
This paper examines ten alphabet books using content analysis to determine whether the books would be effective in teaching pre-reading and alphabet skills. The criteria were formed from research in the subjects of cognitive development, early literacy, and previous studies on alphabet books. Though few of the books were found to be effective teaching tools, most of the books could still serve some purpose, whether as a read-aloud, an entertaining read, or for an older child to read to himself. The success of these books in teaching pre-reading and alphabet concepts greatly depends on how adults present the information to children, and adult guidance can oftentimes make up for what a book lacks. This paper is intended as a guide to help parents, guardians, librarians, and educators select alphabet books to read to children.

Headings:

Alphabet books

Children’s reading – Educational aspects

English language – Alphabet – Juvenile literature
ALPHABET BOOKS AS A TOOL FOR TEACHING PRE-READING SKILLS AND ALPHABET AWARENESS

by

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A Master’s paper submitted to the faculty of the School of Information and Library Science of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April 2010

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Introduction

Across the board, educators and parents insist that reading to children will help them do better in school. Indeed, there is a prevailing opinion that reading a child stories and having books around the house will give them a head start and make school easier. Why do people believe this? Because study after study has shown a correlation between knowing letter names, phonemic awareness, and pre-reading skills in preschool and high reading achievement scores at the end of first grade.¹ When children know letter names before formal instruction begins, it is a good predictor of how much they will achieve in reading later.² However, fair or unfair, many times “knowledge of phoneme identity...[is] commonly assumed, rather than taught, in early instruction.”³ Not having phonemic awareness or pre-reading skills, or not being exposed to books will not doom a child by any means. Children are very adaptable. These statistics are just to say that it is good for children to have some background knowledge of books and letters before they begin to read. Then, learning to read will be easier.

What are pre-reading skills? Before children learn how to read, they learn how books “work,” so to speak. They learn that we read from left to right, from top to

¹ Byrnes, *Cognitive Development*, 175.
³ Murray, “Reading Alphabet Books,” 308.
bottom, from front to back, and that we turn one page at a time. They learn that they read the entire contents of a page before they go to the next one. Children have already learned that a spoken word such as “cat” carries meaning and corresponds to an actual thing. Picture books introduce children to the idea that squiggles on a page (words) also carry meaning, and that they correspond to a sound and a picture.\(^4\) Knowing this background information about a book is essential for when it comes time to learn how to read.

Alphabet books, by their very nature, introduce children to letter names and have them practice the alphabet. Alphabet picture books espouse the idea that the words on a page are composed of smaller elements that sound a certain way (letters), and different words have similar sounds within them, such as the hard “k” sound in “cat” and “cup.” This is phonemic awareness. Children who do not know these basic facts about reading soon fall behind when they reach grade school. Sometimes adults forget that children need to understand these basic things and that this knowledge is the first step on the long journey to literacy. Learning how to read involves complex skills and stages and takes time.

I argue that alphabet picture books, when read with an adult, can help children with their pre-reading and alphabet skills. However, not all alphabet books are created equal, and some books are better at teaching skills than others. An adult must be a smart selector of these books. This paper examines ten alphabet books and determines if the books would be good teaching tools. It is intended as a guide for

\(^4\) Koralek and Collins, “How Most Children Learn to Read.”
parents, guardians, librarians, and educators for selecting alphabet books to read to children. In addition, I argue that the adult’s role in reading the books to the children cannot be overemphasized. The adult can compensate for any deficiencies in the book, recognize teachable moments within the books, and stop and ask thought-provoking questions to the child that aids in comprehension.

Scope

In this paper, I review ten books using content analysis based on a set of criteria I have formed about the words, text, and illustrations of these books. The book citation, a short annotation, and my findings are in the “Results” section, along with a table of the criteria and how the books scored. These are all popular children’s books that are found in the School of Information and Library Science Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In the reviews, I make suggestions for how parents and educators can use these books to teach pre-reading skills and the alphabet to children. The criteria I have formed are based on the research topics of cognitive development, early literacy, and alphabet books. For my selection criteria, I picked only picture books that are written in English. All the picture books here are fiction. The books are alphabet books, which present the letters with words that begin with that letter. Five books have plots, while five of the books only contain the letters and illustrations. I avoided board books for very young children, and I also avoided longer alphabet books to attempt to keep the books on the same level. I also did not select informational alphabet books, like *The ABCs of Asthma*, which is more an information book about asthma than the alphabet, or *T is for Tar Heel,*
which is mainly about North Carolina. Although young children enjoy rhyming books, none of the books that I selected rhyme. Two books, *ABC* and *Anno’s Alphabet*, are from 1974. Two books were published in the 1990s, but the other books are from the 21st century.

**Literature Review**

To understand the developmental stages of young children and how they learn to read, basic information must be known about cognitive development, early literacy, and how alphabet books help children learn the alphabet. It is important to remember every child is different, and children reach different stages at varied ages. Adults can encourage children to participate in early literacy, but ultimately, children set their own pace.

