

The *Words Their Way*® Approach to Word Study and the Common Core State Standards

By Dr. Shane Templeton

Introduction

Words Their Way: Word Study in Action, Developmental Model is a developmentally based approach to word study—phonics, spelling, and vocabulary instruction. This approach reflects the research exploring the developmental nature of word knowledge—how awareness and understanding of word structure at the alphabetic, pattern, and meaning levels successively build upon one another. Students’ efficient, fluent, and meaningful engagement with text depends upon their understanding of the ways in which letters in printed words represent this information about language—its sounds, its structure, and its meaning.

Words Their Way is a foundational program that helps students develop those foundational skills targeted in the *Common Core State Standards (CCSS)*. Specifically, *Words Their Way* supports the CCSS’s Reading Foundational Skills and Language Standards in Grades K–5. The depth and breadth of word knowledge developed through this approach to word study also supports the *Common Core*’s emphasis on students’ reading more complex literary and informational texts.

Words Their Way is embedded in the reading and writing in which students are engaged; because of this, the approach supports the *Common Core*’s emphasis on “an integrated model of literacy” (p. 4).

How Does the Developmentally Grounded Model in *Words Their Way* Support the Foundational and Language Standards of the Common Core State Standards?

The importance of word knowledge is evident throughout the *Common Core State Standards*. It is a central aspect of the Reading Foundational Skills in grades K–5 as these skills relate to the decoding and recognition of words during reading. Word knowledge is a central aspect of the Language Standards in grades K–5 as these skills relate to the encoding or spelling of words in writing. (Spelling is classified in the CCSS as a convention of written language and is addressed in the *Language* standards.) The CCSS are explicit, however, about spelling knowledge being “inseparable” from reading and writing. Research in developmental word knowledge supports this interconnectedness: Spelling knowledge provides insight into the information children and older students use to *read* words as well as to *write* words (Templeton, 2011).



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The developmental research on which *Words Their Way* is grounded shows how learners become aware of and construct knowledge about the relationships among printed words, spoken language, and meaning (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2012; Berninger, Abbott, Nagy, & Carlisle, 2009). When we examine children’s writing, we see the evolution of this understanding and the types of information they are using to construct this understanding.

Emergent readers and writers are immersed in the forms and functions of print through their teachers’ modeling of both reading and writing, talking about print, and teaching about the letters of the alphabet. Over time, their writing increasingly reflects their awareness of the alphabet and how it can capture information about speech. The child who writes BBCUTMO for “Bye, bye, see you tomorrow,” for example, is matching up a letter with a syllable. As children begin to match beginning letters and sounds, they are becoming beginning readers and are moving into the *Letter Name-Alphabetic* stage of spelling knowledge.

Table 1: Reading Levels and Stages of Spelling Development

| BEGINNING READERS | | | TRANSITIONAL READERS | | | INTERMEDIATE READERS | | | ADVANCED READERS | | |
|------------------------|--------|------------|----------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------|-------------------|------|
| Letter Name-Alphabetic | | | Within Word Pattern | | | Syllables and Affixes | | | Derivational Relations | | |
| Early | Middle | Late | Early | Middle | Late | Early | Middle | Late | Early | Middle | Late |
| BD | BAD | <i>bed</i> | | | | SHOPING | <i>shopping</i> | | OPISITION | <i>opposition</i> | |
| FT | FOT | FLOT | FLOTE | <i>float</i> | | | PERAIDING | <i>parading</i> | CRITISIZE | <i>criticize</i> | |
| GF | GRIV | DRIV | DRIVE | FRITE | <i>fright</i> | | | | | ACCOMODATE | |
| | | | | | MARCHT | <i>marched</i> | | | IRELEVANT | | |
| | | | | | | | | | ALLEEDGE | | |
| | | | | | | | | | COMOTION | | |

Letter Name-Alphabetic learners, guided by print and their developing knowledge of beginning and ending sounds, become fully phonemically aware—able to identify and manipulate consonant and vowel sounds within syllables. These children develop the understanding of the alphabetic principle and the sequential, left-to-right matchup of letters and sounds. Table 1 presents common spellings that characterize this stage and subsequent stages of spelling development, together with the developmental reading levels these stages represent.

