

*Guessing: Why the reading wars won't end.* Signatory to letter to Washington Post concerning the NCTQ report on teacher training. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/09/17/another-blast-in-the-reading-wars/>

## Washington Post

### Another blast in the reading wars

By [Valerie Strauss](#), Published: September 17 at 4:00 am

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/09/17/another-blast-in-the-reading-wars/>

The reading wars continue.

Last month I published two pieces by literacy experts who raised serious objections to key parts of a report released over the summer on teacher preparation by a group called the National Council on Teacher Quality. The [first one is here](#), the [second here](#). (I had earlier published posts on the report, [here](#) and [here](#), which criticized its methodology in determining which colleges of education were worthwhile and which aren't.) The literacy experts (some of whom have served as president of the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association) were concerned, among other things, that the council was promoting an old and narrow idea that direct instruction of phonics is the best way to teach reading and that other methods have little or no value.

Not surprisingly, a number of scholars with different views has taken issue with the group's objections and signed a letter about their position. This letter was written and circulated among like-minded scholars by Steven Dykstra, an adolescent psychologist and a founding member of the Wisconsin Reading Coalition.

For the sake of healthy debate on an important issue, I am publishing their letter. This is an important issue, and I'll continue to write and publish pieces on it.

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Here's the Dykstra-written letter, with the names of signing scholars at the end:

Like Washington Post blogger Valerie Strauss, we also regret that the Reading Wars continue to plague education. However, this cannot be blamed on organizations like the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), which recently published its findings on how well our colleges and universities prepare future teachers to teach reading to young students. Rather, the Reading Wars persist because of the continued dissemination of false information about the process of becoming an effective reader, with the latest example being Strauss's own blog on August 13. Strauss's pronouncements are particularly damaging, appearing as they do under the banner of the Washington Post, arguably the most trusted source of unbiased information for the nation's decision makers. As such, they require a decisive response.

Taking aim at the NCTQ's evaluation of teacher preparation programs, Strauss uses her forum to champion and promote the views of a limited sub-group of a society that calls itself the Reading Hall of Fame. Although an independent organization, many members of the Reading Hall of Fame, including eight signers of the critique in question, are Past Presidents of the International Reading Association. Some of their criticisms aren't much more than political innuendo, suggesting that the NCTQ and its allies are a front

for conservatives determined to ruin public education and usurp control of teacher training. Many staffers at the NCTQ as well as their supporters are true-blue liberals, and efforts to paint this as a clash of political philosophies distract from the real issue, which is the need to improve the effectiveness of teacher education in the United States.

Headliner Kenneth Goodman and the other Hall of Fame signers also complain that the NCTQ approach is incomplete, neglecting many important aspects of reading instruction and teacher training. We must remember that NCTQ neither intended nor claimed to evaluate all aspects of how teachers are prepared to teach reading. The NCTQ review focused on the five core components of reading identified by the National Academy of Sciences in 1998: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Weakness in any of these five components impedes or obstructs reading growth and, as attested by the 2000 meta-analysis of the National Reading Panel, growth in each of the components is significantly assisted through appropriate classroom instruction. The NCTQ reviewed programs to see if each of these critical components were covered for at least two lectures, and evaluated by at least one assignment.

The NCTQ standard was a bare minimum level of performance, requiring programs to meet a very low standard for at least four of the five topics. In fact, learning to teach reading requires a great deal more than two lectures on each of these five topics. It would be possible to score well on the review but still do a very poor job preparing teachers to teach reading. What would be *impossible* is to neglect these five topics and still do a good job preparing teachers to teach reading. This is true no matter how much time is devoted to addressing speaking and listening, writing, content-area texts, diversity, the formation of instructional groups, motivation, and metacognition. No one contests the relevance of these more general topics, which Hall of Fame signer R. David Pearson bemoaned as missing in another critique of the NCTQ review that he co-authored for the International Reading Association. However, NCTQ's review focused on the five essential, scientifically-proven reading fundamentals that incontrovertibly underlie the ability to learn to read accurately, fluently, and with comprehension, an ability that eludes far too many school children today.

Goodman and the others accuse the NCTQ of keeping the Reading Wars alive, and in one respect they are right. NCTQ uncomfortably shined a light on those aspects of reading that these critics prefer to minimize. There has never been a disagreement over motivation, diversity, or the importance of reflecting on and responding to high quality reading material. There has, however, been an ongoing battle over the way children become accurate and fluent readers. The Reading Wars are an ongoing struggle between those who understand that children must be taught to use letters and sounds to decode and spell words, and those who think children should mostly or entirely eschew that method (generally known as phonics) in favor of guessing. The first side is guided by science, the alphabetic nature of our written language, and a common sense recognition that understanding the meaning of text is predicated on accurately identifying words. The second side believes that children should be taught to construct meaning from text based on their own meaning-based intuitions about what the words might be. That is, rather than reading the words of a text to expand their knowledge and understanding (as well as their reading prowess), this second side encourages children to use their own existing knowledge and understanding to guess at words.

