

Reading Research and the Sonday System

How the Sonday System aligns with Structured Literacy and the Orton Gillingham approach and empowers schools to implement research-based reading strategies



National Reading Panel Report

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) conducted a meta-analysis of over 2500 reading studies conducted since 1966. The findings were published in the National Reading Panel: Report of the Subgroups (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Based on this analysis, the panel identified five essential elements of instruction necessary for successful reading programs, especially for struggling students. These elements are **phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary** and **comprehension**. Known as the Big 5 or 5 Pillars of Early Literacy, these components are crucial for designing and assessing literacy programs and are recognized by the International Dyslexia Association and the Orton-Gillingham Academy.

The Souday System has been successful because its materials and trainings are meticulously designed to incorporate the essential components of reading as outlined in the NRP's 2000 report. For instance, phonological awareness is necessary for children to be able to manipulate phonemes used in rhyming, segmenting, and blending words—a skill that must become automatic for effective reading comprehension. **Phonological awareness** can be nurtured by engaging children in activities like listening games, rhyming games, syllable clapping, and sentence segmentation. These activities engage children in verbal language play, helping to build the foundation for mapping sounds to letters and words and for understanding the purpose and form of print (Fernandez-Fein & Baker, 1997; Adams et al., 1988).

Imagine Souday System training consultants ensure that phonological awareness is taught with fidelity to reading research by showing teachers how to use the strategies from the instructional materials to directly teach it to students. This includes developing phonological listening skills, recognizing onset sounds and rimes, segmenting and blending sounds into words, breaking sentences into words and words into syllables and sounds, and beginning to manipulate speech sounds. Souday System materials include flash cards, songs, listening activities, and games to help students master these skills.

Systematic synthetic **phonics** instruction was shown by the NRP to significantly enhance reading growth (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). In Imagine Souday System products, activities are provided to teach students the sound-symbol correspondences needed for basic word reading. Through the structured and systematic use of tools in the Souday System such as flash cards, word lists, word games, phrase and sentence reading, and short stories, teachers are able to help students learn to effectively blend phonemes and letters, master the sound-symbol relationships needed for basic reading, and apply effective word reading strategies to unfamiliar words and non-phonetic words.

The system incorporates a systematic spelling component throughout the program, enabling students to routinely practice spelling the words they read. This reading-spelling connection is crucial because teaching reading and spelling together accelerates progress, enhances learning security, and transforms learners into both readers and writers. The program offers opportunities for kinesthetic/tactile practice through tracing and writing, providing immediate diagnostic information about which sounds, rules and concepts have been mastered. This intentional integration of spelling and reading reinforces the reading-writing connection, improves students' spelling proficiency, and boosts their confidence in writing. Additionally, reading phrases, sentences, and stories allows students to apply their phonics skills

in meaningful contexts rather than relying solely on isolated word reading. Teachers can also incorporate the materials into word walls, pocket charts, or other language-based strategies already in use within their school program.

For reading to be meaningful, children must be able to read fluently. Automaticity is crucial for later reading comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). In the Souday System, teachers are trained to incorporate **fluency** into instruction through various methods, including Rapid Naming, single word reading, sentence reading, and repeated oral reading of text. Fluency is introduced systematically, starting with automaticity exercises (Rapid Naming), which may involve simple shapes, colors, numbers, letter names, and letter sounds, especially in early literacy instruction (Souday System Let's Play Learn and Essentials K).

Students begin fluency practice for sounds and words in Souday System 1 or Souday System Essentials 1. Beginning in Level 5 of Souday System 2, teachers use repeated oral reading to practice and monitor reading fluency. Additionally, teachers are trained to use the Mastery Checks for Reading and Spelling in Souday Systems 1 and 2, which are incorporated after every third level of instruction as an in-classroom benchmark or progress monitoring tool. Students engage in guided reading, choral reading, partner reading, and monitored oral reading of controlled texts and leveled readers to build success and ensure mastery. In order to build fluency, automaticity skill drills are integrated into the program.

