

Listening Guide for *A Novel Idea*

Episode 3: “The Rise of Picture Books”

This listening guide is for caregivers interested in learning more about literacy instruction and educators who want to facilitate discussion within their higher education classroom or professional development setting. In this episode, we explore how children’s picture books became a major battleground for debates about literacy instruction. Visit [our website](#) for the transcript and sources for this episode.

Before You Listen

What You’ve Heard So Far

Previously on *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke took an in-depth look at the Enlightenment-era educational reform and its lasting impact on contemporary conversations around the science of reading. Mechelke spoke with her colleague Kate Will to understand the characteristics of the English language that influence the complexity of learning how to read. They discussed Lexicographer Noah Webster’s outspokenness in advocating for phonics instruction.

Pre-Listening Discussion Questions

Before you listen, consider the following questions. This can be a self-guided or discussion-based activity. Activating your background knowledge and considering your thoughts about these topics can help you connect the episode to your own experiences.

1. What were the first books you remember reading? Did you grow up reading Dick and Jane books, Dr. Seuss, or something else? Describe what these books were like.
2. Last episode, you heard about hornbooks, battledores, and primers; in this episode, you will hear about basal readers and decodable texts. What kinds of texts do you use to teach reading? How does the purpose of instruction inform the kinds of texts you use in class?

3. *For educators:* Reflect on the books that you use in class. Do you have a choice in the selections you make? What factors do you consider when selecting books for your students? Why?
4. *For caregivers:* Reflect on the children's books that your child grew up with. Which ones were their favorites? How do those books differ from the types of books you grew up with when you were a child?

Press Play

Break It Down

Here, you can find the key points from the episode, organized with thematic headings and time stamps. Key terms related to literacy instruction are italicized and defined.

New Spelling Initiatives

(00:00 - 5:18)

In episode three of *A Novel Idea*, Host Meg Mechelke describes American Lexicographer Noah Webster and Philanthropist Andrew Carnegie's attempts to reform English spelling.

The Reading Brain and the Look-Say Method

(5:18 -11:58)

In conversation with Fumiko Hoefl, the director of the University of Connecticut's Brain Imaging Research Center, Mechelke explores the importance of both visual and auditory processing when learning to read. In contrast, proponents of the "*look-say*" method, such as Literacy Researcher Edmond Huey, downplayed the importance of the auditory and oral facets of reading. Mechelke introduces research from Linnea Ehri that suggests the look-say method of teaching reading may not be the best approach.

The *look-say method* is a method of reading instruction in which children are prompted to use visual cues (like word length and the first letter of a word) to read words rather than breaking them down into their component parts and sounding them out.

Evolving Early Readers

(11:58 - 20:05)

Mechelke explains the evolution of children's books, including picture books such as the Dick and Jane series. Books such as these are described as *basal readers*. In conversation with Education Correspondent Natalie Wexler, Mechelke contrasts the Dick and Jane books with modern *decodable texts*.

Basal readers include simple stories that typically progress from less to more difficult.

Decodable texts are books or passages written to practice a specific phonics pattern in early literacy instruction. For example, a decodable text written to practice the VCe syllable pattern would contain main words following that pattern such as "race," "nice," and "rose." Decodable texts contain mostly regular words and some high-frequency sight words so that students can read independently.

Moving Away from *Dick and Jane*

(20:05 - 25:04)

Mechelke converses with Wexler about the historical impact of Dr. Rudolf Flesch, who criticized the Dick and Jane series and advocated for the reintroduction of phonics instruction in schools.

Seuss and Phonics

(25:04 - 31:47)

Mechelke introduces the work of Dr. Seuss, explaining how he changed the way of children's books by incorporating some elements that aligned with both phonics and look-say approaches to reading.

After You Listen

Post-Listening Discussion Questions

Continue the conversation with the following questions. This can be a self-guided or discussion-based activity. Considering these post-listening questions can deepen your comprehension of the episode's key ideas and allow you to connect the episode's topics to your own experiences.

1. In this episode, Natalie Wexler describes the extent of America's literacy crisis through Dr. Rudolf Flesch's career. Why do you think his book received such a strong response from the public?
2. *Looking ahead:* What aspects of reading might be especially difficult for individuals with dyslexia?

Go Beyond the Episode

Want to learn more? The following list contains resources and studies that were mentioned in the episode as well as further reading materials on key topics from the episode. For a full list of sources, visit [our website](#).

[How Dr. Seuss Changed Education in America](#): This article details Theodor Seuss Geisel's journey to becoming a children's author and how his writing was shaped by the dominant views on reading instruction at the time.

[McGuffey's Eclectic Readers](#): This PDF is a free electronic version of McGuffey's Eclectic Readers to provide a glimpse of how reading was being taught during that time.