
# Structured Literacy Routines - with Dr. Melissa Orkin & Sarah Gannon

Reach All Readers Podcast #244

**Anna Geiger:** Welcome, Dr. Orkin. Welcome, Sarah.

**Sarah Gannon:** Thank you.

**Melissa Orkin:** Hi. Thanks for having us.

**Anna Geiger:** I'm excited to talk to you both about the work that you do with schools and *The Structured Literacy Playbook*. But first, I'd like to know more about your history in education. So can we start with you, Melissa?

**Melissa Orkin:** Sure. My name's Melissa Orkin, and I am an educator and developmental psychologist. The aspect of development that I specialized in is literacy development.

I started as a reading teacher and when I got my master's I was working with Maryanne Wolf at Tufts University right outside of Boston. She had a number of research studies there and a clinic for reading and language research, and I was really interested in clinical practice. I worked with her on using some of her curricula and different instructional strategies to test sort of the efficacy of the different interventions.

My area of specialty and interest is in fluency development and also in achievement motivation. I'm really interested in the factors that foster persistence in the classroom and engagement and positive experiences around learning.

I worked with Maryanne at Tufts for almost a decade. I got my doctorate there, and I left Tufts when she moved to UCLA, and I started a practice called Crafting Minds. It's a consulting group. Shortly thereafter I began working with Sarah, and through Crafting Minds, we consult with state departments of education, school districts, and independent schools. We provide private workshops and keynotes on all things literacy.

**Anna Geiger:** Thank you so much, Sarah. How about you?

**Sarah Gannon:** I'm a teacher by trade. I knew I wanted to be a teacher when I was five or six and used to play school. I always knew I was going to be a teacher. I love to be in charge and direct things and tell people what to do. It felt very at home for me.

I got my bachelor's in education at the University of Michigan and I started teaching in a small district outside of Boston, third grade. It was amazing. I loved it. Then I became more interested in literacy, so I got a master's in reading. That was great.

Then I became a literacy coach, really trying to work with more teachers, which reduced my role with students. I missed that for sure.

Then around the time I had a first grader who I was trying to teach to read, this was during COVID... I was using my guided reading tools, a lot of balanced literacy techniques, and I think that's kind of why I connect with you, Anna, a little bit. I realized what I was doing wasn't working for her, and it really set me on a road of relearning everything I kind of knew about reading.

And so I became certified in Orton-Gillingham, and I had a small private practice, and I think I really saw the benefits of this approach. I kind of concurrently I met Melissa, followed up with her from a previous, presentation she'd done at my school, and I joined Crafting Minds. So here we are now!

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, that's a very similar story to mine, especially all the way back to being five years old and wanting to be a teacher. I was the oldest of five kids, so I was very good at being a boss, that's for sure.

**Sarah Gannon:** Yes, I love it.

**Anna Geiger:** So Melissa, interestingly, I did not know that you worked with Maryanne Wolf for so long. Were you ever in the balanced literacy space at all, or as a psychologist, were you very aware of the research base?

**Melissa Orkin:** Some of my first work in public schools was in the era of balanced literacy, but I would say that my work in the schools was pretty short. So I was coming at it from sort of the dyslexia side where we were working with families at the clinic whose children had really struggled through the instructional supports they had received. Largely in the Massachusetts and New England area at the time, this was like 2005 to 2017, they were receiving balanced literacy instruction. So I observed, I would say, the impact of it, but I wasn't really as involved in the instruction.

**Anna Geiger:** So, Sarah just talked about balanced literacy, and we can talk about structured literacy and how those two things are very different. Your book is called *The Structured Literacy Playbook*. How would the two of you define structured literacy?

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah, so I think the first thing is just literacy in general. And I know that that is why you've created this resource, Anna, is to really ensure that all educators and parents have a good understanding of literacy.

I think when literacy is such an essential part of our daily life, it's hard to remember that it's totally unnatural. So language is innate; we're born to acquire language. We have neurons, brain cells, that are specifically designed to learn language. But reading and print (written language) is what Steven Pinker, the linguist, calls an optional accessory that is painstakingly bolted on.

