



Curriculum Navigation Report

Fishtank Plus ELA Grades K-5



2025 Publication
Reviewed with Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines (2nd Edition, 2023)

Introduction

CURRICULUM EVALUATION GUIDELINES DESCRIPTION

“Decisions regarding curriculum, instructional approaches, programs, and resources are critical and must be informed by more than experience, observations, or even belief systems. If we are to succeed in implementing effective practices, then we will need to embrace learning as a part of our work as much as teaching itself.”

Hennessy, 2020, pg. 8.

Due to the popularity of the science of reading movement, the term “science of reading” has been used as a marketing tool, often promising a quick fix for decision makers seeking a program aligned with the scientific evidence base. However, as articulated in The Reading League’s [*Science of Reading: Defining Guide \(2022\)*](#),

The science of reading is a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. Over the last five decades, this research has provided a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop; why some students have difficulty; and how educators can most effectively assess and teach, and, therefore, improve student outcomes through the prevention of and intervention for reading difficulties. (p.6)

The Reading League’s [*Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines \(CEGs\)*](#) are a resource developed to assist consumers in making informed decisions when selecting curricula and instructional materials that best support evidence-aligned instruction grounded in the science of reading.

The CEGs are anchored by frameworks validated by the science of reading. Findings from the science of reading provide additional understandings that substantiate both aligned and non-aligned practices (AKA “red flags”) within the CEGs. These serve as a foundation for what to expect from published curricula that claim to be aligned with the scientific evidence of how students learn to read. The CEGs highlight best practices that align with the science of reading. Red flags specify any non-aligned practices in the following areas:



- Word Recognition
- Language Comprehension
- Reading Comprehension
- Writing
- Assessment



The CEGs have been used by educators, building and district leaders, local education agencies, and state education agencies as a primary tool to find evidence of red flags, or practices that may interfere with the development of skilled reading. While the CEGs have been useful for schools and districts for informing curricular and instructional decision-making, The Reading League recognized the challenge of school-based teams that might not have the capacity for an in-depth review process. In the spirit of its mission to advance the awareness, understanding, and use of evidence-aligned reading instruction, expert review teams engaged in a large-scale review of the most widely-used curricula currently used in the United States in order to develop informative reports of each.

This report was generated after a review of the curriculum using the March 2023 *Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines*, which have been refined based on feedback, a lengthy pilot review, and have undergone an inter-rater reliability study with positive results. As you read through the findings of this report, remember that red flags will be present for all curricula as there is no perfect curriculum. The intent of this report is not to provide a recommendation, but rather to provide information to local education agencies to support their journey of selecting, using, and refining instruction and instructional materials to ensure they align with the science of reading.

Disclaimer: The Reading League's curriculum review is deemed an informational educational resource and should not be construed as sales pitches or product promotion. The purpose of the review is to further our mission to advance the understanding, awareness, and use of evidence-aligned reading instruction.

Curriculum Description

The evaluation on the following pages features the review of the Fishtank Plus ELA curriculum which was created for students in Grades K-5.

For this review, it is important to note that the curriculum underwent significant changes between the review in 2024 and the publication in 2025. Due to this, two sections needed to be re-reviewed as indicated. The program will continue to be revised. To ensure the most up-to-date information, please refer to the publisher's response.

For this report, reviewers closely examined both teacher-facing and student-facing materials, including the program's Unit Launches and Intellectual Prep, Lesson Plans, Target Task Student Sample Responses, Ready-Made Slide Decks, Editable Student Handouts, Customizable Unit Downloads, Assessments Package, Vocabulary Package, and Teacher Tools Library. Additionally, students in Grades 3-5 complete Exit Tickets as a way to monitor their understanding of key concepts presented in the text. However, some of the resources required extra purchases. For example, Brainpop videos were frequently linked, but without a subscription, educators could not access them.

Reviewers were selected based on their deep knowledge of the science of reading and associated terminology as well as high-quality instructional materials. Once selected, they were assigned to teams of at least three reviewers. The team met regularly to establish reliability in their individual scores based on the Red Flag rubric that follows and to report their findings. For a more comprehensive description of the review process, visit [The Reading League Compass's Curriculum Decision Makers page](#).

	1 Red Flag statement is False.		2 Red Flag statement is minimally True. Evidence is minimal or briefly mentioned.
	3 Red Flag statement is mostly True. If applicable, evidence is in multiple places throughout the curriculum.		4 Red Flag statement is always true, pervasive, and/or integral to the curriculum.
	A black box indicates that this component is not addressed in this curriculum and must be addressed with other materials.		

Reviewers used the notes section of each component to capture helpful evidence and notes, such as keywords that described a practice listed within the CEGs, specific examples, and precise locations of evidence. Notes were also included in the review of any optional aligned components.

Findings:

COMPONENTS SUPPORTING WORD RECOGNITION

1A: Word Recognition Non-Negotiables

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

WORD RECOGNITION NON-NEGOTIABLES	SCORE
1.1: Three cueing-systems are taught as strategies for decoding in early grades (i.e., directing students to use picture cues, context cues, or attend to the first letter of a word as a cue).	n/a
1.2: Guidance to memorize any whole words, including high frequency words, by sight without attending to the sound/symbol correspondences.	n/a
1.3: Supporting materials do not provide a systematic scope and sequence nor opportunities for practice and review of elements taught (e.g., phonics, decoding, encoding).	n/a

Fishtank Plus ELA’s **word recognition** non-negotiables are “**not applicable.**” The program provides learners with regular practice using complex texts and academic language. Its guiding principles center instruction on diverse and rigorous texts relevant to both students’ lives and today’s world. Additionally, Fishtank Plus ELA builds learner knowledge to support critical thinking, prioritizes student agency through an emphasis on academic discourse to share ideas, and integrates writing instruction within the context of what students are reading and learning. As such, Fishtank Plus ELA does not include foundational skills instruction. The publishers are upfront about this and recommend that schools supplement their Grades K-2 curriculum with a high-quality foundational skills program. While word recognition is not the focus of Fishtank Plus ELA, the program does include additional support within its writing lessons. For example, shared writing in kindergarten references the use of phonics to support encoding by listening to individual sounds and writing the corresponding letters. The teacher first models this process through a think-aloud, demonstrating how to segment a word, identify each phoneme, and match it to a letter. Students then practice this strategy using whiteboards. However, in kindergarten, Unit 8, the program advises that students have access to a Word Wall in order to check the spelling of high-frequency words. Reviewers noted that for novice spellers, a Sound Wall is a more effective alternative, as it organizes words by their initial sounds and connects them to their corresponding graphemes. Additionally, the expectations for writing transcription and composition in kindergarten do not align with the skills typically taught in a kindergarten phonics program. Thus, adopters of this curriculum must be mindful of these discrepancies when considering adopting this program.

1B: Phonological and Phoneme Awareness

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR PHONOLOGICAL AND PHONEME AWARENESS	SCORE
1.7: Instruction only attends to larger units of phonological awareness (syllables, rhyme, onset-rime) without moving to the phoneme level (e.g., blends such as /t/ /r/ are kept intact rather than having students notice their individual sounds).	n/a
1.8: Instruction is focused on letters only without explicit instruction and practice with the phonemes that letters represent.	n/a
1.9: Phoneme awareness is not taught as a foundational reading skill.	n/a
1.10: Phonological and phoneme awareness is not assessed or monitored.	n/a

Fishtank Plus ELA’s **phonological and phoneme awareness** practices are “**not applicable.**” The program provides learners with regular practice using complex texts and academic language. Its guiding principles include centering instruction on diverse and rigorous texts relevant to both students’ lives and today’s world, building knowledge to support critical thinking, prioritizing student agency through academic discourse to share ideas, and integrating writing instruction within the context of what students are reading and learning. As such, Fishtank Plus ELA does not include foundational skills instruction. The publishers are upfront about this and recommend that schools supplement their Grades K-2 curriculum with a high-quality foundational skills program.

1C: Phonics and Phonic Decoding

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR PHONOLOGICAL AND PHONEME AWARENESS	SCORE
1.15: Letter-sound correspondences are taught opportunistically or implicitly during text reading.	n/a
1.16: Instruction is typically “one and done;” phonics skills are introduced but with very little or short-term review.	n/a
1.17: Key words for letter/sound correspondences are not aligned with the pure phoneme being taught (e.g., earth for /ē/, ant for /ā/, orange for /ō/).	n/a
1.18: Phonics instruction takes place in short (or optional) “mini-lessons” or “word work” sessions.	n/a
1.19: The initial instructional sequence introduces many (or all) consonants before a vowel is introduced, short vowels are all taught in rapid succession and/or all sounds for one letter are taught all at once.	n/a
1.20: Blending is not explicitly taught nor practiced.	n/a
1.21: Instruction encourages students to memorize whole words, read using the first letter only as a clue, guess at words in context using a “what would make sense?” strategy, or use picture clues rather than phonic decoding.	n/a
1.22: Words with known sound-symbol correspondences, including high frequency words, are taught as whole-word units, often as stand-alone “sight words” to be memorized.	n/a
1.23: Few opportunities for word-level decoding practice are provided.	n/a
1.24: Early texts are predominantly predictable and/or leveled texts which include phonic elements that have not been taught; decodable texts are not used or emphasized.	n/a
1.25: Advanced word study (Grades 2-5) Instruction in phonics ends once single syllable phonics patterns (e.g., CVC, CVCe) are taught.	n/a
1.26: Advanced word study (Grades 2-5) No instruction in multisyllabic word decoding strategies and/or using morphology to support word recognition is evident.	n/a

Fishtank Plus ELA's **phonics and phonic decoding** practices are **“not applicable.”** While the program provides learners with regular practice using complex texts and academic language, Fishtank Plus ELA does not include foundational skills instruction. The publishers are upfront about this and recommend that schools supplement their Grades K-2 curriculum with a high-quality foundational skills program. Reviewers did note that when the program makes references to decoding multisyllabic words, the lessons refer educators to either their Syllabication Routine for Grades 2-8 or their Structural Analysis Routine for Grades 3-5. For example, in Grade 4, Unit 3, Lesson 1, the program specifies that while advanced word study is not an objective of Fishtank Plus ELA, the program recommends the use of its Syllabication Routine for older students who struggle with foundational skills. Later in Grade 4, Unit 3, Lesson 7, the program references the Structural Analysis Routine to help students break down the word “inexcusable.” Here educators are guided to use the routine to help students determine the meaning of the prefix “in.” Again, these recommendations are not a replacement for direct, explicit instruction in advanced word study and adopters of this curriculum must be mindful of this need.

