

Decodable Texts: Definition, Purpose, and Effective Use at School and Home

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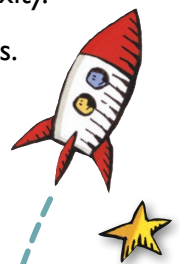
Decodable texts are but one type of print for children to read in classrooms. There are trade books crafted by authors, leveled texts that teachers use to gradually scaffold children's reading by presenting more complex content, letter/sound relationships, vocabulary, sentence structure, etc. as the gradient of text climbs upward, and predictable books that are necessary for our youngest readers who need a supportive repetitive text structure as an anchor when first learning to look at print. We cannot imagine a classroom without this variety of texts, as each serves a purpose in growing readers (Brown, 1999; Conradi-Smith & Hiebert, 2022; Duke, 2020; Strachan, 2014).

How teachers balance the text types in their classrooms depends on their students' ways of working with text. Some children may need more support for decoding and thus may need to spend more time reading decodable texts. Others, who are reading grade level texts accurately, fluently, and with comprehension may need very little time, or no time at all, with decodable texts. It should be up to the expert teacher to decide what texts to use and when (Conradi-Smith et al., 2022; Lammert et al., 2025; Parsons et al., 2025).

Regardless of the text type, texts used in classrooms for instructional purposes should be high-quality. Determining what is high-quality depends on the text type. For decodable texts, it is fair to say that literary merit that is present in the best children's trade book literature may not be present; however, decodable texts can and should be sensical and delightful for children to read (Birch et al., 2022; Blevins, 2025). This means the illustrations should be appealing and there should be a sense of story for fiction texts and interesting content for nonfiction texts (Brookshire et al., 2002; Moya Guijarro, 2011).

Red Rocket Readers publishes two of the text types mentioned above, leveled texts and decodable texts, because they understand that some young readers need both. They need decodable texts to learn how to look at print and practice skills that have been taught in the context of a continuous text that intentionally provides plenty of that practice. They also need leveled readers to apply those decoding skills in continuous texts that include additional challenges, such as complex phonics patterns, multisyllabic words, Tier 2 vocabulary words (Beck et al., 2013), and story and topic complexity.

In this white paper, we discuss the definition of decodable texts and their intended purposes. We also present research regarding the uses of decodable texts in the classroom and the impact they have on student learning when used effectively, as well as the attributes of a high-quality decodable book. We close with suggestions for how families might use decodable books with their children.



Understanding What Decodable Texts Are – And Are Not

Defined by the International Literacy Association (ILA, 2025) as “reading materials designed to prompt beginning readers to apply their increasing knowledge of how the alphabetic system works,” decodable texts have as their primary purpose to expose children to recently learned grapheme-phoneme patterns. These patterns are introduced in a structured, systematic progression and appear frequently in the text to increase students’ exposure to them so that they become automatic in recognizing them in future texts. Foorman and colleagues (2004) indicate that the percentage of previously taught phonics skill words hovers at around 80%.

Decodable texts should not be confused with leveled readers. Leveled readers often emphasize the use of context clues and/or repetition with the intent to help students build fluency and comprehension (Birch et al., 2022). They are also typically crafted to include natural language, unlike the “Primerese” style of writing in decodables (Goodman, 1965; Simons & Ammons, 1989) that occurs because of the truncated sentences that contain an unusual number of phonics skill words.

What Research Reveals About Using Decodable Texts

Cheatham and Allor (2012) and Mesmer (2000) assert that decodable texts are essential to children’s learning of phonics patterns and skills and that they are integral to a systematic phonics instructional program. They work best alongside a program that presents skills in a prescribed and sequential manner, ensuring that children are only practicing those skills that have previously been taught. Some claim that, because children are reading texts that control for the phonics skills they already know, children will feel successful reading the text, thereby increasing motivation and confidence (Murphy Odo, 2024; Pikulski, 1994).

Conversely, decodable texts have their weaknesses. Wyse and Hacking (2024) assert that scheme books, their phrase for decodable texts, sometimes have boring illustrations, contrived vocabulary, and nonsensical storylines. Additionally, they have long been criticized for their truncated sentence structures and unnatural sounding language, language the sounds forced due to the over-inclusion of specific phonics patterns (Birch et al., 2022), what Goodman (1989) called “Primerese”. This significant focus on skill words might also affect the comprehensibility of the text (Martens, 2016; McQuillan, 2022). The language structures frequently inherent in decodable texts can also cause difficulties for emergent bilingual students as decodable texts often do not allow the reader to rely on existing linguistic knowledge in both their languages to assist them in decoding the print and constructing meaning (Bialystok et al., 2012; Murphy Odo, 2024; Taboada Barber et al., 2021).