Kenneth Goodman himself is the father of the guessing approach. Despite ample science to the contrary, this philosophy gained wide popularity following the publication of his paper, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," in 1967. Since then, too many children have been taught to read by a collection of methods that includes a heavy reliance on guessing at words, while lending little attention to the print on the page. Science has incontrovertibly resolved the dispute in favor of the alphabetic approach, but the war cannot end as long as those who reject the lessons of science still dominate in our colleges and classrooms.

The uninitiated who find this difficult to believe may rely on Goodman's own words regarding what reading is and how it should be taught:

- **“Accuracy, correctly naming or identifying each word or word part in a graphic sequence, is not necessary for effective reading since the reader can get the meaning without accurate word identification. Furthermore, readers who strive for accuracy are likely to be inefficient.”** (p.826) Goodman, K. S. (1974, Sept). Effective teachers of reading know language and children. *Elementary English*, 51, 823-828.
- **“Early in our miscue research, we concluded...that a story is easier to read than a page, a page easier to read than a paragraph, a paragraph easier than a sentence, a sentence easier than a word, and a word easier than a letter. Our research continues to support this conclusion and we believe it to be true...”** Goodman, K. & Goodman, Y. (1981). Twenty questions about teaching language. *Educational Leadership*, 38, 437-442.
- **“Matching letters with sounds is a flat-earth view of the world, one that rejects modern science about reading.”** (p. 371) Goodman, K. S. (1986). What's whole in whole language. Richmond Hill, Ontario: Scholastic.

While this approach has been tempered over time, it still dominates the way most teachers are trained to teach reading, and thus the way our school children are instructed. We can trace a clear ideological path leading from Goodman to Reading Recovery to balanced literacy and many present-day iterations of guided reading. Lip service to phonics now allows a child to use the first letter of the word and guess, followed by the first and last letter and more guessing. But this faction adheres to the admonishment of Marie Clay, the influential developer of Reading Recovery, to use phonics only after all other strategies, or “cues,” have been tried.

- **“All readers, from five year old beginners on their first books to the effective adult reader need to use: the meaning, the sentence structure, order cues, size cues, special features, special knowledge, first and last letter knowledge before they resort to left to right sounding out of chunks or letter clusters, or in the last resort, single letters.”** (p. 9) Clay (1998). An observation survey of early literacy achievement. Auckland, Heinemann..

The goal is to keep phonetic decoding of words to a minimum, despite a wealth of research that shows it is a cardinal feature of all skilled reading. Skilled reading and poor phonetic decoding are mutually exclusive. The guessing advocates ignore this richly validated fact because it is inconsistent with their own beliefs. The damage comes when, as the NCTQ found, so many university teacher programs confuse the philosophy with the science. Fresh out of high school, our future teachers are hugely dependent on their college education to prepare them to teach children to read. Teachers can hardly be expected to teach what they haven't been taught, much less that which they have been trained to reject.

Attacks on the NCTQ review are merely ways for defenders of guessing to deflect attention from years of misguided and, ultimately, damaging instruction. There is nothing enlightened about denying serious research, and there is nothing liberal about denigrating or withholding the tools and knowledge on which teachers' successful careers and children's educational horizons depend. Strauss, Goodman, and others need to give up their smokescreen of concern over the politics and particulars of the NCTQ review, and account for the relentless adherence to the guessing strategies that really are perpetuating the Reading Wars. Future teachers and all stakeholders who want our children to have the keys to skilled reading should *demand* this accounting.

Isabel Beck, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, University of Pittsburgh

Susan Brady, Ph.D., Professor of School Psychology, University of Rhode Island

James Chapman, Ph.D., Professor of Educational Psychology, Massey University, New Zealand

David Chard, Ph.D., Dean, Simmons School of Education and Human Development, Southern Methodist University

Carol McDonald Connor, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Psychology, Arizona State University

Carolyn Cowen, Board Member, Literate Nation

Molly de Lemos, Ph.D., President-elect, Learning Difficulties Australia

Mary Delahunty, M. Ed., Learning Difficulties Australia

Steven Dykstra, Ph.D., Founding Member, Wisconsin Reading Coalition

Jack M. Fletcher, Ph.D., ABPP (ABCN), Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of Houston

