Florida Center for Reading Research
Wilson Reading System

What is the Wilson Reading System?

The *Wilson Reading System* is a highly structured reading and writing program that serves as an intervention and helps 2nd – 12th grade struggling readers learn the structure of words and language by directly instructing students to decode and encode (spell) fluently. The program was originally developed for students who have dyslexia, but has been expanded to target the needs of students who are below grade level in reading. Level A uses age appropriate reading material for younger or ESL students, while Level B uses age appropriate reading material for older students.

Based on the Orton-Gillingham multisensory philosophy and principles, the *Wilson Reading System* provides a well organized, incremental, and cumulative 12-step system. Steps one through six provide students with the basics for decoding and encoding to create a solid foundation before moving on. Steps 7 through 12 focus more on advanced word analysis, vocabulary development, comprehension, and metacognition. The *Wilson Reading System* provides a plan in which students receive instruction in: learning to hear sounds; manipulating color-coded sound, syllable, and word cards; performing finger-tapping exercises to assist in phonemic awareness; writing dictated words and sentences; reading aloud; and paraphrasing selections they read, and which are read to them. Students receive direct reinforcement and instructional feedback based on their individual performances and do not proceed to the next step until they have met each step's criteria as each step builds upon the one before.

There are two models of implementation for the *Wilson Reading System*. The intervention model incorporates the use of small group instruction taught by either a remedial reading teacher or regular classroom teacher for four or five days each week during the regular school day. The intensive model provides those students who have been diagnosed with a language learning disability with tutoring or small group instruction provided by a Wilson certified instructor. The lessons are fast-paced with continuous interaction between teacher and student. Each lesson can be completed in 55 to 90 minutes.

The scope and sequence emphasizes six common types of syllables in which sounds are taught as they relate to these fundamental syllable types. The first two steps emphasize skills in phonemic segmentation and blending by working with the phonemes of monosyllabic words. By using sound cards, the student learns a "sound-tapping" procedure where he learns to segment sounds within words. For example, in teaching the word "cat", three letter-cards representing the three sounds in the word are placed in front of the student. Because a student is taught to say each sound while tapping a different finger to his or her thumb, a student would begin by tapping his index finger to his thumb as he says /c/, followed by tapping the middle finger to his thumb as he says /a/, and then tapping his ring finger to his thumb as he says /t/. Finally, the student says the word as he drags his thumb across the three fingers.

The *Wilson Reading System* offers sets of teacher and student materials in standard, deluxe, and starter kit models as well as additional support material through an online resource. Student materials include readers, workbooks, class and group sets. Instructor materials include manuals, dictation books, rules notebook, sound cards, word cards, syllable cards, group cards, and videos. The Wilson Assessment of Decoding and Encoding (WADE) is a criterion-referenced assessment that can be used for pre and posttesting purposes, as well as a placement and pacing guide. The WADE measures sound production of graphemes in isolation, fluent decoding and encoding (spelling) of phonetically regular words and high frequency irregular words.

How is the Wilson Reading System aligned with Current Reading Research?

The *Wilson Reading System* provides extensive instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The unique "sound tapping" system helps students learn to differentiate the phonemes in a word in order to apply the decoding and encoding skills learned. This technique is used for both segmenting and blending sounds.

Phonics instruction in the *Wilson Reading System* is developmentally appropriate, and the presentation of sounds and syllables is controlled beginning with initial phonemes, short vowels, and double consonants. After students succeed at reading and spelling words with three sounds, they then move on to words with four sounds, then five, and so on. Polysyllabic words are introduced in the third step when students are taught to segment words into syllables. From the beginning, students learn sight words from lists that correspond with each lesson and write these sight words in their "rules notebook" for review later. Additionally, students read and spell words in this notebook using the tapping or scooping technique to increase accuracy.

In order to build fluency, students are provided opportunities to read and reread the wordlists, sentences and decodable stories. Additionally, there are timed fluency drills for each step of the *Wilson Reading System* (provided on Wilson Academy online). Students use a penciling technique to develop phrasing and expression. They achieve fluency when they are able to read and spell the words easily and quickly without the use of tapping or guidance from the teacher.

Vocabulary words are introduced in isolation before concentrating on written text. A review of each previous lesson's vocabulary words is included in all lessons. All text is controlled in order for students to master decoding and encoding.

Comprehension is taught from the beginning through visualization techniques that students use during reading from controlled text. By breaking the story into smaller units, teachers show students how to link words with a picture in their minds using the think aloud procedure. Students then are asked to replay the story in their heads while one student retells the story in detail. To help develop comprehension skills at a higher level than the students' decoding work, the teacher also reads aloud other material provided by the students or teacher such as newspapers, magazines, and short stories encouraging the same process of visualization and retelling techniques. Wilson Academy online provides a current event news story each week that is written at both an enriched level (to read to students) and a decodable level (for students to read independently). These stories are other sources of text to use while implementing these comprehension techniques.

