

HOW TO PAIR DECODABLE TEXTS WITH LEVELED BOOKS

by Michèle Dufresne

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Decodable books provide students with valuable opportunities to practice new phonics skills and build on previous knowledge. Multiple studies demonstrate that students benefit from opportunities to practice new phonics skills by reading text that includes the skills they have just learned (Blevins, 2016; Duke & Mesmer, 2019; Ehri, 2020).

But decodable books should not be the only type of text early readers encounter.

Due to the constraints of writing such tightly controlled text, decodable books are limited in what kinds of stories and language they can feature. Leveled books can help bridge these gaps by offering richer narratives and vocabulary to enhance students' language exposure.

That's why I suggest using both decodable books *and* leveled books in your reading lessons to develop well-rounded readers. With this approach, you can be sure that your students are receiving instruction and practice with diverse books to meet their literacy needs.

DECODABLE TEXT	LEVELED TEXT
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Text difficulty determined by:<ul style="list-style-type: none">Previously taught phonics skillsPhonics skills currently being taughtSight wordsSpotlight is on the phonic elementPreviously taught phonic elements are purposely placed in the textHighly controlled text	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Text difficulty determined by:<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sight WordsVocabularySentence length and complexityText structureContent and themeBuilds new vocabularyDeepens comprehensionMore natural language structureIncludes phonics patterns students may not have learned

The Benefits of Pairing Texts

Research supports providing students with diverse reading material for the acquisition of reading skills. Children are best served when they read a combination of text types (Pugh & Hiebert, 2023). All students need daily opportunities to read and discuss complex text that is **engaging and authentic**, which provides development in academic language and knowledge about the world (Shanahan et al., 2010).

Students benefit from frequent opportunities to read and discuss a variety of texts (Duke et al., 2021). Reading diverse texts builds students':

- Vocabulary
- Fluency
- Comprehension
- Background knowledge

Experts agree: Literacy researcher [Tim Shanahan says](#), "It is so important that we not overly constrain the decodability of the texts that young children read, and why I recommend using a combination of both highly decodable texts and controlled vocabulary readers." Champion of phonics [Wiley Blevins says](#), "At least half of phonics should be applying the skills to authentic reading and writing."

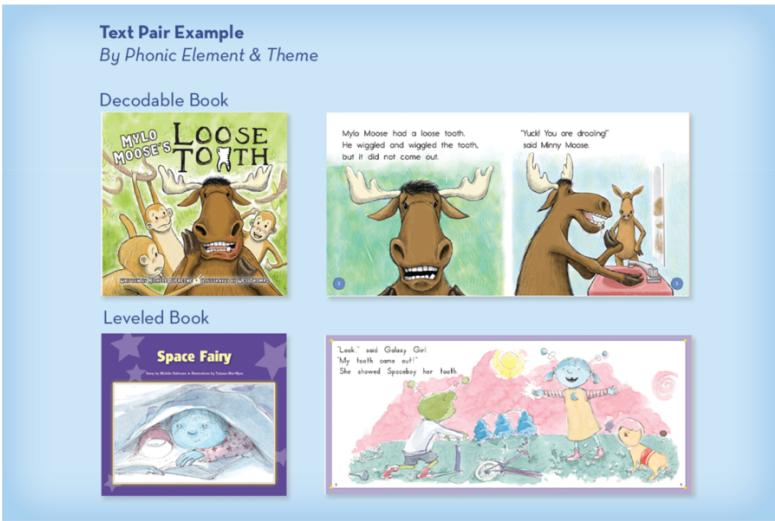
How to Pair Leveled and Decodable Books

Now that you understand the purpose of pairing texts, it's time to make a match! Look through multiple lenses to pair books. You may decide to pair books based on their use of the target phonic element, by theme or character, or a combination of these characteristics.

To best support your phonics instruction, use the scope and sequence to look for:

- Target phonic element(s)
- Previously taught phonic elements
- New sight words
- Previously taught sight words

For example, [Mylo Moose's Loose Tooth](#) and [Space Fairy](#) would be an excellent pairing for students working on the oo sound. Plus, the content will be familiar to students since both books feature the theme of losing a tooth.



To aid in comprehension and engagement, students may benefit from reading a leveled text that features the same characters or topic as the decodable text. Students love reading stories about [Bella and Rosie](#), so consider pairing the decodable book [Mud Fun for Bella and Rosie](#) with the leveled book [Bella and Rosie at the Beach](#).



