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## Six Layers of Phonemic Awareness: Improve Students' Reading Using Their Ears

**Reading With Your Ears?** What if we told you that you could improve your students' ability to read unfamiliar words without showing them a single printed letter? As crazy as it sounds, it's true! This is because one of the major skills underlying the successful decoding of printed words, phonemic awareness, is a purely auditory and oral skill. It may not be "reading with your ears" in the literal sense, but the sounds we hear and play with in words are what allow us to ultimately pull the print off the page with our eyes when we decode.

**What Is Phonemic Awareness?** Phonemic Awareness is the awareness of and ability to manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words (Kilpatrick, 2015). Phonemic awareness is a subset of the broader category of phonological awareness, which is one's conscious awareness of and ability to "play with" the sound structures in oral language (Paulson & Moats, 2010).

### What Is the Difference Between Phonological Awareness & Phonemic Awareness?

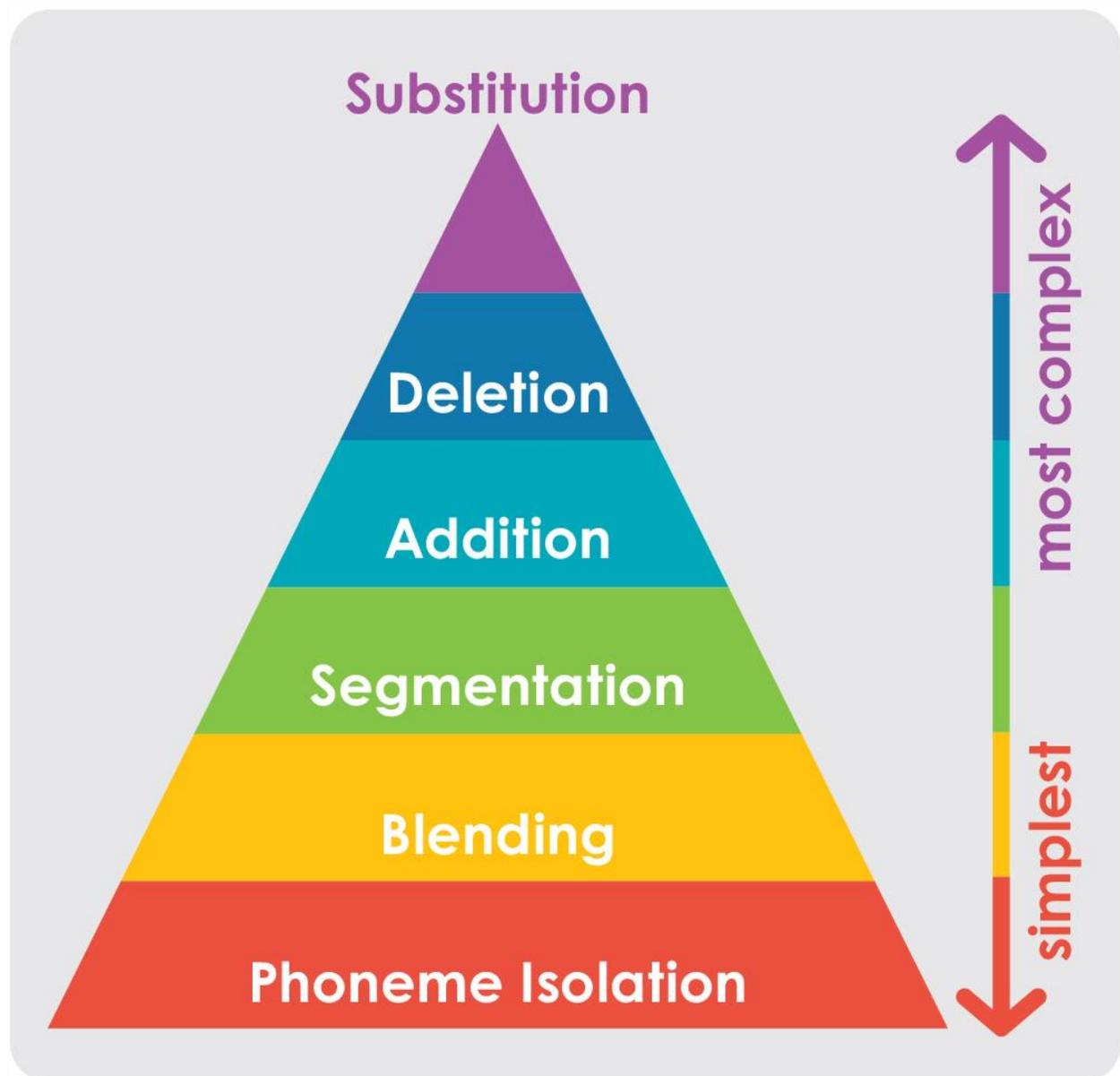
Let's start with **phonological awareness**. Your phonological awareness is what enables you to hear the sentence "My dog ran away" and immediately determine that it contains four spoken words. It allows you to quickly identify that **bat** and **mat** rhyme, while **bat** and **boat** do not. And it enables you to determine that the spoken syllables /pic/ and /nic/ together make the word **picnic** and that the spoken word parts /spl/ and /ash/ put together make the word **splash**. Identifying and manipulating speech at the word, syllable, and onset-rime level are the marks of phonological awareness.