Wilson Language Training provides several levels of professional development. A two or three-day overview workshop is designed to introduce participants to the program. After completing this workshop, individuals are able to use the program but are not considered "trained" as a Wilson certified tutor. The two-day overview is a prerequisite to the Wilson Academy online community membership which provides resources, animated demonstrations of key concepts and procedures, threaded discussions and live chats with a Wilson trainer. A comprehensive online course worth 6 graduate credits is also available. Follow-up site visits can be arranged for both intervention and intensive models of implementation. Certification in Level I (Wilson steps 1-6) requires the two day overview and one year of additional training that includes a supervised practicum. Level II certification requires the above and also involves a one-year course for steps 7 – 12 and advanced group instruction. Wilson recommends that school districts develop in-district Wilson trainers. These individuals receive ongoing support and training material from Wilson.

Research Support for the Wilson Reading System

The Wilson Reading System was introduced in 1988. Its instructional content and design focus on a series of steps and subskills of which the complex act of reading is composed. Each skill of every step is thoroughly learned before the introduction of the next skill.

There is a beginning level of research support for the *Wilson Reading System*. One study referred to in the Wilson materials involves data collected by Wilson Language Training that was analyzed by Dr. Frank Wood of Wake Forest University. At several sites across the United States, Wilson tutors collected data from pre- and post-tests during training. Data were collected from 374 students across a two-year period from 1999 to 2001. The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test (1998) was used to collect data on student performance. The mean age of the participants was 10 – 11 years. The results revealed several findings: (1) pre-/post-test differences were statistically significant on the following subtests and cluster scores: word identification, word attack, passage comprehension, basic skills cluster, and total reading cluster; (2) students with low IQ benefited from remediation as well as did higher IQ students; (3) the most severe group saw greater improvement in their Total Reading Cluster than did the least severe group; and (4) students at all grade levels from grade 3 through grade 8 benefited from remediation. The major limitation of these findings, of course, is that the tests were administered by those who taught the children and thus may be inflated by unconscious supports provided by the teachers. The study also did not employ a control or comparison group, thus it is not possible to attribute the gains directly to the Wilson instruction. A strength of the results, however, is that the data were reported as standard scores, which only improve if the student actually makes reading gains that are greater than those expected during the period of instruction. That is, standard scores indicate the level of the child's reading skill relative to a large norming group. If these scores improve, it means the student is becoming a better reader relative to average readers, or is "closing the gap" in reading skill.

In 1995, O'Connor and Wilson investigated the effectiveness of the Wilson Reading System with learning disabled students in grades 3-12. The study used a pre- and post-test design which involved 220 participants who had not shown progress with any of the other reading programs implemented or individual tutoring. In addition,

approximately 1/3 had been retained at least one grade. The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test-revised (1998) served as the instrument used to assess each student's reading performance. The *Wilson Reading System* was used to assess progress in spelling ability. The teachers who participated in the study attended a two-day workshop at the beginning of the school year and were observed at least 5 times throughout the year. After completing approximately 62 lessons, the participants were given a posttest from which comparisons were made with the pretest indicating that significant gains were made in word attack, comprehension, and total reading. This study has similar limitations and strengths as the one previously reported.

Our conclusion from reviewing current research on the *Wilson Reading System* is that it is consistent with the idea that the program can be used effectively to help "close the gap" in reading skills for struggling readers. However, the research designs in these studies were very weak, so this support must be regarded as tentative at present. The *Wilson Reading System* is one of four intervention programs for struggling readers that was determined to have sufficient preliminary evidence of effectiveness to be included in a large scale, randomized control trial of reading interventions for older students. The results from this study, organized by the Haan foundation, and referred to as the Power4Kids initiative, will be available at the beginning of 2005. Although present empirical support for the *Wilson Reading System* is limited, the content and instructional design of the program is aligned with current reading research.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Wilson Reading System*:
- The instructional design is explicit and systematic.
- The scope and sequence is detailed and logical.
- Each lesson is planned carefully with a timed guideline to follow.
- The lessons are fast paced with multisensory instruction.
- The strong professional development component aims to ensure fidelity of delivery.

Weaknesses of *Wilson Reading System:*
- None were noted.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Wilson Reading System?

District	Phone
Alachua	352-955-7880
Broward	754-321-2600
Collier	239-377-0212
Duvall	904-390-2115
Martin	772-219-1200
Okeechobee	863-462-5000
St. Lucie	772-429-3925

For More Information

www.wilsonlanguage.com

References

O'Connor, J.R. & Wilson, B.A. (1995). Effectiveness of the Wilson Reading System used in public school training. In McIntyre, C. & Pickering, J. (eds.) Clinical Studies of Multisensory Structured Language Education. Salem, OR: International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council.

Wood, F. (2002). Data analysis of the Wilson Reading System. Published in Wilson Literacy Solutions: Evidence of Effectiveness.

Woodcock, R.W. (1998). Woodcock Reading Mastery Test- Revised. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

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Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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