



Academy of
Orton-Gillingham
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The Orton Gillingham Lesson: Time-Tested and Timely: It's More Than the Cards

by Angie Wilkins, Founding Fellow/AOGPE

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Current reading research affirms that the Orton-Gillingham Approach, although it was developed in the 1930s, contains all the basic instructional tenets of an effective reading program. Most phonics programs prescribe teaching sequences and routines that are not to be modified. Thus, teachers do not have the flexibility necessary to address the specific needs of each learner.

Orton-Gillingham is neither a method nor a program. It is an **approach**. Webster's Dictionary defines an approach as, "A means of attaining a goal, or coming close to attaining a goal; a course of action." A program, however, is defined as, "A definite system for doing something, or a systematized plan." The Orton-Gillingham Approach is a "course of action" designed to meet the specific needs of an individual child or adult with language-learning disabilities.

Each lesson is a course of action that requires delivery by a highly skilled and knowledgeable practitioner. In the words of Margaret Rawson, the Orton-Gillingham practitioner must, "Teach the language as it is to the student as he or she is." This statement is deceptively simple for it requires that the practitioner possess a high level of specialized knowledge and skill. "Teach the language as it is" depends on the practitioner's thorough understanding of the English language at the phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic levels. "To the student as he or she is" requires that the practitioner appreciate the nature of language-learning disability. Based on this knowledge, each lesson is individually paced and structured but never programmed. Within the lesson's framework, the therapist must be diagnostic and prescriptive. Thus, an effective Orton-Gillingham practitioner must be constantly alert, prepared, and able to adjust instruction as necessary. An Orton-Gillingham lesson is based on building an association between the sounds and symbols of the English language in a systematic way, starting with the smallest units of the language- the sound- and using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic/tactile reinforcement. Each lesson is carefully designed based on the following principles:

- Diagnostic and perspective
- Structured and sequential
- Synthetic and analytic
- Multisensory and cumulative
- Cognitive and flexible

Subsequent to initial instruction, the emphasis must shift to teaching toward **automaticity and fluency**. Current research (LAberge and Samuels, Adams, Wolf and Felton) reminds us that until the process of decoding becomes automatic, comprehension is compromised. Thus, phonogram drill and reading words in isolation are important steps in the process but not goals in themselves. The individual with a language-learning disability requires direct instruction followed by practice and cumulative teaching. A skilled

practitioner must be able to motivate and to maintain the active involvement of each student, especially during the repetitive portions of the lesson. In the words of Anna Gillingham, "Make the thing go." The pace should always be brisk but thorough." While the pace is brisk, students must always remain accountable. When phonograms are missed, words misread or misspelled, the practitioner must provide several more opportunities to practice what is not yet secure. "He doesn't think anything means anything," writes Ms. Gillingham to a practitioner in training.