A powerful and practical routine for teaching with decodable text – with Brianna Guild

Triple R Teaching Podcast #231

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm speaking with Brianna from SLP Literacy Corner. She's sharing how she structures her tutoring lessons around the use of decodable text to maximize the amount of time that her students are working with text, whether that's reading it or comprehending it. I think you're going to get a lot out of today's episode. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Brianna.

Brianna Guild:

Thanks for having me!

Anna Geiger:

I have loved following your work on Instagram through SLP Literacy, and I'm excited to connect with you today on the podcast. You're going to talk about using decodable text, but before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself and let us know what you're doing now?

Brianna Guild:

Absolutely. I'm a private practice speech language pathologist in Ontario, Canada, and I provide speech therapy services primarily in the areas of literacy, language, and articulation. In addition to providing speech therapy services to clients, I also started SLP Literacy Corner several years ago to support other SLPs and educators. Through that I like to share activity ideas, create resources, and provide professional development, like presentations and going on podcasts like this!

I also serve as the SLP and Literacy Consultant for Nomnivore Games, which is an award-winning indie game studio from Ontario, Canada that focuses on accessibility.

I'm actually collaborating with them to create an effective alphabet book, which should be coming out later in 2025. I'm really excited about this alphabet book because most of the alphabet books out there have really poor word choice, like C is for chimpanzee and X is for X-ray. I've created one that is grounded in the principles of effective alphabet instruction.

The alphabet book is also going to be a component of a larger educational kids' role-playing game called Nomventure, which is designed to make learning fun and engaging. There's even a learn-to-spell story that I helped create.

This alphabet book will be a great resource for parents and educators to use with preschoolers to introduce letter sounds in a really fun and engaging way. It's also helpful for teaching foundational literacy skills to kindergartners and older children as they begin to read and write.

Once children start learning those letter sounds, we want to get them applying this knowledge by reading decodable texts, which is what we're going to focus on today.

Anna Geiger:

Define for us what decodable text means.

Brianna Guild:

Yeah, of course. Decodable texts contain only the letter-sound relationships that readers have already learned.

For example, the very first books introduced usually focus on single consonant sounds and short vowel sounds. You'll see simple word structures like vowel-consonant or VC, and consonant-vowel-consonant, CVC words.

Only a couple of letter-sound relationships are introduced at a time. The first book might focus on the letters A, M, S, T, and P, giving kids the chance to read real words like “mat,” “sat,” “tap,” and “Sam” right away. You can even put those into little sentences like “Sam sat,” or “Tap, tap, tap.”

As readers progress through the books, new letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns like digraphs, consonant clusters, and long vowel sounds, for example, are introduced in a systematic way.

This structure helps build confidence and fluency because learners are reading words they can actually decode based on what they've already learned.

It's also worth noting that most literacy programs and the decodable texts that go with them use a slightly different scope and sequence. This is because there's no one perfect or right scope and sequence when it comes to early phonics instruction. But letter sounds *should* be introduced in a sequence that allows many useful and common words to be read and spelled early on.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, thanks for verifying that there is no perfect scope and sequence. I know that there are different programs and people might argue about which is which, like whether we should do AM at the beginning or wait a while. There really is not a research base for that; a lot of it's just opinion. It would be nice if there was a universal scope and sequence, that would make everything *so* much simpler, but there just isn't and people can let go of that. It's totally fine. But pretty much everyone agrees we're going to start with those VC and CVC words.

Why are decodable texts important for early literacy instruction?

Brianna Guild:

Well, decodable texts are designed so that beginning readers can actually use their knowledge of letter-sound relationships to decode each word. This promotes orthographic mapping, the process where readers connect the sounds in a spoken word, or the phonemes, to the letters in a written word, the spelling or grapheme, and the word meaning, or multiple meanings in the case of multiple meaning words. This mental process of connecting sound, spelling, and meaning is crucial for storing printed words in long-term memory, which is what makes for a skilled, fluent reader.