With continuing reading experiences and guided exploration of word structure, *Within Word Pattern* learners move beyond this linear, sequential expectation and develop insight into spelling-to-sound *patterns* in the spelling system—how groups of letters work together to represent sounds.

When these common patterns within single syllables are secure, students begin examining common syllable patterns in two-syllable words. *Syllables and Affixes* learners first explore the addition of inflectional endings to base words, then move to examination of syllable patterns, as illustrated in words such as *hotel* (V/CV) and *rabbit* (VC/CV). Students at this stage also begin to examine more systematically the morphological word-formation processes by which words are constructed using prefixes, suffixes, and base words.

Students discover the *meaning* layer of word structure as they explore in more depth and breadth the *morphology* of English. The key understanding that should develop at the *Derivational Relations* phase is that the meaning and spelling of meaningful word parts or *morphemes* remains constant across different but derivationally related words. Word study at this level is *truly generative* in that it builds on and expands knowledge of a wide vocabulary, including thousands of words of Greek and Latin origin.

In the CCSS, the instructional scope and sequence for reading and spelling skills presented across the grades follow in large part this developmental sequence (Ehri, 2005; Templeton & Bear, 1992; Templeton, 2011). In our instruction, we will look for what young children and older students “use but confuse” in their spelling of words rather than attempt to target what is absent in their spelling. In this way, we can be assured that they will better internalize and productively apply knowledge of spelling patterns.

What Is the Relationship Between Learning to Read Words and Learning to Spell Words?

By grades 4 and 5, the standards specify that students should “spell grade-appropriate words correctly.” While there will continue to be development in and consolidation of students’ spelling skills at these levels, how are words determined to be “grade appropriate”? The developmental model provides guidance in addressing this standard, and it has to do with the relationship between learning to *read* words accurately and learning to *spell* words correctly. The central insight from research into the development of word knowledge is that words and the patterns they represent should be frequently encountered in children’s reading before we expect children to master those words and patterns in their spelling. Spelling words should not be words the students have not seen before, such as new vocabulary. *Grade-appropriate* spelling words, therefore, are words that often have been introduced at a previous level in reading; this ensures that students will have encountered them often enough to now support their study of these words for the purpose of learning their patterns and their correct spelling.

The developmental nature of this relationship between learning to read words and learning to spell words is reflected in the CCSS. Table 2 represents this relationship in the CCSS between reading and spelling words across grades 1 through 6:

- For beginning readers in kindergarten and first grade, this relationship is quite close. As children learn about beginning, ending, and middle sounds in single syllable words, they develop an understanding of the *consonant-vowel-consonant* common pattern. As they progress, however, their ability to read words will run ahead of their ability to *spell* those same words correctly. The sequence of instruction in the “Phonics and Word Recognition” component of the Reading Foundational Skills addresses the need for students to apply their developing word knowledge in the *decoding* of words before they are expected to *spell* correctly words that include those patterns. They will be able to read many words with long vowel patterns, for example, while they are still beginning readers who spell alphabetically. Supported by context, their alphabetic-level word knowledge is sufficient to support their identification of words with more advanced spelling patterns.
- While most first graders in the second half of the year and second graders would not be able to spell most polysyllabic words correctly, their knowledge of both short- and long-vowel patterns in these words, together with contextual support,

helps them identify these types of words in their reading. This is why, for example, the signpost spelling skills at first and second grade address single-syllable words while the phonics and word recognition skills address two-syllable words. Notably, however, there are no expectations that children will correctly *spell* two-syllable words. Continued experience with such words through reading, coupled with the teacher’s decoding instruction, builds the foundation of word knowledge that moves children toward understanding, learning, and correctly spelling the words.

- At third grade, the spelling skills in the CCSS address the understandings of syllable patterns in two-syllable words. This knowledge, built upon understandings of within-word patterns in single-syllable words, supports the third-grade word recognition skill of decoding multisyllabic words. Again, however, there are no expectations that students will correctly *spell* three- or four-syllable words.