1D: Fluency

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR FLUENCY	SCORE	
1.40: Fluency instruction focuses primarily on student silent reading.	1	
1.41: Rate is emphasized over accuracy; priority is given to the student's ability to read words quickly.	1	
1.42: Word-level fluency practice to automaticity is not provided, or fluency is viewed only as text-reading fluency.	n/a	
1.43: Fluency is practiced only in narrative text or with repeated readings of patterned text.	1	
1.44: Fluency assessment allows acceptance of incorrectly decoded words if they are close in meaning to the target word (e.g., assessment based upon the cueing systems, M/S/V).	2	

Fishtank Plus ELA's fluency practices are "mostly met." In Grades K-2, fluency is modeled daily during teacher read-alouds. In Grades 3+, fluency can be practiced in a variety of ways including whole class choral reading, echo reading, repeated reading, partner reading, and independent reading. For example, in kindergarten, Unit 8, Lesson 3, in addition to reading aloud to model fluent reading, students are tasked to reread a poem with a partner. However, this is not explicitly specified as fluency instruction. Later in Grade 2, Unit 5, Lesson 1, students engage with the Zapato Power text: *Freddie Ramos Takes Off*, by Jacqueline Jules. Students are asked to read dialogue in multiple ways, depending on needs and placement within the unit. Teachers are instructed to say the following:

Tell students that one way to read with expression is by reading the different characters' dialogue differently. Ask them to notice how you do that on this page. Read it twice if necessary, modeling how you might adjust your expression based on what you learn about the characters. (p. 3)

If students struggle to read fluently, the program suggests using the class session to reread some pages together as a class. Teachers are advised to choose one skill to focus on, like decoding or reading with expression. Another example is in Grade 3, Unit 3, which tasks students to read with partners for the second reading of the text. Again, the teacher is instructed to review reading with expression and how to self-correct when reading. If needed, the educator can provide an additional model of fluent reading, and as student partners begin to practice, teachers should circulate and provide feedback as necessary. Words and phrases like “as needed” indicate that teacher modeling is not required and can be based upon teacher discretion. This is problematic for both students and educators, as the lack of clear expectations regarding explicit instruction may result in students not receiving essential fluency instruction. It is important to note that in Grades 4 and 5, reviewers were unable to locate any fluency instruction—only assessment is provided; however, the program does not specify when this assessment should be administered.

Additionally, Fishtank Plus ELA 2024 allots an excessive amount of time for independent reading across grade levels. The program states the following:

We recommend students in 3rd–5th grade have an additional daily 45-minute independent reading block, as well as independent reading assigned daily for homework. We recommend that students in grades K–2nd grade have an additional 15- to 30-minute independent reading block, as well as independent reading assigned daily for homework. These additional opportunities for independent reading are crucial components of student literacy development, helping students access a large volume of complex texts, build knowledge, and develop a love of reading. (Fishtank Plus ELA, Independent Reading: K–5, 2025)

Reviewers felt this emphasis on independent reading placed too much responsibility on students to build literacy skills without sufficient instructional support, and it may reduce opportunities for direct instruction and guided practice in critical skills like fluency. (Please note that the current version of the curriculum, updated in 2025, may reflect different practices. For more detailed information, please refer to the publisher’s response).

Fishtank Plus ELA identifies the core areas of fluency as expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, pace, and accuracy. As such, the program does not prioritize reading rate. The program calculates a Words Correct Per Minute score (WCPM), but only includes an accuracy score on the informal fluency rubric. Additionally, running records, a practice associated with balanced literacy, are recommended for identifying gaps in Grades 3–5. Teachers are instructed to “analyze student responses to identify any trends...[and] depending on the level of need, do word analysis lessons during small-group reading or independent reading” (Fishtank Plus ELA, Suggestions for Fluency Support: Accuracy [3–5], 2025). This recommendation encourages the use of targeted work with the program’s morphology and syllabication routines which do not provide robust remediation or intervention. Fluency practice is integrated into the program’s instructional units, using both narrative and informational texts. Students develop fluency through excerpts from core texts, aligning their practice with the unit’s focus—narrative texts for narrative units and expository texts for expository units.

Regarding assessment, the team noted that directions for administering formal fluency assessments were vague. For example, the program states:

While the student is reading, note any errors the student makes (words read/ pronounced incorrectly, omitted, read out of order, or words pronounced for the student by the examiner after a 3-second pause) on the Teacher Recording Form. (Fishtank Plus ELA, Giving a Formal Fluency Assessment: Step 2, 2025)

The protocol does not reference how to score these errors. As mentioned previously, the program uses running records to assess fluency gaps in Grades 3–5. The publisher clarified that the term “running record” is used interchangeably with the more common term “test of oral fluency” to refer to students reading a passage aloud for a set amount of time, during which their fluency is assessed.

Finally, the team found no evidence of word-level fluency practice; however, Fishtank Plus ELA is not a foundational skills program. The publishers are upfront about this and recommend that schools supplement their K–2 curriculum with a high-quality foundational skills program. Thus, the curriculum received a “not applicable” rating for criteria 1.42.

Findings:

COMPONENTS SUPPORTING LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION, READING COMPREHENSION, AND WRITING

SECTIONS 2–4: Non-Negotiables for Language Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, and Writing

This section begins with a review of non-negotiable elements for language comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing before moving on to the language comprehension strands highlighted in Scarborough’s reading rope. Therefore, identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

NON-NEGOTIABLES FOR LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION, READING COMPREHENSION, AND WRITING	SCORE
2-4.1: (LC, RC, W) In early grades, the instructional framework is primarily a workshop approach, emphasizing student choice and implicit, incidental, or embedded learning.	1
2-4.2: (LC, RC, W) Students are not exposed to rich vocabulary and complex syntax in reading and writing materials.	1
2-4.3: (RC) Comprehension activities focus mainly on assessing whether students understand content (the product of comprehension) instead of supporting the process of comprehending texts.	2
2-4.4: (RC, W) Writing is not taught or is taught separately from reading at all times.	1
2-4.5: (LC, RC) Questioning during read-alouds focuses mainly on lower-level questioning skills.	1

Fishtank Plus ELA’s non-negotiables for **language comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing** are “**mostly met.**” Unlike the workshop model, each unit begins with intellectual preparation, allowing teachers to pre-plan lessons strategically. The Guiding Principles section of their website also states, “Students are not given leveled text in Fishtank Plus ELA because every student deserves the opportunity to engage with complex text and build their understanding of what academic language looks and sounds like” (2025). Although the workshop model is not featured in the unit or lesson plans, reviewers did note a connection to the workshop approach. In the writing section, a workshop-model-based text, *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer’s Workshop*, is one of the references. The reviewers caution program users against following the approach that this language implies; however, the publisher clarified that Fishtank does not advocate a workshop model, and this book was included as one of several to ensure an explicit approach to teaching writing and language.

Fishtank Plus ELA exposes students to rich vocabulary and complex syntax. The curriculum suggests that teachers choose between 7 and 15 priority words per unit to emphasize and assess. These words should be critical for understanding the text, used across contexts, and abstract (representing new or unfamiliar concepts and having multiple meanings). Words are presented via the curriculum's vocabulary routine, which introduces the word by asking students to repeat it three times. The teacher then provides a student-friendly definition (i.e., explains the word's meaning in everyday language), offers an example, and, finally, has students engage with the word through a variety of activities. Review activities are also encouraged. Additional activities for implicit vocabulary instruction include "drop-in definitions," where the teacher provides a brief explanation of an unknown word while reading a given passage, as well as independent word learning strategies, like the use of context clues and word parts.

Regarding syntax, the unit prep for every grade level asks teachers to read through the text and analyze it for its complexity. The curriculum information is then provided by Fishtank Plus for each text. For example, in kindergarten, Unit 8, the Teacher's Guide specifies that the text *What a Waste* by Jess French includes sentence structures and vocabulary that are more complex than other texts in the unit sequence. Sometimes the curriculum makes specific suggestions about problematic sentence structures, like in Grade 1, Unit 5, Lesson 9, where the curriculum instructs educators to close read the following sentence to help students understand how the character feels: "Jean-Michel, an artist among artists, never doubts one line, creating from a soundtrack that is his own." A similar instance was observed in Grade 4, Unit 2, Lesson 3, where the Teacher's Guide identifies two challenging sentences where the author, Seymour Simon, uses comparisons:

- "This multi-level parking garage (center right) collapsed like a house of cards, while some of the neighboring buildings suffered only slight damage." (Volcanoes, p. 6)
- "But finally, like a stretched rubber band, the rocks suddenly snap back at each other." (Volcanoes, p. 8)

Each unit includes Essential Questions aligned to the text’s content; a Reading Focus Area that prioritizes reading skills; a Writing Focus Area that develops writing skills; and a Speaking and Listening Focus Area that addresses the use of discussion, how readers use evidence to support ideas, and vocabulary. The curriculum assessments are all tied to the program’s Essential Questions. For example, in Grade 5, Unit 5, Friendship Across Boundaries: Return to Sender, the Unit Prep includes the following elements:

Essential Questions	How do people develop stereotypical ideas? How can stereotypes lead to prejudice and discrimination? How can friendships and learning across lines of difference help build empathy and stop the spread of stereotypes? What is life like for undocumented Mexican laborers and their families?
Reading Focus Areas	Comparing and contrasting character perspectives helps the reader to build a deeper, more well-rounded understanding of who a character is. Observing the way characters respond to events illuminates the similarities and differences between characters. Characters grow and change through relationships with others.
Writing Focus Areas	Opinion Writing Create topic/introductory sentences that clearly state an opinion. Provide logically ordered reasons and details to support an opinion. Organize ideas into paragraphs. Link opinions and reasons using transition words and phrases. Provide a concluding statement or section.
Speaking and Listening Focus Areas	Elaborate to support ideas by providing evidence or examples to justify and defend a point clearly. Use vocabulary that is specific to the subject and task to clarify and share thoughts. Seek to genuinely understand what peers are saying and then build on their ideas.