Students need to be able to understand the **vocabulary** they read to derive meaning from the text. Research indicates that students learn vocabulary best through repeated exposures to new words (Daniels, 1994, 1996) and when these words are learned in appropriate contexts (Beck et al., 1998; Dole et al., 1995). While the Souday System is primarily a phonics program, it incorporates essential elements of vocabulary instruction that align with its program goals. Direct methods of teaching vocabulary in the Souday System include exploring word meanings through prefixes, roots, suffixes, and understanding of language origins, such as Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon, and Germanic, especially in Souday System 2 and Essentials 4-5. The program also reinforces vocabulary concepts like synonyms, antonyms, homophones, and semantic relationships through its Science of Reading component in Souday System 1 and Souday System 2.

Finally, reading curricula should include robust **comprehension** strategies to help students become independent readers. The Souday System incorporates comprehension activities within its Science of Reading component in Souday System 1 and Souday System 2. These activities include content and critical thinking questions, prediction exercises, and chronological sequencing. Additionally, Activity Guides for Souday System 1 and Souday System 2 Readers, which align with both Souday System 1 and 2 and Essentials 1-3, provide comprehension exercises, allowing for comprehension practice on longer texts.

The Imagine Souday System methods and materials are designed to support teachers in effectively implementing strategies that help to bring students to grade level, focusing on phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. The methods are based on Orton-Gillingham instruction principles that have been well documented over time in raising student achievement.

The Orton-Gillingham Approach

The Orton-Gillingham Approach to teaching reading, in particular to struggling readers, is characterized by its use of multisensory methods that involve spelling, saying, reading, writing, and tracing words, as well as breaking down English spelling rules into manageable phonic patterns. Programs following this approach typically use patterns and rules initially described by Samuel Orton and methods pioneered by Anna Gillingham and Bessie Stillman in their manual *Remedial Training for Children with Specific Disability in Reading, Spelling and Penmanship* (also known as *The Gillingham Manual*). While there is no single way to teach using Orton-Gillingham methods, most Orton-Gillingham programs are intensive phonics curricula that require extensive training and preparation time.

Over the past 70 years, numerous research studies have evaluated the Orton-Gillingham method. The NRP cited studies from 1940, 1956, 1969, 1979 and 1984 and identified Orton-Gillingham as one of the effective methodologies for addressing the needs of struggling students (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Additional studies on Orton-Gillingham include those by Silberberg et al. (1973), Vickery et al. (1987), Foorman et al. (1997), Oakland et al. (1998), Torgesen et al. (1999), Ritchev & Goeke (2006), and Stevens et al. (2021).

Arlene Sondag, the author of the Sondag System, is a Founding Fellow and the first president of the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators, the only credentialing organization for Orton-Gillingham. She was also a founding member and instructor at Orton-Gillingham of Minnesota, an International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council accredited Orton-Gillingham teacher training program. Arlene served on the Advisory Board of the 32nd Degree Masons during the development and implementation of the Learning Center concept in ten states. She has held the position of Vice President of the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and served on the Advisory Board of IDA-Upper Midwest Branch. Additionally, she has been a member of the Board of Directors of Learning Disabilities of Minnesota and the Minnesota Adult Literacy Coalition. Arlene has taught as an adjunct professor at Hamline University and Fairleigh Dickinson University, both leaders in Orton-Gillingham instruction training. In recognition of her contributions, the International Dyslexia Association awarded her the Margaret Byrd Rawson Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009.

Arlene has dedicated over 50 years to tutoring students, consulting with schools, and teaching Orton-Gillingham courses. In her early teaching years, she observed that even competent teachers and tutors struggled to transition from one-on-one or small group interventions to classroom settings. Teachers often lacked time to develop learning plans and create the curricula needed for struggling readers. To address this, Arlene, in collaboration with Winsor Learning (now Imagine Sondag System, part of Imagine Learning LLC), developed the Sondag System, a systematic, explicit, sequential, and cumulative multisensory language instruction program that helps cement student learning into long-term memory. The Sondag System eliminates lengthy lesson planning, allowing teachers to focus on instruction. Its easy-to-use lesson plans reduce initial training requirements, enabling teachers to deliver quality instruction tailored to the needs of struggling readers immediately, even as they continue their own professional development.

