

A Neuroscientist Explains Why So Many Children Can't Read

By now we've probably all heard the statistics. Just a little over [1 in 3](#) American 4th graders are able to read proficiently.

Unfortunately, that statistic doesn't get better as time goes by. Consider the following statistics:

- [14%](#) of adults can't read.
- Only [13%](#) of adults can read at a proficient level.
- [28%](#) of adults didn't read a book in the last year.
- [50%](#) of adults can't read a book written at an 8th grade level.

So how did we get to this point?

The answer to that question has been debated through "the reading wars" for years. In brief, the "reading wars" pit those who favor phonics instruction against those who favor the whole word method approach to reading.

Professor Mark Seidenberg would place himself in the former camp as a phonics advocate. In his new book, [Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It](#), Professor Seidenberg explains how his work in psychology and neuroscience has led him to believe that giving children the tools to read (through the medium of phonics) is so essential.

But as Professor Seidenberg goes on to explain, getting phonics into the hands of the children isn't as easy as it sounds. The hurdle blocking the way is the education system:

"Educators are deeply immersed in their own worldview and well defended against incursions from outside. The education side focuses on 'literacy' (literacy practices, cultural

attitudes toward literacy, multiple types of literacy including ones that do not involve print), not reading. The scientific perspective is seen as sterile and reductive, incapable of capturing the ineffable character of the learning moment or the chemistry of a successful classroom. ...

Education as a discipline has placed much higher value on observation and hands-on experience..."

Do you think Seidenberg is right? Have feel-good practices and culturally sensitive attitudes replaced the factual tools kids need in order to read? If so, will parents have to [take things into their own hands](#) and do the teaching if they want their children to become readers?

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