Answers to common questions about decodable readers

by Anna Geiger, M.Ed.

What are decodable readers?

Who should be reading them?

When can students move on to a different type of text?

We'll answer these questions and more in today's post!

› The Why, When, How of Using Decodable Books

I've been upfront about this before, but I'll say it again.

I wasn't always a fan of decodable readers.

Decodable readers (also called decodable books) can be stilted, boring, and nonsensical.

The good news is that times are a-changin'.

These days it isn't hard to find beautiful, interesting, and meaningful decodable texts … even for very young readers.

In today's post we'll answer common questions about this important tool.

› What are decodable readers?

I love this definition from Iowa Reading Research.

> *Decodable readers* are texts that introduce words and word structures in a carefully planned scope and sequence. The order in which that word structure is introduced often aligns with the scope and sequence of the curriculum. In this way, students have the opportunity to apply the phonics skills they are learning and to build confidence in their abilities to read full sentences and short stories.
>
> **Iowa Reading Research**

The fact is that a book is only decodable for a child *if s/he has been taught the sound-spellings within the book.* What is decodable for one child is not necessarily decodable for another.

You might be wondering if a book has to be 100% decodable to quality.
It does not.

In his book, Choosing and Using Decodable Texts (definitely one to add to your library!), Wiley Blevins shares this opinion: "If one story is more comprehensible and engaging at 65

percent or 70 percent decodable than another story at 80 percent decodable that has stilted sentences and odd language structures, I prefer the story with slightly lower decodability."

Here's a sample book from my collection of decodable books (you can get a version of the book below for free on this page).

Of the 25 different words in the book (many are repeated, for a total of 64 words), 64% are decodable based on the sound-spellings that have been taught thus far.

We could easily stretch that number to 76% if we include the words *has, is,* and *a*. HAS and IS are decodable when you teach students that "s" can also represent /z/. And "a" is such an easy word I hesitate to call it irregular.

The remainder of the words are the following: for, go, to, look, the, her

Some of those are functional words that kids should learn early on: *to* and *the.*

Some are words with the r-controlled vowel pattern: *for* and *her*. It will be a while until these students are explicitly taught r-controlled vowels, but that doesn't mean we should prevent them from seeing or learning any words with that pattern. The book also contains the word *look*, another word I think kids should learn before we teach the related phonics pattern.

That leaves us with the word GO. Soon, these students will learn open and closed syllables.

But for now it's fine for them to learn to recognize this word without that explicit instruction.

⟩ Why should we use decodable readers with our students?

For years I resisted decodable books. Not only did I believe that all of them were boring without any kind of meaningful story line, I also thought that I had a much better alternative.

I used leveled books with my beginning readers. Early leveled books usually have predictable text and words that students can figure out using the picture and/or context.

I *thought* that I was teaching my students to be strategic readers by encouraging them to use all the "cues" available to them: **m**eaning, **s**yntax, and the **v**isual cue of phonics. (You might know that this is called "three cueing," or MSV.)

It wasn't until I began exploring the science of reading that I realized that teaching kids to use three-cueing is counter-productive at best, and harmful at worst.

It all comes down to how the brain learns to read.

Let's review.

In the brain, there are different areas that work together to help us read. We need to get the phonological assembly region (that focuses on sounds) to connect with the orthographic processor (which focuses on print). How do we get these areas to work together?

We give kids explicit, systematic phonics instruction AND practice with decoding. Where will they get that practice?
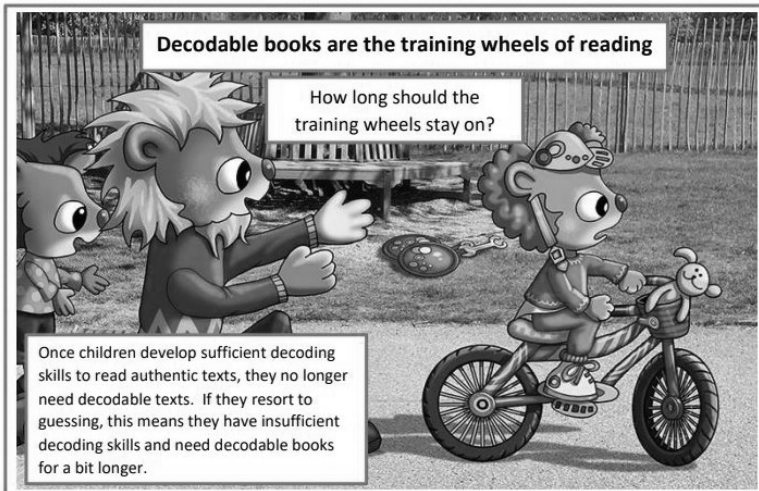
You guessed it. Reading and re-reading quality decodable texts and books.

