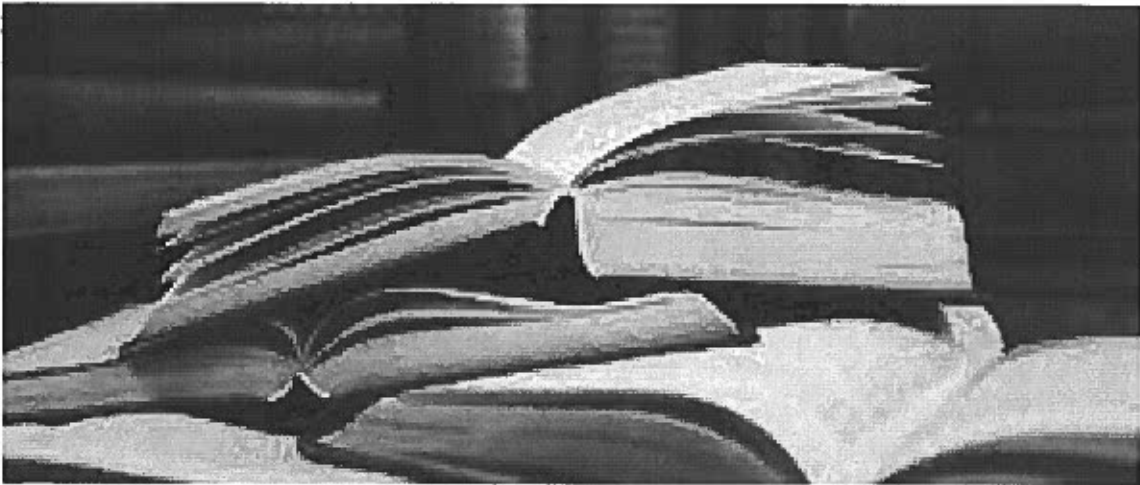

THE READING PARADIGM

A Journal of the Alabama Literacy Association

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The Alabama Literacy Association is the local affiliate of International Literacy Association. Established in 1968, the Alabama Literacy Association, formerly known as Alabama Reading Association, serves the state of Alabama to promote literacy for all ages.

The Reading Paradigm (RP) is the peer-reviewed journal of the Alabama Literacy Association that provides research-based teaching ideas to literacy educators. The journal publishes articles covering topics such as applying literacy research to classroom practice and using strategies to help all learners succeed. Topics may include, but are not limited to, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and programs for diverse populations of literacy learners.

Full-length articles and brief Teaching Tips are accepted for consideration through peer review. In addition, RP publishes informal, personal essays from classroom teachers for the non-peer-reviewed Voices from the Classroom.

RP is published online twice each year in June and December. Submission deadlines are April 1 for June publication and October 1 for December publication.



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Beyond the ABCs: Using Alphabet Books to Support Literacy Learners

Alphabet books are one of the oldest genres of children's literature in America dating back to the 1691 publication of the *New England Primer*, whose purpose was to teach both letters and moral values (Sutherland, 1997). The number of alphabet books written since the 15th century is impressive (Smolkin & Yaden, 1992), and their diversity ranges from the simplistic structure found in the classic *Dr. Seuss's ABC* to very complex, thematically focused books spanning a great variety of topics and types (Chaney, 1993).

Despite their immense variation, alphabet books are usually concise and follow a consistent, predictable pattern that is easily recognized, thus, contributing to the success of beginning readers. The most common organization format for alphabet books is sequential. Reading these books helps children begin to acquire the life-long skill of alphabetizing.

Aardvarks, Disembark! and *AlphaOops! The Day Z Went First* further increases children's familiarity with alphabetical order and reinforces awareness of individual letters by presenting the alphabet in reverse.

