

A Quick Guide

to the Fitzroy Readers



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by Nicholas Berryman, English teacher at Fitzroy Community School employing the **FITZROY METHOD** as the core literacy curriculum

English is a **phonic** language. Put simply, this means that letters have **sounds**, words are formed by combinations of these letters/sounds, and reading is the **sounding out** (decoding) of these combinations.

Interestingly, the English language has only 26 letters, but at least 44 sounds. To make all the sounds required, some letters are joined together to make **new sounds**. We call these special combinations of 2 or more letters **digraphs**.

Reading therefore involves the learning of these **rules** of spelling/pronunciation and the **exceptions** to those rules. The Fitzroy Readers teach these rules and the exceptions in a gradual and systematic

way, using special stories with a limited vocabulary. This way, we can introduce the knowledge to children one step at a time. Just as we teach Maths one step at a time.

them. They know these stories have been written especially for them to be able to read.

The Fitzroy Readers provide children with the

necessary tools to quickly become successful readers of English. The Fitzroy Method works because children thrive on success.

The alternative is to learn each word as a unique block of letters – a task

which, given the huge number of words in English, is like climbing a mountain with no peak. Too many children are demoralised by constant failure. This “immersion” approach also leads to guessing incorrectly and inaccurate reading habits.

RE: THE NAPLAN

The test-bed school for the Fitzroy Readers, *Fitzroy Community School**, is rated **first in Reading** for the entire state of Victoria (with 1834 primary schools). and in the top .1% of Australia.

(2012 results, released in 2013)

* The Fitzroy School does not select children for enrolment and has all children participate in the NAPLAN tests.

This common-sense approach makes sense to children – it makes English make sense. The somewhat “silly” very early stories (with their very limited vocabulary) are appreciated by children because **they can read**

Each of the Fitzroy Readers is based around the teaching of a **sound**. The first 5 Readers focus on the **basic vowel sounds (a, e, i, o, u)**. Additional practice of these key vowel sounds is then given in the following few readers, which do not contain a new sound. This review provides extra practice in the initial stages of reading, consolidates the phonic method, and builds the foundations for the successful reading of many other sounds.

The next Readers are focussed around the teaching of a **digraph** – for example, the sound that **oo** makes in **too, moon**, etc. This, our first such rule, is taught in reader 9. From reader 12 onwards, each reader teaches another one of these spelling rules (**ch, ar, all, ay**, etc). Sometimes, 2 or 3 digraphs are taught in the higher readers where students are already reading competently.

Before beginning the Readers, it is vital that students know the **basic sounds** of the letters: the **a** in **apple**, **b** in **bat**, **c** in **cat**, etc. To teach the letters –

and in particular their **sounds** – we have created the **Alphabet Book** and the **Fitzroy Sounds** package (which includes folders for each letter and an audio CD with a little song for each letter **sound**).

The fact that the letter **c** also makes another sound – the **c** in **ice** – is taught in a later Reader. [The letter **c** sounds like **s** when followed by **e, i** or **y**.]



To create a sense of accomplishment for beginner students, we can begin them on the first Reader once they have learned the sounds of 13 letters. This allows students to get on with reading early and experience success. It also makes the task feel more manageable.

The second reader requires students to learn the sounds of a further 4 letters. In this way,

students are able to progress in reading before they have learnt the whole alphabet or completed the Alphabet Book. Reading is something they do – something they know they can do.

Students need to understand that words are made up of **sounds put together**, e.g. the word **cat** is made up of the three letter sounds, **c-a-t**. As noted, the readers focus on the **sounds** that letters (and later, digraphs) make. In reading, the **sound** a letter (or digraph) makes is more important than the **name** of the letter (“ay”, “bee”, “see”, etc).

The difference between the **name** of a letter and the basic **sound** of a letter must be made clear to students. At the beginner stage, we explain this by showing a picture of a cat to our students, naming it a “cat” and then asking what sound a cat makes. The students will reply, “Meow.” “Cat” is the **name** and “meow” is the **sound**.

