

Improving Literacy Brief

FEATURES OF STRUCTURED LITERACY INSTRUCTION

DEFINING STRUCTURED LITERACY

Structured Literacy is an approach to reading instruction that explicitly teaches systematic word-identification and decoding strategies. It is informed by the Science of Reading. Structured Literacy is most effective when instruction in the six elements is integrated appropriately to emphasize their relationship in our language system. All six elements work together and are important to read, write, listen, and speak successfully. The phrase Structured Literacy was first coined by the International Dyslexia Association.

KEY FEATURES OF STRUCTURED LITERACY

There are four key features to a Structured Literacy approach:

1. **EVIDENCE-BASED** A Structured Literacy approach includes instruction in six evidence-based elements. These elements – phonology, sound-symbol association, syllables, morphology, syntax, and semantics – work together to provide students with the tools they need to learn to read.
2. **DIAGNOSTIC** Structured Literacy must be tailored to meet each student's needs. The instruction is based on careful and continuous assessment. The content presented must be mastered to the degree of automaticity. For example, using assessment data as evidence of student proficiency with essential knowledge, understanding, and skill in the elements; providing opportunities for additional instruction or practice when assessment results indicate

The 6 Evidence-based Elements of Structured Literacy

Phonology: the study of sounds in spoken words

Sound-symbol association (orthography): how to map sounds (*phonemes*) to letters (*graphemes*)

Syllables: knowing the types of syllables and how to divide words into syllables

Morphology: the study of base words and affixes (*prefixes and suffixes*)

Syntax: understanding the grammatical order of words (*like sentence structure*)

Semantics: understanding the meaning of words and sentences



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that need; and providing opportunities to advance or extend knowledge when assessment results indicate mastery.

3. **SYSTEMATIC** Structured Literacy instruction follows the logical order of language. For each element, the teaching sequence begins with the easiest and most basic concepts and progresses methodically to the more difficult. It is okay to teach more than one element at a time or integrate the elements in instruction. Systematic is a feature of time. For example, connecting a series of related lessons over time, a set of simple to complex instructional tasks, moving from explicit to implicit instruction as students demonstrate proficiency, and incorporating cumulative review of skills and processes previously learned with new learning.
4. **EXPLICIT** Structured Literacy teaching requires direct teaching of concepts, skills, and processes with a fast pace of student-teacher interaction to keep students engaged. It is not assumed that students will naturally deduce these concepts on their own. Instruction is delivered in an explicit manner. For example, setting the purpose for the instruction; making connections to previously learned material; and gradually releasing responsibility to students through the "I do, we do, you do" process. This means introducing concepts, skills, and processes in a direct manner with modeling, providing guided practice with students with immediate corrective feedback, and having students independently practice while continuing to monitor their progress and reteaching when necessary.

Teachers who employ Structured Literacy ensure learning tasks align with the knowledge, understanding, and skill in instruction; all students reason and work at high levels; and all students have equally engaging and interesting learning tasks.

TIPS:

To engage students, gain their attention before initiating instruction, pace the lesson appropriately to hold attention, maintain close proximity to students, transition quickly between tasks, and intervene with off-task students to redirect their focus.

If students experience difficulty with independent application, revert to guided practice with the teacher working through tasks with students at the same time, step-by-step, and providing corrective feedback. Provide opportunities for practice after each step of instruction, and provide extra practice based on accuracy of student responses.



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If guided practice is breaking down, revert to teacher explanation and modeling. Use explicit language in the demonstration of skills, speak clearly and make eye contact with students while modeling skills, and continue to model as needed—once is often not enough.

Engage students in meaningful interactions with language during instruction by providing and eliciting background information, emphasizing the distinctive features of new concepts, making relationships among concepts overt, engaging students in discussion about new concepts, and elaborating on student responses.

Adjust task difficulty by moving from simple to more complex tasks, breaking down tasks into smaller steps, or going back to the simpler task, firming up, and then moving forward.

SUGGESTED CITATION

National Center on Improving Literacy. (2024). *Features of Structured Literacy Instruction*. <https://www.improvingliteracy.org/resource/features-of-structured-literacy-instruction>

REFERENCES

Cowen, C.D. (2016). *What is Structured Literacy?* International Dyslexia Association. <https://dyslexiaida.org/what-is-structured-literacy/>