**Cognitive Development**

Understanding what children are like when they are three to five years old is very important because it helps adults teach them better. Educators and parents can improve pre-reading strategies based on cognitive development to better suit the child.

According to the Swiss psychologist Piaget, when children are at preschool-age, they are in the preoperational stage of development. They are in this stage from around eighteen months of age to about age six or seven. In the preoperational stage, children can think in a representational or symbolic way, like when they draw pictures of things or play with toy telephones. They have a more developed sense of
past, present, and future. Children under the age of five tend to group things based on perceptual similarity. For instance, children are more likely to group cows and goats together because they have four legs. This is why it is important to look for accurate drawings in alphabet books so as not to confuse children. Piaget also said that this group can only think of one thing at a time and have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy. In general, children grow out of this by age five or six.5

Concepts, like the alphabet, shapes, or counting, are a part of development. Piaget defines concepts as “forms of understanding that involve relations among things or aspects of things.”6 This conceptual ability is only present in older children and develops slowly over time. I argue that, with alphabet books, there are three elements of understanding: the letter, such as “B,” the word selected for that letter, such as “boat,” and the corresponding illustration on the page. Behind these three elements, there are three main levels of concepts: 1) that the word on the page relates to the picture, 2) that the first letter of the word on the page corresponds to the first letter of the word in the picture, and 3) that the first letter of the word corresponds to the letter presented on the page.

According to Piaget, children this age are concrete thinkers. Therefore, for 3 and 4 year olds, it is best to steer clear of abstract concepts and abstract pictures in picture books. This might confuse them. Three and four-year-olds are egocentric


6 Ibid., 15.
thinkers as well, and they rely on their senses to perceive the world. They have limited experience with the world and enjoy rhymes and word play. Young children also remember less than older children; because of their limited experience with the world, they are less able to connect new experiences with prior knowledge. They also process information slower than older children. In addition, they overestimate their ability at remembering things.

By the time children reach ages five and six, they are still concrete thinkers, but their thinking is less egocentric. They have a better grasp of cause and effect and a better sense of reality.

When teaching pre-reading concepts and alphabet awareness, the best thing to do is rely on rehearsal with young children—reinforcing, repeating, and practicing skills and concepts to strengthen their memories. Educators can also try elaboration—in the middle of a story, ask the child simple questions about the picture and try relate it to his or her limited experiences. For instance, if the picture is of a dog, ask, “Does this picture look like your dog?” or “Have you ever seen a dog that looks like this?” Ask the child about his or her preferences—if he or she loves animals or trucks, select books about these things. Then, a child’s interest in the book is heightened, increasing arousal and motivation.

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7 Cohen, Developmental Considerations, 3.

8 Byrnes, Cognitive Development, 48.

9 Ibid., 75.

10 Ibid., 4.
Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, also emphasized the social nature of learning with his concept of the “zone of proximal development.” The zone of proximal development represents the difference between a child’s actual knowledge and skills and his potential knowledge and skills that he can achieve with the help of someone at a “higher level” of knowledge. Adults are critical to children’s emergent literacy because they can help children go from their actual skill level (skills the child has mastered and can carry out independently) to their potential skill levels. Adult provides a “scaffold” of support for the child when looking at alphabet books with the child, showing the child skills and strategies that the child will later use independently.  

Elements of Emergent Literacy

The building blocks of literacy start earlier than most people probably realize and involve several aspects other than just reading. Having a grasp of these concepts will help adults understand what contributes to pre-reading success and how they can help their child with these steps.

Language and literacy are directly linked, since words on a page are representations of our spoken language. Children learn language from their first months in this world. Parents notice that babies go from cooing to babbling; this occurs around six months of age. At this point, babies are learning the phonology, or sounds, of the

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11 Griffith, *Literacy for Young Children*, 3.
native language spoken by the babies’ culture. Sounds not in the native language disappear from babies’ babbling.\(^\text{12}\)

By age one, children begin linking spoken words to meanings and begin to recognize that certain words correspond to familiar people and things. Around eighteen months of age, children learn a new word at a rate of one every two hours. At age two, most children know one or two thousand words. Children hear and tell stories and learn to follow verbal commands, such as when doing the hokey pokey. Indeed, being exposed to language directly relates to literacy.

As stated in the introduction, young children realize that words are made up of discreet sounds. They begin to notice that different words have the same sounds in them. Hence, they begin to notice alliteration.\(^\text{13}\) They play at writing lists and imitate their parents or caregivers in writing. They learn that text carries meaning when they watch adults point to words while they read to them.

When looking at books, the child “relies heavily on the contextual information provided by the pictures in the text.”\(^\text{14}\) When children get older, they start to learn the alphabet and slowly learn to pick out letters in their names or other words. Alliteration awareness, combined with a child’s reliance on contextual information, makes alphabet books, if done well, a good choice for children at this level.

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^\text{13}\) Koralek and Collins, “How Most Children Learn to Read.”

