MAYA Smart

How to Give Your Child a Smart Start

Maya Payne Smart

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HIGHLAND COMMUNITY SCHOOL
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ABOUT

Maya Payne Smart

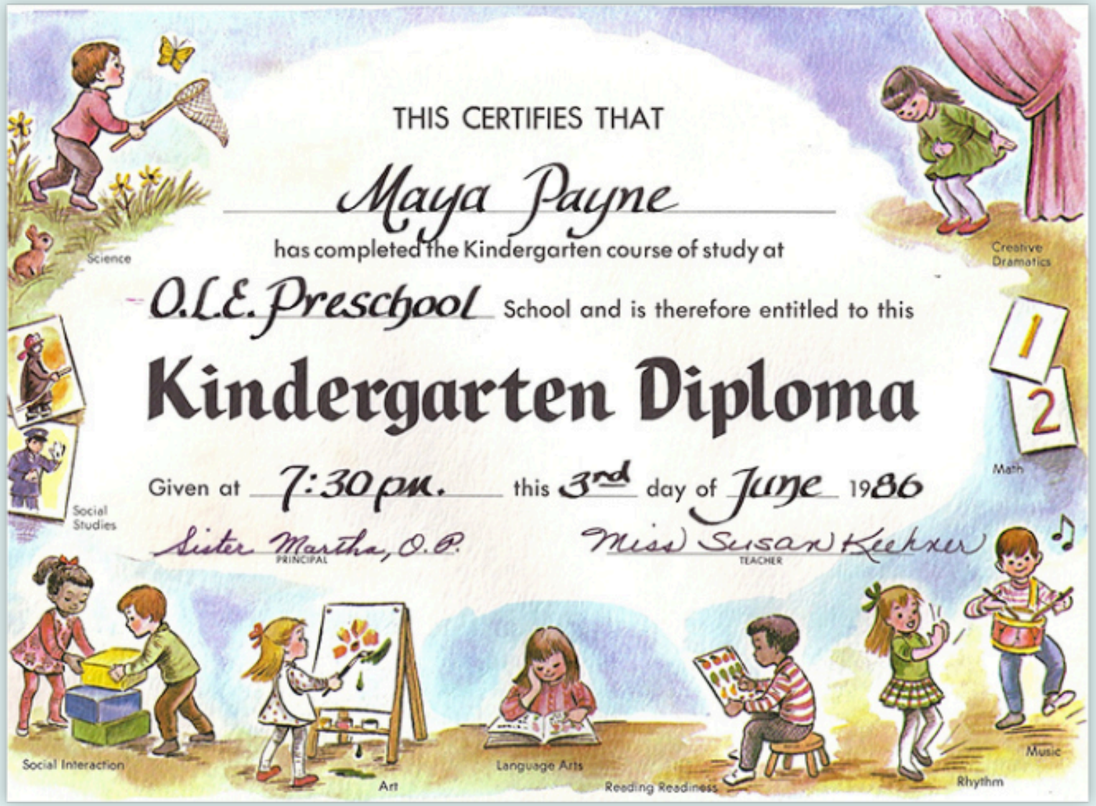
Parent educator, literacy advocate, and author of *Reading for Our Lives: The Urgency of Early Literacy and the Action Plan to Help Your Child* (Avery / Penguin Random House).

MayaSmart.com publishes new book lists, literacy activities, and free family resources every week for parents playing their dual roles as their children's first teachers and educational advocates.

Master's in journalism, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University.
Bachelor's in social studies with honors, Harvard College.

ABOUT

Maya Renee Payne





* What on my early resume mattered most?

ABOUT YOU

Start with your own story

01

What's your earliest memory of books or reading?

02

What do you remember about the process of learning to read?

03

What **one word** describes the feeling of learning to read?

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We can use our feelings about the road to reading as motivation to shape our children's journeys.

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MY JOURNEY

The knowledge parents need about reading development and instruction is not easy to come by.

Excerpt from *Reading for Our Lives*

OUR JOURNEY

Her growth was my curriculum



How it started



How it’s going

MY GROWTH

- Reading
- Conversations
- Interviews
- Podcasts
- Courses

* I learned the slow way so you don’t have to.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

What is reading?



