



# BEYOND THE LABEL

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## Defining **Quality** in Decodable Texts

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As evidence-based literacy practices have gained momentum, decodable texts have emerged as an increasingly important instructional resource in early reading classrooms. Research consistently supports their use, demonstrating positive effects on students' decoding accuracy, fluency, and application of newly taught phonics skills in connected reading (Blevins, 2024; Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Leitch, 2023). As schools have renewed their focus on explicit, systematic phonics instruction, decodable texts have emerged as an essential bridge between isolated skill instruction and authentic reading experiences.

However, the growing popularity of decodable texts has revealed an important reality: **not all decodable texts are created equal**. A book labeled *decodable* is not automatically appropriate for every beginning reader. Research asserts that decodability is determined by alignment to the phonics skills students have been explicitly taught, not by a publisher label or a predetermined percentage of decodable words (Blevins, 2024; Castles et al., 2018). Furthermore, controlling phonics patterns alone does not guarantee a high-quality reading experience.

This distinction is especially important because the earliest books students encounter help shape their identities as readers. **Beginning readers deserve books that are not only decodable, but also engaging, coherent, and meaningful**. While strong lesson-to-text alignment is non-negotiable, students should not have to sacrifice interesting topics, authentic language, knowledge-building opportunities, or age-appropriate content simply because they are learning to decode. Decodable texts should be held to the same standards we expect of all children's literature.

**At Laprea Education**, we believe high-quality decodable texts should do far more than help students sound out words. They should invite students to read stories, learn about the world, build vocabulary, engage in discussion, and experience the joy of reading. Strong decodable texts are intentionally designed to balance lesson-to-text alignment with purposeful reading experiences, helping students bridge explicit phonics instruction to meaningful interactions with text.

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# The Purpose of Decodable Texts

Reading instruction is most effective when instructional components work together toward a singular goal: developing skilled readers (Castles et al., 2018). Explicit phonics instruction, vocabulary instruction, fluency practice, and comprehension instruction each serve an important purpose within a comprehensive literacy framework. This same principle applies to decodable texts. Rather than functioning as isolated reading materials, decodable texts should be viewed as purposeful instructional tools that help students integrate and apply multiple components of literacy during connected reading.

Perhaps the most common misconception surrounding decodable texts is that a book labeled decodable is automatically appropriate for every beginning reader. However, a text is only decodable relative to a student's current phonics knowledge (Blevins, 2024; Castles et al., 2018).

**In other words, decodability is not determined by a publisher label, but by alignment to the phonics skills students have been previously taught.**

Blevins (2024) describes decodable texts as "critical practice tools" that contain a large percentage of words students can read using previously taught phonics skills. Consistent with Castles et al. (2018), this definition emphasizes that decodable texts are instructional scaffolds intentionally aligned to students' prior learning and designed to leverage explicit phonics instruction through meaningful practice in connected text.

This lesson-to-text alignment is essential because **learning phonics rules in isolation does not automatically lead to skilled reading**. Students need repeated opportunities to apply newly learned sound-spelling relationships in connected text (Ehri, 2014). When texts contain numerous untaught patterns, students are unlikely to rely on their phonics knowledge and may instead turn to context clues, picture clues, or memorization to identify unfamiliar words (Juel & Roper-Schneider, 1985; Mesmer, 2005). This disconnect between instruction and text can inadvertently teach students to undervalue their phonics knowledge and overrely on compensatory strategies that become increasingly inefficient as text demands increase (Stanovich, 1989).



Like arithmetic without application, **phonics without connected reading amounts to useless mechanics**. And like the arithmetic that we never did understand well enough to do the word problems, it is easily forgotten altogether.