\(^\text{14}\) Moats, “Stages of Reading Development.”
There is some research that suggests that letter knowledge and phonemic awareness depend on how many synapses have formed in areas of the brain such as the frontal lobe, and whether these regions of the brain have matured enough to form synaptic connections to neighboring areas. Children develop these synapses at different ages. Sometimes the synapses are not fully formed because children have not been exposed to a sufficient amount of words and letters. It is important to be patient with children and to continue to expose children to books, stories, other sources of print, and verbal communication.

Alphabet Books and Pictures

People have different opinions about whether (and how much) alphabet books are able to teach pre-reading skills and the alphabet. In her *School Library Journal* article, Ann Carlson argues that alphabet books are not effective teaching tools because young children do not have adequate phonemic awareness yet. Furthermore, letters in the English language have many sounds, not just one. For example an “E” can sound short like in “egg” or long like in “eel.” Carlson posits this might confuse children. Carlson states that guided reading with an adult, or “ritualized dialogue,” is the most important thing to come out of reading concept books to children. I agree that the role of the adult in teaching concepts in a picture book is extremely important; most of what children get out of a book depends on guidance from adults. However, I think that alphabet books do get children thinking

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about individual sounds like “B” when they see words with similar sounds on the page such as “ball” and “boat.” They start to make the connection between these sounds, phonemes, and letters.

Murray, Stahl, and Ivey discuss the importance of phonemic awareness as a stepping stone to reading and posit “researchers are near consensus on the usefulness of phoneme awareness for those who begin to read.” They studied whether children’s phonemic awareness increased through alphabet book read-alouds (when compared to regular story books or letter-name books). Though they found minimal support for this hypothesis, they felt that alphabet books are probably beneficial to children and acknowledged that the results they found were heavily dependent on the instruction styles of the teachers. Their studies also focused on classroom settings rather than one-on-one interactions and admitted that instruction “may be much less likely in a class of 18 wiggling pre-kindergarteners than with a single child on her mother’s lap.”

This paper focuses on one-on-one interactions between adults and children rather than classroom settings.

Barbara A. Bradley and Jennifer Jones studied teachers’ instructional styles while they read aloud different genres of alphabet books to students. They emphasize the importance of adults in sharing books with children; they argue that what children get out of the book depends on what the adult points out. They caution against using themed or informational alphabet books, or using books with complicated

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17 Murray, “Reading Alphabet Books.”
plots when teaching the alphabet, because discussion of these books usually ended up revolving around plot.¹⁸

Patricia Roberts champions alphabet books in *Alphabet Books as a Key to Language Patterns* and compiled a 263-page bibliography based on the belief that alphabet books are effective in teaching the alphabet. Not only that, but she argues that alphabet books can be used to teach other language patterns such as alliteration and rhyme as well.¹⁹ She does not address the assumption that alphabet books are effective teaching tools, though, or talk about why she believes this.

Jane Deacle cites a study that found that alphabet picture books can help with concepts like letter orientation—that “M” is different than “W” and that “q” is different than “p.”²⁰ This is another important stepping-stone in pre-reading.

Warner and Weiss cite a study that found that children learn the difference between a letter and a word and awareness of specific features of letters through alphabet books. They say that alphabet books are good for teaching both pre-reading skills and the concept of caring for books as a valuable possession. One wonders how the latter concept is unique to alphabet books, though. Like others, they also emphasize the parents’ crucial role in introducing children to the love of books and teaching children the alphabet before the children begin school.²¹

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Some people argue that teaching children the names of letters, as opposed to the sounds of letters, oftentimes confuses children. For instance, the letter name “C” sounds like “see,” but it makes a “cuh” sound. Many letter names, such as “B,” “S,” and “K,” contain the sound they stand for, while other letter names, such as “W” and “H,” do not. Other people, such as Rebecca Treiman, argue that children who are more familiar with letter names will recognize the connection between letter names, pronunciations, and the correspondence between letters and sounds.\textsuperscript{22} Griffith says that knowing letter names is a precursor to the understanding of the alphabetic principle (that letters stand for sounds).\textsuperscript{23}

In terms of pictures, Nodelman argues that “the intended audience of picture books is by definition inexperienced—in need of learning how to think about their world, how to see and understand themselves and others. Consequently, picture books are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture.” Illustrations are an integral part of reinforcing concepts and for understanding what occurs in books.

This article also says that children “scan a picture with equal attention to all parts.” Adults will look at a picture of a woman in front of a barn, recognize the woman is the main subject, and treat everything else as background information. Young children do not do this and assign equal importance to everything in the picture.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Byrnes, \textit{Cognitive Development}, 180.

\textsuperscript{23} Griffith, \textit{Literacy for Young Children}, 68.

\textsuperscript{24} Nodelman, “Decoding the Images.”
Therefore, it is important in alphabet picture books that the illustrations are not too complicated or elaborate. If they are, they will distract the child from the main letter-picture relationship.

