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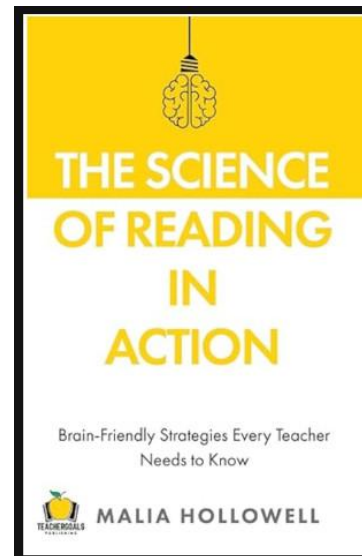
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Malia Hollowell's *The Science of Reading in Action* arrives at a moment of continued and vigorous debate in the field of literacy education. The book frames the so-called "reading wars" as a resolved conflict, positioning the "science of reading" not only as the most recent development in research-based instruction, but as the ultimate solution to disputes among whole-language, balanced literacy, and phonics-based approaches. As Hollowell writes, "Finally, the pendulum swing between phonics, whole language, and balanced literacy stopped in its tracks. The reading wars had come to an end. What replaced it? The science of reading" (p. 12). This framing is bold and exclusionary.

Hollowell presents the science of reading as a unified, research-driven alternative, implying that previous approaches, and the substantial bodies of research supporting them, should be dismissed. This is a sweeping claim that oversimplifies a complex field and risks overlooking the contributions of multiple literacies, culturally responsive pedagogy, and multimodal learning. In advancing this narrow vision, the author intends the book to serve as a definitive manual for novice teachers, offering accessible strategies and classroom tools while simultaneously setting the boundaries of "research-based" practice in a way that may not reflect the diversity of learners or the complexity of reading development.



Despite this contradiction and all that it may imply, the book is organized in a simple, well-structured format that is easy to follow, particularly for novice educators. With clear definitions and step-by-step strategies, the tools and instructional routines are presented in a very accessible way. While this level of simplification may not capture the full complexity of literacy instruction, it offers a consistent approach that can support early implementation and confidence-building. The book is divided into



10 concise chapters; each designed to build on core components of reading instruction and offer actionable strategies for classroom use.

Chapter one is an introduction to the so-called “reading wars,” the decades-long debate between whole-language, balanced literacy, and phonics-based approaches. Hollowell characterizes these debates as settled, asserting early in the book that “the pendulum swing... stopped in its tracks” and that the science of reading has replaced previous approaches (p. 12). This framing presents the science of reading as the singular, research-based solution implying that other approaches lack merit. However, while the science of reading movement draws on important cognitive and linguistic research and models, including whole-language and balanced literacy, are also rooted in research. Literacy educators today continue to navigate among competing theories, and many scholars argue that no single framework can fully capture the complexity of reading development. Chapter two presents an outline of several “myths” about how children learn to read, such as the belief that reading is a visual task or that students will naturally learn to read without explicit instruction. It also introduces one of the book’s conceptual anchors: the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which defines reading comprehension as the product of word reading and language comprehension. Hollowell uses this model to support her structured literacy stance and represents it visually through the High-Level View of Reading chart featuring three labeled “buckets.” While helpful for instructional organization, this model reinforces the author’s reliance on a narrow cognitive framework, with little connection to more recent developments in literacy research.

Chapter three focuses on phonological awareness, broken down into several subskills. The explanations are accessible and supported by instructional routines like chants and group activities. However, the chapter offers little discussion of how these skills might vary across language backgrounds, which limits its usefulness in multilingual or culturally diverse classrooms. Chapter four presents a two-phase phonics model described in the book as “The Plunge” and “The Deep Dive.” This framework transitions from playful, alphabet-based activities to explicit instruction in phoneme-grapheme correspondences and spelling rules. A 75-phonogram table is included to support instruction. While this chapter is one of the book’s more structured and practical contributions, it remains narrowly focused on rule-based decoding without addressing adaptations for students with learning differences or those acquiring English as an additional language.