David Francis, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of Houston

Margie B. Gillis, Ed.D, President, Literacy How; Research Affiliate, Haskins Laboratories

Sally Grimes, Ed.M., Founding Director, Grimes Reading Institute

Cinthia Haan, Haan Foundation for Children

Lorraine Hammond, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Edith Cowan University; President, Learning Difficulties Australia

Kerry Hempenstall, Ph.D., RMIT University, Australia

Marcia K. Henry, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, San Jose State University

E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Education and Humanities, [University of Virginia](#)

R. Malatesha Joshi, Ph.D., Professor, Teaching, Learning, and Culture, Texas A&M University

Edward J. Kame'enui, Ph.D., Dean-Knight Professor of Education, University of Oregon

Yvonne Meyer, Committee Member, National Inquiry into Teaching of Literacy/Report: Teaching Reading (2005) Australia

Louisa C. Moats, Ed.D., Moats Associates Consulting; former Vice President, International Dyslexia Association

Frederick J. Morrison, Ph.D., Professor, School of Education and Department of Psychology, University of Michigan

Mary Newton, J.D., CALP, Founding Member, Wisconsin Reading Coalition

Charles A. Perfetti, Ph.D., Distinguished University Professor of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh

Margot Prior, Professor of Psychology, AO, FASSA, FAPS, University of Melbourne, Australia

Daniel J. Reschly, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University

Mark S. Seidenberg, Ph.D., Donald O. Hebb and Hilldale Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Donald Shankweiler, Ph.D., Senior Scientist, Haskins Laboratories; Professor Emeritus, Psychology, University of Connecticut

Holly Shapiro, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, Ravinia Reading Center, LLC

Bennett A. Shaywitz, M.D., Professor, Co-Director, Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity

Sally E. Shaywitz, M.D., Professor, Co-Director, Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity

Susan M. Smartt, Ph.D., Vice President of Science Core Group, Literate Nation

Louise A. Spear-Swerling, Ph.D., Area Coordinator, Graduate Program in Learning Disabilities, Southern Connecticut State University

Morag Stuart, Ph.D. Professor Emerita in the Psychology of Reading, University of London

Geraldine L. Theadore, M.S., CCC-SLP, Clinical Associate Professor, University of Rhode Island

Joseph K. Torgesen, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Education Emeritus, Florida State University; Director Emeritus, Florida Center for Reading Research

William E. Tunmer, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology, Massey University, New Zealand

Kevin Wheldall, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor and Director of MULTILIT Research Unit, Macquarie University, Australia

Joanna P. Williams, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Education, Columbia University



CDM2

[8:41 AM EST](#)

I cannot resist a second comment, in this case a response to Dykstra's claim (below) that whole language was "founded" to eliminate the need to teach phonics. I know of no one, including Ken Goodman, who would ever claim that teachers should not teach phonics. Only the critics of whole language make this claim. Phonics is part of the equation for every reader and all good teachers attend to the teaching of phonics. Some of us differ, however, in terms of how, when, and why phonics is taught. But no one would ever assert that phonetic cues aren't part of what successful readers do in the process of reading.

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CDM2

[8:36 AM EST](#)

I suspect that the defenders of the NCTQ report agree with the report's conclusions but I cannot believe they are really defending the NCTQ's methodology which is, I believe, indefensible. The claim that an examination of course syllabi and textbooks offers anything close to an evaluation of course content is ludicrous and, in any case, unproven. The proof of the pudding, as it were, is how effectively graduates of teacher education programs actually teach reading and the NCTQ report is silent on this issue, merely assuming that graduates of programs they rate poorly will not be qualified to teach reading. Consider this: if you compare the NCTQ ratings of teacher preparation programs in individual states with data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for fourth grade reading for those states you get a small negative correlation between the NCTQ rankings and the NAEP rankings. In other words, there is absolutely no relationship between NCTQ's assessments of teachers' preparation to teach reading and students' reading performance in individual states. Surely if the NCTQ evaluation of teachers' preparation in reading had any validity at all you would expect at least a modest relationship between the NCTQ rankings and NAEP scores. But there is no relationship which seriously undermines any claims for the validity of the NCTQ assessments.

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MidwestPragmatic

[9/18/2013 2:53 PM EST](#)

As a parent, I appreciate the authors weighing in on the topic of teaching reading.

I did not find the "guess the word" strategy helpful in teaching my young children to read. Nor did I find the "look at the picture" strategy helpful.

I do believe that teachers need more training in teaching children how to read. I also believe that many parents need to step up their own efforts to get their children to read. One problem that isn't mentioned is that it is hard for children to learn to read when they can't sit still and behave for prolonged periods of time.