Written language is only about 7,000 years old, which is just a blip in, the history of our species, and it is not something that develops naturally. There are no neurons, there are no individual genes that are designed for reading development. Every single child has to build a reading circuit in their brain and they do so by repurposing existing neurons that were designed for other reasons.

And so the way that that recycling happens of neurons is through instruction. We know that children need different levels of intensity of instruction. But overall, the most effective instruction for developing literacy skills is what we think of as structured literacy. This is a term that was coined about 10 years ago

by the International Dyslexia Association, and structured literacy is an approach that is characterized by a certain type of delivery and certain components.

Structured literacy is delivered in an explicit, systematic, diagnostic, and cumulative manner. It does not assume anything. Everything is very directly stated. It is taught in a sequence that is thoughtful. It is building on itself and it is starting the skills where the child needs support.

The components of structured literacy include the multiple aspects of word knowledge, so that includes teaching the sounds of knowledge, the way that we spell those sounds, the orthography, the meanings of words, the parts of speech, the smallest units of meaning in words. That's base words, prefixes, and suffixes, and the ways in which we comprehend the written language as well.

**Anna Geiger:** Interesting that you started by talking about this idea that learning to read is not innate. But balanced literacy would say more that it's a natural thing, that we kind of pick it up. Maybe that's part of why we didn't think there was this necessity for this structured way of teaching.

And what you said too, Melissa, you said it was a thoughtful sequence. That's, I think, a good way to describe it because we know there's not one scope and sequence that people need to follow. People can choose, but we want to gradually move from simple to more complex, and we want to build on the previous skills. Then you talked about all the different aspects of word knowledge, which I like that way of putting it. I think I was pretty clueless on a lot of that.

Sarah, I don't know if you were too, but I never even heard the word morphology until like five or six years ago. That was a new term to me.

**Sarah Gannon:** Very true. When I think back to my teaching, even as a reading specialist for eight or nine years, I mean, I worked with children who struggled and by and large it's not like I never taught anyone to read using balanced literacy components.

But I think what I've realized, through being trained in structured literacy and really diving in as deep as I can, is that it provides sort of an equal playing field. If you assume nothing and you provide this type of teaching, you're going to ensure that, by and large, most kids are going to learn to read as opposed to starting with the assumption of balanced literacy. You can certainly reach certain kids, but we may find out a little bit later that we've done them wrong, and then we have to kind of backtrack and we've lost that precious time.

**Anna Geiger:** Maybe you've kind of already answered this, but can you talk to me about why you wrote your book, *The Structured Literacy Playbook*?

**Sarah Gannon:** Yeah, I can do that. I think part of what attracted me to Crafting Minds in the first place was the practicality piece of what Melissa was doing. As a researcher, she had this deep knowledge, this whole other field, that I really wasn't... Not that I wasn't aware of, but just really didn't have access to.

She was able to translate this research into practice and something that as a teacher, I could say, okay, I get that. I can do it tomorrow. Or, I can see what she's saying. I can add it to something I'm already doing and again, do it the next day.

I think that when we wrote the book, it was really attempting to provide this cohesive and practical approach that combined lessons that we could teach tomorrow. We wanted to give teachers sort of this playbook, something that's not all theory, that's not just research heavy in a sense that they read

something and they have to then think about how to do it. But really trying to take this evidence and the research so that they'd feel comfortable in doing it the next day, and also giving them the tools to plan their own lessons. It was sort of two part.

I think sometimes when I would have PD providers come in and tell me all these great things, I'd say., great, but how am I going to do something tomorrow? I have 23 kids the next day, and I have to plan math, I have to plan social studies. I don't have time to really delve too deeply into this.

And so that was really, I think, the catalyst for creating this book. The other piece was having text at the front and center. I think as I learned more about structured literacy, sometimes it seemed that due to time constraints or whatever, a lot of times kids were reading from word lists or they were spending a lot of time at the single word level.