In the most recent edition of *The Gillingham Manual* (1997), Gillingham and Stillman note that skilled educators can introduce some variation to the order in which phonics concepts are taught, but the methodology for teaching is clearly described and should be performed with fidelity for best results. The

Sonday System adheres closely to this method. For instance, Gillingham and Stillman emphasize the importance of “drill cards” with phonograms on the front and key words on the back, which should be divided into those taught and those not yet taught. The Sonday System uses Sound Cards with key words on the back and provides explicit instructions on how to build the deck as each new sound is introduced.

The methodology for explicitly teaching each new phonogram is as follows in the two programs:

“The card is exposed and the name and sound of the phonogram are clearly pronounced by the teacher and repeated by the pupil. [...] The letter is carefully made by the teacher and its form, orientation, etc., explained. It is then traced by the pupil over the teacher’s lines, and copied, and written from memory, and written again with eyes averted while the teacher watches closely.” (Gillingham and Stillman, 1997)

“Show the card and say the sound. Student repeats the sound while tracing it on a desk or table and again while writing it on paper. Student reads words from the Word Book, p. 48.” (Sonday System 1 Learning Plan Book, 2024)

Gillingham and Stillman also describe having students read printed word lists that include only known phonograms. The Sonday System Word Book provides such lists for every lesson of Sonday Systems 1 and 2, and digital slides of word lists fill this role in Sonday System Essentials. They discuss dictating sounds and having students write possible spellings, as well as showing known cards and asking students to pronounce the phonogram, both of which are incorporated explicitly into the review steps of each Sonday System Lesson (Steps 1 and 2).

The Sonday System also broadly follows the order of phonogram introduction laid out by Gillingham and Stillman. In all systems, instruction starts by teaching students only one symbol per sound and one sound per symbol until students have mastered the concept of English as a phonetic language. Only then are multiple spellings of the same sounds and other more advanced concepts introduced. The Sonday System begins by teaching all single consonant spellings and sounds so that, once vowels are introduced, as many new words as possible can be formed from known sounds. It follows the Gillingham Manual in beginning with the short vowels a and i and creating simple CVC words by building them out of cards with known sounds before introducing other vowel sounds. Both systems also introduce all short vowels before introducing doubled consonants (the fszl rule), blends, VCe, and multisyllabic words.

The Orton-Gillingham approach, due to its continued success in improving reading outcomes for struggling readers, has been frequently adapted into different programs. The Sonday System’s adaptation of this approach is systematic and scientific, based on years of the author’s experience teaching students with dyslexia, and laid out in explicit units that require little preparation from instructors, making it an ideal way to implement Orton-Gillingham methods with minimal training and maximal results.

Structured Literacy and the Sonday System

Structured Literacy is a term created by the International Dyslexia Association (originally known as the Orton Society) in 2016 to unify research-based approaches to reading instruction. Structured Literacy is effective for teaching students with dyslexia, because they learn systematic strategies for decoding and identifying words (International Dyslexia Association, Structured Literacy). The key elements that work together to build literacy are phonology, sound-symbol association, syllable structure, morphology, syntax,

and semantics. Three key principles guide how these elements should be taught: instruction needs to be **systematic and cumulative, explicit, and diagnostic** (Cowen, 2016).

Structured Literacy is based on the cumulative reading research and science of the past decades and is built on the foundation of the Orton-Gillingham approach to phonics-based, **systematic, explicit, multisensory** instruction (Spear-Swerling, 2018). The Souday System follows these Structured Literacy methods. The following is an explanation of each of the main principles of Structured Literacy and how the Souday System exemplifies these principles.

Systematic and Cumulative: *The organization of material follows the logical order of language. The sequence begins with the easiest and most basic concepts and elements and progresses methodically to the more difficult. Each step is based on concepts previously learned.*

In the Souday System, skills are introduced from simple to complex and each lesson builds on previous learning. The Souday System aligns with Orton-Gillingham's presentation of sounds, concepts, and elements of the English language. The most common sounds are introduced first. Concepts spiral throughout subsequent lessons and are reviewed throughout the product to strengthen mastery. Each lesson contains the following essential elements: 1) A review of what has been previously taught. 2) The introduction of new material. 3) Practice with connected text.