How to Teach with Paired Texts

Incorporate these text pairs into classroom or small-group instruction with this sample lesson plan.

1. Assess your students

Determine student gaps with a phonics assessment and look for patterns. You may notice, for example, that a majority of students struggle with the silent –e rule.

SCRIB	scribe
SMOCK	smoke
FLOT	flute
PLAT	plate
SWEPLNG	sweeping
STRANDED	stranded

2. Explicit phonics lesson

Informed by student data, select the phonic element to teach explicitly. An explicit phonics lesson may include activities like:

- Making Words
- Sound Boxes
- Breaking Words
- Analogy Charts

Your silent –e instruction may look something like this:

The Complete Series: Silent e

Making Words:
slid-slide-
slime-slim-
dim-dime

Sound Boxes:
make
safe
clone
stripe

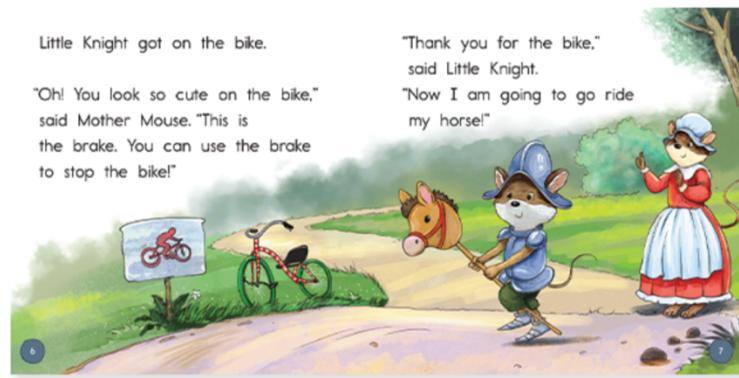
Breaking Words:
drive
thrive
strive

Analogy Charts:

Analogy Chart	
cub	<u>cube</u>
tub	<u>tube</u>
cut	<u>cute</u>
hug	<u>huge</u>

3. Decodable book

Give students the opportunity to apply the phonics skill they have just learned by reading a decodable book. Follow [best practices for teaching with decodable books](#) by giving a brief introduction, locating words with the target phonic element, and supporting students as they read. Consider having students read [A Bike for Little Knight](#) to use the silent –e rule.



4. Paired leveled text

Now have students read the leveled text you paired with your decodable book. Encourage students to look for similarities between the leveled book and the decodable book and use the phonics skills they've learned. [A Bike Ride for Jack](#) provides practice with the silent –e rule and continues the theme of bikes.



chapter one
THE BIKES

One morning, Bella
looked out the window.
"Look," she said.
"Dad has the bikes out."
"Oh! I like bike rides.
I hope I get to go!" said Rosie.
"Dad is getting the cart ready.
I think we are going too!"
said Bella.
"A bike ride!" said Daisy.
"It will be so much fun!"

2 3

5. Writing

Applying skills to writing is an essential part of any reading lesson. Dictate a sentence for students to write that includes the target phonic element and other skills they have learned.

The dictated sentence should include:

- Sight words you have taught
- Phonic elements you have taught that day
- Previously taught phonics skills
- New words with easy-to-hear sounds

For silent –e practice, you could dictate the sentence:

Jack is not brave. He does not want to go for a bike ride.

I hope that these tools will help you powerfully pair texts to strengthen your literacy instruction. I believe there's room on the bookshelf for all types of texts, and they can all make an impact in building lifelong readers and learners.

References

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michèle Dufresne's career in education began in the elementary school classroom. Later she became a reading specialist, Title I Director, and Reading Recovery Teacher Leader. Although now retired from teaching, Michèle continues to work with children learning to read as a consultant in school districts across the nation. She holds a doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts.

Michèle is the author of several professional resources for teachers including *The Next Step Forward in Word Study and Phonics* co-authored with Jan Richardson, and numerous children's book series, including *Bella & Rosie*, *Jack & Daisy*, *Marshmallow the Pony*, and dozens of nonfiction texts, all published by Pioneer Valley Books, the company she and husband Robert Dufresne founded. Pioneer Valley Books is dedicated to providing educators with high-quality print and digital resources for comprehensive literacy instruction.



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