Overall, decodable texts help beginning readers develop those foundational skills and the confidence necessary to become strong readers.

Now, we can also contrast this with leveled books, which are often used with the three-queuing system. These books tend to encourage students to guess at words based on context clues like the meaning of the sentence, the structure of the sentence, or even the pictures on the page.

The problem here is that guessing doesn't reinforce the relationship between sounds and spelling. It actually bypasses that crucial sound-spelling, or phoneme-grapheme, connection that we just talked about.

When kids rely on these strategies, they may start to develop habits like looking at the first letter and guessing the rest of the word, or using the picture to figure out the words. While this might look like it's working in the short term, it really doesn't support accurate decoding.

Instead, it sets up a pattern of guessing rather than truly reading, and that can lead to bigger struggles down the road.

Anna Geiger:

I want to interject there for a second because, as my listeners know, that was definitely something that I did with my beginning readers. I was basically fooled into thinking they were reading fluently because they sounded fluent. They picked up those patterns quickly, most kids did, and they could pretty quickly name the word by using the picture and the first letter.

But as you said, that kind of blows up later on for a lot of kids, right? They'll get to third grade and all of a sudden the words are longer and there's no picture support, and they have not been taught this habit of reading all the way through.

Then, of course, the other important thing you mentioned is that this bypasses orthographic mapping, which is the whole point of this early reading practice. We want to learn words so we are able to read them by sight.

Like you said, the problem with not using decodable text at the beginning, but instead using these patterned predictable books, is that they can undermine foundational skills.

Let's talk a little bit about decodable text routines and activities. That's what you are joining us today for, to talk about specific things that you can do with a decodable text with your students.

Brianna Guild:

Yeah, so first let's talk about a decodable text routine for beginning readers, maybe those learners who are working on single consonant sounds and short vowel sounds.

I always start my lessons by having the student reread the decodable text from our previous session.

As an example, if we're following your set of Reach All Readers Fiction Decodables, I would have them reread that first book, “Sam,” if we're just starting out.

They reread the book and I record their accuracy and rate, and I compare it to their initial reading. What we'd like to see is improved accuracy and rate across repeated readings.

We're also working on expression, especially during rereading once they're familiar already with the text. With beginning readers, a good place to start with working on expression could be correct intonation for those question marks and exclamation marks.

Next, I ask them questions about the story structure, and you can start doing this even with decodable texts. Who are the characters? What's the setting? What's the problem? How did they feel? How did they

fix the problem? What happened in the end? I help them refer back to the text and pictures to teach them how to find the answers as needed.

Also, some students respond better to fill in the blank statements rather than direct questions like, "The characters are _____." "The setting is _____." Sometimes that simple shift from a question to a fill-in-the-blank statement can be really helpful. You might get less of those, "I don't know," answers.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's a really good tip. I also want to say that you can only ask those questions if the decodable text is written well enough to allow you to ask those questions!

When I taught, I was very turned off by decodable books, for a good reason, multiple reasons. Also, I didn't understand orthographic mapping and why it was important to use the decodable text, but also because the options that I had were not good. A lot of them were kind of nonsensical. They were forcing words, and it was hard to ask good questions because the story was hard to find.

Nowadays, there are so many good options. I'll link in the show notes to my Ultimate Guide to Decodable Books where people can find many of my favorites that actually do have problem/solution and an actual story that you can ask questions about.

What do you do after you go through the questions?

Brianna Guild:

Once we go through those questions, I model an oral story retell that follows that narrative story structure of character, setting, problem, feeling, actions, ending, ending feeling. Then I have the student produce an oral story retell that follows that structure that I had just modeled. I prompt them for more details as needed.

Like you were saying, one of those main things that I look for too when choosing fiction decodables is that it follows that narrative story structure. That's actually why I really like your fiction decodables. You did do a really good job with that.

