

Sent to the Sydney Morning Herald, June 24, 2019.

Re: “When two tribes go to war”: The reading debate explained. June 23, 2019. <https://www.smh.com.au/education/when-two-tribes-go-to-war-the-reading-debate-explained-20190619-p51z6d.html>

Consideration of “Basic Phonics” might settle the reading wars and bring the “two tribes” closer together.

Basic Phonics recommends teaching only the straight-forward rules of phonics, the ones that work well and that students can remember.

According to Basic Phonics, we learn to read by understanding what is on the page. Most of our knowledge of phonics is the result of reading; the more complex rules of phonics are subconsciously acquired through reading.

A conscious knowledge of some basic rules can help children learn to read by making texts more comprehensible. Frank Smith, in *Understanding Reading*, demonstrates how this can happen: The child is reading the sentence “The man was riding on the h ____.” and cannot read the final word. Given the context and knowledge of ‘h’ the child can make a good guess as to what the final word is. This won’t work every time, but some knowledge of phonics can reduce the possibilities of what the unknown words are.

Basic Phonics appears to be the position of Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, a book widely considered to provide strong support for phonics instruction:

“...phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular of letter-to-sound relationships ... once the basic relationships have been taught, the best way to get children to refine and extend their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is through repeated opportunities to read. If this position is correct, then much phonics instruction is overly subtle and probably unproductive.”

Stephen Krashen