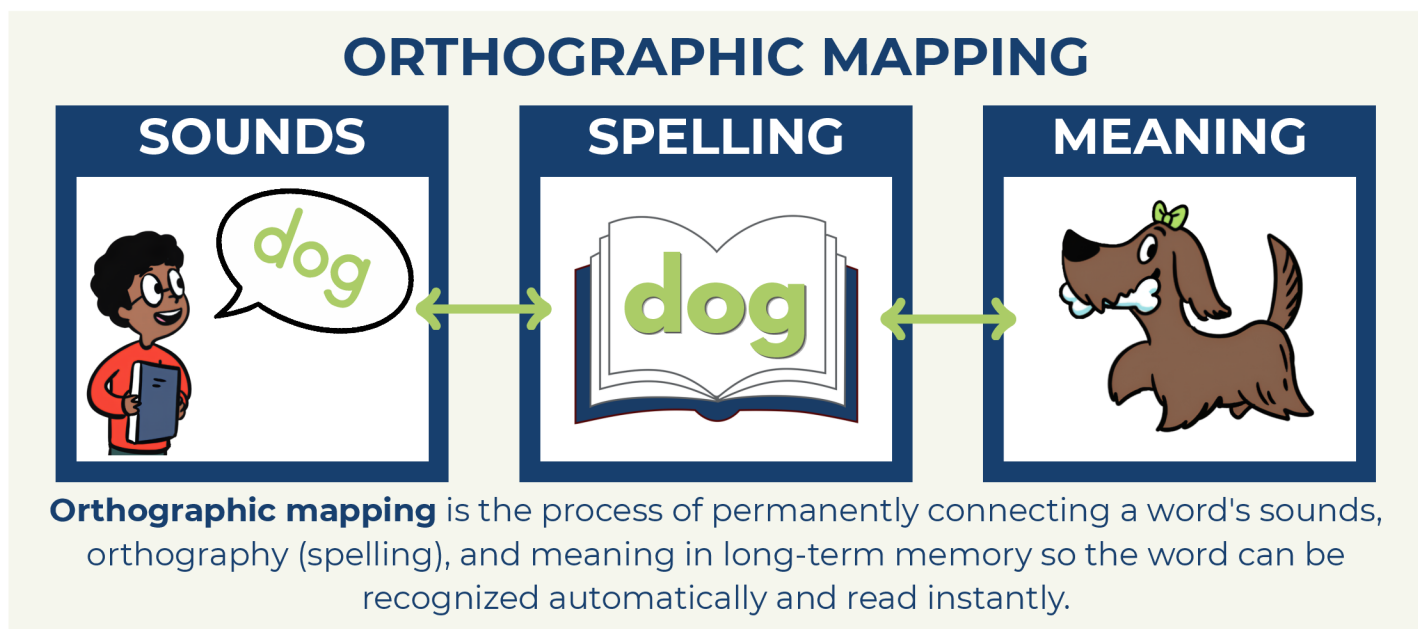
**Marilyn Jager Adams, Ph.D. (1990)**



For this reason, **a direct connection between phonics instruction and connected reading is essential**. Adams (1990) emphasized that phonics instruction is most effective when students have opportunities to apply newly learned skills in authentic reading experiences rather than practicing those skills in isolation. Decodable texts provide a supportive environment for this application, allowing students to successfully practice newly learned skills while building accuracy and confidence as readers (Blevins, 2024).

Research consistently demonstrates positive outcomes associated with the use of decodable texts, particularly in students' foundational reading skills and their ability to transfer phonics knowledge to connected reading. Students who use decodable texts show improvements in decoding accuracy, fluency, and their ability to apply taught phonics skills in connected reading (Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Leitch, 2023). Likewise, Jenkins et al. (2004) found that at-risk readers who used decodable texts made significant gains in decoding, word reading, passage reading, and comprehension.

The effectiveness of decodable texts is closely tied to **orthographic mapping**, the process through which words become stored in long-term memory for immediate and automatic retrieval (Ehri, 2014; Kilpatrick, 2015). Orthographic mapping occurs when students form connections among a word's sounds, spelling, and meaning, allowing the word to become instantly recognizable.



This process of orthographic mapping is difficult to achieve when students encounter too many untaught patterns in text. Rather than using decoding strategies, they may begin to rely on guessing or memorization. Skilled readers do not memorize words as visual shapes; instead, they build increasingly automatic connections among sounds, spellings, and meanings. By aligning texts to previously taught phonics patterns, decodable texts provide successful opportunities for students to apply their phonics knowledge, creating the conditions that support orthographic mapping and the development of automatic word recognition (Dehaene, 2011; Ehri, 2014).

