

## An ABC Guide for Literacy Teachers

Debra Knaebel  
*Indiana State University*

### Abstract

With new literacy legislation passed in the state of Indiana, the Science of Reading (SoR) is a hot topic for all literacy educators and others involved in the educational process across the state. With this added pressure to comply with SoR mandates, this article shares twenty-six ideas alphabetically from A to Z that all teachers who teach literacy in any grade K-12 can use while navigating the transition and change. Each of the ABC's ranging from *asking questions* and *being positive* to *yet* and *zeal* includes ideas and suggestions for the classroom teacher in a positive and uplifting manner.

With the new Science of Reading (SoR) legislation passed recently in the state of Indiana, teachers and teacher educators are reviewing the reading curriculum with a renewed understanding of the components of SoR: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency, and Comprehension. Every teacher will tell you what matters is student understanding, and the goal is comprehension. "Learning is stronger when it matters, when the abstract is made concrete and personal" (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, p. 11). During this time of transition and change, it is easy to become overwhelmed.

Here, I present to you my ABC Guide for Literacy Teachers as an acrostic poem to help you stay energized and hopeful throughout your teaching career even when things are changing. Explanations of the poem content follows. As you read, you should get the feeling that you are doing these dispositional and pedagogical skills because *You Got This!*

**A**sk questions.  
**B**e positive.  
**C**onsistency.  
**D**emeanor.  
**E**at your breakfast.  
**F**aith.  
**G**rit.  
**H**umor.  
**I**ntegrity.  
**J**anitors and Secretaries.  
**K**nowledge.  
**L**isten.  
**M**entor.  
**N**ever forget to communicate with parents.  
**O**unce of Prevention.  
**P**rocedures.  
**Q**uestioning.  
**R**ead.  
**S**mile.

**T**echnology.

**U**n-afraid.

**V**alor.

**W**ait Time.

**X**-tra.

**Y**et (the power of “Yet”).

**Z**eal.

So, what do each of these topics mean to classroom literacy teachers? Following are some thoughts as you go about your daily literacy instruction:

**Ask Questions.** Do not be afraid to ask questions of your colleagues and administration. You do not have to be the best at everything. Your colleagues in the building, the district reading specialist, and your past university professors are there to help you achieve and be the best teacher. Reach out, you are not alone in your efforts. Remember, “more often being the best means just being the best version of you” (Barker, 2017, p. 21).

**Be positive.** Your outlook will determine what type of year you have. When you have a positive outlook and attitude, it will be contagious to those around you. Greet colleagues and students with a smile. Rita Pierson (2013) in her “Every Kid Needs a Champion” TED Talk says she gave her students a saying. This saying was: “I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I’ll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful and I am strong. I deserve the education that I get here. I have things to do, people to impress, and places to go.” If you have not seen her TED talk, it is available online.

**Consistency.** Students need to know what to expect and will have great respect for you when you are consistent with your rules and procedures for your literacy lessons. Students in all grades succeed better with reading when the teachers say what they mean and mean what they say, but do not say it mean.

**Demeanor.** It is important to present yourself as a literacy professional which means holding yourself to a higher standard. Your demeanor is evident in your appearance and shows in your respect for students, colleagues, and parents.

**Eat your breakfast.** You will need to eat your breakfast to keep your energy high to keep your attitude positive. This energy will help you keep your energy and enthusiasm as you teach your phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, or comprehension lessons.

**Faith.** Have faith that you will do a good job and your students will be successful. If you believe it, this concept will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When your students know that you believe in them and their ability to learn to read, and that they can succeed; then they believe in themselves and do succeed (Jussim, 2001; Rosenthal, 2012). Having a bad day, week, or semester? Here’s an idea, using an expo marker, write: *I AM a great teacher. My students WILL succeed.* on your mirror at home and read it to yourself every morning before going to work.

**Grit.** The first year is hard work, but you can persevere until the last day of school. Grit is *passion* and *perseverance* over the long haul (Duckworth, 2016). Never give up on yourself and your students. “Grit is one of the key reasons why we see such differing levels of achievement between people of the same intelligence and talent levels” (Barker, 2017, p. 64).

**Humor.** You need to be able to laugh at the little things. Share a joke of the day with your students and if it relates to literacy, even better. For example, why did it take so long for the pirates to learn the alphabet? Because they got stuck at *C*.

**Integrity.** Say what you mean and mean what you say when communicating with students, parents, and colleagues. Price-Mitchell (2015) shares five ways to increase integrity. The literacy teacher can do this by 1) including integrity into the classroom climate and culture, 2) developing and using moral vocabulary, 3) having an appropriate response when cheating does occur, 4) starting meaningful conversations using famous quotes, and 5) helping students to believe in themselves.

**Janitors and Secretaries.** Two people you want to always remain on their good side are the janitors and secretaries of your building. They are the two that can make your life easier. Why not invite them into your classes to read aloud to your students at least once a year? Don't forget the lunch person or the school safety officer (SSO). Here's an idea, ask the SSO what his or her favorite picture and chapter books were growing up. With some direction from you, maybe the SSO will video record him- or her-self reading the book aloud or talking about how they use literacy in their career. The purpose is to see that the adults your students encounter on a daily basis value literacy.

**Knowledge.** Make sure that you are teaching accurate information. This is especially important given the changes with SoR legislation and mandates. Not every curriculum covers SoR components well. This means you may need to do some research more than one night before a lesson. For teachers in younger grades, Orton-Gillingham (Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators, n.d.) or LETRS (Lexia, 2023) training is valuable.

