

Curriculum Evaluation: SPELL-Links to Reading & Writing

[The Reading League’s Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines](#) (2022) highlights instructional practices to look for when evaluating how well a curriculum aligns with the science of reading research.

Their curriculum evaluation guidelines identify instructional practices recognized by The Reading League as “evidence-aligned” with the current science of reading research. These practices are organized into the categories of Word Recognition, Language Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Writing, and Assessment. For each of these five categories, the curriculum evaluation guidelines also identify “Red Flag” practices, those not aligned with the science of reading.

The Reading League’s recommendation is to first review a curriculum for Red Flags and proceed to reviewing the program for evidence-aligned practices once you decide the program “does not have enough nonaligned components to remove it from consideration”. They emphasize that “the primary decision-making mechanism for selecting a curriculum is the absence of Red Flags.”

Learning By Design, Inc. used The Reading League’s Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines to evaluate its SPELL-Links word study program, a program that teaches foundational skills and word-level reading (decoding), spelling (encoding), and meaning with immediate application of these skills to connected reading and writing. Because SPELL-Links is *a word study program* and not a language comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, or handwriting program, those components were not evaluated here.

SPELL-Links has NO Red Flags!

SPELL-Links checks the boxes for these evidence-aligned practices:

Section 1. WORD RECOGNITION

WORD RECOGNITION NON-NEGOTIABLES

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks ALL **non-negotiables**.

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading
Explicit instruction of phoneme awareness, phonics, and spelling.
Systematic scope and sequence of skills building from simple to complex.
Curriculum and support materials that provide opportunities for practice and interleaving of elements taught (e.g., phonics, decoding, encoding).

Phonological and Phoneme Awareness

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks ALL areas of **Phonological & Phoneme Awareness**

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading

Instruction includes larger units of phonological awareness (syllable, rhyme, onset-rime) in Pre-K and beginning of K (Note: instruction should progress to the phoneme level as soon as possible).

Phoneme awareness is taught directly, explicitly, and systematically.

Instruction includes conversations about the way sounds are made in the mouth (i.e., how the articulatory gestures of air flow, tongue and lip placement, vocal cord voicing are happening).

Instructional focus on attuning students to all phonemes in words (e.g., first, final, medial, individual phonemes in blends).

Notes: Instruction regarding the way sounds are made is provided on an as-needed basis, determined by the target phoneme(s) of a lesson, by the individual student (taking into consideration factors such as the absence/presence of a speech sound disorder and whether the student is an English Language Learner, and/or by the presence of a deficit in phoneme identification/discrimination as identified by the SPELL-Links prescriptive assessment.

Phonics and Phonic Decoding

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks 12/13 areas of **Phonics and Phonic Decoding**:

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading

Letter-sound correspondences are taught to automaticity in an explicit manner.

Phonics instruction includes cumulative review including application in reading and writing.

Phonics instruction is systematic and sequential, building from simple letter-sound correspondences to complex phonic patterns (i.e., instruction begins with short vowels and consonants).

Segmenting and blending are taught explicitly and practiced regularly, in both decoding and encoding.

Explicit instruction directs students' attention to the structure of the word; the emphasis is on phonic decoding.

Irregular high-frequency words are taught by drawing attention to both regular and irregular sounds once sound-spellings have been taught.

Opportunities to practice decoding words in isolation are provided.

Instruction includes spaced practice and interleaving of skills taught (e.g., practicing old and new phonics patterns in one activity, practicing a learned phonics pattern in reading and spelling).

Phonics skills are practiced by applying letter-sound knowledge in decodable texts that match the phonics elements taught, securing phonic decoding.

Advanced Word Study (Grades 2 and above): Instruction begins with basic letter-sound correspondences followed by increasingly more complex patterns such as syllable types, morphemes, and etymological influences (i.e., word origins).

Advanced Word Study (Grades 2 and above): Includes more advanced phonics skills (e.g., second sounds of c/g, digraphs, variant vowels).

For Multilingual Learners, once they decode the word accurately, supports (e.g., descriptions, pictures, or gestures) are used to teach or confirm the meaning of the decoded word(s).

