

The “Science of Reading” Multiverse



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Historical Context: Lou LaBrant (1947)

- ▶ Published in 1947 in *The Elementary English Review*, a flagship journal of the [National Council of Teachers of English](#) (NCTE) that [later](#) became *Language Arts*, "[Research in Language](#)" is one of the most cited pieces by [Lou LaBrant](#) in my scholarship and public writing about education and literacy.
- ▶ LaBrant served as president of NCTE in the 1950s, and along with being an active and influential literacy scholar, LaBrant was a practitioner over a staggering 65 years of teaching.

Historical Context: Lou LaBrant (1947)

LaBrant made two incisive claims in this article:

A brief consideration will indicate reasons for the considerable gap between the research currently available and the utilization of that research in school programs and methods. (p. 87)

It is not strange, in view of the extensive literature on language, that the teacher tends to fall back upon the textbook as authority, unmindful of the fact that the writer of the text may himself be ignorant of the basis for his study. (pp. 88-89)

LaBrant, L. (1947, January). Research in language. *Elementary English*, 24(1), 86-94.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41383425>

Historical Context: Lou LaBrant (1947)

- ▶ Having written an [educational biography of LaBrant](#) for my doctoral dissertation, I am vividly aware that LaBrant taught and wrote as a complex progressive who used the term "research" in broad Deweyan terms that included everything from gold-standard experimental research to the daily observations made by classroom teachers.
- ▶ I cite her because as a practitioner and scholar I also embrace a very complicated understanding of "research," "evidence," and the word of the moment, "science." I am also deeply skeptical of [textbooks and programs](#).

Historical Context: Lou LaBrant (1947)



Lou LaBrant
Photo courtesy of NCTE Archives.

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...**This is not the time for the teacher of any language to follow the line of least resistance**, to teach without the fullest possible knowledge of the implications of his medium. Before we, either as individuals or as a Council, experiment with methods of doing specific things or block out a curriculum, let us spend some time with the best scholars in the various fields of language study to discover what they know, what they believe uncertain and in need of study. Let us go to the best sources, and study the answers thoughtfully. (p. 94)

LaBrant, L. (1947, January). Research in language. *Elementary English*, 24(1), 86-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41383425>

The “Science of Reading”: A Brief Introduction

Since early 2018, the phrase “science of reading” has entered and often dominated media, public/parental, and political discourse around the teaching and learning of reading in the U.S.

Almost for as long—I discovered the movement a few months after it began—I have been waving a red flag, advocating for skepticism and extreme caution about that *discourse*, the media, public/parental, and political *rhetoric*. For that reason, I persist in placing the phrase in quote marks since I am specifically criticizing the discourse.


If anything, my criticism is having far too little impact on the consequences of the “science of reading” discourse that is driving many states to adopt new reading legislation. And on social media, I am routinely attacked, often quite aggressively, as a science denier and someone intent on hurting children (although I have been a life-long educator across five decades as both a K-12 classroom teacher and a college professor).

I am also often discredited and told that journalists, parents, and politicians understand my own field better than I do.

► Part of the problem with debating the "science of reading" movement is the term itself, one that has at least three different meanings, a multiverse if you will (although absent, darn it, Doctor Strange or Wanda).

► Before anyone can, or should, answer "Do you support/reject the 'science of reading'?" we must first clarify exactly what the term means; therefore, here, then, I want to detail the three ways the phrase currently exists since it entered mainstream use in the media during 2018.





"Science of Reading" as Media, Public/Parental, and Political Discourse

THE MOVEMENT

The SoR Movement

Beginning with Emily Hanford and then perpetuated by mainstream media (*Education Week* and the *New York Times*, notably), the "science of reading" is a narrative that claims teachers are not teaching students to read using the "science of reading" because teacher educators have failed to teach the "science of reading" in teacher prep programs. Concurrently, this discourse also blames low student reading achievement on the dominance of balanced literacy reading programs (often erroneously) since, as advocates claim, balance literacy is not grounded in the "science of reading." This version of the "science of reading" maintains that primarily (or even only) cognitive science research is the "science" that counts and that the "simple view" of reading is the one valid theory of reading supported by the "science of reading." [Note: This is the version of the "science of reading" that most of my scholarly and public writing challenges as misguided and harmful; see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).]