Griffith also discusses the importance of illustrations in books, arguing they increase comprehension, entertain the reader (thereby keeping them engaged), and help readers "acquire meanings for words introduced in the story." Griffith emphasizes word and page layout. She says the layout should “enhance children’s ability to follow the text” by reading left-to-right, top-to-bottom, and only having a few words on each page. The font should be large and include easy-to-read letters.25

Methodology

The key to my methodology was translating these three areas of research into a set of criteria judging whether a book is good at teaching pre-reading and alphabet skills. After I made my criteria, I looked at Deacle’s listings of several professional criteria, as well as Bradley’s discussions of alphabet books, to make sure mine were not off base.

The table of the results is in the “Results” section. My criteria are as follows:

1. Are the sentences horizontal?

2. Is the font sans serif?

3. Are both lower case and upper case letters present?

25 Griffith, et. al., Literacy for Young Children, 134.
4. Do the words begin with the letter presented, and/or does the beginning of the word contain the sound of the letter?

5. Are the words that go with the letters broad categories of things, nothing too specific?

6. Are the words that go with the letters within the experience of a three to five-year-old?

7. Does the picture match the word on the page?

8. Are the images a realistic and accurate color?

9. Are the pictures clearly identifiable?

10. Are the pictures simple—nothing too cluttered or busy?

I included the first criteria about the text orientation and font because children in the pre-reading stage are also learning basic rules about the printed word. It might confuse children and they would not be able to recognize words and letters as easily if the text is written diagonally. Font that is sans serif, such as Arial, is easier to read than a more ornate serif font, such as Times; children would have an easier time identifying text that is simpler. I also wanted to make sure that the books contained capital and lower case letters so that children have a chance to see what both letters look like. These considerations are important conventions in our written language and rules that children have to learn.
It is also important that the words uniformly begin with the letter presented. Children might be confused if one letter presented were in the middle of the word instead of at the beginning of the word. Yopp & Yopp urge educators to make sure that the chosen words in alphabet books that correspond to the letters start with the sound of the letter when they are said aloud. For instance, “artist” or “ark” both begin with an “a,” but the word actually begins with an “r” sound when spoken, so it would be a poor choice in an alphabet book. Bradley & Jones point out that silent letters (“knight”) would be confusing as well.26

Likewise, children age three to five tend not to understand certain categories of things and only understand basic names. For instance, they only understand “horse,” not that a mare and a colt are types of horses. Also, if they see pictures of geese, nightingales, or woodpeckers, they are more likely to say “bird.”27 Having to explain that a nightingale is both a nightingale and a bird at the same time would confuse them and would take away from the alphabet lesson, so I considered it a detriment if alphabets books stray from basic categories. It is also important whether a word is within a child’s realm of experience. For this category, I consulted Dolch’s list of 95 common nouns that children should know by first grade (see the Appendix at the end of the paper).28 Children usually come across things like dogs, apples, birds, beds, etc. on a regular basis. Children might not have seen chickens, cows, giraffes, and other more exotic animals in person, but these animals are ever-


28 Dolch, “95 Nouns.”
present in other children’s books. They are less likely to be familiar with things like anvils or gondolas.

I included the criteria about color since children’s thinking is usually more concrete at ages three and four. I consider it an advantage if books stay away from inaccurate colors; presumably realistic colors would make the picture more identifiable.

Sometimes the relationship between the illustration and the word presented is not explicit. When reading an alphabet book, the child should be able to point to the picture and guess the word, or at least understand what is happening in the picture. If it is not clear what the word is based on the illustration, the book receives a “no” in this category.

I wanted to make sure the books have good visual aids that match the words given. If the pictures are clearly identifiable, the pictures are well drawn and the child could presumably identify what the artist is trying to portray. Pictures that are too busy, complicated, or have multiple images that don’t begin with that particular letter, like a deer on an “F” page, get a “no” in the category. This is important because of Nodelman’s point that young children pay attention to all parts of the picture equally. If too many things are in the picture, then this might be distracting and confusing to the child.

**Findings**

In this section, I discuss overarching themes in the results. Then I look at each book separately to discuss what the book does best and what the book lacks. I start with
the book that scored the highest and move to the book that scored the lowest in the criteria. This section contains a short summary of the books as well as specific examples from the books. The Table holds the results of the content analysis. “Y” means yes, the book meets the criteria. A blank space means the book does not meet the criteria.

Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Analysis of Pre-Reading Concepts and Alphabet Reinforcement</th>
<th>Anno’s Alphabet</th>
<th>Bad Kitty</th>
<th>Click Clack</th>
<th>ABC for You and Me</th>
<th>Kipper’s A to Z</th>
<th>Once Upon an A to Z</th>
<th>SuperHero ABC</th>
<th>Goodnight to Annie</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>Max’s ABC</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horizontal sentences</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sans-serif font</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper and lower case letters</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Words begin with letter</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad categories of words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word within experience</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture matches word/phrase</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Realistic colors</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures clearly identifiable</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures not busy or cluttered</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total criteria met</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of criteria met</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the most part, the books do not meet many of the criteria. *ABC for You and Me* meets nine out of ten criteria, followed by *Anno’s Alphabet* (eight out of ten) and then *Kipper’s A to Z* and *Max’s ABC* (seven out of ten). The six other books meet 50% or less of the criteria. All of the books scored the highest in the illustration sections. Nine of the books contain realistic colors of things, and children would be likely to discern what the pictures portray in eight of the books. For example, in *Goodnight to Annie*, the dogs are clearly dogs and would not be mistaken for any other kind of animal. Six of the books’ illustrations were simple enough to not obscure the main idea of the pictures. However, in half the books, children would probably not be able to guess what the word or plot is based on the picture. Usually the idea that the picture represents is too abstract or complicated. For instance, in *Max’s ABC*, Max’s sister says “EEeeeeeeek!” for “E,” but in the picture, she is holding a doll in one hand and pointing at Max with the other. An adult would need to read the child the text in order for them to know what the “E” stands for. As for pre-reading conventions, half the books abandon horizontal text and letter orientation at some point. Six books add serifs to the font, making them more difficult to discern, and half the books only contain the upper or lower case letter—not both.

Surprisingly, three of the books contain words that do not begin with the letter or use silent letters at the beginning of words. *Bad Kitty* uses “U” for “Rhubarb,” *Once Upon an A to Z* uses “X” for “Christmas,” and *SuperHero ABC* uses “K” for “Knight.” Only three of the books stay away from more specific categories of things and stick to simple names for things. For instance, most of the books chose to name types of boats like yacht or types of birds like kittiwakes. Six of the books selected words
that stay within a young child’s range of experience, while the rest selected more advanced words like “jaywalker” and “queried.”


In this book, each letter has its own page. The letters are at the top of the page, and the photograph is of a child with Down syndrome with the item that stands for the word. For instance, the “I” page contains a photograph of a small child eating ice cream. The photographs are therefore uncluttered, and the pictures always match the word.

*ABC for You and Me* met the most criteria and would be an effective teaching tool for the concept of the alphabet. It contains upper and lower case letters in the same place on every page, though the book contains a serif font. The photographs are concrete, and the pictures contain what is being described. For the most part, the book relies on broader categories and easily recognizable words such as “dog,” “orange,” and “sand,” although a child might say “blanket” when looking at the “Q” for “quilt” page. The words such as “kite” and “hug” would be easy for young people to guess. The words the authors chose are short, and it is easy to imagine a young person picking out the individual phonemes from these words. Furthermore, the photographs of children might make the book more engaging. This book met most of the criteria and would be a good pre-reading and alphabet teaching tool for young children.

ABC is the simplest book out of the ten. Each page contains one picture and both the upper and lower case letter. There is no text other than the letters. Like ABC for You and Me, ABC met the most criteria of the ten books. For the most part, ABC would be good to use when teaching children about the alphabet. The capital and lower case letters are in the same place on every page and are in a basic sans-serif font. The pictures all start with the letter presented. Most of the pictures, like the apple, bird, cat, and kangaroo, are within a child’s limited knowledge and are accurate colors. The pictures usually stay within broader categories. One that does not is the “Y” picture, which is a boat. Also, the “G” page is a goose, instead of a duck or a bird. Children would see these pictures and say “boat” and “bird,” rather than goose or yacht (especially because earlier they saw that “B” is for bird). Furthermore, the goose looks like a duck, and the yacht looks more like a sailboat. Therefore, I considered the pictures not easily identifiable. However, the book is consistent and simple and uses good examples like queen, robot, house, and moon that would reinforce the relationship between a spoken word and the letter on the page.


The left side of the page contains a large upper case letter, and the opposite page has one simple color illustration. There is no story or text other than the letter. Like *ABC, Anno’s Alphabet* is a simple book, and it met eight of the ten criteria. The letters in *Anno’s Alphabet* are large and easy to read, and some of the letters, such as “K” for
“kangaroo” and “C” for “clock,” would be easy for children to guess. The drawings and colors are realistic.

On the other hand, some of the pictures are old-fashioned. The fire truck on the “F” page looks like it is from the beginning of the 20th century. Children might have a harder time recognizing this image. The “N” is a nutcracker shaped like a man and holding a nut in its mouth. I cannot imagine that a child would guess “nutcracker” at seeing this picture. The “R” is for “rocking horse,” but the illustration runs the risk of being identified as simply “horse.”

Some choices are beyond a child’s realm of experience as well. An old fashioned typewriter is on the “T” page, and an anvil is on the “A” page. The book uses a more specific category in the case of a boat—“Y” for “yacht.” When looking at this book with a young child, the adult could ask the child what sound the letter makes or the name of the letter, and see if the child could name something about the picture that begins with that letter. This might be frustrating to some children, since there is no definite answer, but fun for others, since it allows for creativity. Still, the book ranked among the highest in the content analysis section because of the simplicity of the letters and illustrations.


