

# Science of Reading: What Every Montessori Guide Needs to Know

A concise guide to current reading science and its implications for Montessori practice

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## Why This Matters Now

The Science of Reading — a body of research drawing on cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and linguistics — has reshaped how reading instruction is understood and delivered in schools across the country. Many states have changed laws. Many districts have mandated curriculum changes. And many Montessori guides are wondering: what does this mean for me?

The short answer: Montessori has always done some of this right. But not all of it. This guide names what the research says, where Montessori aligns, and where the field needs to update its practice.

## What the Science of Reading Actually Says

The most important finding is this: reading is not a natural skill. Speaking is natural. Reading must be taught — explicitly, systematically, and in a specific sequence.

### **Phonemic awareness is foundational.**

Before children can read, they need to hear and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. This is an auditory skill, not a visual one. It develops before and alongside early reading instruction.

### **Phonics must be explicit and systematic.**

Children need direct instruction in the relationship between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes). They do not reliably discover these patterns on their own through exposure to print. The instruction must follow a logical sequence from simpler to more complex patterns.

### **Decodable texts matter — especially early.**

Early readers should practice with texts that use only the phonics patterns they have been taught. Texts that require guessing from context or memorizing 'sight words' before phonics instruction is established interfere with the development of accurate decoding.

### **Fluency is the bridge to comprehension.**

Once phonics accuracy is established, children need repeated practice reading at their level to build fluency — the ability to read accurately, quickly, and expressively. Fluency frees cognitive resources for meaning-making.

### **Vocabulary and background knowledge are essential for comprehension.**

Decoding is necessary but not sufficient. Comprehension depends heavily on vocabulary and on what children already know about the world. Wide reading, discussion, and content-rich curriculum all build this knowledge.

### **The 'three-cueing system' is not supported by the research.**

The practice of teaching children to guess unknown words using context, picture cues, or sentence meaning — rather than decoding — is inconsistent with what the research shows about how skilled readers actually process text. Skilled readers decode; they do not guess from context.

## Where Montessori Aligns — and Where It Doesn't

Montessori Practice	SoR Alignment	Notes
Sandpaper Letters (letter-sound work)	Strong alignment	Multisensory, explicit phoneme-grapheme instruction. Consistent with SoR.
Moveable Alphabet (encoding before decoding)	Strong alignment	Encoding supports phoneme segmentation. Consistent with current research.
Pink/Blue/Green reading series (systematic phonics sequence)	Strong alignment	A genuine systematic sequence. Often underimplemented in practice.
Traditional "sight word" memorization	Partial misalignment	Many "sight words" are decodable. Memorization before phonics instruction is established is not recommended.
Using context/picture cues to identify unknown words	Misalignment	This is a guessing strategy, not a decoding strategy. Should not be taught as a primary reading strategy.
Free choice of reading materials before fluency	Partial misalignment	Independent reading time is valuable, but early readers need access to decodable texts at their level.
Read-alouds, storytelling, broad vocabulary	Strong alignment	Builds vocabulary and background knowledge. Essential for comprehension. Keep and expand.

## Three Things to Do in Your Classroom

### 1. Audit your sequence.

When did you last trace the Pink-Blue-Green sequence from beginning to end for a child? Many children in Montessori classrooms are given free reading materials before the phonics sequence is completed. Map each child's current position in the sequence.

### 2. Use decodable texts intentionally.

Match independent reading materials to the child's current phonics level. The Montessori Makers Decodable Book Series (96 books) is designed specifically for this — organized by the Pink/Blue/Green sequence so you always know which books match which children.

### **3. Stop teaching cueing strategies.**

If you or your school currently teaches children to use pictures, context, or first-letter guessing to identify unfamiliar words, stop. Teach decoding instead. The Moveable Alphabet and phonics sequence already give you the tools — use them consistently.

The full 7-hour course *Montessori Meets Science of Reading* goes deeper on all of this — with direct application to your classroom, your materials, and your children. Available at [montessorimakersgroup.org/learning/courses](https://montessorimakersgroup.org/learning/courses)