"Science of Reading" as Marketing and Branding

THE FIGHT FOR MARKET SHARE

The Fight for Market Share

Since the "science of reading" advocacy identified above has been extremely effective, states are adopting new reading legislation, some of which directly bans popular reading programs and then narrowly mandates the use of materials and programs that meet the narrow characterization above. This means education companies, especially ones focusing on literacy, have begun to brand and rebrand their materials as programs with the "science of reading."

FEATURED PROGRAM

LANGUAGE! Live

LANGUAGE! Live offers more for struggling readers than any other product. Proven foundational and advanced reading intervention. Peer-to-peer instruction. Literacy brain science. A captivating modern, digital platform for grades 5–12. All in one affordable solution. More is possible

[Explore LANGUAGE! Live](#)

MORE LITERACY PROGRAMS

The Science of Reading-aligned Programs

Literacy solutions guided by the Science of Reading pedagogy, the Structured Literacy approach, and explicit teaching of sound-letter relationships for effective reading instruction.

Voyager Passport

Grades K-5 blended literacy intervention

Reading Rangers

Grades K-5 online reading practice

[All Literacy Programs](#)**REWARDS**

Grades 4-12 print literacy program

Step Up To Writing

Grades K-12 writing program

LANGUAGE!

Grades 4-12 literacy intervention

Dyslexia**Reading Intervention**



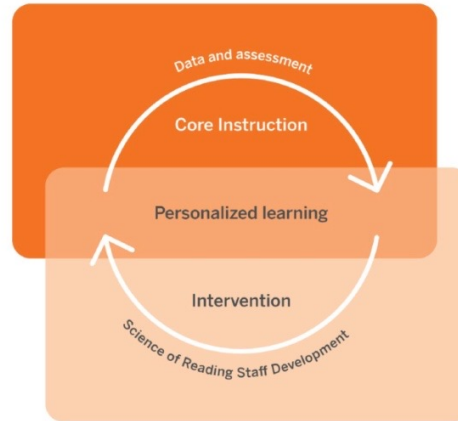
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Is your district eyeing a Science of Reading adoption but unclear where and how to start? Download our free roadmap now.

Your roadmap to the Science of Reading



AMPLIFY.COM/SORROADMAP

Free SOR roadmap

Get started on your Science of Reading journey

Download

The Fight for Market Share

- ▶ [Don't Buy SoR Propaganda APM Reports Is Selling](#)
- ▶ [Beware The Reading League](#)
- ▶ [NYT Blasts Calkins with "Science of Reading" propaganda](#)
- ▶ [Media and Political Misreading of Reading \(Again\): NYC Edition](#)
- ▶ [Don't Buy It: The Marketing Scam of MSM and the "Science of Reading"](#)

“Science of Reading” Media Advocacy Continues to Mislead

Here is something you will
never see

But here is an actual
headline

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READING

New research shows systematic phonics instruction less effective than a balanced approach to reading instruction in UK

Move to systematic phonics for all students in UK has not produced outcomes advocates promised.

April 23, 2021 by Emily Hanford and Christopher Peak

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OUR REPORTING | PODCASTS | ABOUT US

READING


New research shows controversial Reading Recovery program eventually had a negative impact on children

Initial gains from first-grade intervention didn't last and kids performed worse in third and fourth grade.

April 23, 2021 by Emily Hanford and Christopher Peak

The Fight for Market Share

As a market response to legislation, as well, some popular reading programs have responded to this version of the phrase. This marketing dynamic is very common in education. Many years ago, I attended a state-level literacy conference where Smokey Daniels spoke. Daniels is one of the top literacy scholars associated with the term "best practice"; however, he warned then that the term had been quickly co-opted by textbook publishers and that there was no mechanism for insuring that something labeled "best practice" was, in fact, demonstrating those concepts (the same problem exists for "whole language" and "balanced literacy").



"Science of Reading" as Shorthand for the Research Base for Teaching Reading

READING SCIENCE

Reading Science

This is what LaBrant referred to as the "research currently available" in 1947. The irony in this use of the phrase is that many people have been using some form of this phrase for a century—"research," "science," "evidence." And of course, scholars and practitioners are often aware of and practicing many aspects of that "science"—even though science, research, and evidence are all necessarily in a state of flux (and thus, LaBrant's nod to "currently available"). To be blunt, no reasonable or informed person would reject this use of the "science of reading." However, I must note that this use is almost entirely absent in public discourse; it remains used almost exclusively among researchers and some practitioners. Another irony, in fact, is that the first use of the phrase above is itself a gross mischaracterization of this complex and broad use.