Opportunities for developing a child's metalinguistic abilities are particularly prevalent during the reading of alphabet books (Smolkin & Yaden, 1992) because they provide an ideal context for using language to discuss concepts like letters, sounds, and words. Further, such discussions increase children's understanding that letters are distinct graphic symbols different from numbers or words, letters possess identical features (such as vertical and horizontal lines) arranged differently to generate unique and distinguishable forms, and letters, unlike objects, are dependent upon a specific orientation (such as facing left or facing right). Books like *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, that use both capital (in the text) and lowercase (in the illustrations) letters

offer additional opportunity for letter identification and naming while alliterative examples (*Animalia, Adelaide to Zeke, and Aster Aardvark's Alphabet Adventures*) reinforce letter-sound correspondence.

The value of alphabet books for developing vocabulary has been long recognized (Anderson, 2013), since they inherently require readers to focus on the names of the objects pictured. *Owl and Other Scrambles, The Graphic Alphabet, Picture a Letter, and Alphabatics* associate single words with each letter through unique visual representations while other books, like *The Ultimate Alphabet*, depict many and varied words that begin with each letter. Books using specific language conventions, such as *Achoo! Bang! Crash! A Noisy Alphabet* (onomatopoeia) and *Easy as Pie: A Guessing Game of Sayings* (idioms), contribute to children's knowledge of words and their definitions by demonstrating ways that language is manipulated to influence meaning. The purpose of different kinds of words is revealed in *The Z Was Zapped: A Play in Twenty-Six Acts* (verbs), *C Is for Curious: An ABC of Feelings* (adjectives), and *Have You Ever Seen a Smack of Jellyfish?: An Alphabet Book* (collective nouns), which each present a different part of speech.

Sharing alphabet books written in various forms--narrative (*G is for Goat, Old Black Fly, and The Alphabet Keeper*), expository (*A Caribou Alphabet, Illuminations, and I Spy: An Alphabet in Art*), and poetic (*R Is for Rhyme: A Poetry Alphabet and Alphabet Animals*)--increases children's knowledge of different text types. Reading alphabet books from different disciplines – social studies (*D Is for Democracy: A Citizen's Alphabet and A Pioneer ABC*), science, (*W Is for Wind: A Weather Alphabet and The Yucky Reptile Alphabet Book*), and mathematics (*G Is for Googol: A Math Alphabet*) -- increase content knowledge along with

literacy learning (Kane, 2008). Ranging from food (*Alphabet Soup*) to football (*T Is for Touchdown: A Football Alphabet*), the wide array of alphabet book themes cover the world (*P is for Poppadoms!: An Indian Alphabet Book* and *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*) allowing ample opportunity for increasing motivation to read and conduct further research by connecting children to personally relevant, meaningful topics.

As children participate in animated conversations surrounding these intriguing texts, their knowledge of print grows. Speaking, reading, and writing share common knowledge sources and provide contexts for one another (Clay, 1998; Dyson, 2000) making alphabet book discussions a natural connection between reading and writing. Routman (1991) describes alphabet books as invitations for writers to write by providing the means to organize their writing. Taking dictation and translating kid-writing (Tunks & Giles, 2009) provide the means for very young children to author their own alphabet books or contribute to class publications. Immersing children in an assortment of alphabet books becomes the impetus for them to be used as anchor texts during writing workshop (Ray, 2006), where they serve as guiding examples of a particular kind of writing. Evers et al. (2009) recommend anchor alphabet texts as an effective means of providing first, fifth, and eighth graders with scaffolded instruction, supportive writing opportunities, and multiple forums for sharing child-authored books.

Children who are learning to read and write need access to meaningful and personally interesting books. Alphabet books from various genres of literature reflecting a wide range of developmental abilities, interests, cultures, and reading levels increase the likelihood that appealing options are available to everyone. Through interactions with alphabet books children will expand their language and cognitive skills by learning the purpose and meaning of letters

and words as they discover that written language comes in different forms and is used for various purposes. Capitalizing on children's familiarity with alphabet books is one way to support early writing attempts and promote their progress to becoming independent authors.

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