Your **phonemic awareness**, on the other hand, is what enables you to hear and manipulate the smallest units of speech, called phonemes. Your phonemic awareness gets the credit when you identify that the word **map** has three sounds, /m/ /ă/ /p/, while the word **split** has five, /s/ /p/ /l/ /ī/ /t/. Your phonemic awareness allows you to hear the individual sounds /f/ /r/ /ō/ /g/ and know right away that this is the word **frog**. And it is what tells you that **stop** without the /s/ is **top**, that adding /s/ to the beginning of **mash** gives you **smash**, and that changing the /ī/ in **quick** to /ă/ gives you **quack**.

These phonemic exercises are not only fun, they are essential to proficient word recognition and decoding. Seidenberg (2017) tells us that, "we read with our eyes but the starting point for reading is speech." In fact, researchers have found that "among poor readers, 70-80% have trouble with accurate and fluent word recognition that originates with weaknesses in phonological processing" (Fletcher, Lyon, & Fuchs, 2007). We know that "when children lack awareness of the role that sounds play in words, [they] rarely learn to read easily" (Henry, 2010, p. 76). Strong phonemic awareness skills lead to strong readers because phonemic awareness lays the underlying framework for reading (decoding) and writing (encoding) (Trehearne, 2003). Although playing with words at the larger levels of syllable and onset-rime is fun and helps to develop an ear for the sound structures in words, we want to get students as quickly as possible "to where it really matters, the individual phoneme level" (Tolman, 2018).

# What is the Importance of Phonemic Awareness in Decoding?

Kilpatrick (2015) tells us that phonemic awareness is an essential part of the process of storing words in one's sight word vocabulary; that is, the body of words (high-frequency or not) that an individual can decode quickly and effortlessly. "Phonemic awareness is what allows us to anchor the sounds in a word to the written sequence of letters that represent those sounds" (Kilpatrick, 2015). This process is called orthographic mapping. Studies have shown that students with better phonological awareness skills can handle this mapping process more proficiently than those with weaker phonological awareness skills (Kilpatrick, 2015). The goal of decoding is to build words into our sight word memory, and phonemic awareness allows this to happen!