Reading Science



Because of these different and often conflicting uses of the "science of reading," we are experiencing incredibly jumbled and even nonsensical outcomes such as teachers being required to attend training in programs that are not supported by research ([LETRS](#)) and states adopting reading legislation that implement practices that are not supported by research ([grade retention](#)).

Reading Science?

LETRS

“ A growing number of U.S. states have funded and encourage and/or require teachers to attend professional development using Moats’s commercial LETRS program, including Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Texas. This is despite the fact that an Institute of Education Sciences study of the LETRS intervention found almost no effects on teachers or student achievement (Garet et al., 2008). (p. S259)

— HOFFMAN, J.V., HIKIDA, M., & SAILORS, M. (2020). CONTESTING SCIENCE THAT SILENCES: AMPLIFYING EQUITY, AGENCY, AND DESIGN RESEARCH IN LITERACY TEACHER PREPARATION. *READING RESEARCH QUARTERLY*, 55(S1), S255-S266. [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1002/RRQ.353](https://doi.org/10.1002/RRQ.353)

Grade retention

U.S. Grade Retention 2017-2018

	Hispanic or Latino of any race		Black or African American		White	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
GRADE 3						
50 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	13,979	30.3	17,951	39	11,215	24.3
South Carolina	62	10.9	305	53.6	181	31.8
Mississippi	61	4	1084	71	357	23.4
GRADE 4						
50 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	4434	29.2	5657	37.3	4179	27.5
South Carolina	19	9.4	96	47.5	73	36.1
Mississippi	16	1.7	624	67.5	271	29.3

Reading Science



So, if you return to LaBrant's claims above, you may notice an eerie similarity between her valid assertions and the current "science of reading" discourse that is not credible even as it is highly effective.

The problem is that teaching, learning, and literacy are extremely complex human behaviors that resist simple labels or explanations—and also defy efforts to prescribe templates that will magically fulfill the urge for "all students must."

Alas, in this multiverse there is no magic.

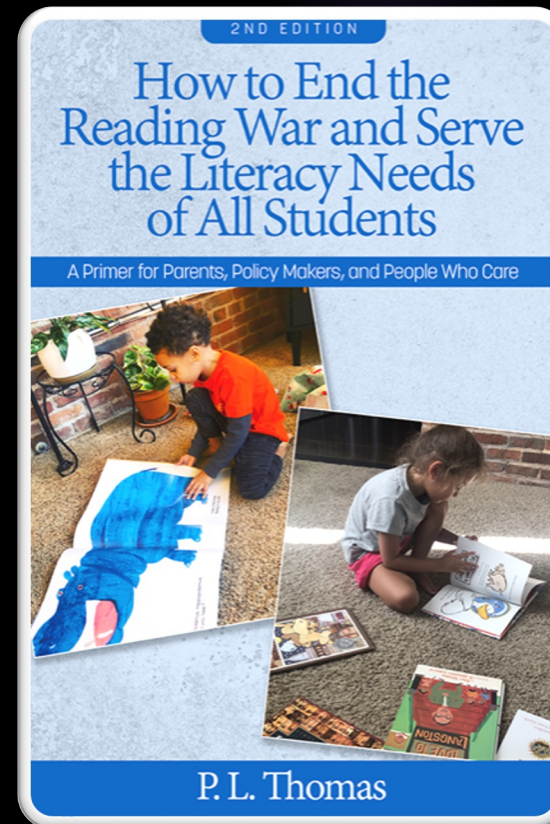
How to End the Reading War and Serve the Literacy Needs of All Students (2nd Ed)

The twenty-first century Reading War is, in fact, nothing new, but some of the details are unique to our current culture driven by social media. This volume seeks to examine the current Reading War in the context of the historical recurrence of public and political debates around student reading abilities and achievement.

Grounded in a media fascination with the "science of reading" and fueled by a rise in advocates for students with dyslexia, the current Reading War has resulted in some deeply troubling reading policy, grade retention and intensive phonics programs.

This primer for parents, policy makers, and people who care confronts some of the most compelling but misunderstood aspects of teaching reading in the U.S. while also offering a way toward ending the Reading War in order to serve all students, regardless of their needs.

The revised/expanded 2nd edition adds developments around the "science of reading," including the expanding impact on state policy and legislation as well as robust additions to the research base around teaching students to read.



The Science of Reading movement: The never-ending debate and the need for a different approach to reading instruction (NEPC Policy Brief)

Thomas, P.L. (2022). *The Science of Reading movement: The never-ending debate and the need for a different approach to reading instruction*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/science-of-reading>