When kids decode a word enough times, it becomes "orthographically mapped." That means that they recognize it instantly without needing to sound out or guess. It's not because they've memorized the word as a whole … it's because they connected the letters to the sounds.

Some kids can orthographically map a word after reading it just a few times. Other kids need more exposures to the word.

› Who should be reading decodable books? And for how long?

I can't think of a better way to explain this than with this lovely graphic from Phonicbooks.

Decodable books are the training wheels of reading

How long should the training wheels stay on?

Once children develop sufficient decoding skills to read authentic texts, they no longer need decodable texts. If they resort to guessing, this means they have insufficient decoding skills and need decodable books for a bit longer.

www.phonicbooks.co.uk   PhonicBooks   www.phonibooks.com (USA)

(Phonicbooks is one of many companies with quality decodable readers in multiple levels. The books are sturdy and engaging, and I definitely recommend checking out their website.)

As pointed out in the graphic, kids should start to read with decodable books.

Eventually, as they develop the skills to read authentic texts (books that were written for us to enjoy and not to teach a specific phonics pattern) they can move on to other texts for independent practice.

In an excellent webinar presentation that you can find on YouTube, Michel Hunter and Linda Farrell state that they feel that kids are ready to move out of decodable books when they are at about a level J. (While I am no longer a fan of Fountas and Pinnell, I do think that their leveling system can be useful when helping kids choose books for independent reading … particularly at level J and higher, when kids can't use three-cueing to read all the words.)

However! Even though we can eventually guide our students toward non-decodable books for their independent reading practice, decodable text is still very valuable in our small group phonics lessons.

Let's chat about that next.

› How to use decodable texts

In general, I recommend teaching phonics in small groups rather than to the whole class.

That's because – if you are teaching anywhere at all – you know that students come to you with a huge variety of reading skills.

My first year of teaching first grade, I had a student who couldn't remember the letters of the alphabet after two years in kindergarten, and two students who were reading at a fourth grade reading level.

Teaching phonics to the whole group (which I was expected to do) was a fail. My sweet little student who couldn't remember letter sounds was quickly confused. And my advanced readers were thoroughly bored.

In my opinion, it's better to assess kids with a good phonics assessment (coming soon!) and teach phonics in small groups.

A future post will break those lessons down for you, but for now let's share some activities that you can do as you teach your students to read a particular decodable text.

Check out the infographic on the side for reference!

ROUTINES FOR TEACHING WITH DECODABLE TEXT

BEFORE READING
- Explicitly teach the new sound-spelling.
- Read blending lines that give practice with the new concept and review previous taught skills.
- Introduce high frequency words that appear in the text.

DURING READING
- Have students read the title, examine the cover, and make predictions.
- Read the book chorally.
- Give feedback as students read independently.
- Discuss the story as you go.

AFTER READING
- Ask both low and high-level questions about the text.
- Provide opportunities for students to reread the text on future days.

the measured mom

› Where can you find quality decodable readers?

After all this talk about why, when, and how we should use decodable books (and with whom), one question remains … Where can we find them?

For about six months, I collected as many decodable books that I could find. Then I reviewed the books and put them together in [The Ultimate Guide to Decodable Books.](#)

Looking for more information about decodable text? Here are some great resources!

[The Drudgery (and Beauty) of Decodable Texts](#) – by Margaret Goldberg of The Right to Read Project

[Fear Not the Decodable: Why? When? How?](#) – by Heidi Ann Mesmer, PhD at Heinemann

[How to Use Decodable Books](#) – by Santina DiMauro at Phonics Hero

[How to Use Decodable Texts](#) – by Christina Winter of Mrs. Winter's Bliss

[Decodable Books: What Are They, and How Should I Use Them with My K-2 Students?](#) by Alison Ryan of Learning at the Primary Pond

More resources for you

- *Get the book, [Reach All Readers](#)*
- *Sign up for the [Reach All Readers online course](#)*
- *Join our [membership for K-3rd grade teachers](#)*