Educators are encouraged to unpack the text, but guidance is limited, placing the responsibility on teachers to anticipate student difficulties and select appropriate instructional tools from a vast selection. The curriculum includes some video supports and a unit launch that provides guidance on topics such as text complexity for each unit. The Language Support sections are often the primary scaffolds provided within lessons. The program assumes a high level of teacher expertise, requiring the ability to facilitate complex, difficult discussions and effectively support all students.

For example, in Grade 5, Unit 5, Lesson 2, educators are tasked to have students watch a video, *Under The Cloak of Darkness*, about Vermont's migrant Mexican farm worker population. The Target Task is to describe the conditions and experiences of migrant workers in Vermont, and educators are expected to lead students in a class discussion of the difficulties faced by migrant workers. Afterwards, students write a paragraph that summarizes the challenges faced by undocumented workers. Teachers are asked to encourage students to use the words "stigma," "immoral," "prejudice," and "diversity" in their responses. The lesson goes on to tell educators to "push students to think about how hearing about the experiences of migrant farmworkers helps readers begin to unpack stereotypes" (Fishtank Plus ELA, *Friendship Across Boundaries: Return to Sender*, 2025). This requires significant teacher guidance, as it involves navigating sensitive topics, fostering critical thinking, and ensuring that discussions remain respectful and inclusive. However, the lesson provides minimal scaffolding or structured support for educators to facilitate these conversations effectively. Teachers are expected to independently manage student responses, address misconceptions, and guide analysis using the suggested vocabulary. Given the complexity of the subject matter, additional resources or explicit discussion frameworks would help ensure that all students engage thoughtfully and meaningfully with the topic.

Writing tasks are integrated with reading, but explicit, systematic writing instruction is limited. Teachers have flexibility with which writing activity they choose (e.g., "because," "but," "so" sentence stems, answering key questions, annotations, responding to prompts about texts). However, reviewers were unable to locate explicit teacher directions or scripts for teaching writing. Finally, Fishtank Plus ELA does support higher-level thinking through its emphasis on academic discourse. The curriculum breaks this into three tiers:

- Tier 1: Students Clarify and Share Their Thoughts
- Tier 2: Students Engage With the Thinking of Others
- Tier 3: Students Critique and Analyze the Reasoning of Others

Some examples of the program’s questions are included in the table below:

GRADE LEVEL, UNIT, LESSON	TASK
Grade 1, Unit 6 (Power of Reading), Lesson 5	Have students Turn and Talk about how the Library Lady brought joy to Tomás’ life.
Grade 2, Unit 2, Lesson 12	Compare and contrast these forest and desert habitats. Discussion for this lesson should push students to go deep into the content. It is not enough for students to provide surface-level answers.
Grade 4, Unit 1, Lesson 15	Lead students in a discussion of what it means to feel ashamed. Why is Minli feeling ashamed? Then give students time to independently brainstorm and write about how Minli has changed.

2B: Background Knowledge

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAG PRACTICES FOR BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	SCORE
2.1: Read-aloud opportunities emphasize simple stories or narrative texts. Read-aloud text is not sufficiently complex and/or does not include knowledge-building expository texts (i.e., topics related to science, social studies, current events).	1
2.2: Opportunities to bridge existing knowledge to new knowledge is not apparent in instruction.	1
2.3: Advanced (Grades 2–5): For students who are automatic with the code, texts for reading are primarily leveled texts that do not feature a variety of diverse, complex, knowledge-building text sets to develop background knowledge in a variety of subject areas.	1

Reading Mastery’s practices for **background knowledge** are “**met.**” Students engage with complex texts that build knowledge of the world around them. Complex grade-level texts are selected for the whole group. However, there are no differentiated texts suggested based on the reading skills of students. For enrichment, text selections seem to prioritize deeper content exploration and independent study rather than reinforcing automaticity with the code.

Texts are selected carefully and progressively increase in complexity to help students expand their knowledge. This knowledge develops from grade to grade, and students rely on the knowledge they’ve built in previous grades to access texts and tasks in later grades. For example, in Grade 1, students engage in the *Folktales From Around the World* unit, which introduces foundational story grammar elements through the exploration of folktales and fables. As they progress through the curriculum, later units build upon this foundation, including *Cinderella Around the World and Lessons From Anansi the Spider* in Grade 2, *Passing Down Wisdom: Hispanic & African American Folktales and Discovering Mythology: Roman Myths* in Grade 3, and *Interpreting Perspectives: Greek Myths* in Grade 4. The program’s Parallel Scope and Sequence document provides several examples of how students build knowledge from grade to grade.

Lessons also encourage connections between vocabulary and student experiences. For example, in kindergarten, Unit 8, *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle*, students discuss examples of household waste and relate them to their own homes (e.g., “Which examples of household waste do you have in your home?”). While students are offered opportunities to connect new concepts to personal experiences, opportunities for deeper, systematic connections are limited.

2C: Vocabulary

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR VOCABULARY	SCORE	
2.7: Vocabulary worksheets and activities are used with little opportunity for deep understanding of vocabulary words.	2	
2.8: Instruction includes memorization of isolated words and definitions out of context.	1	
2.9: Tier 2 words are not taught explicitly and practiced; students are not given opportunities to use them in their speech, see them in print, and use them in writing.	3	
2.10: Students are not exposed to and taught Tier 3 words.	1	
2.11: Explicit instruction in morphology is not present and/or not taught according to a scope and sequence (i.e., simple to complex) consistently throughout K-5 instruction.	4	

Fishtank Plus ELA's practices for **vocabulary** are “**somewhat met**” Target vocabulary comes from the text, and each unit includes a Vocabulary Package with a corresponding Glossary and Handout Activity. The documents remain in the same format for Grades K-5. The program does feature an explicit vocabulary routine and instructional strategies for implicit instruction. However, teachers are responsible for designing their own vocabulary review structure, as no specific instructional sequence is provided for distributed, cumulative, or interleaved practice. This approach results in a broad but superficial understanding of priority vocabulary words rather than deep understanding of these words. Furthermore, resources for the explicit vocabulary routine and implicit instruction are not embedded within the lesson, requiring educators to utilize resources outside of the lesson plan. This creates a challenge in ensuring consistency regarding vocabulary instruction.

The program suggests using the explicit vocabulary routine each day a priority word is introduced, allotting 5-7 minutes for the activity. Often, instruction relies on open-ended prompts to elicit students' prior knowledge of priority words, assuming they have an accurate understanding to build upon. Practice opportunities are also limited and left to teacher discretion, and, as mentioned, teachers are responsible for planning the spiral review of vocabulary across lessons without a provided framework. The curriculum includes both Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary words. For example, in Grade 1, Unit 3, *Amazing Animals*, the text-based, Tier 2 terms include "cooperated," "detect," "disguise," "excess," "imitate," "maneuver," and "poisonous." However, students are frequently asked, "What do you think the word ____ means?" Again, use of open-ended prompts like this assume students have prior knowledge of the word's meaning and risk reinforcing misconceptions. The nature of the curriculum's complex, nonfiction text offers students exposure to technical, Tier 3 vocabulary. For instance, in the *Amazing Animals* unit, students in Grade 1 learn the Tier 3 words "predator" and "prey." However, the team found no consistent evidence of explicit instruction of either Tier 2 or Tier 3 words. While these words appear in student writing exemplars, expecting students to incorporate them into their own writing with minimal exposure seems unrealistic.

Finally, explicit instruction in morphology is not present, and *Fishtank Plus ELA* does not feature a morphology scope and sequence; work with roots and affixes is tied to the vocabulary word of study. The program's Structural Analysis routine is designed to help students break down words into their corresponding parts; however, this is no replacement for direct, explicit instruction in morphology that progresses from simple to complex and is consistent across grade levels.

This section was re-reviewed in July 2025 after the initial review as the lessons were updated, and the prior lessons no longer exist.

2D: Language Structures

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR LANGUAGE STRUCTURES	SCORE	
2.18: Conventions of print, grammar, and syntax are taught implicitly or opportunistically with no evidence of consistent, explicit, simple to complex instruction across all grade levels.	2	
2.19: Instruction does not include teacher modeling nor sufficient opportunities for discussion.	1	
2.20: Students are asked to memorize parts of speech as a list without learning in context and through application.	1	

Fishtank Plus ELA’s practices for **language structures** are “**mostly met.**” From kindergarten through Grade 5, students are introduced to increasingly complex concepts, and lessons often include explicit teacher modeling, opportunities for partner and whole-class practice, and connections to authentic texts that students are reading and learning about. One recurring challenge is that many practice opportunities and follow-up lessons are marked as optional, potentially undermining consistency and student mastery. Additionally, while these language lessons are present in earlier units, they were less frequently observed in later ones. Fishtank has plans to release additional revisions and updates during the 2025-26 school year. However, decision-makers should be aware of this inconsistency if they are considering implementing the curriculum in its current iteration.

The program progresses systematically, starting in kindergarten with the introduction of the basic parts of speech, building student awareness of nouns and verbs using student-friendly language (e.g., Unit 1, Lesson 3 defines nouns as “people, places, and things,” while Unit 2, Lesson 4 defines verbs as “actions”). This foundation builds steadily, with sentence level work advancing in complexity through Grade 5. Grade 5 was noted for its emphasis on revision skills through sentence expansion and by eliminating redundant information in writing. However, as noted previously, these language lessons exist in earlier units, but at the time of review were observed less often in the later ones. For example, in kindergarten, Units 1 through 4 include the program’s language lessons. Not all units include these updates as the publisher is still in the process of revising their materials. While Fishtank is transparent about this, educators using these resources should be aware of these inconsistencies and proactively plan to supplement these later units to ensure consistent student learning opportunities.

Fishtank ELA provides opportunities for teacher modeling and direct instruction. For example, Grade 1, Unit 1, Lesson 5, includes strong teacher modeling of revising as the teacher displays a sentence fragment from a class read-aloud (e.g., “Wants friends.”) and explains that it’s incomplete because it doesn’t say who wants friends. The teacher then models how to fix the sentence by adding the missing subject, providing clear, explicit demonstrations of key skills. However, sometimes the explicitness of modeling is inconsistent. Some lessons, such as Grade 1, Unit 1, Lesson 7 (e.g., Words Working Together activity), introduce useful tools, but lack full models for teachers. For instance, given the example sentence, “Mr. Kim puts groceries in the bag,” the “who/what” is “Mr. Kim,” and the “is doing” is “puts.” Yet, the lesson does not provide guidance on how to address the remaining parts of the sentence—specifically the direct object (“groceries”) and the prepositional phrase (“in the bag”)—if student questions occur.