Table 2: Relationship between Spelling Skills and Phonics/Word Recognition Skills

| | Spelling Skills | Phonics and Word Recognition Skills |
|--------------|---|---|
| Kindergarten | Print concepts and phonological awareness understandings are presented as well as phonics/word recognition skills. These skills are all <i>developmentally</i> arrayed. | |
| Grade 1 | Conventional spelling for words with common spelling patterns | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Know the spelling-sound correspondences for common consonant digraphs. b. Decode regularly spelled one-syllable words. c. Know final -e and common vowel team conventions for representing long vowel sounds. d. Use knowledge that every syllable must have a vowel sound to determine the number of syllables in a printed word. e. Decode two-syllable words following basic patterns by breaking the words into syllables. f. Read words with inflectional endings. g. Recognize and read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words. |
| Grade 2 | Generalize learned spelling patterns when writing words (e.g., cage = badge; boy = boil) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Distinguish long and short vowels when reading regularly spelled one-syllable words. b. Know spelling-sound correspondences for additional common vowel teams. c. Decode regularly spelled two-syllable words with long vowels. d. Decode words with common prefixes and suffixes. e. Identify words with inconsistent but common spelling-sound correspondences. f. Recognize and read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words. |
| Grade 3 | Use conventional spelling for high-frequency and other studied words and for adding suffixes to base words (e.g., <i>sitting, smiled, cries, happiness</i>). Use spelling patterns and generalizations (e.g., word families, position-based spellings, syllable patterns, ending rules, meaningful word parts) in writing words. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify and know the meaning of the most common prefixes and derivational suffixes. b. Decode words with common Latin suffixes. c. Decode multisyllable words. d. Read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words. |
| Grade 4 | Spell grade-appropriate words correctly | a. Use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read accurately unfamiliar multisyllabic words in context and out of context. |
| Grade 5 | Spell grade-appropriate words correctly | a. Use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read accurately unfamiliar multisyllabic words in context and out of context. |
| Grade 6 | Spell correctly | |

How Does the Instructional Model in *Words Their Way* Develop the Foundational and Language Standards of the Common Core State Standards?

While the CCSS presents Foundational and Language skills for reading and writing in a developmental sequence, they do not suggest how to teach these skills. For guidance in this area, we must turn to the research in effective instruction of word knowledge. We know that the most effective instruction supports children's integration of knowledge across sound, spelling, and meaning (Ehri & McCormick, 2004; Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Effective instruction supports students' *general* knowledge of how words work: This is the type of knowledge learners apply when they are not sure how to spell a word, when they encounter an unfamiliar word in their reading and need to decode it, or when they encounter a brand-new word and need to determine its meaning. Effective instruction also supports students' *specific* knowledge of individual words: This is the type of knowledge that pertains to specific words, such as remembering the correct spelling of *clean* even though it could logically be spelled *cleen*.

We also know that instruction should be enjoyable and engaging. With respect to words, knowing that there is an understandable structure is empowering for students. The combination of both exploratory and explicit frameworks of the *Words Their Way* approach develops this enjoyment and engagement, and as a consequence, more efficient and long-term learning.

Teachers support *Emergent* children's concept development through comparing and contrasting objects and pictures, as well as children's beginning sound recognition. When children develop a concept of word in text and phonemic awareness, they will explore the letter-sound relationships within written words. Under the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher, the logic of the spelling system is revealed when students sort words into categories. Effective and engaging word study occurs in hands-on activities that reflect basic cognitive learning processes: Comparing and contrasting or categorizing word features and discovering similarities and differences within and between categories. During word study, words and pictures are sorted in routines that require children to examine, discriminate, and make critical judgments about speech sounds, spelling patterns, and meanings.

Letter Name-Alphabetic learners explore first the consistency of the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) short-vowel structure with simple beginning and ending consonants, as in Sort 25 (Mixed Vowel Word Families *-at, -ot, -it*). They then grow this understanding into CCVC structures, as in Sort 38 (Short *a, i* Words with Beginning Blends).

Within Word Pattern learners will be guided to the understanding of the role of position in determining spellings. The CCSS acknowledge this in Grade 2 with the spelling of the /j/ sound in *badge* and *cage* being determined by the vowel sound that precedes it (short vowel = *dge*; long vowel = *ge*; see Sort 40); and the spelling of the /oi/ diphthong being determined by where it occurs within a word (*oi* in the middle of a word; *oy* at the end of a single-syllable word; see Sort 30).