THE RESEARCH

The Simple View of Reading

Written word recognition

Turning print symbols into spoken language.

×

Oral language comprehension

Vocabulary, knowledge, meaning.

=

Reading comprehension

*** If either side is zero, the product is zero.**

Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education, 7* (1), 6–10.
Hoover, W., & Gough, P. (1990). The simple view of reading. *Reading and Writing, 2*, 127–160.

WHAT IT TAKES

Nurturing reading requires two things

1. **Talking** to them, so they learn words and gain knowledge.

2. **Teaching** them how letters represent speech sounds in writing.

* **What role do parents play in each area?**



YOU DECIDE

Do audiobooks count as reading?

YOU DECIDE

Do audiobooks count as reading?

No. Audiobooks build oral language comprehension, but they skip written word recognition. If either side is zero, the product is zero.

HOW IT DEVELOPS

The road to reading



BY AGE AND STAGE

What to focus on when

At every age

- Oral language
- Vocabulary
- Background knowledge
- Reading attention, interest, and motivation

Babies and toddlers

- Responsive talk
- Book handling

Preschoolers

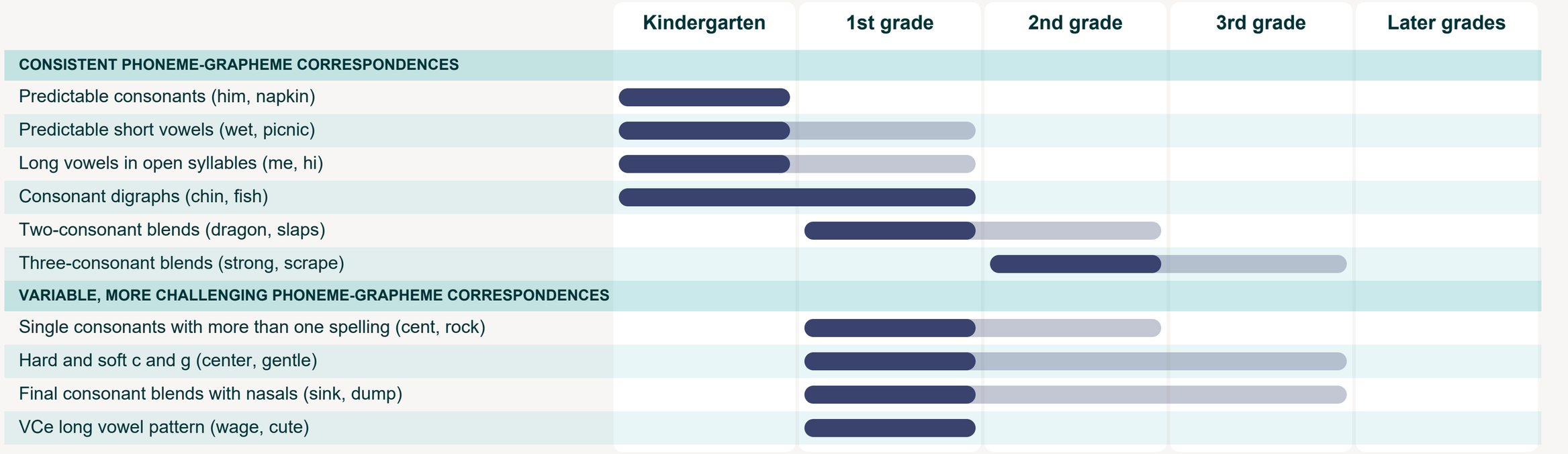
- Alphabetic knowledge
- Phonological awareness