Characteristics of High-Quality Decodable Texts

While decodable texts serve different purposes than authentic literature (i.e., trade books), they are still placed in the hands of children, and thus, should be held to some of the same standards as high-quality children’s literature. First, the content should delight children with the inclusion of interesting stories, nonfiction topics that appeal to young readers, and visuals (e.g., illustrations and photographs) that are stimulating (Eng et al., 2020; Gambrell, 2011). Second, children should have opportunities to engage with literature that authentically represents diverse ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds, as such representation affirms identity, builds empathy, and promotes deeper understanding of others (Bishop, 1990; Fleer & Raban, 2005; Kelly & Moses, 2018; Leu et al., 2004; Mol & Bus, 2011; Muhammad, 2020; Serafini & Moses, 2014; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). Third, the text should be comprehensible. Decodable texts are so ubiquitously used in classrooms currently to the extent that they are replacing other text types (Elson et al., 2024; Lawson, 2024). Consequently, if children are going to be spending large amounts of time reading decodable texts, these texts should offer opportunities for literal and inferential comprehension (Blevins, 2025).

Decodable texts often contain many phonics skill words, to the extent that the text is difficult to comprehend (Simons & Ammon, 1989). There should be a balance between phonics skill words and other words so that the text sounds more natural and more like the child’s own language (Birch et al., 2022; Castles et al., 2018; Goodman, 1989; Murphy Odo, 2024). Additionally, short, choppy sentences can hinder the reader’s ability to use their knowledge of syntax to read the text (Cheatham & Allor, 2021; Goodman et al., 2002). This is especially true for emergent bilingual children and readers who experience difficulties with oral language and (Graesser et al., 2011; Mesmer et al., 2012). Models of reading processes (see Duke & Cartwright, 2021 and Gough & Turner, 1986) assert that, along with word recognition, the act of reading must encompass language comprehension.

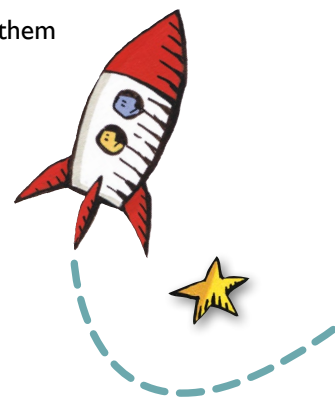
Recommendations for Using Decodable Texts at Home

- 1) Be sure your child is the one holding the book and doing the reading. You are there to support and guide when needed.
- 2) Introduce the text. Look at the picture on the cover. Invite your child to look through the illustrations/photos and talk about them. As you browse through the pictures, talk about what the characters are doing if the book is fiction and use the characters' names. If the book is nonfiction, talk about the topic and what the child knows about it as well as other words in the book that are important to the text.
- 3) Discuss any words that your child might not know the meaning of.
- 4) Talk to your child about the phonics pattern or patterns that are the focus of the book and show them an example by writing a word or two from the text on a piece of paper or small dry-erase board. Underline the phonics pattern. Invite them to find another word or two with this same phonics pattern in the text. Say the word, have them repeat it, find it, and say it while running their finger under the word. Have them frame the phonics pattern in the word with their index fingers in the book.
- 5) Invite your child to read the book aloud. Because the text is decodable and because it should be one where most of the new information is in the newest phonics skill presented, your child should be able to read the text out loud so that you can listen in. If your child is hesitant, you can try reading the book together or you can read the book while your child points to the words. If your child feels confident after the first reading, ask them to try reading it on their own.
- 6) If your child comes across a tricky word, prompt them by saying one of these prompts:
"Run your finger under the word and say its parts."
"Find a part you know with your finger."
"Say the sounds of the letters and then put them together."
"Look for parts you know."
"Try other sounds for the letters."

After you have helped them do these things, say:
"Read the sentence again with the word. Does it make sense?"

If yes, say, "Keep reading." If no, say, "Go back and try again" and try one or more of the prompts above.
- 7) After your child reads the book, talk about it. You can ask questions and make statements about the book but keep the conversation natural and enjoyable for your child. After reading, talk about the book. If it is fiction, discuss the characters and the story. You might say:
"What did you think about that story?"
"I thought ____ was clever when she..."
"The ending was something else! What did you think?"

If it is nonfiction, discuss new things learned. You might say:
"Wow! I can't believe that..."
"What surprised you about ____?"
"I think I'd like to learn more about _____. Would you?"
- 8) Ask your child to "collect" the words that contain the phonics pattern they are working on by having them write the words on a piece of paper or small dry-erase board. Have your child underline the phonics pattern. Then, ask your child to say each word while running their finger under the word at the same time. Use magnetic letters or letter tiles to make the words, showing your child how you can change the letters to make new words with the new phonics pattern.



Final Thoughts

Children deserve high-quality texts, and decodable texts are no exception. Even though decodable texts are written with the main purpose of presenting specific letter-sound correspondences and phonics skills, they should appeal to children through their illustrations, stories, topics, and use of language. Additionally, publishers of decodable texts should pay particular attention to the wide representation of people so that children can see themselves and others in texts. It is through books such as these that children will learn to read and learn to love reading.

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