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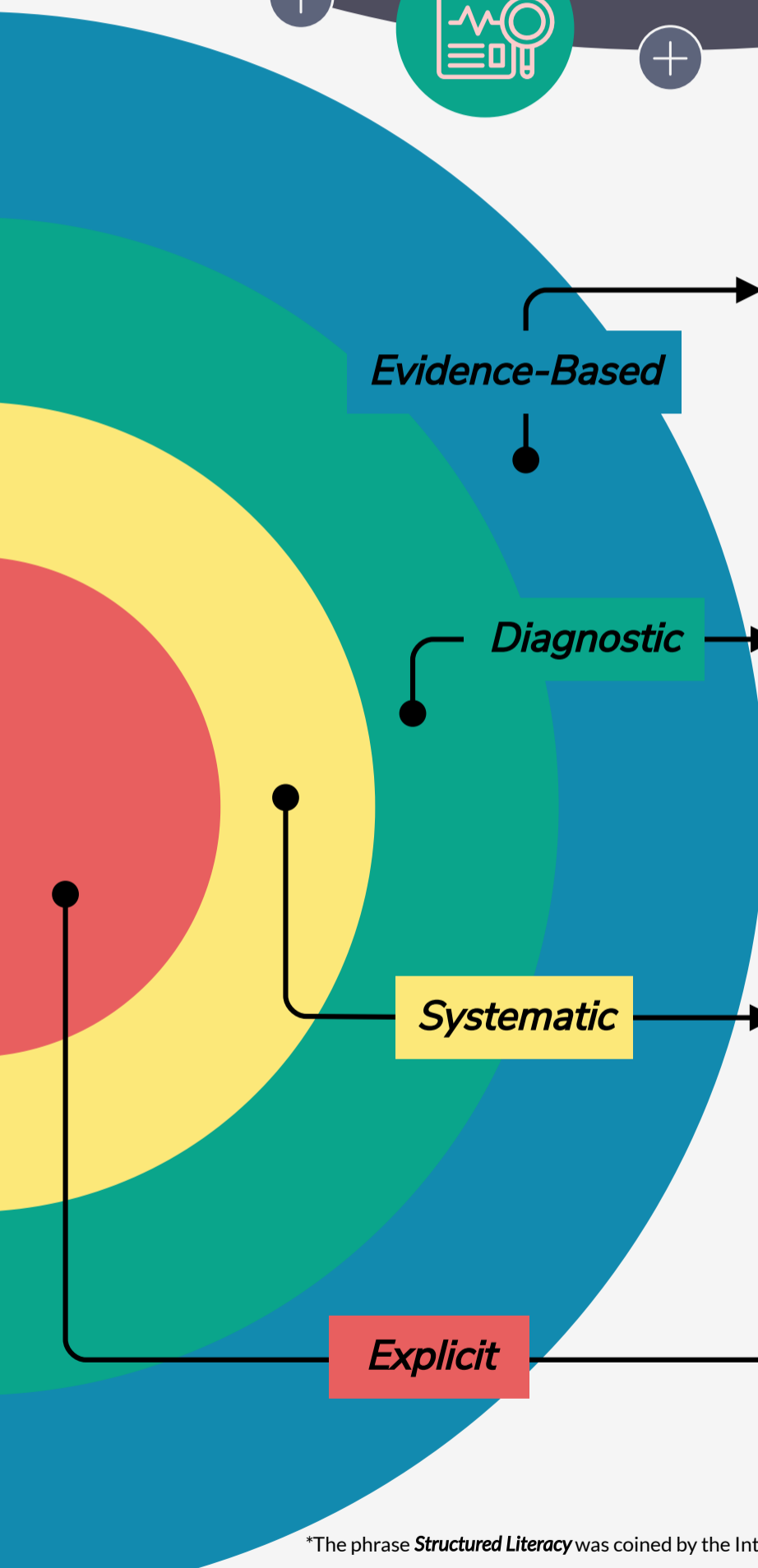
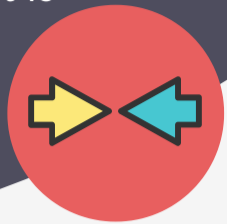
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Structured Literacy Instruction

FEATURES

Structured Literacy* is an approach to reading instruction that explicitly teaches systematic word-identification and decoding strategies. It is informed by the **Science of Reading**. Structured Literacy is most effective when instruction in the six elements is integrated appropriately.



Evidence-Based

A Structured Literacy approach includes instruction in six evidence-based elements. These elements – phonology, sound-symbol association, syllables, morphology, syntax, and semantics – work together to provide students with the tools they need to learn to read.

Diagnostic

Structured Literacy instruction is individualized to meet each student's needs. The instruction is based on careful and continuous assessment. The content presented must be mastered to the degree of automaticity.

Systematic

For each element, the teaching sequence begins with the easiest and most basic concepts and progresses methodically to the more difficult. It is okay to teach more than one element at a time or integrate the elements in instruction.

Explicit

Structured Literacy teaching requires direct teaching of concepts with a fast pace of student-teacher interaction to keep students engaged. It is not assumed that students will naturally deduce these concepts on their own.

*The phrase **Structured Literacy** was coined by the International Dyslexia Association.