A lot of these kids were not able to actually access a book. And so if we can keep the text at the front and center, and that's what we did with our lesson planning and the different lessons for each of the chapters, we're giving kids that opportunity to be able to apply those skills into that connected text.

**Anna Geiger:** Do you want to add anything, Melissa?

**Melissa Orkin:** No, I agree. I mean, I think exactly what Sarah was saying. We would love to be able to present to every single teacher who wants to learn more about structured literacy, but in lieu of that, we wanted to create a resource that essentially had what we think of as the best parts of our PD lessons that are aligned to text, as Sarah said, so that we're really centering a book as the star of each lesson.

And also the justification for why you're doing the activities you're doing. And then how you move through those activities as students are developing their skills or if they've plateaued in a certain area. And I think that's the diagnostic part of structured literacy. Everything's great when the students are responding to your instruction, but what about that one student that's really stuck? And you're kind of tearing your hair out at night, thinking about how you can modify your strategies to reach that particular child.

We wanted to give teachers an understanding of how word recognition develops in students and what are some of the high leverage tricks and tips that they can use if they need to differentiate their teaching.

**Anna Geiger:** So before we get into some of the specific routines and things in the book, I just want to clarify something for people who are listening because I have over 200 episodes, and there are different approaches to teaching reading across them. I've found when I've shared things on Facebook, like questioning different types of practices or saying you can use this, or you don't have to use this. Then people will say, oh no, that's the science of reading. One is with syllable types. People will say that if it doesn't use syllable types, it's not the science of reading. And I was like, well, we know these general big ideas, but then we can make these smaller decisions and then we adjust based on the response of our students, right?

We might try a strategy because it sounds good and makes sense according to research, but the child's not moving forward so we switch, right?

I think understanding the difference between research-based and evidence-based when it comes to individual practices is important, because we're not often going to find a study that's going to examine every single type of activity that we're doing in our practice.

More than that, we're not going to find multiple studies, because one study saying this thing works isn't enough. But I think we need to be okay with that, but also not to hear something and glab onto it and say that this is the only way to do it because my program does it this way.

So I just want to get that disclaimer out there because we're going to talk about some things that are a little different than maybe what I would do, but I want to hear your perspective and why you've chosen to include them.

One thing I love about your book is you talk about the backward planning approach, which you start with the decodable text and move backward, which I thought made a lot of sense. Can you talk about that?

**Sarah Gannon:** I think the backward planning approach is helpful because, again, it keeps the text at the front and center. So if I'm working with a student and I've done a diagnostic survey, and I've determined that a student maybe is missing digraphs, in particular, they're struggling with sh… Or if I'm teaching my Tier 1 phonics program, and I'm realizing that during the whole class lesson, I have a few students who for whatever reason need additional practice.

It allows us to really find the text that is suitable, that teaches that concept front and center. For example, sh, and if we start with the text at front and center, we can pull out specific sentences that highlight the targeted phonics concept. We would pull out three to four sentences containing words that have the sh pattern.

We would then pull out single words that contain the sh pattern. The idea is that we can create these routines that give kids sort of incremental practice at the letter sound level, at the single word level, at the phrase level. All in preparation to be able to tackle that connected text.

And I think for us it was a nice bridge from teachers who maybe are familiar with guided reading, where they would choose a book for maybe a comprehension strategy or on a particular text level. What we're saying is let's look at the skills the students need to be able to do. Rather than give the children the book and say, "This is a story about a rat who travels to the junkyard," we're going to be very purposeful in our understanding of what the student needs.

I think that has been the helpful bridge for me, looking back as a reading specialist, in how I could make that jump.

Using that backward planning creates that cohesive, tight lesson. And it doesn't simply address the phonics piece alone.

**Anna Geiger:** Also if you have some good decodable text, it makes the process simpler for the teacher, right? They don't have to go to ChatGPT and find word lists or sentences. They work directly from that decodable text.

**Sarah Gannon:** Totally. And we know decodable texts are for a certain period of time, both Melissa and I always encourage broad reading. We encourage students, once they have an understanding of the simple code, that they really should be reading a bit more broadly and teachers can use different texts to teach. But for certain students in this very foundational stage, it can be very daunting to encounter all sorts of words that they aren't able to tackle.