As word recognition becomes more automatic, students devote fewer cognitive resources to decoding individual words and can instead allocate more attention to constructing meaning from text (Baddeley, 2012; Roembke et al., 2019). In this way, decodable texts support not only foundational skills, but also the development of fluent reading and comprehension. This integration reflects Scarborough's (2001) Reading Rope, which emphasizes that skilled reading emerges when increasingly automatic word recognition works in concert with language comprehension.

**Ultimately, educators should move beyond asking whether a resource is simply decodable and instead consider whether students can successfully read the text because they have been taught the necessary phonics skills.**

The goal is not for students to finish a decodable book; the goal is for them to read increasingly complex text with accuracy, fluency, and understanding because they have been explicitly taught the skills required to do so.



# What Makes a High-Quality Decodable Text?

Once educators understand that decodability is determined by lesson-to-text alignment rather than a publisher label, a second question naturally emerges: *What makes a decodable text a high-quality book?*

A text may be technically decodable yet still fail to engage students if it lacks a coherent story, natural language, or meaningful content. **Lesson-to-text alignment is necessary, but not sufficient, for determining quality.** It answers whether students can successfully read a text, but it does not answer whether the text is worth reading. Students deserve books that are not only readable, but also enjoyable.

In *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, Anderson et al. (1985) argued that effective decodable texts should be **comprehensible**, **instructive**, and **engaging**. These principles remain remarkably relevant in our twenty-first century world.

Too often, conversations about decodable texts begin and end with phonics control. While alignment to instruction is certainly essential, high-quality decodable texts should ultimately support the broader goal of developing engaged readers. They should provide opportunities for students to apply newly learned skills while simultaneously fostering fluency, vocabulary, oral language, comprehension, and a genuine enjoyment of reading.



## KEY TAKEAWAY

A high-quality decodable text does more than align to phonics instruction. It engages students, builds understanding, and creates meaningful reading experiences.

**Students deserve books they will want in their hands, not worksheets disguised as books.** Beginning readers should have access to the same quality reading experiences we expect for all readers. In fact, a hallmark of a high-quality decodable text is that it should look and feel like any other book a child might choose to read. Strong lesson-to-text alignment may determine whether a text is decodable, but these additional design elements help determine whether it is a book students will genuinely want to read.



# Six Characteristics of High-Quality Decodables

1

## Genre Variety

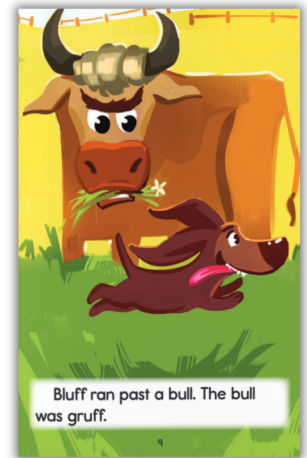
Students should encounter a range of text types, including both narrative and informational texts. Historically, informational text has been underrepresented in primary classrooms (Duke, 2000), despite research demonstrating its important role in building background knowledge, vocabulary, and content understanding (Cervetti et al., 2016). While fictional stories foster imagination, empathy, and narrative understanding, informational texts help students develop curiosity about the world around them and expand their knowledge across content areas. High-quality decodable collections should intentionally provide a balance of both, ensuring students learn from the very beginning that reading is a tool not only for enjoying stories, but also for learning about the world.



2

## Purposeful Visuals

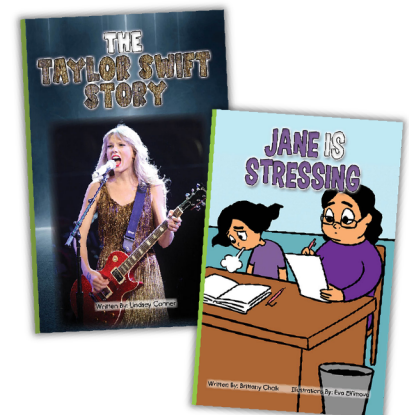
Visuals should enrich the reading experience and support meaning-making without encouraging students to guess at unfamiliar words (Mesmer, 2005; Pennell et al., 2024). Illustrations and photographs should be purposeful, engaging, and worthy of a children's book (Lewis, 2001). In narrative texts, visuals can deepen understanding of characters, settings, and events. In informational texts, photographs can increase authenticity and help students connect new learning to the real world.