Fishtank’s lessons also include the use of visuals and anchor charts to support student learning. For example, in Grade 4, Unit 2, Lesson 17, student understanding of progressive verb tense is supported by visible classroom charts. This provides learners with lasting visual cues to reinforce more abstract concepts. These class-created anchor charts are a frequently utilized tool across all grade levels to reinforce student understanding. Sometimes, however, these activities can lead to an overreliance on guided discovery, especially in the early grades. In kindergarten and Grade 1, initial grammar instruction often emphasizes that students “notice and collect” patterns (e.g., nouns and verbs) in texts and then add what they’ve found to class created anchor charts. While this can promote inquiry, it may result in uneven understanding if not supported by explicit teaching.

Fishtank Plus ELA offers practice opportunities to reinforce these language skills. However, it was noted that many of these opportunities for practice are labeled as “Optional Language Practice and Review.” For instance:

- Grade 3, Unit 1, Lesson 15, does a nice job explicitly teaching students how to use coordinating conjunctions and commas to produce compound sentences. However, subsequent lessons (e.g., Lessons 16, 17, 18, 19) are optional.
- In Grade 4, Unit 1, only Lessons 4 and 13 on sentence fragments and run-ons are required.
- In Grade 5, Unit 1, only Lessons 4 and 11 on revision and conciseness are required.

This inconsistency may lead to gaps in student understanding and reduce opportunities for repeated, varied practice—especially when optional lessons are skipped due to pacing or scheduling constraints.

The program does not emphasize memorization of the parts of speech. However, reviewers noted that the curriculum sometimes includes inconsistency in key terminology. For example, in Units 1 and 2 of kindergarten, students are introduced to the terms nouns and verbs using student-friendly language. However, Unit 4 introduces the concept of complete sentences as “who or what and what they do” (Fishtank Plus ELA, *Falling in Love with Authors and Illustrators*, Lesson 4, 2025). This change in wording and framing may confuse young learners, as it introduces new terminology that doesn’t clearly connect back to earlier lessons. Thus, one recommendation would be to provide clearer links between the definitions used across units—for example, explicitly connecting “who or what” to nouns and “what they do” to verbs early on. Doing so would help reinforce prior learning and support students in making conceptual connections as their understanding of sentence structure expands.

2E: Verbal Reasoning

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR VERBAL REASONING	SCORE
2.26: Inferencing strategies are not taught explicitly and may be based only on picture clues and not text (i.e., picture walking).	2
2.27: Students do not practice inference as a discrete skill.	1

Fishtank Plus ELA’s practices for **verbal reasoning** are “**mostly met.**” Lessons frequently prompt students to make inferences through questioning (e.g., “Why do you think...,” “What do you think...”) without the use of explicit instruction or routine. In the Additional Supports section, teachers are prompted to have students complete a close read and answer corresponding guiding questions. However, because texts in the primary grades are frequently written above the decodability level of students, many of these prompts rely on story pictures to derive inferences. For example, in Grade 1, Unit 6, Lesson 1, teacher guidance states, “The text does not explicitly state how the children are feeling. Guide students to look closely at the illustrations to make inferences about how the children are feeling” (Fishtank Plus ELA, The Power of Reading, Lesson 1, 2025). Later, in Lesson 16 of this unit, teachers are told that “if students are struggling to make inferences from the pictures, prompt: What clues in the picture make you think that?” (Fishtank Plus ELA, The Power of Reading, Lesson 2, 2025). As students progress through the grades, this shifts to an emphasis on close reading of text and the use of guided discussion questions and graphic organizers to ensure students rely on textual evidence rather than illustrations to make inferences. For example, in Grade 4, Unit 4, Lesson 1, teacher support states, “Students will need to make inferences based on clues in the text to answer this question. Direct students to the last line on page 4, ‘They hoped they would never have to fight again’” (Fishtank Plus ELA, Examining Our History: American Revolution, Lesson 1, 2025). Later in Grade 4, Unit 5, Lesson 15, students answer the question, “Why does the author start with a powerful description of the power of words? What inference can be made about the narrator’s relationship with words?” (Fishtank Plus ELA, Believe in Yourself: The Wild Book, Lesson 5, 2025). These later queries require students to engage in deeper thinking by drawing on textual evidence and interpreting the author’s intent.

This section was re-reviewed in July 2025 after the initial review as the lessons were updated, and the prior lessons no longer exist.

2F: Literacy Knowledge

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR LITERACY KNOWLEDGE	SCORE
2.33: Genre types and features are not explicitly taught.	1
2.34: Genre-specific text structures and corresponding signal words are not explicitly taught and practiced.	2

Fishtank Plus ELA’s practices for **literacy knowledge** are “**mostly met.**” Knowledge of genre and text structure is introduced in both the Building Background and Engagement portion of initial lessons as well as during the Genre Launch in the writing block. During these instances, the teacher is directed to define a concept, and then discusses and/or model various components of the targeted structure. For example, in Grade 1, Being a Good Friend, students are introduced to the fiction genre in the first unit of the school year. Here they are taught that this genre includes make-believe characters, elements of story grammar (e.g., characters, setting, problem, solution), features a beginning, middle, and end, and are created to tell a story. Genre connections are often most prominent at the beginning of a unit or writing project but become less intentional as instruction progresses. For example, after the initial introduction in Grade 1, references to fiction’s defining characteristics become less prominent. The next mention appears in Lesson 5, where students explore character motivation by analyzing characters’ actions and desires using a T-chart; however, this focus on motivation is not explicitly connected back to the genre’s structure or purpose.

Later in Grade 1, Unit 1, Lesson 15, students are introduced to opinion writing and tasked to write an opinion on what it takes to be a good friend, just prior to the unit content assessment and final narrative writing project. This approach appears to prioritize breadth over depth, introducing a new genre without sufficient time for students to develop a deeper understanding of its purpose, structure, and craft. The publishers clarified that genres are revisited in subsequent units. For the final writing project, students are tasked to write a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end that shows a character’s actions, motivations, and feelings. While the teacher’s modeling includes some implicit use of temporal signal words (e.g., first, next, then) to demonstrate sequence, and the emphasis on beginning, middle, and end supports understanding of event order, there is a missed opportunity to explicitly teach and reinforce the use of temporal language.

In Grade 2, Unit 2, Lesson 1, students explore nonfiction texts as they learn about animal habitats, building on knowledge from the Grade 1 *Amazing Animals* unit. Students review text features and discuss the author's purpose for including them. Later, they are tasked with writing a paragraph explaining how plants and animals in a habitat depend on their surroundings, accompanied by an illustration and relevant text features (e.g., title, pictures, labels, headings, captions). While this lesson introduces the structure of an informational paragraph and the importance of including relevant facts, it lacks structured opportunities for teacher or peer feedback on how well the key information in students' outlines supports their topic.

In the Grade 1, *Being a Good Friend* unit, the final writing project unexpectedly shifts from one writing genre (e.g., informational writing) to opinion writing, asking students to create persuasive travel brochure about a chosen habitat. Although related, informational and opinion writing are distinct genres with different purposes, structures, and features. There is no intentional transition to help students understand how informational writing skills transfer to opinion writing. This abrupt genre shift risks confusing students, especially regarding the use of facts—blurring when they are expected to inform versus persuade.

Grade 3 does a good job introducing the realistic fiction genre in the first unit of the year, *Defining Identity*. This is reinforced in the writing portion of the lesson where students write an alternate story about what might happen if Free, the main character who recently moved away from Detroit, returned to the city. They utilize the Story Mountain organizer to compose a logical story that includes an exposition, rising actions, climax, falling action, and resolution. Later in Grade 3, Unit 2, students are taught about the cause-and-effect text structure to describe conditions on the Mayflower. This lesson provides explicit instruction on the varying types of signal words authors use to show cause-and-effect relationships, including “so,” “because,” and “since,” as well as transitions like “therefore,” “as a result,” and “consequently.” Students are then tasked to add these signal words to their own writing. Again, while there is strong teacher modeling, both repeated practice and feedback is limited, which may hinder students from refining their use of these signal words in their writing.

In Grade 4, students are introduced to the fantasy genre through the text *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*. Teachers are prompted to introduce the elements of fantasy stories, including that things and people have magical powers, animals and nonliving things possess human characteristics, and that supernatural events can occur. Additionally, educators are encouraged to make connections to previously studied genres, like folktales, which share similar features. However, outside of the launch, most of this unit is centered on summarizing. For example, in Lesson 7, students practice using temporal words in their summaries. While summarizing is an important skill, there is a missed opportunity to deepen students' understanding of the novel's genre by making more explicit connections to the elements of fantasy and the folkloric tradition in which *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* is based.

Later in Grade 4, Unit 2, students explore how authors use cause-and-effect and chronological structures to explain natural disasters. In Lesson 2, students are shown how to identify signal words that convey cause-and-effect (e.g., *seventy million years ago*, *caused*, *for months*, *when*, *soon*), with further teacher modeling in Lesson 4. By Lesson 8, students draft two paragraphs describing the causes and effects of volcanoes. While teachers are encouraged to model logical causal relationships (e.g., *magma builds up* → *eruption occurs*), there is no explicit instruction on how to incorporate signal words into writing. A simple addition of direct instruction and guided practice would strengthen this component. For example, Day 4, Lesson 12, includes instances of modeling and practice to incorporate temporal words into a fictional account of a natural disaster and serves as a strong example of what this could look like. However, publishers should be advised to revise the teaching point under the “modeling” header in this lesson as it states: *Writers use dialogue and description to depict the narrator's thoughts and feelings*. This is not the associated teaching point of the lesson.

In Grade 5, Unit 1, students recall the genre of fiction and discuss its unique structure in the context of the story *Seedfolks*, noting that the story is told through a series of individual character vignettes that are ultimately woven together to form a cohesive narrative. Much of the unit focuses on citing story evidence to compare and contrast characters and engage in literary analysis and opinion writing. Students are taught to annotate as a way to keep track of story characters; however, this instruction lacks explicitness as students are simply directed to mark key sections of the text to keep track of important information. A more concrete approach—such as using a consistent coding system to focus on elements like character actions, changes, and impact—would better support comprehension and prepare students to cite relevant evidence in their writing. Additionally, the unit does not include an explicit review of compare and contrast signal words within the core lesson instruction. While these words are mentioned as a language support in the Additional Supports section, it would be beneficial to incorporate explicit review, especially given that this is the first unit of the school year.