K-3

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Spelling

SAMPLE SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

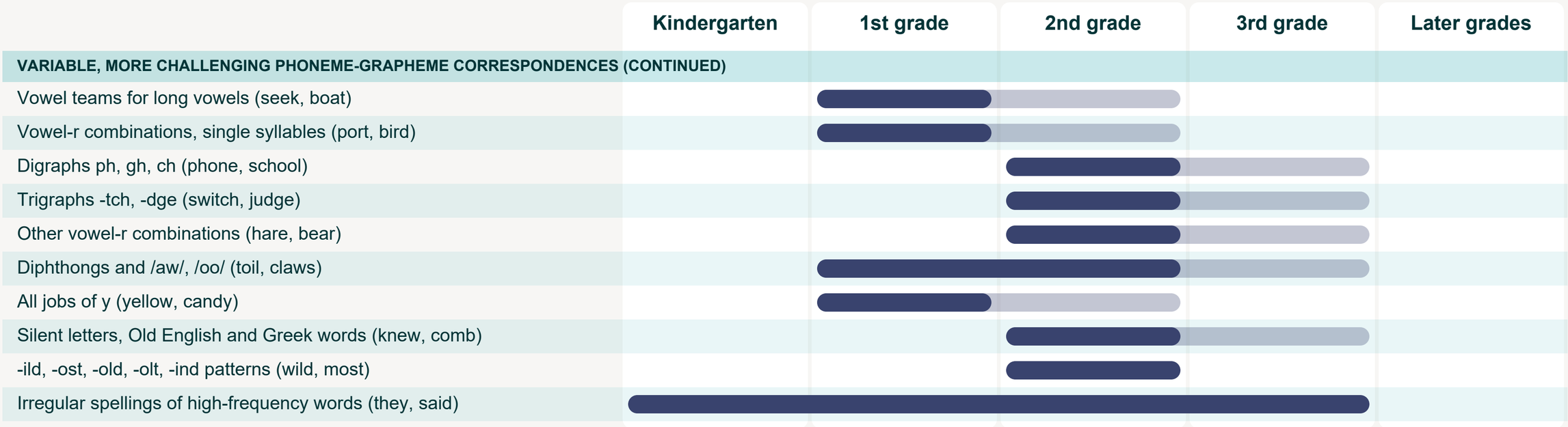
Letters and sounds



Source: Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, "Appendix B: LETRS Scope and Sequence for Word Study, Reading, and Spelling," LETRS (Lexia, a Cambium Learning Group company, 2024). Grade placements are approximate; there is no one accepted scope and sequence.

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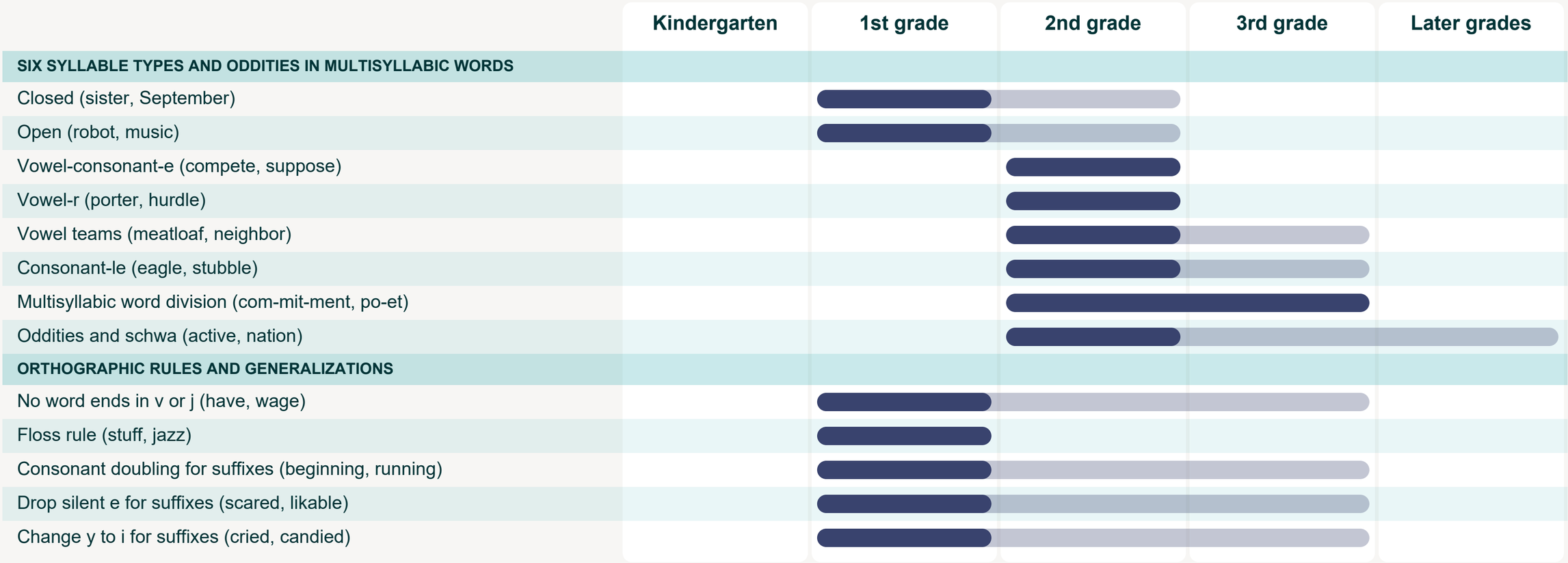
Trickier spellings