Fluency

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks ALL areas of **Fluency**:

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading
Letter names and associated sounds are given sufficient opportunities for practice with feedback to ensure accuracy and automaticity.
Instruction includes teacher-led modeling, oral reading by students, and immediate feedback.
Reading accuracy and automaticity are emphasized as the hallmarks of fluent reading.
Word-level fluency practice is provided.
Connected text fluency practice is provided.
For Multilingual Learners, additional support is included whenever possible to ensure students understand the meaning of words being read.

Sections 2-4 LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION, READING COMPREHENSION, WRITING

SPELL-Links is *a word study program* and not a language comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, or handwriting program. For this reason, many of the components in these sections are not applicable and were not evaluated here.

Sections 2-4 NON-NEGOTIABLES

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks ALL **non-negotiables**.

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading
There is a clear and consistent instructional framework, featuring a comprehensive scope and sequence of elements of language comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing taught in an explicit system.
Students are exposed to rich vocabulary and complex syntax in reading and writing materials and orally, including but not limited to read alouds, at language levels beyond students' reading levels.
For Multilingual Learners, instruction in English language development (ELD) and acquisition is included to support reading comprehension and continued reading and writing development.

Section 2: LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

Background Knowledge

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks 2/3 areas of **Background Knowledge**:

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading

Read-aloud opportunities (for students who are still learning the code) and text reading opportunities (for students who are automatic with the code) feature a variety of diverse, complex texts, including narrative and expository texts above grade-level to develop background knowledge and vocabulary in a variety of subject areas.

Opportunities are provided to make connections between a new word or concept and other known words or concepts, relating ideas to experiences.

Vocabulary

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks 3/5 areas (one area is not applicable to word study programs) of **Vocabulary**:

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading

Explicit instruction in vocabulary for Tier 2 and 3 words is evident, as well as instruction in the context of texts (most Tier 1 words).

Tier 2 words are taught explicitly, and students are given opportunities to use them in their speech, see them in print, and use them in writing (when appropriate).

Explicit instruction in morphology is provided with numerous opportunities for students to read and write words with these morphemes

Notes: Semantic awareness and Vocabulary skills including meanings, multiple meanings, and related words are developed at the word-level to support reading and writing beyond the word level.

Knowledge of Language Structures

Not applicable

Verbal Reasoning

Not applicable

Literacy Knowledge

Not applicable

Section 3: READING COMPREHENSION

READING COMPREHENSION EVALUATION

Not applicable

Section 4: WRITING

WRITING EVALUATION

Handwriting

Not Applicable

Spelling

NO Red Flags.

SPELL-Links checks ALL areas of **Spelling**:

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading

There is a clear scope and sequence for explicit spelling instruction, closely aligned with the phonics scope and sequence.

Patterns taught for decoding are also practiced in encoding/spelling lessons.

(Grades 2-5 Advanced Word Study): Spelling instruction continues in grades 2 and above and includes explicit instruction in vowel teams, variant vowels, and how morphology influences spelling.

Composition

Not Applicable

SECTION 5: ASSESSMENT

NON-NEGOTIABLES FOR ASSESSMENT

NO Red Flags

SPELL-Links checks ALL **non-negotiables**

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading
A school or LEA's suite of assessments provide multiple data points to understand students' word recognition and language comprehension abilities.
Assessment data is used to differentiate instruction across tiers of instruction based on student progress.
Assessments are standardized, reliable, and valid for the intended purpose.

ASSESSMENT

NO Red Flags

SPELL-Links checks 7/9 areas (one area is not applicable to word study programs) of **Assessment**:

Practices Aligned with the Science of Reading
Assessments include screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring to inform instruction and prevent future reading difficulties.
Foundational skills assessments identify students' instructional needs.
Phonics skills are assessed using both real and nonsense words in all syllable types as each has been taught to students.
A systematic spelling survey/spelling inventory is used to analyze students' applications of phonemes, graphemes, and morphemes.
Phonological and phoneme awareness (PA) are assessed in K/1 and for older students who exhibit PA weaknesses as evidenced by appropriate assessment.
Trends in groups of student scores can be used to identify the overall effectiveness of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).
Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) assessments are used to assess fluency, usually first grade and beyond.

Notes: In-depth spelling error analysis is used to measure phonics and other skills across all syllable patterns. Assessments of reading rate and accuracy are included along with a variety of other progress monitoring measures. Outside-the-program standardized assessments are recommended to obtain normed oral reading fluency (ORF) scores and to provide an additional measure of progress as students advance through the word study program.