Finally, students explore the research writing genre, focusing on learning more about community gardens to present to their local neighborhood association as the culminating writing project. The lesson includes teacher modeling of research question generation; however, there is also no explicit instruction on how to revise a “boring” question into a more meaningful, broad inquiry, which is a missed opportunity to deepen students’ understanding of effective research practices. Additionally, the frequent shifts in writing genres across the unit—moving from compare and contrast to literary analysis/opinion to research writing—appears to prioritize breadth over depth. This rapid pacing may limit students’ ability to fully internalize the demands of each genre within the unit’s 19 lessons.

SECTION 3: Reading Comprehension

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAG PRACTICES FOR READING COMPREHENSION	SCORE	
3.1: Students are asked to independently read texts they are unable to decode with accuracy in order to practice reading comprehension strategies (e.g., making inferences, predicting, summarizing, visualizing).	2	
3.2: Students are asked to independently apply reading comprehension strategies primarily in short, disconnected readings at the expense of engaging in knowledge-building text sets.	1	
3.3: Emphasis on independent reading and book choice without engaging with complex texts.	1	
3.4: Materials for comprehension instruction are predominantly predictable and/or leveled texts.	1	
3.5: Students are not taught methods to monitor their comprehension while reading.	2	

Fishtank Plus ELA’s practices for **reading comprehension** are “**mostly met.**” Read-alouds serve as the primary instructional method in Grades K–1, as students have not yet developed the decoding skills necessary to read featured texts independently. However, the program does reference independent reading in the primary grades and places significant emphasis on independent reading across Grades K–5. The curriculum recommends that students in Grades K–2 engage in 15 to 30 minutes of independent reading during class, in addition to daily independent reading assigned for homework. Independent reading is also presented as an enrichment option, as seen in kindergarten, Unit 7, Lesson 9, which suggests, “If students are able, have them read the book in partners or independently. While reading, have them notice any details that are new” (Fishtank Plus ELA, Exploring Life Cycles, Lesson 9, 2025). Additionally, students in the primary grades are encouraged to engage with texts before they are fully capable of independent reading. For example, in kindergarten, Unit 8, Lesson 3, the Foundational Skills Support section advises teachers to, “Have students reread the poem in partners. Or display the poem in a place in the classroom where kids can return to the poem and read it independently at other points in the day” (Fishtank Plus ELA, Foundational Skills Support: Building Deeper Meaning, 2025). There is a disconnect between the realistic expectations of students’ decoding skills and the suggestion that they read the poems independently or with a partner. The poem that follows comes from “The Last Straw: Kids vs. Plastics,” by Susan Hood, and would be used for fluency practice in kindergarten:

Fantastic Plastic

Is plastic fantastic?
No doubt about it!
Where in the world
would we be without it?

Where in the world
would hospitals be
if medical tools weren't germ-free?

How in the world
would we safely play sports without
proper gear
on our fields and our courts?

What in the world
would we want to eat
if food wasn't fresh
in the store down the street?

Where in the world
would technology be?
Think smart phones, computers!
See? Plastic is key!

Is plastic a blessing?
Or is it a curse?
It makes our lives better.
BUT could they get worse?

(pp. 6-7)

The complex sentence structures, unfamiliar vocabulary (e.g., fantastic, germ-free, proper), and challenging phonics concepts (e.g., use of varied vowel teams, multi syllabic words, contractions) make this text quite complex for fluency practice in kindergarten, especially since early readers benefit from practice with decodable text that aligns with targeted phonics instruction.

In Grades 3-5, the program strives to have learners develop the “stamina and drive to read for 1 hour independently each day” (Fishtank Plus ELA, Independent Reading Goals: 3-5, 2025). If a school does not allocate a separate independent reading block, the program recommends using a significant portion of the ELA block for independent reading—ranging from 50-80% in Grade 3, 75-80% in Grade 4, and 80% in Grade 5. In the version reviewed, this allocation greatly reduces the time available for direct, explicit instruction, potentially limiting opportunities for modeling, guided practice, and teacher-led support. The publisher clarified that this is one of the areas that has been revised. Please see the Publisher’s Response for additional information.

Materials for instruction focus on the use of high-quality trade books designed to build learner knowledge. As such, there are no leveled or predictable texts featured. Fishtank Plus ELA also highlights some methods to help students monitor their comprehension, but these strategies are not consistently or explicitly framed as comprehension-monitoring techniques. While activities like guided discussions, graphic organizers, and reflective writing prompts implicitly support comprehension monitoring, there is limited explicit instruction on how to apply these methods independently. The team felt this was a missed opportunity to make the connection between these activities and self-monitoring transparent. Other resources, like the Key Questions Tool, are teacher driven, while the Active Reading Routines document, which includes strategies such as stop and jots, annotations, graphic organizers, and the use of anchor charts are dependent on teacher discretion. In the instances where comprehension monitoring is explicitly addressed within the lesson plan, it comes in the form of guided questions. For example, in Grade 3, Unit 5, Lesson 6, teachers are directed to ask the guided questions, “Why does Maddie not stand up to Peggy?” and “Do you agree with Maddie’s reasons?” to help students self monitor their comprehension and evaluate characters’ motivations while reading *The Hundred Dresses*. Again, this places an emphasis on the teacher driving student self-monitoring instead of explicitly teaching students how to independently apply self-monitoring strategies. Without direct instruction on metacognitive reading skills, students may become reliant on teacher questioning rather than developing the ability to recognize comprehension gaps and adjust their reading approach independently.

4A: Writing – Handwriting

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAGS PRACTICES FOR HANDWRITING	SCORE	
4.1: No direct instruction in handwriting.	n/a	
4.2: Handwriting instruction predominantly features unlined paper or picture paper.	n/a	
4.3: Handwriting instruction is an isolated add-on.	n/a	

Fishtank Plus ELA’s **handwriting** non-negotiables are “**not applicable.**” While the program includes instruction connected to writing composition, it does not address foundational transcription skills like handwriting. The publishers are upfront about this and recommend that schools supplement their Grades K–2 curriculum with a high-quality handwriting program. Adopters of this curriculum must be mindful of this and plan for additional instructional time and resources to ensure students receive explicit, systematic instruction in handwriting and other foundational transcription skills.

4B: Writing – Spelling

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAG PRACTICES FOR SPELLING	SCORE	
4.7: No evidence of explicit spelling instruction; no spelling scope and sequence for spelling, or the spelling scope and sequence is not aligned with the phonics / decoding scope and sequence.	n/a	
4.8: No evidence of phoneme segmentation and/or phoneme-grapheme mapping to support spelling instruction.	n/a	
4.9: Patterns in decoding are not featured in encoding/spelling; spelling lists are based on content or frequency of word use and not connected to decoding/phonics lessons.	n/a	
4.10: Students practice spelling by memorization only (e.g., rainbow writing, repeated writing, pyramid writing).	n/a	
4.11: Spelling patterns for each phoneme are taught all at once (e.g., all spellings of long /ā/) instead of a systematic progression to develop automaticity with individual grapheme/phonemes.	n/a	

Fishtank Plus ELA’s **spelling** non-negotiables are **“not applicable.”** Reviewers noted that while the program’s writing rubrics include spelling as an evaluation criterion and provide incidental spelling instruction, Fishtank Plus ELA does not explicitly teach spelling. The publishers are upfront about this and recommend that schools supplement their Grades K-2 curriculum with a high-quality spelling program. Adopters of this curriculum must be mindful of this and plan for additional instructional time and resources to ensure students receive explicit, systematic instruction in spelling and other foundational transcription skills.

This section was re-reviewed in July 2025 after the initial review as the lessons were updated, and the prior lessons no longer exist.

4C: Writing – Composition

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

RED FLAG PRACTICES FOR COMPOSITION	SCORE	
4.17: Writing prompts are provided with little time for modeling, planning, and brainstorming ideas.	1	
4.18: Writing is primarily unstructured with few models or graphic organizers.	1	
4.19: Conventions, grammar, and sentence structure is not explicitly taught and practiced systematically (i.e., from simple to complex) with opportunities for practice to automaticity, instead it is taught implicitly or opportunistically.	2	
4.20: Writing instruction is primarily narrative or unstructured choice.	1	
4.21: Students are not taught the writing process (i.e., planning, revising, editing).	2	
4.22: Writing is taught as a standalone and is not used to further reading comprehension.	1	

Fishtank Plus ELA’s practices for **composition** are “**mostly met.**” Reviewers observed that the curriculum provides students with instances of modeling, planning, and brainstorming ideas for compositions across genres. In Grade 1, Unit 2, Lesson 8, Day 1, students use the Narrative Writing Organizer for Grades K-2 to brainstorm a folktale with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Later in Grade 3, Unit 2, Lesson 7, Day 1, the teacher models how to use a cause-and-effect T-chart to identify challenges (i.e., causes) faced by those coming to America on the Mayflower. Following this modeling, students work collaboratively to brainstorm the effects of these challenges, which they then use to complete a single-paragraph outline. And in Grade 5, students work in partners to collect evidence showing how one person can influence a community based on character actions in the story *Seedfolks*.

The curriculum incorporates a range of graphic organizers to support student brainstorming and idea development. These include:

- Main Idea & Details Graphic Organizer K-5
- Narrative Writing Brainstorm K-2
- Narrative Writing Organizer (Grade 3, Unit 1)
- Single Paragraph Outline (Grades 2-5)
- Cause and Effect T-Chart (Grade 3, Unit 2)
- Story Mountain Organizer (Grade 4, Unit 1)
- Evidence Brainstorming Page (Grade 5, Unit 1)

These tools are accompanied by teacher modeling and explicit instruction to guide students in their effective use.