Syllables and Affixes learners, grounded in a firm understanding of spelling patterns within single-syllable words, apply this understanding to the spelling of two-syllable words. The CCSS acknowledge this development beginning in Grade 3 with the spelling signposts of first adding inflectional endings to base words (as in Sorts 3 and 5), and then moving to the exploration of syllable patterns (as in Sorts 12 and 16).

The CCSS address *morphology* in reading, spelling, and vocabulary development—prefixes, derivational suffixes, and roots of Greek and Latin origin. At the *Syllables and Affixes* and the *Derivational Relations* levels, students explore the breadth and depth of word formation processes. This develops *generative* vocabulary knowledge as well as spelling knowledge. Students must understand how affixes combine with and affect the meaning of the bases and roots with which they combine (see Sorts 47, 48 in *Syllables and Affixes*). Students also become aware of *spelling-meaning* relationships among words (Templeton, 2004). These are explored first through spelling-meaning families in base and derived words (see Sorts 7, 8 in *Derivational Relations*) and then through systematically addressing Greek and Latin roots and affixes (Sorts 18, 24).

How Does *Words Their Way* Support the Common Core’s Call for Differentiated Instruction—Particularly for Struggling Readers?

The CCSS acknowledge that not all students at each grade level will reach grade-level standards: “No set of grade-specific standards can fully reflect the great variety in abilities, needs, learning rates, and achievement levels of students in any given classroom” (CCSS, p. 6). The standards emphasize, therefore, that “Instruction should be differentiated.... The point is to teach students what they need to learn....to discern when particular children or activities warrant more or less attention” (CCSS, p. 15).

Traditionally, most children have entered first grade without full phonemic awareness and knowledge of all of the letters of the alphabet. The CCSS has set full phonemic awareness as well as manipulation of sounds as an expectation by the end of kindergarten. Phonological awareness—of numbers of syllables, onset-rime, and of individual phonemes and their manipulation—requires some time to develop in most children. Importantly, this awareness best develops in a context that includes texts that contain features about which the children are learning. The types of categorization activities in which the children will be engaged in the *Emergent-Early Letter Name* level are integrated with appropriate rhymes and texts. Children who have not attained these signposts by the end of kindergarten, therefore, will need the support of the *Emergent-Early Letter Name* materials in Grade 1.

By using students’ spellings as a guide, teachers can differentiate efficient, effective instruction in phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. As we move through the grades, it is common that the range of variability among students increases. Developmentally-appropriate differentiated instruction effectively accommodates this range, and *Words Their Way* provides powerful support for assessing and grouping appropriately.

The type of word study provided in *Words Their Way* also supports the Response to Intervention process. The combination of explicit and exploratory instruction and learning is effective for students who need intensive, often one-to-one intervention; these include students identified as being learning disabled in the area of literacy (Graham, Harris, & Chorzempa, 2002; Torgesen, 2004; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006).

Words Their Way Supports English Language Learners

The *Common Core State Standards* address expectations for English Language learners: “Each grade will include students who are still acquiring English. For those students, it is possible to meet the standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening without displaying native-like control of conventions and vocabulary” (CCSS, p. 6). This is a realistic observation, reflecting the understanding that word-level knowledge and skills at each grade level often, though not always, are not as fully developed as those of many native English-speaking students at the same grade level. Because the *Words Their Way* approach is developmentally-grounded, teachers are able to assess their English learning students’ knowledge of word structure and place them at the appropriate levels within the *Letter Name-Alphabetic*, *Within Word Pattern*, or *Syllables and Affixes* curriculum. They may also adjust the pace of instruction accordingly, taking more time with particular features and patterns as necessary (Bear, Helman, & Woessner, 2009; Helman & Bear, 2007; Helman, Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2012).

Conclusion

For the next several years the *Common Core State Standards* will guide efforts to “ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy” (CCSS, 2010, p. 3). Word knowledge plays a critical role in both the encoding and decoding of print and meaning. It is essential that students be guided to the understanding of the underlying nature and structure of the spelling system that is appropriate to their level of development. This understanding will in turn support their more fluent decoding of text and their more confident encoding during writing. Through its assessment, lessons, and instruction, *Words Their Way: Word Study in Action, Developmental Model* provides this guidance for both students and teachers.

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ADV: 978-0-328-71621-0

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