The story follows Kipper, a dog, and his friend Arnold, a pig, through some exploring of bugs, animals, toys, and other things. A little bit of the story is advanced with each letter, and the pages contain many words that begin with that letter. For
example, the “G” page says, “Arnold was still wondering where the ant had gone, when a little green grasshopper jumped straight into his box. ‘Good!’ said Kipper. [G g] is for grasshopper.” The book meets seven of the ten criteria; unlike the books that scored higher, Kipper’s A to Z also manages to have a plot. The words are simple and within a child’s knowledge, such as ducks, elephants, frogs, juice, and zebras.

There is a problem with the categories, however. The book contains ants, caterpillars, grasshoppers, ladybugs, worms, and xugglybugs. However, “I” is for “insect.” All of these are types of insects, but children usually cannot comprehend that these things are insects and caterpillars or grasshoppers at the same time. I think the author should have used another word for “I” when using so many types of insects.

Some illustrations are a little cluttered and contain many things besides the alphabet item. For instance, the “I” page shows Kipper, Arnold, a box, and a zebra (Kipper tells the zebra it isn’t his turn yet, but I think this might confuse small children.) To be effective, I think all of the things in the picture should only start with “I.” The adult would have to be present to ask interactive questions such as, “can you find the caterpillar?” on the “C” page or “where is the ladybug?” on the “L” page since these drawings are relatively small on the page. However, since the pictures are large and clear, and since the story has a plot, it would be a good read-aloud. The book would also still be effective at teaching pre-reading skills, since it scored high on the text criteria.

It is Max’s birthday, but the ants escape from Max’s ant farm and cause much trouble. The story follows the alphabet, and for every letter (every set of pages), the words predominantly begin with that letter. The main letters are different colors, but they are always on the top outside corner of the page. The other text is on the bottom of the page, and when a word begins with the letter, the letter is in bold.

Like *Kipper’s A to Z*, Max’s ABC meets seven of the ten criteria and tells a story at the same time. The text is simple—the “J” page says, “Max jumped into the bath. The ants jumped into the bath, too.” All of the items featured in the book are within the child’s realm of experience, such as birthdays, ants, bathtubs, high chairs, toast, and vacuums. The only thing about the illustrations is that children would not be able to guess the letter or word from the pictures. For instance, Max is in his high chair is on the “S” page, and the ants are crawling up the chair leg. The story reads, “‘Sit still Max,’ said Ruby. ‘We are smarter than those ants.’”

Though the book meets the majority of criteria, the plot might be too complex to make *Max’s ABC* a good instructive alphabet book. Since children have a smaller working memory than adults, they would probably stop focusing on the words that start with the letter in order to pay attention to the plot. In this respect, the story in *Kipper’s A to Z* is simpler and therefore does a better job of concentrating on the alphabet. However, *Max’s ABC* would be a good simple storybook.

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29 Byrnes, Cognitive Development, 73.

*Click, Clack, Quackity-Quack* chronicles farm animals going on a picnic. There is one letter per page with phrases containing words and pictures that start with that letter. In this book, words are crooked in a few different places, so it received a no in the “horizontal sentences” category. A child would be familiar with almost everything in the book—ducks, rain, wagons, and sheep—except perhaps the typewriter that is featured.

The book only meets five of the criteria. Although the chickens in the book are within a child’s realm of experience and contained in Dolch’s list of nouns, the chickens are on the “animals awake” page. A child would almost certainly have to be corrected at this point because they would say “chicken” for “A.”

Like in *Max’s ABC*, the pictures are oftentimes not illustrative of the text, either. Two cows and a duck are under blankets in front of a typewriter on the “clickety-clack” page. Children would not be able to guess that this picture represents this phrase or the letter “C.” The same goes for mice with the umbrellas (“tippity-toe”) and the worm (“jumpity-jump”). I did not consider the pictures identifiable because in one illustration, the goat looks too much like a cow. When children reach the “G” page, they would probably say “cow,” in which case the alphabet lesson would be lost until the adult corrected the child.

While this might be a fun read in general, *Click, Clack, Quackity-Quack* would not be a good alphabet teaching tool. There are too many items in every illustration—for “Q”
(“Quackity-Quack!”), there is a wagon, an umbrella, a picnic basket, a duck, and mice in the picture. Therefore, this book would not be useful to reinforce concepts or the relations between words, pictures, and letters. This could work as a read-aloud if the adult would tell the children beforehand the book is about animals going on a picnic on a farm. Since younger children have smaller working memories than older children and adults, telling them the plot in advance so they can concentrate more on the letters and illustrations might be helpful.


Like *Click, Clack, Quackity-Quack,* *Goodnight to Annie* meets five of the ten criteria. In the book, each letter depicts either an animal going to sleep, or things like rainbows which are “fading from their rush of bright colors to rose and russet and deep indigo,” marking the time to go to bed. Each letter corresponds to one complete sentence with a few words that start with that letter. Every page includes the capital letter, with the sentences written clearly at the bottom of the page, which would reinforce pre-reading concepts. All of the words begin with the letter the word is paired with.