So when we select these texts, we're being very purposeful. We know they're not these high quality literature pieces. With that said, I think we've actually been able to infuse some great vocabulary routines in there so that we're actually expanding on more than just the phonics piece, as I mentioned.

**Anna Geiger:** I'm going to go back in time. I do not remember when this was, but this was in the 20-teens somewhere before I was in the science of reading space, before I knew what the science of reading was or research-based instruction really.

Someone commented on one of my blog posts, probably criticizing my balanced literacy something, maybe it was three-queuing, I don't know. She said, kids should be using decodable text. And I said, well, there's not much comprehension work you can do with those and there's not much vocabulary. I was basically saying that there's really no point to them. Basically worthless.

She said something like, oh no! And then she talked about multiple meanings of CVC words, but I still poo-pooed it. At the time, I remember thinking, what does she know?

But I've come around and also, I really love the vocabulary work examples that you have, even for CVC words.

You just talked about that a little bit, but can we talk a little bit about your approach to teaching vocabulary? We can talk first more simply with the CVC words. Maybe give some examples of questions that you would ask for a very simple word. And then also we can talk about, later on in the book, you talk about building word associations.

**Melissa Orkin:** As we said, the structured literacy routines, every single routine, even if you're just starting with very basic sound blending for students, we're still bringing in vocabulary work because we're always trying to connect the multiple aspects of word knowledge.

That's something that Maryanne and other colleagues have really been emphasizing - that the importance of this connectivist approach. We're not just building these skills in isolation: now's our phonics time, now's our vocabulary time. We're really trying to be much more integrative and kind of crosspollinate all these different aspects of word knowledge because it builds connectivity and supports automaticity, basically.

So what we're trying to do, even from the beginning, is find ways to build out what's called student semantic neighborhoods. This is a really great term that's been coined in the linguistic field. I don't know exactly who coined it first, but I know like Lori Buchanan talked about it in the late 1990s.

The semantic neighborhood is a way to conceptualize how you store information about word meanings. Words that live in very populated neighborhoods where it's really crowded are going to be read faster when they are encountered in text. Sometimes we think of this as just background knowledge, but we're always thinking about words that we can expand or populate semantic neighborhoods, and there are very simple ways to do this.

One way to do this is just to ask questions about a word. For example, I think in the book we gave the example of…

**Sarah Gannon:** Mend is a good one. I know that's not CVC, but it's a good one.

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah. So you can just ask regular CVC words, but then if you really wanted to find a word whose neighborhood you really could populate, it's going to be what's called a multiple meaning word.

Something like 75% of words that children encounter in English have multiple meanings, even if it's just as a noun and a verb, like watch, watch.

Mend is a great one because you can think of the different meanings of mend. Trick is another great one. These are words that lend themselves to lots of discussion about the different meanings. Then to say something like, who would perform a trick? And what kind of tricks have you performed? How do tricks make you feel? What's the difference between a magic trick and a trick that's like a prank?

And by activating all of these different associations for students, you're really supporting not only their comprehension, but also their word retrieval when they see trick in context.

Every lesson that we do has a vocabulary component, and that can be simple, or it can be complex. I just think to not neglect it, to really kind of make an effort to bring vocabulary work into every lesson goes a really long way in building that connectivity in the reading circuit.

**Anna Geiger:** I opened the book just now and found an example of a very simple CVC book, called Pip, Sam, and Tam, and there are four words: pip, tip, not, and top. There are four questions that require students to choose from them. Which word is a name? Which word means to fall over? Which word has a negative meaning? So you might have to teach them what negative means. Which word means the peak or highest level? And just in those questions, you're building vocabulary.

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah, I'm thinking of a word that means this, right? They can choose the word and that is something. When we're thinking about explicit and systematic instruction, rather than having children individually raise their hand, if you're working with a group, you can have them turn and tell your neighbor which word I'm thinking of.