3

## Interesting and Relevant Topics

Texts should spark curiosity and invite discussion by exploring topics that are meaningful, engaging, and connected to students' experiences and interests. Young readers are naturally curious about animals, weather, transportation, community helpers, inventions, sports, and the world around them. Decodable texts should capitalize on that curiosity rather than limit students to overly simplistic or repetitive content (Blevins, 2022).



# 4

## Age-Appropriate Content

Older readers who are still developing decoding skills deserve access to age-appropriate and intellectually engaging content. A student's ability to read independently should not determine the sophistication of the ideas they encounter. Content should respect students' developmental interests, maturity, and intellectual curiosity, allowing them to engage with topics they find meaningful while practicing foundational skills (Anderson et al., 1985).



# 5

## Authentic and Diverse Characters

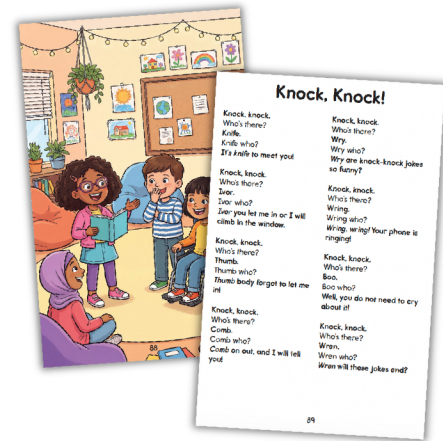
Characters, settings, and scenarios should feel believable and relatable, helping students connect personally with what they read. Decodable texts can serve as both mirrors and windows, allowing students to see themselves reflected in books while also learning about people and experiences different from their own (Bishop, 1990). Diverse representation helps students develop empathy, broaden their perspectives, and see reading as a way to connect with a larger world.



# 6

## Joy and Engagement

Texts should create moments of delight. Humor, surprise, and opportunities for discovery help students see reading as an enjoyable experience rather than an isolated academic task. Blevins (2022) argues that students should encounter texts they are motivated to revisit multiple times, as rereading is an important contributor to fluency development. Students who enjoy what they read are more likely to engage deeply and read again.



**Beginning readers deserve books that feel like books from the very beginning.** The earliest texts students encounter help shape their identities as readers. Decodable texts should therefore be designed with the same intentionality we expect from any children's literature: engaging topics, authentic language, high-quality visuals, and experiences that foster curiosity, confidence, and a love of reading.

# Beyond the Label

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Decodable texts have become an increasingly prominent component of science-of-reading aligned instruction, but their effectiveness depends on far more than a publisher label or a percentage of phonetically regular words. While research consistently supports the use of decodable texts to strengthen decoding accuracy, fluency, and the application of newly taught phonics skills, not all decodable texts are created equal (Blevins, 2024; Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Leitch, 2023).



## KEY TAKEAWAY

To move past the label of *decodable*, educators must ask not only whether a text is aligned to previously taught phonics skills, but also whether it reflects the characteristics of a high-quality resource intentionally designed to help students become skilled readers.

As schools continue to expand their use of decodable resources, this distinction becomes increasingly important. **Strong decodable texts align to explicit phonics instruction, but they do not stop there.** They also incorporate natural language, engaging topics, knowledge-building opportunities, and age-appropriate content while inviting students to discuss, wonder, and connect with what they read.

At the same time, decodable texts should not be viewed as stand-alone reading programs or replacements for rich literacy experiences. They are one component of a comprehensive literacy framework in which explicit phonics instruction, interactive read-alouds, vocabulary instruction, fluency practice, writing opportunities, and comprehension instruction work together toward developing skilled readers (Pennell et al., 2024).

**At Laprea Education,** our goal is not simply to create decodable texts. Our goal is to create books that help students become readers. We believe high-quality decodable texts should function as bridges between instruction and independence, honoring both the science **and** the joy of reading. When thoughtfully designed, decodable texts become more than controlled texts; they become meaningful reading experiences that build confidence, curiosity, and a lifelong identity as a reader.



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We believe going beyond the label means designing books that do more than control phonics patterns. It means creating meaningful reading experiences that build confidence, curiosity, and a lifelong identity as a reader. **When thoughtfully designed, decodable texts become more than controlled texts; they become books students want to read and experiences that help them grow into skilled, engaged readers.**

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