We explain that letters also have a **name** and a

sound, and it is this **sound** that is the key to reading. At this early stage, we say the **sound** of each letter – and we ask students to utter the sounds. Rather than say “see”, “ay”, “tee” (the names of the letters), we say **c-a-t** (the sounds of the letters). To make the sound **c** for example, begin to say *cat* without saying *at*. Similarly, **a** from *apple* and **t** from *tent*.





Before reading the first reader, it is advisable to practise putting some sounds together. The back of the Alphabet Book contains some pre-reading exercises. These exercises contain mainly pictures, but have the students form basic two-sound words such as **on**, **in**, **at**, etc.

Once the student understands that it is the **sound** of the letter that is important, and that words are made up of these **sounds joined together**, the next step is to teach and then practise the **new sound** on which each new Reader is based. Each Reader will provide many words using its new sound.

All words contain **vowel sounds**, and for beginner readers a firm grasp of the basic vowel sounds is vital. That is why the early Readers focus on teaching and then reviewing these. Later Readers, as we have noted, focus on the **new sounds** that are made when letters are joined together, e.g. **oo** as in **moon**, **ch** as in **chip** (the digraphs), and the alternative sound that a letter can make: e.g., the **c** in **ice**, the **y** in **my**, etc.

Completing Words

See the picture, say the word, write in the missing letters.

 _ _ m	 _ _ t	 _ _ n
 _ _ g	 _ _ t	 _ _ t
 _ _ t	 _ _ g	 _ _ t
 _ _ n	 _ _ d	 _ _ t
 _ _ g	 _ _ g	 _ _ t

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As many teachers, schools, parents and students desire even greater practice and consolidation

at this crucial early stage, a second set of Readers, the 1x -10x set, mirrors the first set, but has a higher degree of difficulty through more and longer words (though no additional knowledge of sounds is required to read these).

There are, of course, words that are exceptions in spelling: e.g., **was**, **of**, **the**, etc. We term such words **special words** (also called **sight words**) and incorporate a few of these into most readers. The Fitzroy Readers contain the fifty most common special words and many others, which, together with the basic **sounds** and **digraphs**, enable students to read a vast body of written English.

The Fitzroy Readers are designed to be used in conjunction with the **Fitzroy Word Skills** work books. These support writing, spelling, comprehension and grammar. Each Word Skills book contains a number of activity sheets (7 to 14) that relate to each reader. The A sheet for each Reader focuses on the **sound** of that Reader.

The B sheet reinforces the **special words**.

Some words are **special words** when first encountered (e.g., **too** in Reader 7), but become **sounding words** later when a new digraph has been learned (in this case **oo** as in **moon**, introduced in Reader 9). These words turn out to be **not-so-special words**.

[At Fitzroy Community School, we alert the students that such words are **not so special** and that there is a rule for them which they will learn later. Such information seems to interest and engage them.]

Special words that never submit to a rule – words like **eye** or **yacht** – are called **very special words**.

The A and B worksheets in the Word Skills books provide the ideal preparation for the corresponding Reader. Thus prepared, students often require little or no assistance to read it through! The remaining worksheets can be tackled after reading the Reader.

Indeed, some sheets ask questions about the Reader story (comprehension activities).

If the Word Skills books are not used, it is important to go to the **back cover** of a new Reader, and rehearse the **new sound** and the **special words** before attempting to read the story.



It should be made clear that **special words**, which do not follow the rules we have learned, **cannot be sounded out** as other words are. These words need to be learned by sight and simply read out.

After a Reader and its Word Skills sheets have been mastered, we recommend some **dictation**. Say aloud a

sentence that by now they should be able to read and spell. Ask them to write it down.

The order we recommend for the Readers is 1-6, and then 1x-6x (as these Readers practise the 5 basic vowel sounds and do not contain any digraphs). After these have been completed, we

recommend Readers 7-10 then 7x-10x.

After this, the journey has begun. The method is the same all the way through the remaining Readers. Having completed Reader 60, they will have a high standard of early secondary English. This will prepare them well for secondary subjects.

* * *

When teaching little fingers to write, we do not teach the letters in alphabetical order. We teach the straight-line letters first (**l, i, t**, etc.) before the curved letters (**o, c, a, s**, etc). This helps students to develop their fine-motor skills with letters that are easier to write. □

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