Then you're getting 50% of the students participating at one time rather than individual turn taking, so it doesn't have to derail your instruction. It doesn't have to affect the pacing. You can still facilitate engagement, and it can just be a piece that you bring into your work with students.

**Anna Geiger:** You talked a little bit already about building associations, but on page 82 of the book, you have a vocabulary word, the student friendly definition. You use the term in a sentence, and then there's like three or four questions that are like those who, why, what, how type of questions. Teachers that are doing this, this is very simple to plug into ChatGPT to help with that and do the work for you. Those can be very simple. ChatGPT stinks in a lot of areas with teaching phonics, like getting word lists it's not so good. But yeah, that kind of thing I found is very helpful.

**Melissa Orkin:** Or images, I think images would go a long way., Having an image of one of the meanings or multiple meanings I think is really powerful, especially for our students who really need a visual support. Maybe they're multilingual learners and they would benefit from some clarity around the meaning. You want them to visualize exactly what the word is, or maybe they could then share the word in their language. It's a great way to do some of that cross languaging too.

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, exactly. So a part of your lessons is dependent on the word family, or rime as you call it.

The onset is the part before the first vowel of a syllable, and rime is the vowel and the rest of it. But a lot of us know it by word family, so like -and, -ent, -ip. And then backward decoding, which uses the rime in sort of a practice activity.

This is not something that I've focused on. Backward decoding is new to me. And I'm hesitant always to recommend the word family approach because it feels like it's maybe introducing extra code for kids to learn versus just sounding out left to right. Can you explain your reasoning for including these two features in your lessons?

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah. I think what we are really focusing on with the book is how to move children through the stages of word recognition. What we have found, and even at Tufts, Maryanne had developed a curriculum there called RAVE-O, which is designed for primarily Tier 3 instruction. So primarily students who have been identified with specific learning disabilities in reading, including those with dyslexia who had developed accurate decoding skills but were not necessarily becoming fluent at the same rate or, reaching the average range of fluency.

Her work was really sort of the basis of this connectivist model of ensuring that every lesson connects: word meaning to parts of speech to word parts to morphology, et cetera. And in her work she has a piece that ensures accurate sound symbol correspondence, and then quickly moves to rime patterns. That was based on some earlier research that had been done around the efficacy of what we call the analytic phonics method. Synthetic phonics is individual sound symbol correspondence, and analytic is more family patterns.

In addition to some of the linguistic information that the most common rime patterns in English account for about 500 high frequency words. Rime patterns are found very frequently in our language, just in terms of their usability, and they help to stabilize the sound of the vowel. The vowel sound in a word is dependent on the letters that follow it, not the letters that precede it.

For example, if you think of the word, be. I will be home in a minute. What kind of sound is the vowel making there?

**Anna Geiger:** Long.

**Melissa Orkin:** Long. And how did you know that?

**Anna Geiger:** It's an open syllable.

**Melissa Orkin:** Open syllable. Just B-E, right?

What about the word best, which also begins with B-E and then is closed in by S-T. What kind of sound is the e making there?

**Anna Geiger:** A short sound because it's a closed syllable,

**Melissa Orkin:** Right. What about in the word beast?

**Anna Geiger:** Long because it's part of a vowel team, a long vowel team.

**Melissa Orkin:** Right, so you determined how to pronounce the vowel sounds in those words based on the letters that were following it. So there is a incredible value in helping children read across an entire word and pay particular attention to that rime pattern.

In order to stabilize the vowel sound, many children will look at the first two letters of the word, and they might guess, or they might sound out a word, one part at a time. Kind of the segmenting, recoding, like /b/ /e/, BE, /b/ /est/, BEST, and then go back and recode it. And they might, as the words get longer, transpose some of the letter sounds or mix up the places.

We found that by really emphasizing the rime pattern, it supports he accuracy of the vowel pronunciation, and it also helps with the overall retrieval of the word, because it's a chunk of the word. It's not one letter at a time.

So much of this, as you said, like empirically, it's based on some of the efficacy studies that have been done with Maryanne's curriculum, RAVE-O, which uses this approach.

