

# How to knock down five strawman arguments against phonics

Countering some of the most common claims bandied about by opponents of phonics.

Recently, the *Washington Post* published an article about the latest hostilities in the “reading wars”. I noticed it because the columnist, Jay Matthews, quoted from [my blog](#).

The column did a good job of surfacing the disagreements, but what really caught my eye was the comments section. More than 50 readers had weighed in – defending phonics or trying to clothesline it.

As a longtime phonics advocate, I was especially sensitive to the illogical arguments against decoding instruction. They were mostly the same arguments I’ve heard for the last 50 years of my career.

I might think these to be illogical arguments, but they appear to be persuasive to someone or they wouldn’t keep getting repeated. That’s the thing about logically fallacious arguments – they sound a lot like logically reasonable ones. That’s particularly true for people who may not have a depth of knowledge on the topic, like a first-time mum whose kids are just reaching phonics age, or the experienced high school teacher who knows education, but is not well-versed on decoding.

This article considers five of these claims.

## 1 Phonics is inherently boring.

This argument against teaching phonics is both wrong and inane. The inane part is that it suggests that we shouldn’t teach whatever students might not like.

“In my experience, kids don’t like long division so let’s not bother with that any more in math class.” Musicians no longer need to play scales, and basketball players no longer need to shoot free throws, and ... well, you get the idea. The argument is: don’t teach anything that kids might find boring, no matter what the implications.

I have no problem with teachers and curriculum designers who fear phonics might be dull, so they try to juice it up a bit – making it more energetic and fun in some way. But omitting an important part of the curriculum because it might not be fun? That’s silly.

Of course, phonics instruction can be dull. But so can fluency instruction, vocabulary, guided reading, workshop conferencing ... and, there goes literacy.

Kobe Bryant wrote, “Why do you think I’m the best player in the world? Because I never ever get bored with the basics.”

Great musicians will tell you the same thing about playing scales. They became great because they learned to manage or overcome their boredom, and teachers and coaches should try both to instill a respect for foundational skills and to make an effort to keep it interesting.

This advice is especially important for teachers who, themselves, may find phonics to be boring. Don’t communicate that to your students about phonics or anything else that you teach. Enthusiasm is contagious, so buck it up.

In any event, there is nothing inherently boring in phonics, phonics isn’t



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boring to everyone, and good teachers find ways to liven up what may be, for some, dull ground to cover.

### 2 English spelling is too inconsistent for phonics to make sense.

I'm surprised that this claim continues to be made. [Extensive computer analysis](#) has shown that English, [while being complex](#), is [not nearly as inconsistent](#) as is often claimed. One must pay attention to syllable boundaries, letter positions, and morphological information, but English spelling and its relationship to pronunciation is systematic and quite consistent overall.

The argument that it is pointless to teach decoding because of the chaotic nature of English spelling loses its persuasiveness when the language turns out to be not particularly chaotic. It may have made sense for the George Bernard Shaws and Theodore Roosevelt to seek English spelling reform, but in the 2020s to ignore the consistency identified in extensive empirical analyses of the language is foolish.

### 3 I learned to read without phonics.

Some of the complaints against phonics were based on personal experience. It is not uncommon that a parent or teacher remembers learning to read without phonics, so any insistence on phonics seems to them narrow and pig-headed ("just like an educator to insist things be done in a particular way even if it makes no difference"). This argument is also put forth this week by Barbara Murchison, the director of the educator excellence and equity division of the California department education [in Education Week](#).

I've written about this before. There is no question that it is possible to learn to read without explicit phonics instruction. I'll concede that.

The problem with this argument is that it proceeds on the assumption that the outcomes are discrete rather continuous. It isn't that phonics leads to learning and other approaches do not. The differences are at the margins. They are statistical. The groups of kids taught with phonics score higher in reading on average or have fewer out-and-out failures.

In such cases, the anti-phonics person points out the kids who learned with little or no phonics, and the pro-phonics person points out the higher achievement

and lowered incidence of failure. They're both right, but that it is possible to learn to read without phonics ignores the value that such instruction adds for the overall population and the kids on the margins. Writing them off because some kids can learn without phonics is illogical (and a little mean, too).

### 4 We all learn in different ways.

In some ways this is a corollary of the previous argument. The folks proposing this recognise the complexity and individuality of human beings. There's a reason Baskin & Robbins doesn't tout one flavour. We're all different, we all like different things, different strokes for different folks, you say potato and I say ... well, you get it.

This is a very appealing argument. You learn one way, I learn another, and if schools would simply vary their instruction to address the learning needs, styles, and tastes of everybody, we'd all be happier. Hell, that's democracy! Viva, diversity! And we poor phonics idiots only have phonics to offer.

While that might seem like a bad trade, again, I turn to the research. [Studies of reading show](#) that anyone who learns to read English – no matter how they are taught – must master decoding, and [brain studies show](#) an incredible consistency in how this takes place in proficient readers.

Basically, research says that as readers, we aren't that diverse. We all process text in pretty much the same way. It makes greater sense to teach someone something they need to learn, rather than teaching them something else hoping they'll figure it out.

What that means is that, whether or not we teach phonics, is not a matter of learning style or taste, but effectiveness.

### 5 There is more to reading than phonics.

Great argument. I used to try this one with my father when as a boy I didn't want to eat my vegetables. "Dad, there is more to nutrition than just veggies. I'm eating my meat and drinking my milk." Dad wasn't impressed with that tactic, and you shouldn't be either.

My claim is correct: you won't be healthy if you only eat vegetables, but it was a distraction more than a real argument. After all, Dad was pro-protein and pro-calcium, too. The only reason he was so stridently insistent on the vegetables

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was because I was hiding them under the edge of my plate instead of eating them – and when he challenged that practice, I made it sound like the argument was about who was most committed to a balanced diet, not whether I needed to eat my green beans.

I fear that we are engaged in that same dance step today. Someone isn't including phonics instruction, and when anyone challenges that omission, the response emphasises the importance of teaching reading comprehension or writing. "Please don't notice the good things that we aren't giving kids, just notice the other good things we are."

As you can see, those five arguments against phonics, when considered carefully, hold no water.

And, what of the arguments for phonics?

I can think of only one: the only reason that I can think of for teaching phonics explicitly in the primary grades is because a large number of independent studies with a variety of approaches and methods have consistently found that providing such instruction to children gives them a clear advantage in learning to read. They, as a group, do better; we lose fewer kids off the lower end.

That's the only reason, and it ain't made of straw.

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