Fishtank frames its structure for writing around its writing routines, including Analyzing an Exemplar, Analyzing a Non-Exemplar, Write Aloud, Shared Writing, Analyzing Student Work, Quick Practice, and Independent Writing. Several examples were found including those highlighted in the table below:

GRADE LEVEL, UNIT, LESSON	EXAMPLE
Grade K, Unit 1, Lesson 12	Following a whole-group brainstorm on the prompt, “ <i>How can you make the classroom community a joyful place to be?</i> ”, the teacher engages students in a Shared Writing routine to capture their responses, focusing on nouns such as people, places, and things. However, the concept of a “joyful classroom community” is abstract and multifaceted, which can be particularly challenging for kindergarten students to grasp and express without additional concrete examples and language support.
Grade K, Unit 2, Lesson 12, Day 2	A Non-Exemplar Analysis is used to help students identify what is missing from a piece of writing. In this instance, the non-exemplar lacks the necessary labels to support the author’s opinion of the read-aloud <i>Caps for Sale</i> .
Grade K, Unit 3, Lesson 10	The Analyzing an Exemplar routine is used to show students how to effectively complete the Main Idea & Details Graphic Organizer.
Grade 1, Unit 2, Lesson 8, Day 3	The Write Aloud routine is used to model how to write the beginning of a trickster folktale, followed by a Shared Writing routine to collaboratively compose the middle of the story. The Write Aloud segment includes a potential script with clear and detailed teacher guidance, whereas the Shared Writing portion offers less specific instructional support for educators.

(continued)

GRADE LEVEL, UNIT, LESSON	EXAMPLE
Grade 1, Unit 2, Lesson 23, Day 1	A Think Aloud is referenced in the lesson; however, it appears to function as a Write Aloud routine intended to show students how to complete a note-taking sheet. While the lesson includes a sample response to support teacher modeling, the inconsistent use of terminology (Think Aloud vs. Write Aloud) may cause confusion for both teachers and students.
Grade 2, Unit 2, Lesson 7	The Write Aloud routine is used to model how to translate a Single Paragraph Outline into a fully developed paragraph. This modeling supports students in understanding how to expand notes into complete sentences and organize their ideas coherently in writing.
Grade 2, Unit 1, Lesson 22	The Mentor Text, <i>Cinderella and the Kind Stepfamily</i> , is used to reinforce the idea that writers reveal a character's personality through the character's words and actions.
Grade 3, Unit 2, Lesson 7, Day 1	A Think Aloud is referenced in the lesson but appears to serve as a Write Aloud routine to model how to complete the Cause and Effect T-Chart for note-taking. While a sample completed T-Chart is provided to guide teacher modeling, the inconsistent use of instructional language (Think Aloud vs. Write Aloud) may lead to confusion for students and reduce clarity in teacher delivery.
Grade 4, Unit 2, Lesson 12, Day 4	A Mentor Text is used to demonstrate how writers incorporate temporal words and phrases to show the sequence of events. This example helps students see how time-related language supports the flow and clarity of narrative writing.
Grade 5, Unit 1, Lesson 18, Days 1 & 2	An analysis of a completed Exemplar Graphic Organizer and a corresponding narrative based on the novel <i>Seedfolks</i> is used to help students understand how to organize their ideas effectively and apply narrative techniques modeled in the example.

The Quick Practice routine offers the least amount of structure and clarity among the instructional routines, presenting several implementation challenges. While the suggested questions can be helpful, they assume that teachers have a strong, foundational understanding of writing instruction and the specific strategy being taught, which may be difficult for novice teachers. Additionally, there is limited support or concrete examples on how to adapt the practice to meet diverse student needs.

Although the guidance recommends that teachers provide feedback during Quick Practice, it lacks clear direction on what effective feedback should look like. Furthermore, the routine does not clarify how Quick Practice connects to or fits within the broader context of a writing unit or instructional sequence, making it harder for teachers to integrate it cohesively into their teaching plans.

Language conventions, grammar, and sentence structure are introduced in a progression that moves from simple to complex. Lessons frequently include explicit teacher modeling and purposeful connections to the authentic texts students are reading. However, a recurring challenge is that many practice opportunities and follow-up lessons are designated as optional, which may compromise instructional consistency and limit opportunities for students to achieve mastery. Additionally, while these language lessons are present in earlier units, they were less frequently observed in later ones. Fishtank has plans to release additional revisions and updates during the 2025–26 school year. However, decision-makers should be aware of this inconsistency if they are considering implementing the curriculum in its current iteration.

While Fishtank ELA does address the writing process, reviewers observed gaps in the explicitness with which this process was addressed within the curriculum. For example in kindergarten, Unit 2, Lesson 12, teachers and students are provided with a clear instructional map to brainstorm and draft a piece of writing about their favorite text from the unit, *Noticing Patterns in Stories*. Over the two day lesson, they engage in brainstorming and drafting, followed by revising and editing of their work. However, this explicitness is inconsistent. For instance, in kindergarten, Unit 7, Lesson 7, students are tasked to write a story of a seed that travels from one location to the next. However, this lesson lacks the explicitness in language and connections to the writing process highlighted in the earlier unit. In fact the lesson structure itself differs dramatically. In kindergarten, Unit 2, Lesson 12, the structure of the lesson is clearly broken into the components of the writing process, and students engage in brainstorming, planning, revising, and editing throughout the two day lesson. In the later unit, the lessons lack this explicit focus and are instead chunked into “Day One,” “Day Two,” and “Day Three” blocks. As noted previously, Fishtank has plans to release additional revisions and updates during the 2025–26 school year. However, decision-makers should be aware of this inconsistency if they are considering implementing the curriculum in its current iteration.

Additionally, there is some inconsistency in the terminology used around brainstorming and planning. For example, in Grade 2, Unit 1, Lesson 13, students engage in an exercise that asks them to brainstorm a “detailed setting” using a 5 Senses Graphic Organizer. Then on Day 2 of this lesson, students are tasked to plan the sequence of events in their own Cinderella story, including a beginning, middle, and end. However, the lesson is also labeled as “brainstorming.” Reviewers recommend a clearer delineation between the two terms as brainstorming involves the generation of ideas, while planning is focused on how those ideas are organized. Using these terms more accurately would support both teacher implementation and student understanding of the writing process.

Reviewers did note that Fishtank Plus ELA purposefully connects its writing tasks to the content of the unit and its connected texts. This was observed consistently across grade levels. Writing instruction is also embedded throughout the curriculum and is used as a means to further comprehension. Its writing framework states:

In grades K-5, students should be writing daily to show understanding of the lesson Target Task and text. Daily Target Task writing is essential for ensuring that students build stamina and fluency with writing for a variety of purposes, and for understanding key content of the lesson.

Prompts that ask students to respond to the Target Task in writing were observed throughout the curriculum.

Findings:

COMPONENTS SUPPORTING ASSESSMENT

SECTION 5: Assessment

Identification of the following red flag practices were prioritized in the review of this section.

NON-NEGOTIABLES FOR ASSESSMENT	SCORE	
5.1: Assessments measure comprehension only without additional assessment measures to determine what is leading to comprehension weaknesses (e.g., phonics, phoneme awareness, nonsense word fluency, decoding, encoding, fluency, vocabulary, listening comprehension).	3	
5.2: Assessments include miscue analysis in which misread words that have the same meaning are marked as correct.	1	

RED FLAG PRACTICES FOR ASSESSMENT	SCORE	
5.6: Assessments result in benchmarks according to a leveled text gradient.	1	
5.7: Foundational skills assessments are primarily running records or similar assessments that are based on whole language or cueing strategies (e.g., read the word by looking at the first letter, use picture support for decoding).	2	
5.8: Phonics skills are not assessed.	n/a	
5.9: Phoneme awareness is not assessed.	n/a	
5.10: Decoding skills are assessed using real words only.	n/a	
5.11: Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) assessments are not used.	1	
5.12: The suite of assessments does not address aspects of language comprehension (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, listening comprehension).	2	
5.13: Multilingual Learners are not assessed in their home language.	4	

Fishtank Plus ELA's non-negotiables and practices for **assessment** are “**somewhat met.**” Reviewers observed that the curriculum's End of Unit Assessments focus primarily on comprehension. This includes a vocabulary component where students are asked to explain what a word means and a section where students engage in a writing task about reading. For example, in kindergarten, Unit 7, the End of Unit Assessment consists of a vocabulary component where students are asked to pick two vocabulary words and draw a picture or write a sentence that shows each word's meaning. After this, they pick one life cycle that they learned about in the unit and tell what happens in each stage. However, the consistent use of writing tasks to determine reading comprehension can be a confounding factor when students lack the transcription and/or composition skills needed to complete the task. There is also a Cold Read Assessment where students read an unfamiliar passage and answer standards-based questions. Each Cold Read Assessment has a corresponding “answer key” that provides scoring guidance and example responses.

For fluency, Fishtank Plus ELA uses a Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) score to measure student fluency. The program states, “While the student is reading, note any errors the student makes (words read/pronounced incorrectly, omitted, read out of order, or words pronounced for the student by the examiner after a 3-second pause) on the Teacher Recording Form.” However, guidance in the Morphology and Syllabication Overview states the following:

This [rationale] aligns with the understanding that students in grades 3–5 will have already participated in a structured phonics sequence, and the goals of foundational skills work in grades 3–5 are to review and reinforce any gaps students may have. These gaps can be identified by doing a running record while administering the Fluency Assessment. Based on the running record, teachers should identify which students need more targeted syllabication work. (Fishtank Plus ELA, Morphology and Syllabication: Overview, 2025)

Reviewers cautioned that this could lead to misinterpretation on the part of educators administering this assessment as they may infer that the recommendation to use running records would include an analysis based on meaning, structure, or visual cues. However, the publisher clarified that Fishtank uses the term “running record” interchangeably with “test of oral reading fluency,” and nowhere in the rubrics or scoring guidance does the program suggest teachers analyze errors based on M/S/V cues.

Fluency Assessments are provided for all units beginning in Grade 2, Unit 2. This includes informal measures using the program's Reading Fluency Rubrics as checkpoints, and formal assessments at the end of each unit for learners in Grades 2 through 8. This is administered one-on-one while the rest of the class is independently reading or writing. The program includes The Hasbrouck-Tindal oral reading fluency charts to help educators interpret students' reading fluency levels. However, outside of this, recommendations on how to follow up and provide targeted support are minimal. Finally, multilingual learners are not assessed in their home languages, and educators would need to look to outside assessment tools to ensure that they are assessed in this manner. However, the team also noted that this would most likely be the case with most core curricula programs.

Final Report Summary

Overall, the **reviewed components** for Fishtank Plus ELA's curriculum were found to **“meet”** or **“mostly meet”** most criteria for Grades K–5. This means there was limited evidence of red flag practices. While an evidence-aligned core curriculum is a critical part of any literacy program, it is no substitute for building a solid foundation of educator and leader knowledge in the science of reading as well as a coaching system to support fidelity of implementation.