I think that working on story structure early is really helpful for supporting comprehension as well as written expression in the long term, because we have to understand correct story structure in order to be able to use it ourselves, both orally and in our writing.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I think that's a really good point because we might sometimes think that decodable text is only for practicing decoding, only that part of the Simple View of Reading, that word recognition part.

But as you said, with the rereadings, as kids become more fluent with the text, we can also absolutely work on language comprehension.

Brianna Guild:

Definitely.

Then after we do that reread and retell the decodable, I typically do a sound review where I have the student review all the letter sounds that they've learned, and then I introduce any new letter sounds that will be present in the next decodable.

Then we do some word-level activities with both the review and new letter sounds. These might be activities like word building using sound cards or some sort of tile, sound swapping, or word chaining activities to work on that phoneme blending, segmenting, and manipulation, but in the context of using the letters as well. Then reading and then spelling words.

For all of these activities, I pull words right from the decodable text we've read, the new decodable we will read, and then you can come up with more words as needed based on the letter sounds that this student has learned.

We might also do some sentence-level writing, even with those beginning readers, once they're ready for it and up for a challenge. A sentence doesn't have to be long, right? It can just have that subject and the verb piece, so “Sam sat” might be our very first little sentence. We can also start by copying a sentence from the decodable text, so we've got that layer of support.

We might then move on to writing a sentence that I dictate, but it still might be a sentence that they've read in a decodable text. Or I have them generate a sentence for a word once we kind of get to that level.

For sentence-level activities, again, I'm pulling from previous texts or I create sentences with the letter sounds I've taught them. Unless a student needs a challenge or really feels like they're up for a challenge, and then I'll add in some of the new letter sounds. But mostly when I'm doing sentences, it's all with the taught letter sounds.

Then last, I have the student read the next decodable. If we're following your set of Reach All Readers Fiction Decodables, that would be the second book, “The Cat.” We discuss any new vocabulary that comes up in the books.

Again, if you've got a solid decodable, you can even work on things like vocabulary learning because some unfamiliar words might come up like “rut” or “suds.” I always review what those words mean. We talk about it in the context of the book, and I also help the student come up with some more personally relevant examples or context so that they can start to generalize and understand that meaning.

Then last, I assign that book for them to reread for home practice, along with some accompanying activities like blending lines or cut and paste story retell.

When we have our next session, so for me as a private practice SLP, I typically see my students once a week. When we'll have our next session, I'll follow up with that same routine of rereading the previous decodable to build reading fluency, working on story comprehension and retell, introducing any new letter sounds, doing word and sentence-level activities with known letter sounds, and then reading the next decodable book.

I do think that planning lessons around decodable books like this helps ensure that even beginning readers are reading two texts per lesson, a reread and a new read. My goal here is always to maximize the time my students spend with their eyes on text, doing that real work of reading and discussing the reading.

Anna Geiger:

This is a one-on-one lesson, correct?

Brianna Guild:

Yes.

Anna Geiger:

How long would all of this take typically?

Brianna Guild:

It really depends. We offer half an hour, 45 minute, or an hour sessions, but most of my littles, like a beginning reader, I would only see them for half an hour or 45 minutes, usually at the most.

Anna Geiger:

What about when kids are further along? We know that at some point kids do not need to be reading decodable text all the time, but it's still very useful in their phonics lessons. Even if they're further along learning long vowel patterns, we would use decodable text in their lessons. Can you talk through how that might look a little different than what you did with the beginning reader?

Brianna Guild:

Yeah, so let's run with that example of long vowel sounds. I actually use a speech to print approach to literacy instruction, so I might have a student learning different spellings for the sound /ā/, such as A by itself, like in "table," A consonant E, like in "came," AI, like in "train," and AY, like in "play." We'll start with those four common spellings of the sound /ā/.

Like we discussed for beginning readers, I still follow this general routine of rereading our previous text to build reading fluency, doing word and sentence-level activities, and then reading a new decodable text.

Kind of circling back to your point on the amount of time I see a student for, something I should mention as well is I might not get through tons of the word and sentence-level activities. Maybe I get to some of the activities on my list, and then I'll swap out what I'm doing the next week.