Chapter five presents a six-step “sound mapping” routine grounded in orthographic mapping principles. Hollowell refers to this as a “magical solution” (p. 97) and claims that it helps students learn words “ten times faster.” The method incorporates tactile and auditory elements like tapping phonemes and graphing letters. Although the routine is well-sequenced and developmentally appropriate, the language encompassing it is exaggerated. The promotional tone and lack of clear, supporting citations compromise the scholarly foundation of the chapter. Chapter six critiques traditional sight word instruction. Rather than asking students to memorize high-frequency words in isolation, Hollowell recommends teaching them in phonics-aligned groupings using spelling rules. On page 117, she identifies the second solution to the ineffectiveness of traditional sight word instruction as “throwing out flashcards,” reinforcing her broader claim that visual and mental

imagery strategies are not effective tools for supporting literacy learning. Although her approach aligns with structured literacy research, the outright dismissal of visual strategies may overlook the needs of learners who benefit from multimodal or context-rich instruction.

Chapter seven focuses on language comprehension and introduces five skill areas: vocabulary, background knowledge, language structure, literacy knowledge, and verbal reasoning. These are mapped to cognitive systems including phonological, meaning, and context processing. The chapter includes helpful visuals, such as idiom examples and ambiguous sentences, but lacks engagement with how comprehension is influenced by culture, identity, or language experience, especially for multilingual learners. Chapter eight returns to the High-Level View of Reading visual, which is introduced in Chapter 2 and referenced throughout the book, depicting three labeled “buckets”: word reading, language comprehension, and reading comprehension. This visual is accompanied by a second graphic representing the four brain processes involved in reading comprehension. These include phonological processing, meaning processing, and context processing, initially introduced in Chapter 7; and in Chapter 8, Hollowell adds a fourth: orthographic processing, which she defines as the process of translating words on a page into spoken language that can be heard internally. While the bucket metaphor is helpful for organizing instructional focus, the brain-processing chart aims to explain comprehension at a more cognitive level. However, both frameworks reflect the book’s emphasis on internal cognitive processes, with little acknowledgment of the social, emotional, or cultural dimensions of reading.

In chapter nine, the author adopts a Q&A format based on commonly asked teacher questions. The responses are short and practical, and several are accompanied by QR codes linking to additional tools or resources. Chapter ten concludes the book with motivational encouragement to continue learning and improving practice. Hollowell promotes her professional development program through direct references and QR codes. While some readers may welcome these tools, the repeated promotion blurs the line between instructional support and personal branding.

Although I strongly disagree with the book’s framing of the science of reading as the definitive resolution to decades of debate, I also recognize the value it offers, particularly for novice educators. The language is clear, the structure is consistent, and the presentation makes complex concepts accessible. As a simple entry point into the components of literacy instruction, including phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, *The Science of Reading in Action* can serve as a useful resource. When understood as one of many tools rather than a standalone solution, the book can contribute meaningfully to early professional development and instructional planning.

This critique is not a rejection of direct instruction or phonics-based teaching. On the contrary, systematic, research-informed approaches to word recognition and decoding are essential components of reading instruction and must remain central to literacy curricula. However, they cannot be the only focus. Reading is not an isolated cognitive act; it is deeply entwined with the broader dimensions of language, and language itself is embedded in the lives, identities, and contexts of its speakers. As scholars such as Andrews (2010) remind us, language reflects and constructs

complex social meanings, and those meanings are shaped by systems of inclusion, exclusion, and perception. Literacy instruction that focuses only on technical skill acquisition risks erasing the rich, diverse experiences of students and ignoring how language is shaped by power and culture. What is needed is a literacy framework that integrates both direct instruction and an awareness of context supporting students as readers and as full participants in their linguistic and cultural worlds.

Two additional concerns stand out in the book's structure and framing. First, Hollowell builds much of her argument on the Simple View of Reading, a model introduced in 1986 by Gough and Tunmer. While influential, this model does not reflect the entire scope of contemporary research on reading, especially in areas such as bilingualism, affective engagement, or multimodal literacy. By anchoring her instructional framework so tightly to this formula, Hollowell risks promoting an outdated and overly narrow definition of reading. Second, although the book includes an extensive list of references at the end, the chapters themselves do not clearly connect specific claims to specific studies. The book's use of citations lacks clarity, as in-text references are generally absent. Instead, sources are listed at the end of the book and linked to quotations or general claims, which makes it difficult for readers to trace specific ideas back to their original research or evaluate how the supporting evidence is being applied. This lack of citation transparency weakens the book's scholarly rigor, particularly for educators hoping to engage critically with the science of reading.

To truly serve all students, literacy instruction must go beyond cognitive efficiency. It must also honor language diversity, integrate with speaking and writing, and remain connected to the cultural and social contexts that shape children's literacy lives.

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About the Reviewer




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