STRENGTHS

Fishtank Plus ELA centers each unit on diverse, relevant, and rigorous texts that provide students with windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to reflect students' own lives and the lives of others.

Fishtank Plus ELA provides all students with access to complex texts that foster engagement with academic language, critical thinking, and analysis, while promoting the development of student knowledge.

Fishtank Plus ELA provides educators with a thorough explanation of text complexity, including qualitative analysis, to support their capacity for evaluating and teaching complex texts.

Fishtank Plus ELA is designed to build student knowledge, incorporating both social studies and science content, to deepen students' understanding of complex and diverse topics.

While Fishtank Plus ELA emphasizes teacher planning and preparation—a valuable goal—it places a significant demand on educators. Additionally, there is a lack of explicit guidance for teachers, particularly in areas like lesson planning and implementation.

Fishtank Plus ELA lacks consistency in explicit instruction, with some lessons featuring minimal scripting and clear guidance for educators, potentially leading to variability in implementation. Clearer guidance and scripting could support more consistent and equitable instruction. The curriculum is currently undergoing revisions to address these issues, but current adopters of the curriculum should be aware of this variability.

Fishtank Plus ELA's planned opportunities for student practice are limited, particularly with vocabulary. As noted in Section 2C, although the program highlights target vocabulary words in student writing exemplars, it is unrealistic to expect students to transfer these words effectively, given their limited exposure to and practice with both Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary. Additionally, many of the follow-up lessons for language structures, which include opportunities for practice and review, are labeled as “optional,” potentially undermining consistency and student mastery.

Fishtank Plus ELA lacks educator support on how to respond to and follow up with students who require more support. For example, when students struggle to read fluently, the program suggests using a class session to reread some pages together as a class. Teachers are also advised to choose one skill to focus on, like decoding or reading with expression. Furthermore, when learners struggle with decoding, the program refers educators to either their Syllabication Routine, designed for students in Grades 2–8, or their Structural Analysis Routine, intended for students in Grades 3–5. However, these recommendations are vague and do not provide teachers with targeted interventions to address individual student needs effectively.

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PUBLISHER'S RESPONSE



Fishtank Plus ELA
Grades K-5

Fishtank Plus K-5 ELA Publisher's Response

Our Approach

At Fishtank Learning, we firmly believe that every student deserves access to challenging, knowledge-rich, and engaging learning experiences. These experiences are crucial for developing critical thinking, effective communication, and the essential skills needed to thrive in an ever-evolving world. Our vision is to empower all students to become critical thinkers, problem solvers, and agents of change.

Our [English Language Arts curriculum](#) is thoughtfully crafted to honor the expertise of teachers while ensuring that every student has access to high-quality, research-based, grade-level materials. As [a team of former teachers and school leaders](#), we recognize that a lesson plan alone cannot capture the myriad instructional decisions teachers make each day. We also recognize that teacher preparation programs aren't always sufficient to relay current research to practitioners, and seek to create both plans and supportive materials that develop teachers' content and pedagogical expertise in best classroom practices.

In sum, two [core values](#) impact every decision we make: *we believe in students* and *we trust teachers*. We have designed our curriculum to empower teachers to make informed instructional decisions, allowing for diverse teaching styles and instructional routines within the bounds of research-based best practice. Ultimately, this approach ensures that all students have access to what truly matters: grade-level texts and tasks that challenge and inspire.

This document offers our response to The Reading League's review (hereafter, the Review) of our K-5 Fishtank Plus curriculum. While we fully support and agree with the majority of their recommendations, we also believe it is essential to clarify the intentionality behind several aspects of our design:

- The role of **independent reading**.
- Our research-based approach to **vocabulary instruction**.
- The deep emphasis on and support for **teacher intellectual preparation and development of content expertise** that exists within our materials.

We welcome the opportunity to share these perspectives, grounded in both research and classroom practices, as part of our ongoing commitment to designing curriculum that advances literacy and equity for all students.

First: Notes on Publishing Timeline

The Review raised concerns about “inconsistencies” in Writing, Language, and Literacy Knowledge, as well as misalignment in our Independent Reading recommendations. We would like to clarify that these concerns pertain to outdated versions of our units and Teacher Tools, not our current materials. Specifically:

- **Independent Reading:** Our guidance has already been updated to align with current research, reflecting the consensus that independent reading is appropriate only for fluent readers and should not replace foundational skills instruction in early grades.
- **Writing & Language:** All of our early units (those in use in Fall/Winter 2025) have already been revised to include our enhanced Writing and Language approach. By February 2026, the entire K-5 suite will be fully updated and aligned with the latest research, in time for the teaching of each unit during the 2025-26 school year.

Because we believe teachers deserve access to the most current materials without waiting years for a new edition, we release updates on a rolling basis. This means that teachers always have access to the most up-to-date version of our curriculum.

Publishing Timeline Snapshot:

	Kindergarten	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade
Unit 1	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available
Unit 2	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available
Unit 3	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	October 2025
Unit 4	Available	October 2025	Available	October 2025	September 2025	December 2025
Unit 5	Available	December 2025	November 2025	Early 2026	Early 2026	Early 2026
Unit 6	November 2025					
Unit 7	Early 2026					
Unit 8	Early 2026					

This approach is aligned with another one of our core values: *we listen, learn, and adapt*. We continuously improve and refine our resources by drawing on research, collaborating with partners, and actively seeking feedback from our users.

Independent Reading

The Review raised concerns about Fishtank Plus ELA's guidance on independent reading, suggesting that we endorse a discredited reader's workshop model and that we recommend using "a significant portion" of the ELA block for independent reading.¹ This does not reflect our current approach. In fact, several of the citations in the Review reference outdated versions of our materials.

Our current [Teacher Tool for Independent Reading](#) says:

Research does not recommend dedicating time to independent reading for students until they have become somewhat fluent readers, able to independently decode and make meaning from grade-appropriate texts. For that reason, we do not recommend independent reading time in Kindergarten through 2nd Grades, or for students in upper grades still developing their foundational reading skills.

Ideally, students in Grades 3-5 have a dedicated independent reading block of 20–30 minutes in their daily schedules. Since studies consistently reveal a positive relationship between the amount of independent reading and reading proficiency—"the best readers tend to read the most" (Shanahan 2018)—we also recommend that students be encouraged to read at home. These additional opportunities for independent reading outside of the ELA block are crucial components of student literacy development, helping students access a large volume of complex texts, build knowledge, and develop a love of reading.

In addition, when Independent Reading is used as an in-class instructional strategy for engaging with the text (see our Teacher Tool on [Reading Routines: Independent Reading](#)), we state that independent reading should only be used for 10–15 minutes in the latter half of Grade 2 through Grade 5, and only for texts or sections of text that are not particularly complex. Notably, this tool also emphasizes independent reading as an opportunity for fluency support and practice: "Every time that students read independently they are working on building fluency. This includes reading a section of text for the first time or rereading sections of text."

Fishtank Plus ELA's current approach to independent reading is informed by research and provides teachers with clear guidance on how to leverage independent reading for students who would benefit from it.

¹ Red Flag Practice 3.1: Students are asked to independently read texts they are unable to decode with accuracy in order to practice reading comprehension strategies (e.g., making inferences, predicting, summarizing, visualizing)

Fluency

Although Fishtank Plus ELA is not a foundational literacy skills program, we recognize the research that suggests a critical connection between fluency and reading comprehension. As such, we have built a robust set of supports for teachers, ensuring this essential element of skilled reading is embedded into core literacy instruction.

Starting in Grade 2, every Fishtank unit is accompanied by a Fluency Assessment, and Foundational Skills Supports are built directly into relevant lesson plans, offering opportunities to progress monitor or practice the specific fluency demands of this assessment. Notably, this Fluency Assessment is designed as a test of oral reading fluency using an excerpt from a core unit text. Teachers are instructed to use our [Fluency Rubric](#), which includes categories for Prosody (Expression & Volume, Phrasing, Smoothness), Rate (Pace), and Accuracy. To provide further guidance, our [Assessing Reading Fluency Teacher Tool](#) directs teachers to the [normed Hasbrouck-Tindal oral reading fluency charts](#) to understand the target Rate (Words Per Minute) for each grade level.

The Review, however, flagged our use of the term "running record" to suggest we support outdated and harmful methods of coding fluency errors according to meaning, syntax, and visual cues. This is not the case. When it appears in the curriculum, the term "running record" is used interchangeably with "test of oral reading fluency." Nowhere in our materials do we suggest accepting incorrectly decoded words if they are close in meaning to the target word, nor do we use running records based on whole language or cueing strategies.²³

Fishtank Plus ELA does not reference such scoring methods. Our assessments and guidance are fully aligned with the latest research and best practices, always directing teachers toward normed, evidence-based fluency evaluation and instructional tools.

Vocabulary

Again, in accordance with the research, Fishtank Plus ELA recognizes the critical importance of vocabulary to literacy development. As an explicitly knowledge-building curriculum, words matter, both for the acquisition of new, important content and to support students' ability to write and speak about that content. Our vocabulary structures, therefore, are thoughtfully designed not only to identify important words but to spiral practice with those words using a variety of evidence-based methods, pulled notably from our team's work with the English Learners' Success

² Red Flag Practice 1.44: Fluency assessment allows acceptance of incorrectly decoded words if they are close in meaning to the target word (e.g., assessment based upon the cueing systems, M/S/V)

³ Red Flag Practice 5.7: Foundational skills assessments are primarily running records or similar assessments that are based on whole language or cueing strategies (e.g., read the word by looking at the first letter, use picture support for decoding).

Forum (ELSF), *The Reading Comprehension Blueprint* (Hennessy, 2020), and *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck, 2002).

The Reading League Review suggests, incorrectly, that "teachers are responsible for designing their own vocabulary review structure, as no specific instructional sequence is provided for distributed, cumulative, or interleaved practice." This observation obscures the intentional design of the vocabulary words we choose to include in each unit, and when we choose to introduce them. Each K-5 unit is designed such that ~20 vocabulary words are identified and taught throughout each unit. Words are chosen based on their centrality to students' ability to understand, write, and/or discuss the content of the text in service of arriving at the unit's enduring understandings. After being introduced, these words are intentionally spiraled in subsequent lessons through authentic practice as students recall, discuss, and write about unit content. By both explicitly and implicitly teaching the identified words, prioritizing questions that ask students to apply their knowledge of the word, and encouraging students to use the taught vocabulary words in their written and oral language, Fishtank ELA promotes a deep understanding of vocabulary words.