The words and illustrations are things like “turtle,” “snow,” and “zebra” which children would be familiar with fall well within their limited knowledge. The illustrations are also very lifelike so children would be able to identify them. Still, the pictures contain many details besides the main item. The bees, fireflies, grasshoppers, and inchworms are all hidden in leaves and foliage, which might
make it harder for the child to identify them. However, the “U” page contains leaves, branches, and a bird, but the word is “umbrella tree.” Children would see this illustration and say “bird.” Also, the “K” stands for kittiwakes and the “N” is for nightingale, both specific types of birds that a child would not be able to identify. All-in-all, Goodnight to Annie might be a soothing book to read at bedtime as a nightly ritual and reinforce alphabet concepts once the child is familiar with all the words in the book.


This book is about an ill-behaved cat and meets four of the criteria. In the first part of the book, each letter corresponds to a healthy food. In the second part, each letter corresponds to the bad things the cat does. In the last section, each letter corresponds to the cat’s good behavior. There are usually four to eight letters and illustrations to a page.

Though the font is sans serif, it looks like handwriting, which might be more difficult for a young child to read. The book contains specific categories of lettuce that a young child would not be able to identify, like watercress, spinach, and iceberg lettuce. The book also uses navy beans and kidney beans. These two pictures would be misleading for a child who would simply want to say “beans” and “lettuce” when reaching these words.

The book utilizes words and situations that are beyond the realm of the child’s experience. Watercress, leaks, fennel, and rhubarb are also featured in the healthy foods section of the book. In addition, the cat writes a letter to UNICEF when it is
trying to make up for its bad deeds, a more sophisticated joke that young children
would not understand.

The illustrations are colored realistically, and the parts of the picture are
identifiable. However, sometimes the relationship between the illustrations and the
text is not explicit. One picture shows men and women’s feet. The pants and the
skirts all have frayed bottoms. Instead of saying “C” is for “clawed the guest’s
clothes” the caption is a more understated “G” is for “grappled with guests.”

“Grappled” is not in a young child’s vocabulary, and one has to infer the meaning of
the caption from the picture.

*Bad Kitty* definitely should not be used to teach the alphabet, or as a book for
emerging readers. There are simply too many advanced concepts, like when Bad
Kitty loiters. No child would no what this means, or what a rhubarb is, and this
word doesn’t even begin with “U.” If anything, an adult could read this book to a
child one-on-one for the humor. This would also be a good book for children who
like to look at illustrations and for older children who can already read.


In *SuperHero ABC*, Each letter corresponds to a superhero, whose powers also start
with that letter. For example, “D” is for “Danger Man,” who “does daring deeds
every day,” “doesn’t have a dog,” “duels with dragons,” and is “dramatic.” The
pictures are highly stylized with bright colors, and every letter gets its own page.
This book markets itself as an alphabet book—the back of the book says “learn your ABC’s with the heroes of the universe.” However, *Superhero ABC* is definitely not a didactic tool and meets four of the criteria like *Bad Kitty*. Though the book contains both upper and lower case letters, the letters are oftentimes crooked, and the sentences run diagonally across the page. The colors of the drawings are accurate, though the background colors are bright and eye-catching. Some drawings correspond to the words presented. There are bubbles that go with Bubble-Man, a whale that matches the caption “Whales welcome her” on the “W” page, and a lollipop that matches the caption “she likes lollipops” on the “L” page.

*Bad Kitty* and *SuperHero ABC* are both visually engaging books. However, enough pictures do not correspond to the words to negate any serious word-picture relationship. The “O” page shows a group of boys playing basketball, and a deer takes center stage in the middle of the “F” page. When emergent readers would look at this page, they would probably say “deer!” instead of anything that starts with “F.” Then, the relation between the picture and the word and letter would be lost. The book’s text contains too many abstract notions for the child to be able to guess the word based on the picture. For instance, the Superhero for “I” is Ms. Incredible, who is “impressive;” “Q” is for Mr. Quick, and “Z” is for The Zinger. The book also gets into more specific categories with “P” for Power Pup. Young children would see Power Pup and immediately say “dog.”

The advanced vocabulary features words like felon, jaywalker, lass, and zanily, and is therefore beyond the realm of understanding for a young child. Furthermore,
some of the words do not begin with the letter presented. The “X” page describes
the superheroes as “excellent examples of extreme excitement.” As stated above,
this would be confusing for young children, who would see the “E” at the beginning
of the word. This book is obviously intended for older children who like comics. It
is less of an instructive ABC book and more of a fun, alliterative book that combines
superheroes with the alphabet and would be a better choice for older children to
read individually or with an adult.

Limscott, Jody, and Holland, Claudia Porges, ill. *Once Upon A to Z: An Alphabet

In *Once Upon A to Z*, each letter has a corresponding story on one page and a picture
portraying the story the opposite page. The story has words that mostly start with
the same letter. The sentences on the left-hand side of the page are horizontal, but
the letters are many times crooked (though both upper and lower case are present).
This book only meets one of the criteria.