Theoretically it's based on the level of frequency of rime patterns in English, and the fact that it's a larger chunk. And also the way that syllables are set up is that the vowel's pronunciation is controlled by the letters that follow it.

We don't start that way, and we don't recommend that teachers jump to that. We certainly want to ensure that students have sound symbol correspondence, individual letter sound and symbol correspondence. But we feel like there's a lot of utility in recognizing those rime patterns and even. When teachers do letter sound drills, which often is the first part of a lesson.

Sarah and I, we're in the field collectively probably like 20 hours a week, and so we get to see tons and tons of amazing teachers sitting down with students, mostly during intervention lessons, but sometimes whole class too. And there's an extraordinary amount of time spent on holding up a letter card and asking the student to say the letter sound and then the keyword, right? A apple /a/, b bed /b/, and almost all of them are individual letters. That is fine for a certain amount, but it usually is at the very beginning of a lesson. It's when the student's energy is the highest, and it is usually about 10 plus letter sounds.

And so what we're recommending is rather than doing just individual letter sounds, why don't you bring in some of those rime patterns to recognize these larger chunks of language? Why don't you bring in some consonant blends so that students can recognize not only digraphs, like the H brothers, but also like SL or SP. Then that visual recognition of these chunks, which we know is a piece of the orthographic mapping, is supported throughout the entire lesson.

**Sarah Gannon:** Yeah, and this is often a temporary scaffold, so I've worked with lots of students who were sort of stuck in that decoding phase. They would approach a word. They had been taught to segment the word, as many popular curricula do. /b/ /e/ /s/ /t/, and then they would recode it.

It almost seemed for some that it was an internal habit, for others it was really that they needed support in mapping larger chunks of language.

What we would do is take a word like best, and we would teach kids to recognize the rime pattern by finding the vowel when we would scaffold this. They would read it with me. We would say the sounds /e/ /s/ /t/. What's the rime pattern? Est. What's the starter? /b/ Blend it. Best.

Inherently we're still teaching kids to think about that sound symbol relationship, blend it in that sequence, and then recode it with the onset.

To us it's really a temporary scaffold that can often move kids really stuck in that decoding phase to really that partial or what we're calling that partial mapping phase, to kind of jumpstart that fluency piece.

**Anna Geiger:** Thanks for explaining that. That's interesting, and something for people to think about for sure.

One thing I really liked too about your lessons are the fluency grids. That's what I call them. You call them RAN charts, which is different from a RAN assessment, which is seeing a set of objects that they know the names of which tests how quickly is their processing speed. I have an episode about that.

But that's different from what you have, because yours is more about practicing. Do you have letter sounds in there too? Or is it just words and phrases?

**Sarah Gannon:** I think at the very basic level, the very early levels, you could utilize the single letter. And we've seen that done, for a certain population of kids. But ideally when kids are able to kind of blend a few or have a handful of letters, we want to move to that blending piece, utilizing continuous blending.

And so generally we would do single words, but RAN comes, actually, Melissa, I don't know if you want to continue your Maryanne thread here...

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah, so Maryanne was pretty instrumental in putting forth the importance of RAN as a separate contributor to reading achievement from phonemic awareness.

So dyslexia, or difficulties with accurate or fluent word reading, could be the result of one or multiple areas of deficit. One could be phonological processing, so either the ability to manipulate sound or match up sounds and letters.

It could also be difficulty with retrieval, meaning you have those sounds and letters accurately, but your brain kind of takes the long way around. It's not efficient. Or it could be both, which Dr. Wolf and her colleagues call a double deficit in the field.

A way to distinguish these things is through sort of these assessments. That's how we understand students' learning profiles and what kind of instruction they need.

At the most foundational level, in order to measure retrieval, you can use something called a rapid automatic naming test, and that's where you establish a set of letters or objects that a student knows, and it's no more usually than five letters or five objects.

Then you repeatedly present those letters or objects in a grid, basically. So it'll be something like book, star, dog, chair, hand, hand, book, star, dog, chair, and the student is reading from left to right across a row. Then they do what's called a return sweep, so when they get to the end of the row, they go to the next row.