Source: Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, "Appendix B: LETRS Scope and Sequence for Word Study, Reading, and Spelling," LETRS (Lexia, a Cambium Learning Group company, 2024). Grade placements are approximate; there is no one accepted scope and sequence.

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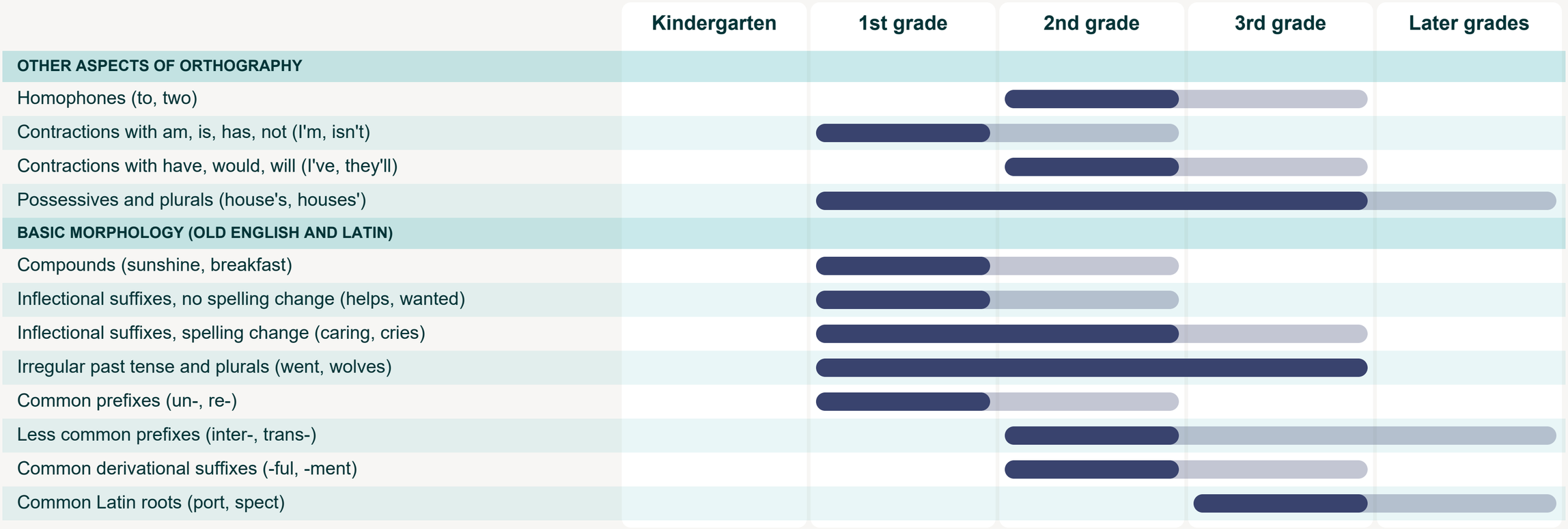
Syllables and spelling rules



Source: Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, "Appendix B: LETRS Scope and Sequence for Word Study, Reading, and Spelling," LETRS (Lexia, a Cambium Learning Group company, 2024). Grade placements are approximate; there is no one accepted scope and sequence.

SAMPLE SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Word parts and more



Source: Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, "Appendix B: LETRS Scope and Sequence for Word Study, Reading, and Spelling," LETRS (Lexia, a Cambium Learning Group company, 2024). Grade placements are approximate; there is no one accepted scope and sequence.