Explicit: *Instruction requires direct teaching of concepts with continuous student-teacher interaction and does not assume students will deduce concepts.*

The Souday System 1 and 2 curricula are built to be taught face-to-face in small groups. Lesson plans ensure that effective multisensory instruction can be taught the same way by different teachers. The lessons guide the teacher to directly teach a sound or concept and reinforce it with tracing to strengthen neural pathways. Students then practice reading and spelling words using the sound or concept. Reading and spelling errors are addressed at the moment they occur, with multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery. Lessons contain explicit instructions for teachers, thus limiting the need for improvisation and improving consistency of instruction across settings. Souday System Essentials adapts this successful model to be used in whole-class settings.

Diagnostic: *Teachers must be adept at individualizing instruction (even within groups) based on careful and continuous assessment, both informal (e.g., using observation) and formal (e.g., using standardized measures). Content must be mastered to the degree of automaticity needed to free attention and cognitive resources for comprehension and oral/written expression.*

In the Souday System, direct instruction ensures that errors are identified and corrected during a lesson. The lesson structure promotes continuous student-teacher interaction. Instructions are consistent by design so both students and teachers are familiar with how the lesson is taught. This allows the teacher to focus more on students, differentiating instruction and reinforcing skills not yet mastered. Errors are identified and addressed at the table, enhancing diagnostic and data-driven decisions.

Mastery Checks for Reading and Spelling are found after every third level to assess proficiency in Souday Systems 1 and 2. Mastery Checks for Spelling are found about every five lessons in Souday System Essentials. These checks allow a teacher to quickly identify a student's proficiency in fluency, decoding, and spelling. A plan can be prescribed based on these data results.

The Sonday System Assessments book for Sonday Systems 1 and 2 contains multiple assessments, including a placement test to pinpoint where instruction should begin as well as pre- and post-tests to document growth over a set period of time. The Sonday System Pre-Reading Survey assessment checks students' ability to hear and process sound. This assessment can be used to identify students who are ready for phonics instruction as well as determining if these skills are strong enough to begin learning to read.

Sequential: *Instruction is scaffolded and begins with teaching of the simplest, most basic language concepts and elements, then progresses systematically to more difficult and complex concepts and elements. Instruction in every lesson moves from teaching of skills to functional use and application of skills. New concepts are related to previously taught concepts, skills, and information—and presented in anticipation of future learning.*

In the Sonday System, instruction meets students at their current level and progresses as they develop. Concepts introduced follow the Orton-Gillingham scope and sequence. The first four steps in every lesson review previously taught material, requiring students to read and spell sounds, then to read words and practice fluency. Step 5 introduces new content for students to read and spell. In Sonday Systems 1 and 2, an additional Step 6 (one-third of the lesson time) focuses on phrases, sentences, and connected text to support reading fluency and comprehension.

Multisensory: *Multisensory instruction purposefully integrates and stimulates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-motor pathways to support memory and learning of both oral and written language skills.*

Sonday System lessons direct students to see, hear, and feel content simultaneously. Two multisensory strategies are the hallmark of the Sonday System: tracing and Touch Spelling. When reading a difficult word, students trace the letters while saying the letter sounds, then blend the sounds together to read the word. Touch Spelling addresses spelling errors. Students identify the sounds within the word using their fingers to represent each sound, or phoneme. Touch Spelling is a highly effective multisensory strategy for segmenting and blending. When these strategies are utilized, content is learned faster and is more secure.

Conclusion

The Sonday System prides itself on its foundations in scientific methods for reading instruction that have been proved time and time again to be effective, as well as in theoretical models that are widely supported in literacy research, including the recommendations of the NRP report, the Orton-Gillingham approach, and Structured Literacy as supported by the IDA. The author, Arlene Sonday, has credentials spanning decades and including both personal experience tutoring struggling readers and recognition from the Orton-Gillingham Academy and the IDA. Imagine Sonday System continues to follow current research in literacy education and to expand its offerings, but the core methodology of the program has not changed in over two decades and continues to be supported by current reading science.

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