Finally, I agree with an earlier commentator that the critics need to put aside their political differences and consider the evidence.

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PMichaels-Artist-at-large

[9/18/2013 12:08 PM EST](#)

I hope more reading specialists weigh in on this topic. One of the reason that teachers need to be aware of as many various strategies as possible is that they will be able to better identify students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities, i.e. memory and auditory issues. If a student has some auditory problems - and it's not as simple as a little volume loss - he or she may have difficulty correctly sounding out words, or identifying specific sounds. Memory issues like retrieval can interfere with a student's pulling up the correct word to match a definition. Reading is a complex subject - many parts of the brain have to be working in concert for a student to pull it off easily.

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Reading Teacher - WI

[9/18/2013 8:59 AM EST](#)

The letter signed by the experts in response to Valerie Strauss' two articles earlier is "right on the money!" We have been using ideas that were developed by Kenneth Goodman and Marie Clay for way too many years. Many of our schools here in our state and in many other states have been unable to achieve an 85 to 90% proficiency in reading rate. Often we are able to bring about two-thirds of our children to reading proficiency. Why is this happening? As a Reading Teacher (grades K-12), former English teacher (grades 7-12) and private reading tutor trained in Orton-Gillingham, I have seen systematic, explicit instruction in early reading skills as highly effective when working with our struggling learners and also effective at providing the basic skills all readers need to continue to progress to higher levels in reading achievement. Now, of course, as our experts who signed the letter to Ms. Strauss attest, we must teach in all the areas recommended by the National Reading Panel Report along with motivating and exposing children to high-quality literature. It is disheartening as a teacher to watch so many children struggle when they do not receive instruction in the foundational skills of reading. As teachers we must ensure that all children can read and encode words in order to be successful readers and writers. It is not enough to just keep doing the same old, same old - time and time again - and then be surprised by the results. Our colleges have to start addressing the lack of reading proficiency in our schools and realize their accountability in preparing teachers to meet the needs of all students. Our children need to learn to read the words and the motivation to read and love of reading will follow! Let's all stand up and say that every child has a "right" to understand the alphabetic principle of the English

language. Too many of my fellow colleagues continue to follow the "gurus" as they call them or the experts who support "guess and check!"

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Yvonne Meyer

[9/18/2013 8:05 AM EST](#)

My son struggled through 6 years of elementary school, receiving the best Progressive/Whole Language/Reading Recovery instruction money could buy and by the end of Grade 5 was spelling at Grade 2 level.

His classroom teachers told me this was not a problem and that reading and spelling would 'click' when he was developmentally ready to read and spell at his appropriate Grade level.

I found a retired teacher who gave him direct, explicit and systematic instruction in synthetic phonics and after 12 hours of instruction, he was spelling at his Grade level.

He learnt more in 12 hours of direct, explicit and systematic instruction than he had in 6 years of classroom instruction from teachers who were indoctrinated to believe that giving children direct and explicit instruction made the teacher a bad person as well as a bad teacher.

In Australia, our current generation of elementary school teachers were themselves taught using Progressive/ Whole Language/Reading Recovery strategies and as a result, we have a generation of teachers who can't read, spell and write well.

University Schools and Faculties of Education who continue to promote non-evidence based strategies continue their Ivory Tower existence while teachers and students struggle to survive in the classroom. Its time to have a 'surge' in the Reading Wars to once and for all expose these charlatans for the damage they do.

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CherylWardWI

[9/18/2013 6:14 AM EST](#)



The clarion cry of appalling student reading outcomes and the focus on accountability for schools, districts, leaders and teachers should galvanize us all to collective action. Expose the Emperor without clothing- our schools of higher education and those that have made careers and personal fortunes propagating antiquated ideas, and suggesting that reading acquisition does not require a teacher with strong content knowledge and skills.

It is the tireless work of advocates all across the country, which are beginning to shine a bright bulb on dismal student reading and academic outcomes. Now, teachers, leaders, and administrators are beginning to pay attention. Most do not understand the complexities as they should but they must be urged to grapple with the fact they “don’t know what they don’t know”. It is time that we demand that they find out and improve this dreadful state of affairs.

I strongly support NCTQ for tackling this foundational civil rights issue. Without education, without reading mastery, far too American children, who grow up to be low literate adults, will not realize their potential, their dreams and will suffer psychologically and financially, and so will the country!

Reading instruction delivered by a well-trained individual will greatly enhance mastery of discrete foundational decoding skills.

Today, because we do not prepare or support our teachers tasked with providing children foundational reading skills instruction we must unite. We know that we can improve student outcomes by supporting the preparation and ongoing professional development of teachers and demand educational structures and programming that addresses the strengths and weaknesses of all children.