It really is like mimicking the act of reading across the line of text, and for letters. A student's performance on RAN letter naming universally is more predictive of reading achievement than phonemic awareness. Regardless of the type of language the child speaks, that tends to be the most predictive measure of reading achievement.

And so what we did, kind of following in Maryanne's footsteps, because she did this with her curriculum, RAVE-O, is rather than... There's no value in just repeatedly practicing letter names, but there is value in being able to rapidly retrieve commonly occurring words.

And so what we did was we created these, what we called RAN grids, but fluency grids are just as accurate, where it's a set of no more than five words. We also have them for phrases or five phrases that are repeatedly presented and the student reads across from left to right and does the return sweep. This is based on the theory that students benefit from multiple exposures, and that the format of left to right reading, requiring that return sweep and the tracking across a line of text is beneficial for students. And that it gives children an opportunity to automatically retrieve words or phrases that they've already practiced through some sort of accuracy activities beforehand.

**Anna Geiger:** So in a way to promote orthographic mapping.

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah.

**Anna Geiger:** And this is part of your backward planning. So if teachers create them on their own, they just take words and phrases from the actual decodable text and plop them in and mix them up?

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah, and there's something about these charts that kids love.

**Anna Geiger:** I know, isn't that funny?

**Melissa Orkin:** I know. They just enjoy being able to do it quickly. They enjoy the pace. We will usually use like one of the squares in the grid and populate that with like some kind of emoji. Or a popular character that the students like, and when they get to that character, they can say the name or do a certain hand gesture that keeps them interested in reading.

And we have students do this chorally, unless there's a real need to differentiate. As a teacher, you would guide the pacing of this, and usually you would stand at a board. The grid would be either projected onto the board or in front of you. You would hold your pointer to the left of the first word or phrase, and you would say to the student, think of this in your head. When I scoop underneath, I want everyone to say it aloud, and I want to hear all the voices together like a chorus. That way you're controlling the pacing, and you're providing, quick corrective feedback if students are making mistakes. Otherwise it can get a little unruly.

However, if students need extra support or they need extra practice, then these charts are great. With these charts plus a sand timer, you have a great, individual practice opportunity for students.

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah, so I would like to talk about one more technique that you have in your book, and that is the syntactic phrasing exercise. Can you discuss what that is and how that works?

**Sarah Gannon:** Sure, I think this is, not that I play favorites, but I think this routine has really opened my eyes to the lack of sentence level comprehension that I was instructing my students on. Let me first back up.

Thinking about syntactic knowledge is really the understanding of sentence structured and parts of speech. So if we can explicitly teach students that words have jobs, for example, as we were talking about with multiple meaning words like bat, depending on where it is in the sentence or preceding and following words. It might be a noun; it might be a verb. So if we can help kids recognize not only the different jobs of words, but that different words work together to form phrases, then this lends itself to more fluent reading and better comprehension.

If we think of an example, I pulled one from the book. This was from a later chapter, so I think we were working on probably suffixes. The sentence is, "Dennis the kitten licked his mittens." A great sentence, of course.

One way we could do this is we first have students read the sentence in their head or whisper read. We want to give kids the opportunity to try that out first before we ask anybody to do anything chorally. Then again, there are lots of different ways to do this, but we could model how we would break this sentence up into its syntactic phrases.

We could scoop or underline the subject phrase, Dennis the kitten. We could underline the verb phrase, licked, and then we could underline the object, his mittens. What we're really showing kids is a way, an approach, to not only read the sentence for understanding, but to group these words into their phrasing.

Again, as Melissa was mentioning, tapping into that choral reading piece, we would have kids read in their head, following our scoop. So everybody would read Dennis the kitten out loud. They would read the next scoop in their head then out loud. The next scoop in their head then out loud. Then we would go back and do it again.

So there are lots of different ways to scaffold it, depending on what your kids need. That's probably the most highly scaffolded approach.