## Why Are the Six Layers of Phonemic Awareness Essential to Learning to Read?

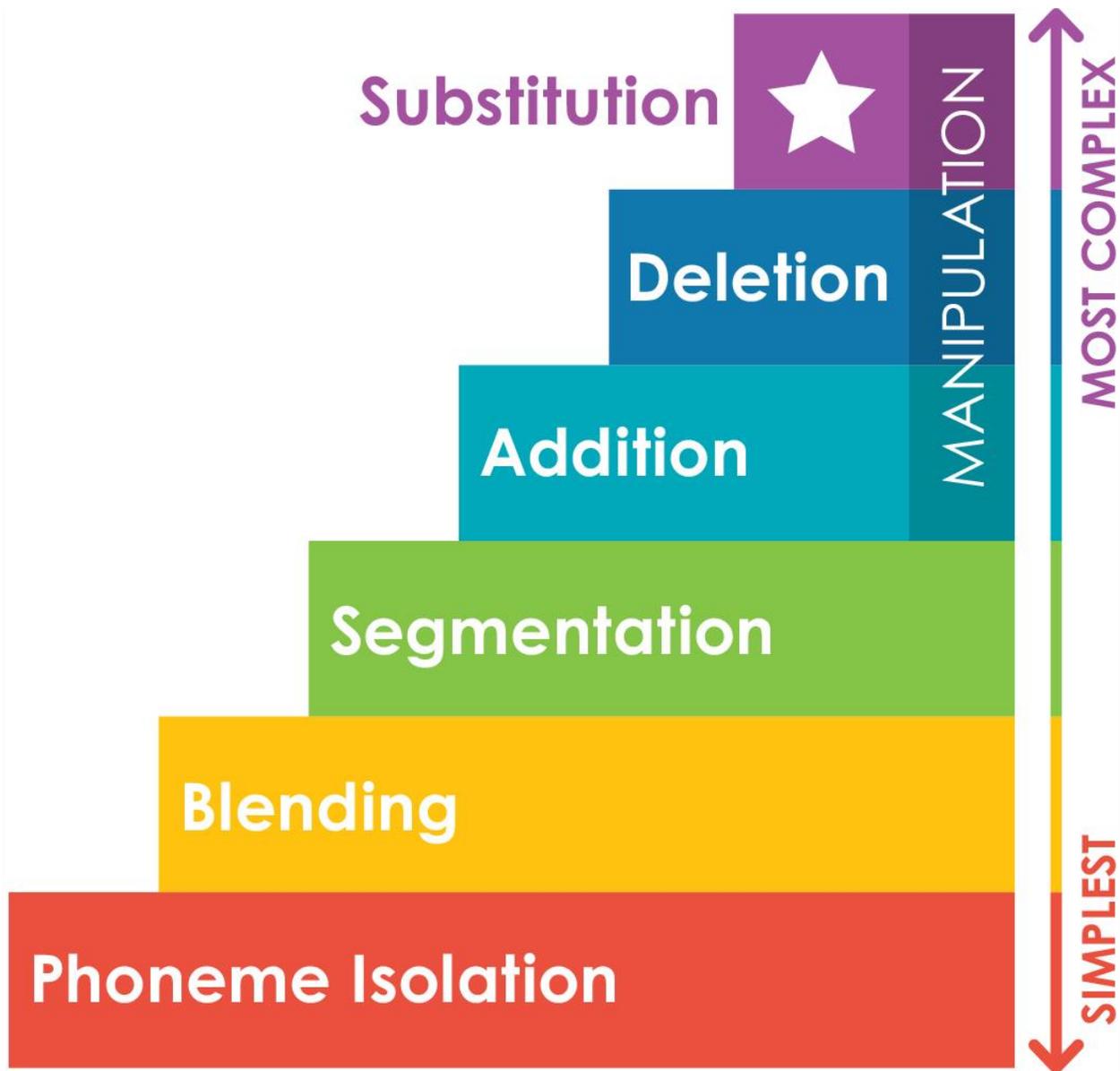
Adams (1994) emphasizes that while phonemic awareness is essential for learning to read, it is not easily established, and children need explicit instruction to gain the necessary skills. This makes it extremely important for teachers to understand that there are various layers of phonemic awareness and that each of these layers represents a skill that can be developed through targeted instruction and practice. These layers build from the simplest phonemic awareness skills at the bottom of the pyramid to the most complex at the top. These are skills that can be modeled, practiced, and established through oral word play.

