MAYA Smart

How to Give Your Child a Smart Start

Maya Payne Smart

Author, *Reading for Our Lives*

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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).

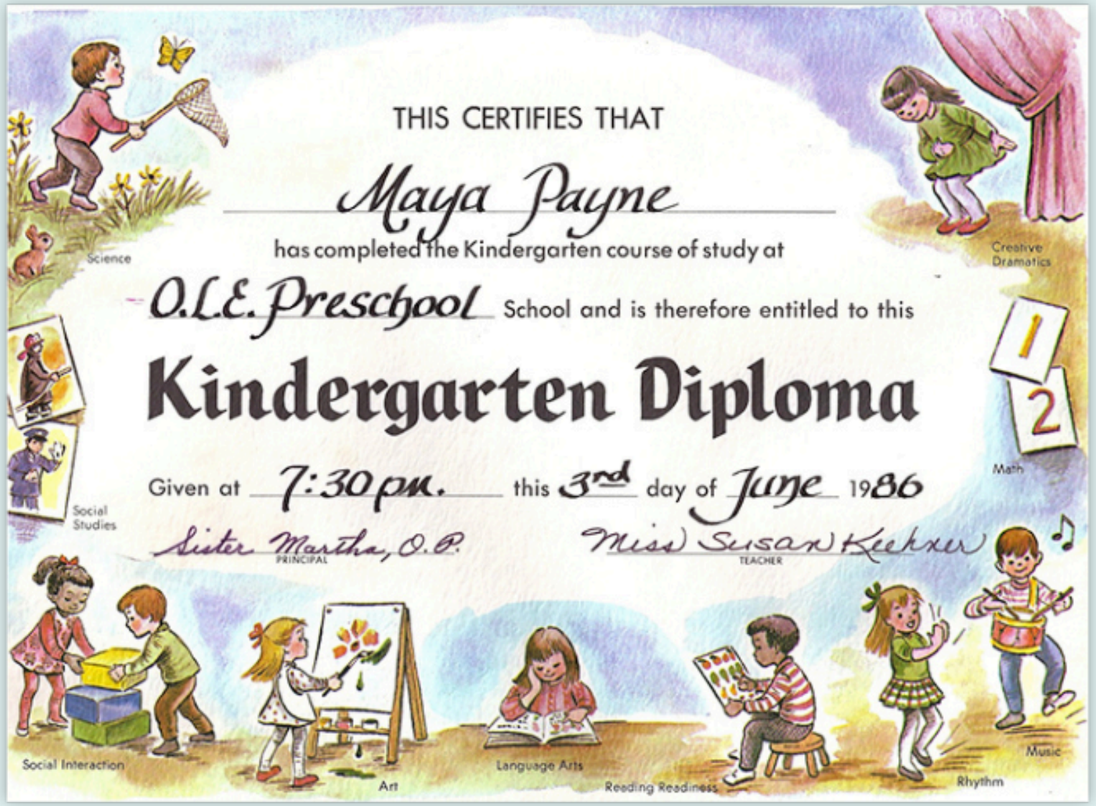
MayaSmart.com publishes new book lists, literacy activities, and free family resources every week for parents playing their dual roles as their children's first teachers and educational advocates.

Affiliated faculty Marquette University School of Education.

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

What are your earliest reading memories at home or school?

What **one word** would you use to describe learning to read?