Then from there, so it's really a two part activity... One is to really promote that fluency, grouping words into phrases, and really getting rid of that robotic reading word for word.

But the second part is asking kids to utilize the sentence and its phrases to then be able to answer sentence level comprehension. So I would lead that and say, who or what is this sentence about? And, kids would be like, Dennis. I'm able to say, let's actually go to this phrase, and let's read it again.

So inherently, by design, I'm having the kids think about it, but I'm also having them read it again. You're right, Dennis, the kitten. Dennis is the subject. That's the noun. What is he? He's a kitten. What did he do? You're right. He licked. That's a verb phrase.

So I'm able to really provide a little bit more grammar instruction embedded in that activity and also promote that comprehension piece and fluency piece.

To me, I think it's one of the most high leverage practices we have. You get a lot of bang for your buck, and when kids go to read that decodable text, the three sentences that they've read for syntactic phrasing, almost always, it's like, it feels miraculous. It becomes so fluent that you really see the power of that practice.

**Anna Geiger:** I love all those different things. Like you said, high leverage, integrating so many things.

We hear so often these days about integrating and not just teaching all these different language skills separately, but understanding how that looks in practice is important. You do a really good job in your book laying out for teachers what all this can actually look like with really great examples.

**Sarah Gannon:** Thank you, we try. Practicality and high leverage, those are our two favorite words lately.

**Melissa Orkin:** Yes, and the one other thing I'll say about syntactic phrasing is the hope then it will also inform writing. Once students understand that sentences should have these different components or these different phrase structures, they can then analyze their own writing to see do they have those phrase structures?Do they include an adjective or an adverb when it's appropriate?

**Anna Geiger:** Yeah. Just thinking about how much more valuable this might be, taking these sentences out of text they're going to read and then actually seeing that those sentences in context versus maybe an isolated worksheet.

I don't think worksheets don't ever have a place, but I think when we can integrate them into the reading they're doing it makes much more sense. And we all know that. It's just hard to know how to do that sometimes.

**Sarah Gannon:** Totally.

The last piece, and I know we're probably running low on time, was in making sure to incorporate that dictation and making sure that the words that students are going to be spelling are the same words or patterns that we've been talking about in reading. I think having that opportunity built in for teachers reminds them of the importance of that dictation.

I think by and large, dictation and teaching that handwriting piece. Proper letter formation and the strategy for the thinking about how to break a word up that can be, for me, it's the most challenging part of teaching reading, but it's often the one that, in my experience, is not always done for whatever reason. Maybe you're out of time.

But I think when you have this routine and you realize it's an essential component, you can make that time necessary and carve it out because you'll see the the rewards in the reading piece, if we're incorporating that spelling.

**Anna Geiger:** Well thank you so much for talking through all this with me today.

Is there anything else you'd like to share? Like I know you have your morphology resource and the work you do with schools. Anything else you'd like and also where people can find you?

**Melissa Orkin:** Yeah, so people can find us at, craftingmindsgroup.com. And we do have a number of free lessons and versions of the books that these lessons accompany. Those can be accessed through our website, I believe. Is that right, Sarah?

**Sarah Gannon:** If you have the book, you'll be able to see a special URL that you're able to pop in. And, as Melissa said, there are lots of free resources, not just the lessons, but you can actually download the books.

And the last piece is we really developed a web application called the Game Plan Generator. And this was purposeful. We took this idea of backward planning, and we added in a decodable text generator. Teachers are able to select whatever concept they're working on. They select the grade level, and the system creates a decodable story from there. We've trained it to pull the different routines to create this

comprehensive lesson that we're showing in *The Structured Literacy Playbook*. We've got a sale going on, and we'd love educators to give it a try and give us some feedback.

**Anna Geiger:** Well, thank you very much. We'll make sure we get those things in the show notes.

**Sarah Gannon:** Yeah.

**Melissa Orkin:** Thank you Anna. Thanks for having us.

**Sarah Gannon:** Thank you.

**Anna Geiger:** Thanks so much. It was nice to talk with you. And thanks for being here.