The story is mostly nonsense and would probably be too complicated for a child to
follow. For instance, each page contains around 25 words and reads like the “E”
page: “...evening at exactly eleven to eight the endless edibles Andy enjoyed eating
ended. He’d eaten everything entirely! Exhausted and empty, he was…” Clearly, the
book does not try to pick words that children would know or that are simple
categories. A glossary at the end of the book reveals that the story contains words
like kerosene, nattered, queried, and virtuoso. Children might be so distracted by
words they don’t know that the concept of alphabet and phonemes would be lost on them.

The illustrations are extremely busy. The “I” page shows a girl lying in grass next to a stream with different types of flowers and a triangle border around her. She is holding a harmonica, and music notes are coming out of it. The girl is “Daisy innocently improvising on her impressive instrument.” There is no way a child, or anyone else, could guess those words from a picture, and there is hardly anything besides “instrument” that begins with “I” in the picture. The people in the pictures don’t have faces and are therefore more abstract and less emotionally engaging.

*Once Upon A to Z* is definitely not a good alphabet teaching tool. Perhaps children would like to listen to the story aesthetically (listening for pure enjoyment of how the words sound rather than listening for information), but it could frustrate some children not to know the meanings of the words. Also, the book does not rhyme or have rhythm. This would probably take away from children’s enjoyment, since young children like rhyme.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, alphabet books are not all the same. Some alphabet books emphasize the story more, and some illustrations are more abstract than others. Most of these books can serve some purpose, whether as a read-aloud, an entertaining read, or for an older child to read to himself. Few books would be good tools for teaching the alphabet specifically. When selecting alphabet books for students or children, do
not assume that because something is an alphabet book, it will be effective in
teaching the alphabet, or pre-reading skills.

When looking for books to reinforce these skills and ideas, remember children’s
limited knowledge, and ask whether there is a clear relationship between the letter,
the word, and the illustration. Looking at the books, it appears that the simpler, the
better. Usually, if the book has a plot, or multiple characters, or more complicated
illustrations, much of the child’s working memory capacity will be occupied trying to
keep up with these things, and pre-reading concepts and the alphabet will take a
back-seat role to this basic comprehension. Also, when the authors stray from basic
categories of things, or use more advanced vocabulary and obscure items, adults
might forget that children might not be able to understand these things.

This is a small sample of alphabet books; however, if these books are any indication
of the genre, the genre is more about beautiful illustrations and interesting stories
than about teaching the alphabet. To make alphabet books more effective, I would
suggest eliminating any plot from alphabet books, or only having a simple plot. Like
in my criteria, the upper and lower case letters need to be present so young children
have a chance to become familiar with both forms. The font should be both sans
serif and easy to read. Authors should consult Dolch’s list of 95 nouns and other
lists of words that young children are familiar with, and stick to these. This would
ensure the child’s working memory is used to comprehend the alphabet. These lists
include words like apple, ball, cat, duck, etc.
In terms of illustrations, there should only be one item per page that begins with the letter. If there is more than one item, all items should begin with the letter presented. For instance, a “B” page illustration could contain a boy with a ball and bat playing baseball. It would be more effective if the words were on the page so the child could see the words. If authors would like to include a plot or story, they should stick to simple categories of things like “fish” and not venture into specifics like “trout” or “salmon.” Even with these guidelines, there is still a lot of room for creativity, and this basic style will ensure the alphabet lesson comes across.

Also, the role of the adult is of the utmost importance. The success of these books in teaching pre-reading and alphabet concepts greatly depends on how adults present the information to children. Thoughtful questions can many times make up for what books lack. Adults can also point things out, clarify concepts, and give the story direction that it might not have otherwise. In the end, the reward of spending time with children and reinforcing these critical skills is worth the time spent.

**Further Study**

I recognize that content analysis can only go so far to determine whether these books are effective teaching tools. Actually studying children in the pre-reading stage might be the next step of investigating how well alphabet books aid the emerging reader.

To determine which alphabet books are better at teaching children alphabet awareness, a study could give children on the same level an alphabet awareness evaluation and then expose them to different types of alphabet books, perhaps of
varying degrees of complexity in the plot. Afterwards, researchers could give the children another alphabet awareness evaluation, and see which group has the most improvements (if any).

To determine how helpful an adult is in introducing alphabet books to children, a study could split a group of children who are on the same level into two groups. Researchers could give the first group an alphabet book to look at on their own, and have trained adults individually sit with each child and the book in the second group. Afterwards, researchers could give the groups an alphabet awareness test and see who scores higher.
Appendix: Dolch’s 95 Nouns

apple  farmer  party
baby   father  picture
back   feet    pig
ball   fire    rabbit
bear   fish    rain
bed    floor   ring
bell   flower  robin
bird   game    Santa Claus
birthday  garden  school
boat   girl    seed
box    good-bye  sheep
boy    grass   shoe
bread  ground  sister
brother  hand  snow
cake   head    song
car    hill    squirrel
cat    home    stick
chair  horse   street
chicken  house  sun
children  kitty  table
Christmas  leg    thing
coat   letter  time
corn   man    top
cow    men    toy
day    milk    tree
dog    money  watch
doll   morning  water
door   mother  way
duck   name    wind
egg    nest    window
eye    night   wood
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