**Listen.** The key to good communication is active listening. Take the time to get to know your students and their personalities. When communicating with your students use their preferred channel of communication: directive (tell), requestive (ask), nurturative (care), or emotive (play). If you use the preferred method of communication after you have listened to the student, you will have less instances of miscommunication (Kahler, 2006; Gilbert, 2020; Regier, 2020).

**Mentor.** Find an outstanding high-quality positive colleague who can provide advice and support as you navigate your use of the SoR curriculum.

Never forget to communicate with parents. It is important to stress the positive as they are your biggest allies. Furthermore, add a paragraph to the weekly classroom newsletter to summarize the literacy concepts being learned with some suggestions for practice at home.

**Ounce of Prevention.** Organize your classroom and materials so that activities run smoothly. If you think this through, you will prevent mass chaos and increase learning opportunities. The old saying, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, is very accurate and useful in the classroom.

**Procedures.** Not only do you need to understand the procedures of the building such as what to do during a fire drill; dismissal, etc.; but you also need to establish procedures for your literacy instruction. For the procedures that involve students, make sure to practice with them. This is so very important for the literacy classroom.

**Questioning.** As a judge listens to both sides of an issue, when students have a problem or issue, be sure to ask questions so you have all the facts before making a decision or jumping to conclusions.

**Read.** Read to your students every day, no matter your grade level. Choose books from both the school library and your classroom library. Are you close to a college or university? Reach out to the literacy faculty and invite them in to read to your students. What about others at your school (i.e.: literacy coaches, principal, teacher across the hall) or local community members (i.e., have an accountant read *Alexander, Who Used to be Rich Last Sunday*)?

**Smile.** Greet every student with a smile so they know you are happy to see them. For some students, this is the only smile they see all day. A smile also conveys warmth and acceptance. These students are more likely to work diligently at a subject they may be struggling with if they feel that you genuinely like them.

**Technology.** Technology does not teach students, teachers teach students. Use technology in an educational manner to enhance your literacy instruction. Many of today's basal readers that are SoR aligned include software to use in the classroom. Another resource for learning about new approaches or technology are your instructional designers or local university professors. Many education university professors would be more than willing to share with the local educators and to learn of the ways that the local teachers are using technology in their classrooms (to help them prepare future teachers).

**Un-afraid.** You are the most important component of your classroom. Be unafraid to take chances. Phillips (2016) states in her TEDx Talk on spiraling the curriculum: "Try something new; no one will die." She is, of course, speaking on moving away from traditional teaching and moving toward research-based instruction, specifically interleaving.

**Valor.** Be brave and bold when advocating for your students. For many of them, you are the only one who is advocating for them.

**Wait Time.** When you ask higher order questions of your students, give them time to think through their answer before calling on someone to answer. Your more reflective students will appreciate this time to reflect (Kahler, 2006; Gilbert, 2020; Regier, 2020).

**X-tra.** Go the x-tra mile and do the x-tra little things for your students. Put in the X-tra effort your student need for them to succeed. Their future reading success will thank you.

**Yet (the power of "Yet").** Your students will learn at different rates, but yet they will all learn. Be patient, they just are not there yet (Dweck, 2016). Include the word *yet* in student feedback if they did poorly. Maybe they do not have it yet, but they will!

**Zeal.** An enthusiastic literacy teacher leads students in enjoyable yet research-based literacy learning activities.

And there you have 26 dispositional and pedagogical skills that every literacy teacher uses to be successful in their classroom. You Got This.

### References

- Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators (n.d.). What is the Orton-Gillingham approach? <https://www.ortonacademy.org/resources/what-is-the-orton-gillingham-approach/>
- Barker, E. (2017). *Barking up the wrong tree: The surprising science behind why everything you know about success is (mostly) wrong*, HarperOne.
- Brown, P. C., Roediger, H. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (2014). *Make it stick: The science of successful learning*. Harvard University Press.
- Duckworth, A. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. Scribner.
- Dweck, C. S. (2016). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine.
- Gilbert, M. (2020). *Saying it right: Tools for deft leadership*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Kahler, T. (2006). *The mystery of management: Or how to solve the mystery of management*. Kahler Communications, Inc.
- Lexia (2023). Lexia LETRS professional learning. <https://www.lexialearning.com/letrs>

- Jussim, L. (2001). Self-fulfilling prophecies.  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/self-fulfilling-prophecy>
- Phillips, K. (2016). Spiraling the curriculum to get sticky learning.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jLANkgniSM>
- Pierson, R. (2013). Every kid needs a champion.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/rita\\_pierson\\_every\\_kid\\_needs\\_a\\_champion?language=en#t-164096](https://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion?language=en#t-164096)
- Price-Mitchell, M. (2015). Creating a culture of integrity in the classroom.  
<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/8-pathways-creating-culture-integrity-marilyn-price-mitchell>
- Regier, N. (2020). *Seeing people through: Unleash your leadership potential*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Rosenthal, R. (2012). Self-fulfilling prophecy.  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/self-fulfilling-prophecy>
- Viorst, J. (1987). *Alexandar who used to be rich last Sunday*. Simon & Schuster.

### Author Information

**Dr. Debra Knaebel** is an Assistant Professor at Indiana State University in the department of Teaching and Learning. She has experience teaching in PK-12, undergraduate, and graduate settings. Her university research focus is mainly literacy and teacher preparation. Her hobbies include reading, scrapbooking, cross-stitching, and listening to music. She can be followed on her professional Twitter account, @dknaebel.