But the piece that I *always* make sure stays is our reread. We do some kinds of activities and we'll swap those depending on the session and the week, and then we do our new read.

It's kind of that middle piece that I'm playing with the most that might change from session to session.

One of those new activities that I'll introduce when working on sounds that can be represented by multiple spellings is a reading and sorting activity.

After the student reads a decodable text focused on the sound they're learning, I have them circle or highlight all the words with that target sound, in this case, /ā/. Then they sort the words based on their spelling. I either give them a chart or help them make a quick chart with columns for the different spellings. Then they read each of their circled words and spell it in the appropriate column saying each sound as they spell the word to help with mapping sound to spelling.

Anna Geiger:

For that last part you just said, can you give an example, let's say with the word "stain." How would it sound if they're writing the word and they're saying the sound for each grapheme?

Brianna Guild:

It would sound like "/s/ /t/ /ā/ /n/," and then I always have them reread it, "stain."

Similarly, a word level activity we'll do after the text rereading is reading and sorting more words with our target sound. So instead of just the words from the decodable, I will give them a list, or present words one at a time, and they'll read the word, identify the spelling of the target sound, and then sort it into the appropriate column on our chart, always saying each sound as they spell the word to help map sound to spelling, promoting that process of orthographic mapping.

Anna Geiger:

So at this time, are they writing the words in the columns versus moving pieces of paper with the words or something on a screen?

Brianna Guild:

You can do it both ways. I do prefer having them write it so that we're getting the handwriting practice and we're getting that kind of physical motor spelling.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Brianna Guild:

I really like the sorting activity because it combines reading and spelling into one activity, and it draws attention to the different spellings for a sound and the different patterns for these spellings as well.

For example, after we've done our chart with the different ways to spell the sound /ā/, I can help them analyze their chart to see that AI is typically used in the middle of syllables, a Y at the end of syllables, and you can kind of, when things are organized in a chart, notice these patterns and be a little bit more in-tune to the pattern seeking.

This activity is also great because it can be easily differentiated by using single syllable words, multisyllable words, or words with specific prefixes or suffixes that students are learning.

Then after we're done with this word sorting, I might dictate some of these same words and new words for them to spell with our target sound.

I might also have them use the words in sentences that either I dictate or they generate for a word that I give them.

Alternatively, at this point, we might be working on some paragraph-level writing inspired either by the text or by some of the words from our activities.

For instance, “rain” comes up a lot when we do our /ā/ sound, so we might be talking about what happens when it rains or the water cycle, some kind of topic related to that. There's going to be spelling that comes up with a lot of words that have the sound that we've been working on.

Then following our word and sentence-level or paragraph-level activities, I'll have them read a new decodable text focusing on that same sound.

Now when it comes to, for example, long vowel sounds or the sound /ā/, we'll be reading multiple texts that focus on that sound, and they have multiple ways to spell that sound, so we can get lots of repeated exposure through reading and spelling activities.

Anna Geiger:

Well, I think you've shown us the sky's the limit for decodable text.

Brianna Guild:

There's so much more to them than people realize!

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I love that you've really kind of hit on everything we think about with Scarborough's Reading Rope. I mean, most things you've covered right here by making the decodable kind of the heart of your lesson, and then really thinking sort of outside the box into all the different things you can do with that. Thanks for walking us through that. That's super interesting.

You also have a list of free decodable texts on your website that we'll link to in the show notes so people can find free resources.

Is there anything else you want to share or draw our attention to for how people can learn from you?

Brianna Guild:

You can follow me on Instagram, @slp.literacy.corner. I also have a Teachers Pay Teachers store, SLP Literacy Corner, and my website is slpliteracycorner.ca. I do have a blog there that I like to keep updated.

Anna Geiger:
Wonderful. Well, thank you so much, Brianna!

Brianna Guild:

Thank you so much for having me!

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode231. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.