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## Letters

### Riled over reading

I just finished reading "Reading the Code, Reading the Whole" (SN: 2/29/92, p.138) with a growing sense of anger. It's a tragedy that the nation's schools are again trying to teach children to read without teaching them the alphabet.

Whether the method is called "look-say," "sight reading" or "whole language," it requires an excellent rote memory on the part of the child. Those who don't have a good memory are lost with this method even if they are brighter than average. If you don't know the alphabet, you are required to memorize by rote each of the thousands of words you could possibly see.

When I was in elementary school in the early 1950s, I lagged way behind the rest of the class in reading ability. My teacher had a number of speculations (some of them very unflattering) as to why this could be. When my parents discovered what "look-say" was all about, they

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#### 232 Haze Clouds the Greenhouse

Cover: On a clear June day in 1985, visibility in Virginia's Shenandoah National Park stretched for more than 180 kilometers (top photo). But the hazy conditions of March 1983 cut visibility at the same location to only 15 kilometers (bottom photo). Atmospheric scientists now realize that this type of haze pollution wields substantial climatic power, enough to slow the greenhouse warming in certain regions. (Photos: National Park Service)

#### 234 Revamping EPA's Science

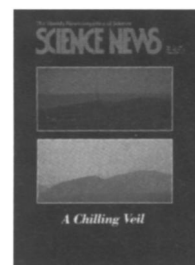
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#### 227 Letters

**Science Service**, a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921, gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of disadvantaged groups.

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promptly taught me the alphabet and how the letters were put together to form words. By the end of the year, I had passed up the rest of the class in reading skills and the teacher was breaking the rules by teaching the ABCs to the rest of the kids.

It may very well be that the proponents of phonics spend too much time and effort making children memorize long lists of phonemes, but knowing the alphabet and a few simple rules (such as "ph" = "f") will give the student a leg up on those who don't know these things.

Knowing the alphabet doesn't preclude the whole-language approach; those children who don't need it won't be harmed by it, while those who do will be helped immensely.

*Ernest G. Tanner  
Valley, Wash.*

**Bruce Bower is** mistaken in stating that the "Dick and Jane" readers were phonics readers. On the contrary, they were developed to use with the "look-say" or whole-word method of reading instruction. The cornerstone of a true

phonics-first approach to reading is the children's ability to read real books instead of the dumbed-down, vocabulary-controlled basal readers or the endlessly boring workbooks (both of which, by the way, are very profitable for textbook publishers).

One of the reasons many of us are now choosing to teach our own children at home is the continued use of whole-word reading instruction in our public schools. This method teaches English as if it were a pictorial language like Chinese! Its proponents put reading instruction back 3,000 years and call it progress.

*Carolyn W. Gwaltney  
Harvest, Ala.*

**It is instructive** to contrast the ways in which new medical therapies and new pedagogical methods are introduced nowadays. In both situations, highly trained professionals are trying to help members of the lay public. The key difference is that each patient, with his

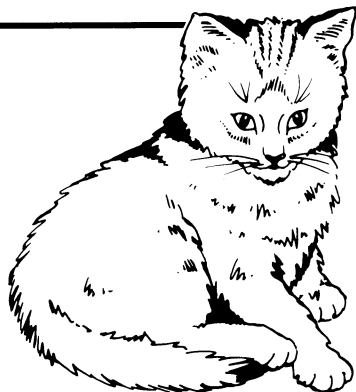
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# EVERYDAY CAT

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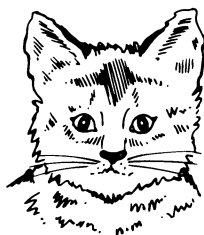
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or her guardian, has the right of informed consent: The doctor must dispassionately explain the advantages and disadvantages of the new therapy, and then obtain agreement or accept the patient's refusal. If the therapy is still experimental, the doctor must say so, and specific formal procedures exist to ensure a fully informed, noncoerced decision from the patient. These formal procedures also ensure that treatment outcomes will be tracked in a systematic and useful fashion. These restrictions have substantially improved the doctor-patient relationship: The doctor is still a professional, but the patient, appropriately, has the control.

Students and their guardians, however, have no individual right of informed consent. Consequently, educators are sloppy: There is no need to assemble convincing data about a new teaching method, such as whole language, which is still controversial, before using professional prestige to inflict it on an entire school district or state. Fads are the result.

If each set of parents has the right to choose or refuse chemotherapy for their child, they can certainly handle decisions about whole language, new math, year-round schooling and so on. Moreover, educators need to learn, as physicians have, that a profession can improve by relinquishing power to individuals. A professional who says, "I don't know what's best for your child; what do you think?" is no longer playing God.

Kevin Jon Williams  
Wynnewood, Pa.

Poor readers apparently have a lot of difficulty in associating sounds with printed

letters. What if they had a multicolored text to read from, with words that rhyme all printed in the same specific color? "Hat" and "cat" and "rat" all could be in one color, "who" and "clue" and "through" in another, and so on.

The text with rhyming elements identified through colors could be part of either a whole-language approach or the more traditional step-by-step instruction in phonics.

Dan Gollub  
Winfield, Kans.

It has been my observation that teacher training in whole-language instruction is not being conducted in a consistent manner. The varied approaches may serve only to confuse children more. Only when researchers with opposing views collaborate will reading instruction truly progress. Until that time, it is the children who suffer.

S.C. Kroon  
Tallahassee, Fla.

As a school board trustee visiting elementary schools in southern California during the 1960s, I noticed that the children liked reading when their teachers were enthusiastic about teaching it.

The staff of each school was encouraged to adopt the reading method it liked best. Some chose phonics, some chose word recognition, some even worked in kinesthetics (tracing letters with one's finger). Most selected a combination. Tests showed good results from each method, when the staff had chosen it.

I am amazed that the fight about teaching methods goes on.

Maryalice Norman  
Bainbridge Island, Wash.

## Extinction distinctions

"Counting the Dead" (SN: 2/1/92, p.72) was a very balanced and thorough treatment of the K-T extinctions, and I enjoyed the humor. Regarding causes of extinction, however, I did not say that "climatic changes lie closer to the truth." Rather, I said that a major contributing factor was the fragmentation of habitats caused by the documented loss of global epicontinental seaways at the end of the Cretaceous.

The author notes that according to Peter Sheehan, our data show that only a fraction of land-dwelling vertebrates survived; however, our data actually show 29 to 41 percent. Peter Sheehan is cited as saying that "those species that did die out represented the largest animals in the ecosystem." In truth, only the percentage of extinctions among largest vertebrates is higher, not the total number of extinctions. This pattern characterizes all major terrestrial vertebrate extinctions, including those at the end of the ice age some 11,000 years ago.

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