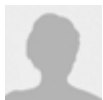
Support kids, support teachers (what teacher doesn't what their student to master reading?) by embracing the science of the reading brain and providing the leadership and structure they need!

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Candace Head-Dylla

[9/18/2013 5:26 AM EST](#)

After many years in the classroom as an English teacher, then reading teacher, then reading specialist, I can attest to the fact that what I learned about reading instruction was learned outside a university classroom. I learned directly from some of the names on this post, such as Louisa Moats and Marcia Henry. I voraciously read the works of almost every other name on this list. I am now a university professor myself, working to change this sad fact, and I very much appreciate the authors taking time to submit these comments. The NCTQ clearly had flawed methods, but what it was looking for in terms of reading instruction was very much on target. As a teacher who has always worked with underserved students, I know firsthand that teaching young children to decode well at early ages is a social justice issue. It allows them to build vocabulary, become good writers, and keep pace with their peers. These authors understand what it takes to do just that. I applaud their efforts, appreciate their leadership, and thank them for the information they have accumulated and shared over the years that helped me teach so many struggling students to read. I vow to work hard as a university professor to pass along their understanding to my own students. I look forward to the day when we all get on with the work and stop defending turf.

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E\_rose

[9/18/2013 2:16 AM EST](#)

"(the) council was promoting an old and narrow idea that direct instruction of phonics is the best way to teach reading and that other methods have little or no value."? Seems to me that the council was looking at comprehensive ways to ensure that ALL teachers would have the skills to teach All students. This requires the necessary array of tools to address all components of 5 components of reading not just phonics or comprehension. As a parent of a struggling reader I was forced to become an expert in teaching reading for my son's survival. As a parent I was amazed that there was so much scientifically validated research to demonstrate that we can teach 98% of kids to read. Yet, I was more amazed that teachers didn't have that knowledge or the skills needed to be effective in their job. I've heard it said that we don't know what we don't know - well - we know how to teach reading to ALL children. Let us all be about that.

It is time to pass the peace pipe and get on with what all students need to learn to read!

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aed3

[9/18/2013 7:48 AM EST](#)

I agree. Students are not uniform in in how they assemble the skills needed to learn how to read. Some need a lot of phonics drilling, and others need a more wholistic approach. The much-maligned Whole Language approach was designed to include phonics (that's why it was called WHOLE), but it somehow got lost along the way.

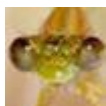
The warring factions should all agree that different children have different needs, and use whatever is appropriate. Sometimes I think kids learn to read in spite of our efforts rather than because of what we do.

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Steve Dykstra

9/18/2013 10:58 AM EST

Actually, Whole Language was developed to eliminate the need for phonics, which Goodman and Smith felt was a distraction from reading. But you are right, some children need a lot more phonics instruction than others to master than critical skill. But no student needs guessing.

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MrsCashton

[9/18/2013 1:13 AM EST](#)

My reason the wars continue. Because we keep holding onto the theories of reading, Constructivism from John Dewey. If we want kids to learn how to read, we have to stop riding on the theories/philosophies that dominate our educational system..We need to teach kids phonics in an explicit, direct, systematic, simultaneous, and cumulative approach, starting with teaching sounds correctly and moving into the intensiveness of our language. Reading will not nor will it ever improve until we get off of teaching kids reading by sight..There, I spoke my truth..

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jimmy24

[9/17/2013 9:40 PM EST](#)

A few thoughts on this piece: There are certain skills necessary but not sufficient needing to be in place for a child to become a successful reader. Oral language, working memory and phonological processing are a few necessary components. Of course the literature-based crowd never accepted this.

The term "Balanced Approach" to reading was a coined phrase used from the nineties by the non-scientific crowd. Since when has reading been out of balance?

Kaye Stripling, former HISD superintendent stated in the PEER Committee of Reading Houston ISD in 1996 we kill off half the kids by fourth grade.

I still remember a college professor telling me the reason African-American students failed to learn to read was the result of slavery!

Over the years I have seen progress in the using the terminology of scientific based reading instruction but little examples, knowledge or success on how to do it in the classroom.

Last but not least is the favorite statement from the Goodmans, Clays and other on what good readers do. They fail to mention forty plus percent of the kids never become good readers and most will be at a 4th-5th level in reading abilities. The educational system loves to blame the victim, the families, poverty, second-language learners, lack of money and so on.

Jimmy Kilpatrick  
jimmy@hipie.org

The colleges have not only refused to embrace the medical/scientific model they attack it as racists!