom; children are 24/7 learning machines. As teachers and parents it’s our job to carefully, and intentionally, maximize the amount of exposure our children receive to early literacy experiences both inside and outside of the classroom.

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This exposure can be as simple as encouraging parents to take their child to the library each week and to read to their child daily. For some parents, the physical act of going to the library may be a struggle, or choosing appropriate books may prove difficult. In such cases, it may be necessary to directly [provide families with high-quality books](#).

Driving in the car and going to the grocery store can also be a literacy-rich experience. Encourage parents to talk about the signs they see on the way to the store. Invite them to point out the logos and labels on items in the grocery store. Have them ask their child to tell them what the signs and labels say. This type of print is often referred to as [Environmental Print](#).

Teachers can help maximize exposure by being intentional in their teaching, and by carefully inserting literacy-rich experiences throughout their daily routines instead of teaching those skills in isolated portions of the day.

Many teachers have had great success hosting [educational sessions](#) to help parents better understand how to help their child at home. Never assume that a parent's knowledge of, and/or interest in, early literacy is directly related to his or her financial status. All parents can benefit from good information presented in a friendly, non-threatening way.

When teachers and parents work together to create a literacy-rich environment for young children, it's a win-win for everybody.

"If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten."

Tony Robbins

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By learning the facts, identifying opportunities, incorporating literacy skills, focusing on fluency and maximizing exposure, early learners can be taught to identify and recognize the alphabet more quickly and efficiently.

About Vanessa Levin

Vanessa is the creator of [Pre-K Pages](#), a popular website for early childhood teachers. She is also the author of the book *A Fabulous First Year and Beyond: A Practical Guide for Pre-K and Kindergarten Teachers*, available on Amazon. Vanessa has more than two decades of teaching experience and enjoys helping young children and teachers through her [professional development sessions](#).

Follow Vanessa on [Facebook](#), [Google +](#), [Twitter](#) and [Pinterest](#).

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List of Related Citations

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