Learning to read

- First base: Automatic word recognition (grades 1-4):
  ✦ Under 50-70 WPM: cannot comprehend easy texts

- Q: What factors matter?
  ✦ Verbal memory (e.g., sentences): $r = .5$
  ✦ SES: $r = .5$ to $.6$

- Q: What pre-reading skills matter?
  ✦ letter knowledge (ident): $r = .5$ w/ reading @ end 1st grd
  ✦ phonemic awareness: $r = .4$
  ✦ print concepts*: $r = .5$

- Q: How do these interact?
  ✦ SES & pre-reading skills; SES and print concepts
Awareness of print: behavioral evidence

- Brenneman et al: writing vs. drawing
  - 4-5-year-olds and 5-6-year-olds
  - Mid-class suburb; exposed English & Hebrew print
- Draw or write names of pictured objects
- Task differences:
  - **Writing task**: More “don’t know how!” sounding out, & spelling/phonology comments
    - 62% left-to-right; 83% linear
  - **Drawing task**: More scribbling, paper turning, referential color use
- Older children’s writing:
  - More sounding out & phonological comments
  - More left-to-right; more linear
The Great Debate over pre-reading: Whole language “vs.” phonics

- Googled 35,000+ hits!
- What is fundamental?
  - Phonics: decoding orthography; alphabetic sound-letter associations; rules for pronunciation
  - Whole language: Word meaning; text comprehension; literacy activities; integrating meaningful reading activities into curriculum
- Stereotypical classroom activities:
  - Drilling sounds & repetitive training vs. reading books
Whole Language vs. Phonics: Research

- Phonics training helps later reading:
  - Letter knowledge predicts 1st grade reading ($r = .5$)
  - BUT many studies show no special improvement
    - except better phonics skills, and
    - only in 1st grade (one study: worse 5th grd comprehens.!!)
  - Many rules are wrong! (ex: 2 vowels walking; 1st talking)

- Exposure to books predicts early reading (WL):
  - Nursery rhymes might teach phonics
  - Reading & phoneme awareness both ↑ in 1st grade

- Direct comparisons of programs:
  - sometimes slight 1st-grade advantage for phonics
  - some research badly confounded; uninterpretable
Best of both worlds?

- Phonics:
  - Word decomposition helps 1st-2nd graders’ word decoding & recognition
  - Some teachers advise minimal time due to boredom

- Whole language:
  - Importance of vocabulary; mostly learned from context
  - Motivation to read (free choice of appropriate texts)
So why did phonics “win,” until 2000?

- CA NAEP scores ‘92-’94: very low
- Looking for blame:
  - Adoption of literature-based basal curricula (‘80s)
  - 1987-’97: from 650,000 to 1.4 million LEP students
  - 1980s: severe budget cuts; 1990s fallout:
    - ‘94 teachers: 39% Ed majors (vs. 69% nationwide); 29% advanced degrees (vs. 41%)
    - ‘96 Ed spending: 17% lower per capita than Nat’l ave; $750 less per pupil
    - 93% of classes larger than 25 (vs. 41% nationally)
The Phonics Tag-Team

- Catalyst: Grossen’s report “30 Years of NICHD funded research” (inaccurate; $$ motivated)
- NICHD publicized 1 study (not published or peer-reviewed; not finished by ‘95-’96 media blitz)
- Conservative lobby & companies selling phonics products
- Why conservative groups?
  - **Fundamentalist Christians**: “God established an orderly universe”—focus on rules; obedience to authority
    - Traditional basal readers: religious content
    - Whole language emphasizes analysis, comprehension, choice of reading...antithesis of fundamentalist ideology
- Became education platform for GHWB & GWB