### The Six Layers of Phonemic Awareness: Definitions & Examples of Instruction at Each Layer

**Phoneme Isolation:** Hearing and isolating the individual phonemes (sounds) in spoken words represents the first layer of skilled phonemic awareness. Isolating phonemes entails knowing that a word is made up of a sequence of sounds and that the individual sounds in words can be differentiated from one another. Beginning sound isolation activities are a great way to help students develop their phoneme isolation skills. Beginning sound isolation is simply pulling the first sound off of a spoken word. Students can isolate the first sounds in words, as in /b/, bear, or /s/, soap.

**Blending:** Moving up the pyramid, we come to a slightly more complex phonemic awareness skill, phoneme blending. Phoneme blending, which is basically combining sounds, involves listening to and pulling together isolated phonemes to create words. This process requires a student to hold the individual elements in his/her mind as the word is created, thus challenging a student's active working memory. When beginning readers sound out a word, they use letter-sound knowledge to say each sound in a word (/b/ /ă/ /t/), and then blend the sounds quickly together to read the word (bat).

**Segmenting:** The third layer in the pyramid is phoneme segmentation. This is the ability to divide a spoken word into its component sounds (phonemes). In a segmentation activity, students are given a word like mad, and then they segment it, or "stretch" the phonemes, /m/ /ă/ /d/. As they are saying the sounds, they can extend a single finger for every phoneme that they hear, starting with the thumb: /m/ (extend thumb), /ă/ (extend index finger), /d/ (extend middle finger). Lastly, they blend the phonemes together as they bring their hands back to their chests and say the word, mad.



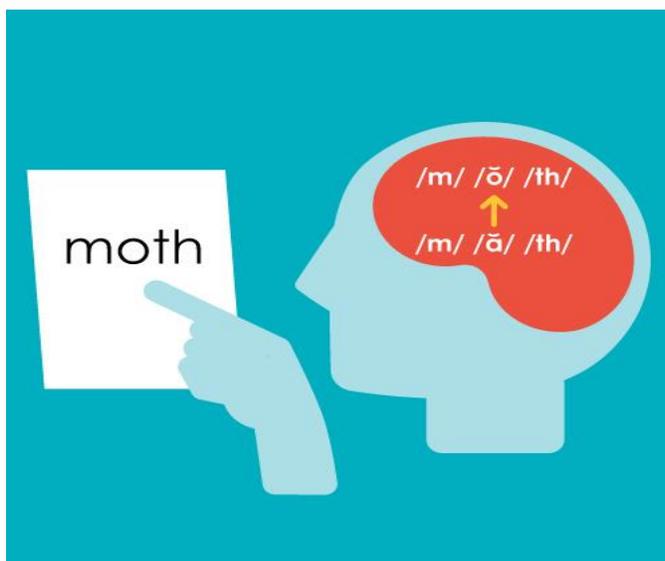
**Manipulation:** Truly refined phonemic awareness includes even more advanced skills, like phoneme addition, deletion, and substitution, all three of which are considered phoneme manipulation. These are the top three layers of the pyramid. Phoneme manipulation is generally more challenging than segmenting and blending phonemes. Manipulation requires students to hold phonemes in their working memories long enough to isolate specific phonemes, add, delete, or substitute (delete and then add) specific phonemes, and then blend the phonemes back together to form a new word. These types of activities are an excellent way to build refined phonemic awareness, particularly for students who may have already mastered phoneme segmentation and blending.