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.**

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?**



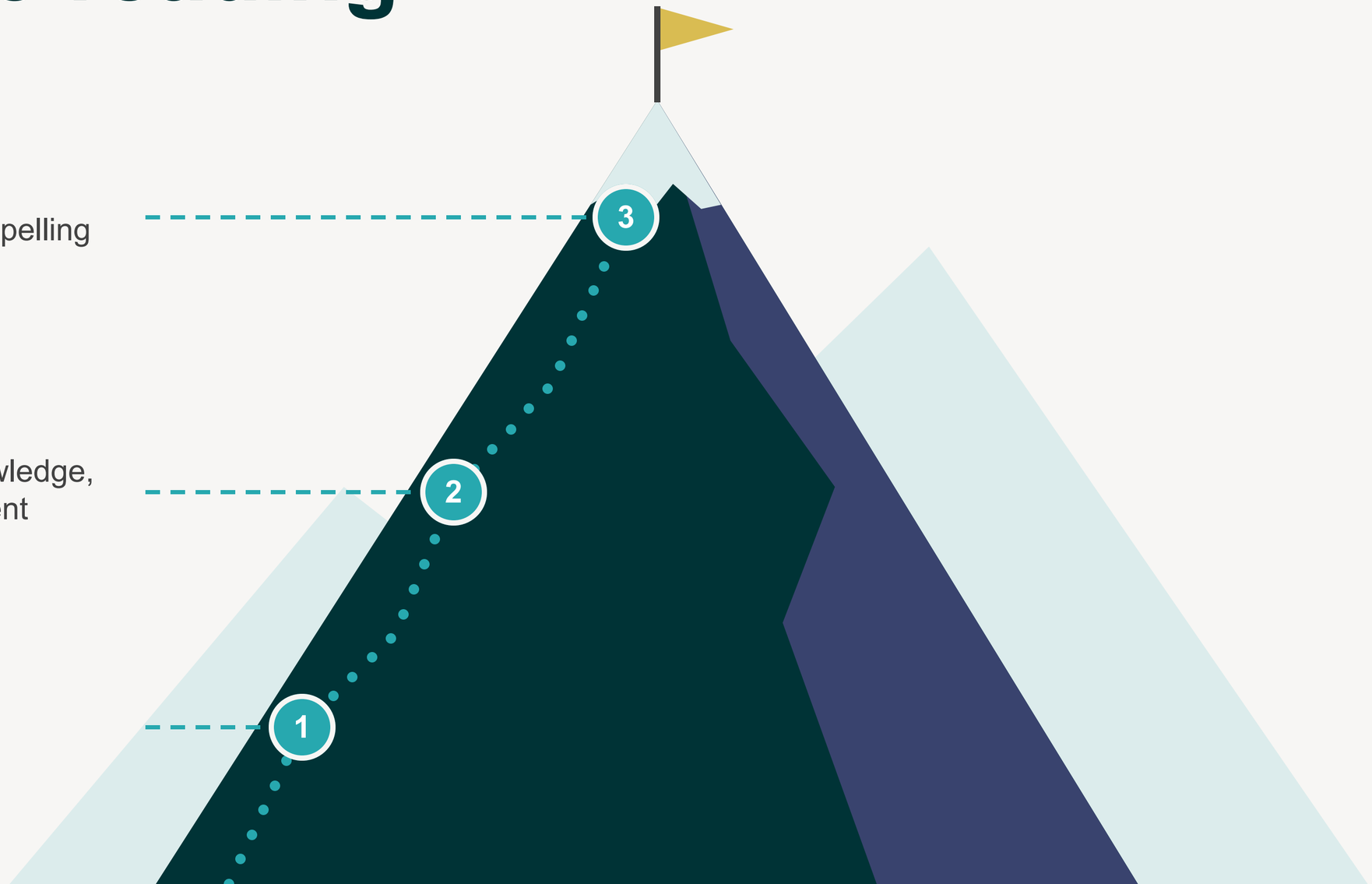
HOW IT DEVELOPS

The road to reading

K-3+
Phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling

PRESCHOOLERS
Print awareness, alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, emergent writing

BABIES AND TODDLERS
Listening and speaking



BY AGE AND STAGE

What to focus on when

Babies and toddlers

- Responsive talk
- Book handling

Preschoolers

- Alphabetic knowledge
- Phonological awareness

K-3+

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Spelling

At every age

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

SAMPLE SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Kindergarten

Type	Letters or patterns	Examples
Predictable consonants	**m, s, t, l; p, f, c (/k/), n; b, r, j, k; v, g (/g/), w, d; h, y, z, x**	him, napkin
Predictable short vowels	**/ă/, /ĭ/, /ŏ/, /ŭ/, /ĕ/ spelled with a, i, o, u, e**	wet, picnic
Long vowel sounds associated with single letters; open syllables in one-syllable words	**a, e, i, o, u**	me, he, we, be, so, no, hi
Consonant digraphs	**sh, ch, wh, th, ng**	chin, fish, then
Irregular spellings of high-frequency words		they, of, said, there

Source: Louisa C. Moats and Carol A. Tolman, LETRS Scope and Sequence (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

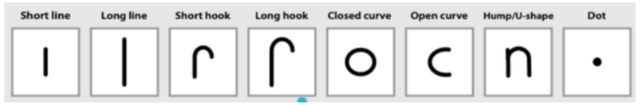
TALK about letters

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.

THE PARENT ROLE, IN FULL

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

YOUR COMMITMENT

Which one will you focus on this month?

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Q&A

What questions do you have?