MANY HATS

Seven levers parents pull

Conversation

Talk all day, in full sentences

Book sharing

Read together, early and often

Teaching

Name letters and their sounds

Monitoring

Watch what your child can do

Connecting

Use the people and places nearby

Investing

Put time, money, and attention in

Advocating

Ask schools the right questions



LENA AT HOME

Language ENvironment Analysis





LEVER 1: CONVERSATION

LENA IN CHILDCARE SETTINGS

Same space, different experiences



LEVER 1: CONVERSATION

THE PRACTICE

The TALK Method

T	A	L	K
Take Turns	Ask Questions	Label & Point	Keep the conversation going

Maya Payne Smart, *Reading for Our Lives: The Urgency of Early Literacy and the Action Plan to Help Your Child* (New York: Avery / Penguin Random House, 2025), 129–131.

LEVER 1: CONVERSATION

THE TALK METHOD

TALK about books

Reading together builds kids’ brains, skills, and relationships.



LEVER 2: BOOK SHARING

THE TALK METHOD

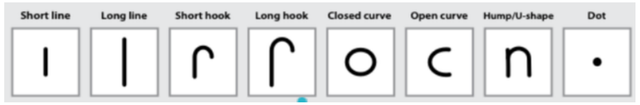
TALK about letters

Make a habit of describing the shapes, names, and sounds of letters in everyday life.



Shape

“Two long lines and one short one connecting them make the letter H.”



Name

Name letters wherever you see them.

Sound

The sound is the part that unlocks reading. So include that too. “H says /h/ like in hippo and happy”

THE TALK METHOD

TALK about and play with sounds

Word games raise kids’ awareness of the sounds inside words.

The Name Game

Swap the first sound: gum, mum, hum.

I Spy

“I spy something that starts with /s/.”

Pig Latin

Play with sounds within words.

Anywhere

Car rides, bath time, the grocery line. No materials needed.

MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Give the gift of your strongest language

The knowledge of the world and of reading that your child builds in any language carry into English.

Talk a lot

Full sentences, stories, and jokes flow best in your home language.

Read any way

Share books in your home language, or tell the story from the pictures in your words.

Skills transfer

Knowledge and sound awareness can carry from one language to the next.

Play to strengths

When English isn’t your strength, let school and community take the lead in that language.

THE GPS FRAMEWORK

Know where your child is

Check three sources to see whether your child is on track.

G

Guidelines

Consult reputable milestone lists, school readiness checklists, and grade-level standards.

P

Personal observations

Honor your gut feelings, recurring worries, and what you notice at home.

S

Specialists

Reach out, ask questions, and raise issues with pediatricians, teachers, and other experts.

YOUR LITERACY VILLAGE

Raise a reader with a village

Free help for families is closer than you think.

Libraries

Free books, story times, and librarians who can help you pick the right book.

Vroom

Free brain-building tips for everyday moments, by text or app.

Reach Out and Read

Pediatricians share a new book and reading tips at well-child visits, birth to 5.

Family resource centers

Playgroups, parenting classes, and connections to local services.

INVEST WITH INTENTION

It’s the intention, not the amount

Aim some of the time, money, and attention you already spend at reading.

Free and low cost

- Library card and story time
- Dollar-store notebooks and crayons
- Bedtime stories, read or told

A step up

- Books of your own
- Magazine subscriptions
- Museum and zoo days (look for free days)

The high end

- Private reading tutoring
- Learning evaluations
- Enrichment programs

ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

Ask about before you ask for

Greet every score report with questions.

Ask about

CURIOUS, INFORMATIONAL, LOW-STAKES

- “What does this score mean for my child?”
- “When is the next assessment?”
- “How many sessions will be devoted to this skill?”

Ask for

A REQUEST, SOMETIMES A FIRM ONE

- More sessions
- A meeting
- A different approach

* **Asking about first makes you a partner when it’s time to ask for.**

THE PARENT ROLE, IN FULL

Seven levers parents pull



Conversation

Talk all day, in full sentences



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Teaching

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Monitoring

Watch what your child can do



Connecting

Use the people and places nearby



Investing

Put time, money, and attention in



Advocating

Ask schools the right questions

YOUR COMMITMENT

Which one will you focus on this month?

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Q&A

What questions do you have?