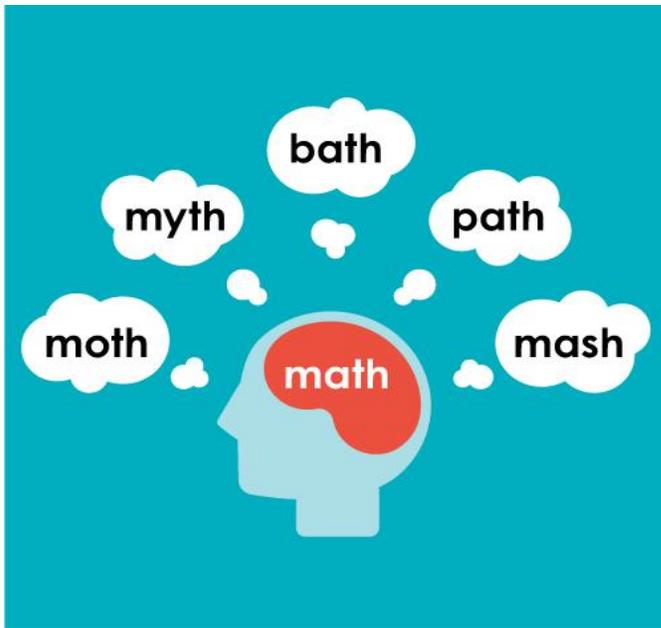
**Phoneme Addition:** Phoneme addition involves adding phonemes to a given word to produce a new word. For instance, starting with the word **we** and adding the phoneme /k/ to the end turns it into week. Phoneme addition can be done with more complex words as well; starting with the word **bell** and adding the phoneme /t/ at the end turns it into **belt**.

**Phoneme Deletion:** Conversely, starting with the word **guide** and deleting the final phoneme, /d/, creates the new word, **guy**. A more complex example of phoneme deletion might include removing one phoneme from a two-sound blend. Starting with the word **blast** and deleting the initial phoneme, /b/, results in the new word, **last**.

**Phoneme Substitution:** Phoneme substitution, the most advanced of all the manipulation skills on our pyramid, requires that a student knows how to both delete and add phonemes. In a phoneme substitution exercise, a student might be asked to drop the short i sound in kit and replace it with the long i sound. When they do, kit becomes kite. This is done through a few intricate steps that are performed automatically and without conscious thought for strong, fluent readers. These steps include recognizing the component parts of the known word (segmenting the word into its phonemes), isolating a specific phoneme, deleting that phoneme, adding the new phoneme, and blending the phonemes together to say the new word. Did you notice that these steps include every one of the lower five layers of the pyramid? That's right —phoneme substitution, our top layer, encompasses every single layer of the phonemic awareness pyramid. If even one of these lower skills is weak, students will struggle to substitute phonemes.

### The Importance of Phoneme Substitution





Teachers are often comfortable with and therefore put the instructional focus on the phonemic awareness skills toward the bottom of the pyramid, particularly phoneme blending and phoneme segmentation. Although these skills are undoubtedly important in helping students as they are learning to decode, it is actually the top of the pyramid, with the more complex phonemic skills, that is often left out of classroom instruction, where we need to pay the most attention, particularly as students move beyond the primary classroom. Kilpatrick (2015) tells us that research suggests that “phonological manipulation tasks are the best measures of the phonological awareness, skills needed for reading because they are the best predictors of word-level reading proficiency” (page 155) because phoneme manipulation (adding, deleting, and substituting) is actually the layer of phonemic awareness that is the most closely related to reading connected text (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Phoneme substitution is the critical breakthrough skill a child needs to teach themselves how to read new words. As illustrated in the images above, if a student encounters a new unfamiliar word, like **moth**, they can use their knowledge of a word that they already know (like **math**) to teach themselves how to read this novel word. Remember that manipulation activities require students to hold phonemes in their working memory long enough to isolate specific phonemes, add, delete, or change specific phonemes, and then blend the phonemes back together to form a new word. Kilpatrick (2015) states that “training in phonemic manipulation has substantial long-term impact on reading.”

## References

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