For example, consider Grade 1 Unit 3, which is described in the Vocabulary section of the Review. In Lesson 2, the vocabulary words *predator* and *prey* are explicitly taught in the Lesson Launch. These words then intentionally reappear in future lessons, as built-in opportunities for teachers to spiral student understanding. In Lessons 4 and 9, these words appear in the Comprehension & Vocabulary Review portion of the lesson, where teachers are directed to give students a scenario and then ask students to apply their understanding of the vocabulary words: "The bald eagle soared above, using its eyes to scan the ground for a mouse to catch" (Lesson 4) and "A lion crouches low in the tall grass, watching a herd of antelope and waiting for the right moment to chase one" (Lesson 9), then, "Which animal is the prey? Which animal is the predator?" In Lesson 6, practice with the word *predator* is also built in, this time in the Lesson Launch when students examine a sentence that uses a conjunction to join ideas: "The tail breaks off because a predator grabs it." Similarly, in Lesson 10, students apply their understanding as they practice generating adjectives about the behavior of other animals towards their predators or their prey. In each of these instances, in addition to several more that occur throughout the latter portion of the unit, the vocabulary words are bolded to make it visible to teachers that they are intentionally spiralling practice.

Besides the intentional design in the lesson plans themselves to spiral vocabulary practice, Fishtank Plus ELA also provides a suite of vocabulary resources, including activities, word cards, and glossaries. While the Review suggests that "Fishtank Plus ELA's planned opportunities for student practice are limited, particularly with vocabulary,"⁴ Fishtank ELA provides both in-lesson

⁴ Red Flag Practice 2.7: Vocabulary worksheets and activities are used with little opportunity for deep understanding of vocabulary words.

opportunities as well as a suite of additional resources to provide ample practice and promote deep understanding of unit vocabulary.

The Review also suggests that Fishtank ELA does not provide explicit vocabulary instruction.⁵ Specifically, the Review says that "resources for the explicit vocabulary routine and implicit instruction are not embedded within the lesson, requiring educators to utilize resources outside of the lesson plan." While this is somewhat true, it is also by design, and in keeping with the research that suggests that students acquire new words when they can make connections to their existing oral vocabularies. When appropriate, opportunities for implicit instruction of vocabulary words are embedded within the Language Supports connected to the Key Question associated with the vocabulary word.

Every Fishtank Plus ELA lesson that introduces new vocabulary words directs teachers to either leverage an explicit instructional routine using guidance from the [Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Teacher Tool](#) or to teach the word in context when it comes up in the text. This Teacher Tool includes specific routines teachers can use to teach vocabulary words, but does not specify precisely what this should look like. This is intentional: we know that word and world knowledge varies significantly based on students' funds of knowledge and lived experiences, and research shows that the ability to incorporate new words into vocabulary comes from making connections to existing words and funds of knowledge (Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; Beck, 2002). Therefore, it is impossible for a lesson plan to capture the single way a teacher might draw upon their students' unique funds of knowledge to make connections to a new vocabulary word. It is imperative that teachers intellectually prepare and make decisions about vocabulary instruction with knowledge of their particular students.

Our Teacher Tools are designed to highlight this for educators. For example, the [Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Teacher Tool](#) reminds teachers that not all words we identify may need to be taught in the first place: "While Fishtank ELA lessons identify priority words for a text, teachers may find additional words worth studying as they complete their intellectual preparation process. Teachers then have to decide which words they want to focus on based on their knowledge of students, knowledge of the text, and recommendations from Fishtank." We do, however, acknowledge that teachers need support in understanding what a customized vocabulary routine might sound like. As such, we include a sample script in this same Teacher Tool using the word "despair."

Clearly, Fishtank Plus ELA prioritizes and provides plentiful resources to support student vocabulary acquisition as they engage with complex texts. We advocate for customized vocabulary instruction for students, recognizing that existing knowledge varies.

⁵ Red Flag Practice 2.9: Tier 2 words are not taught explicitly and practiced; students are not given opportunities to use them in their speech, see them in print, and use them in writing.)

Intellectual Preparation

At Fishtank ELA, we believe that excellent teaching is rooted in thoughtful [intellectual preparation](#). The Review notes that “Fishtank Plus ELA emphasizes teacher planning and preparation” and “places a significant demand on educators.” We agree, and hold that this is critical for effective literacy instruction.

We understand that meaningful instruction does not come from simply following a script. Instead, it is the result of teachers internalizing lesson plans, making informed choices based on their students’ needs, and drawing on their own creativity and knowledge. Research consistently shows that high-quality professional development, directly connected to curriculum and content, leads to better student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). That’s why we provide comprehensive guidance and resources to support intellectual preparation, while trusting teachers to make decisions that fit their unique classroom contexts.

Our approach is validated by teachers themselves. In a recent survey, over 82% of users reported that Fishtank Plus ELA helps them adapt instruction to meet their students’ diverse needs. As experienced users shared:

- “I love that I can make each unit thematic and teach it all day. Mostly, I love that I am not micromanaged. Fishtank respects teachers and allows them to adjust the program to fit the needs of the students” (Fishtank Impact Survey, 2025).
- “This is a well-thought-out and engaging program. The students love it, and it has really raised their level of reading, writing, and academic discourse. It’s a phenomenal program. It’s also a program that allows (and encourages) some flexibility that allows us to best meet our students’ needs” (Fishtank Impact Survey, 2025).

Rather than attempting to script every instructional move, we provide leader training, embedded professional development, and a robust suite of Teacher Tools that help educators internalize content and personalize instruction. For example:

- We offer a [Fishtank ELA Launch](#), a comprehensive, five-module on-demand series designed to empower teachers and instructional leaders to bring Fishtank ELA to life in their classrooms. The ELA Launch is designed for both independent and collaborative learning on the most important elements of the Fishtank Plus ELA curriculum. For school and district adoptions, we also provide Train the Trainer and Leader Development Series to support literacy coaching using Fishtank Plus ELA.
- Each unit is accompanied by a [Unit Launch](#) that offers comprehensive guidance to ensure teachers have a deep understanding of the complexity present in each unit text, the key reading and writing standards students are expected to master, and how students will

demonstrate mastery on assessments. This work supports teachers in understanding how unit standards build on previous learning and prepare students for future success.

- We offer a robust library of [Teacher Tools](#), available for independent study and directly linked in relevant lesson plans when explicit routines are recommended. Rather than filling lessons with step-by-step procedures teachers may already know or need to adapt for their students, our lesson plans help educators build a skill set in research-based best practices.

Teachers don't need scripts; [teachers need support](#). This approach supports culturally responsive teaching, ensuring that every classroom experience is both relevant and meaningful, while also keeping a high bar for rigor.

Future Revisions

As part of our ongoing commitment to continuous improvement, many of the points raised in the Review are already priorities in Fishtank Plus ELA's current and upcoming revision cycles. Staying true to our research-driven approach, we are collaborating with leading organizations to ensure our revisions are not only best-in-class but also reflect the latest research and direct feedback from educators and stakeholders. Specifically, we are partnering with Student Achievement Partners to develop stronger practices regarding **Morphology** and **Progress Monitoring & Assessment**.

Progress Monitoring & Assessment: We recognize the Review's observation that "Fishtank Plus ELA lacks educator support on how to respond to and follow up with students who require more support." In response, for the 2026–27 school year, we are developing a comprehensive suite of tools for progress monitoring and responding to student data, all centered on the vital content and standards students need to master. Prototypes of these supports, including instructional guidance for lesson-level progress monitoring and unit-level summative assessments, are already in development (for examples, see Appendix A).

Morphology: The Review notes that "explicit instruction in morphology is not present, and Fishtank Plus ELA does not feature a morphology scope and sequence; work with roots and affixes is tied to the vocabulary word of study." In reality, explicit morphology instruction is already embedded in several units (for example, Grade 1, Unit 2; Grade 3, Unit 1; and Grade 5, Unit 3), and our lesson plans routinely integrate word parts as part of vocabulary routines. For example, in [4th Grade Unit 1 Lesson 2](#), students learn the word impulsive in the context of their reading. Teachers are guided to: "review with students the meaning of the prefix 'im-' and the suffixes '-less' and '-ful' and challenge students to look for words that use the different affixes."

In fact, in an analysis of the 849 text-based vocabulary and explicitly taught roots and affixes already present in the K-5 curriculum, we discovered that only a handful of important roots and

affixes are missing from our complete scope (Beck et al., 2013; Bowers & Kirby, 2010; Moats, 2010; Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

However, while Fishtank Plus ELA does teach a wide array of vocabulary words, we concede that we do not yet have a clear morphology scope and sequence. Given the critical link between word knowledge, fluency, and skilled reading, we are prioritizing the development of a robust, explicit scope and sequence for roots and affixes, ensuring that teachers can intentionally and systematically build this knowledge with their students across all grade levels.

Conclusion

Fishtank Learning is committed to providing teachers and students with high-quality curriculum materials. Our resources are intentionally designed and grounded in research and our core values. We are committed to continuing to revise and refine our product to ensure students have access to high-quality materials in their ELA classrooms, and we appreciate the work of The Reading League in thoughtfully evaluating our materials and affirming our research-based approach to literacy instruction.

Appendix A

Instructional Guidances

Figure A1

Lesson-Level Progress Monitoring Instructional Guidance

5th Grade ELA
A Single Shard

Progress Monitoring Lesson Guidance: U1 L5

Target Task: Choose one: Crane-man, Min, Min's wife, or the villagers. How does the author develop Tree-ear's character through his interactions with this character?

Standard for Progress Monitoring: RL.5.3: Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

Alignment to Assessment: Warm Read Assessment #s 4, 6, 7 - all these items ask students to make an inference about a character's personality or to make inferences about their actions.

Why this task is essential for progress monitoring: Students have been getting to know Tree-ear as a character for the past several lessons, and have been doing this by noticing his actions, thoughts, and dialogue. In this lesson, they practice the final piece: noticing what his interactions with others reveal about his character.

How to monitor student understanding:

Below are understandings necessary for the Target Task question and potential misconceptions. Suggested supports can be used to intervene with individual students during the lesson, or if a majority of the class has a misconception, they should be used to modify a portion of an upcoming lesson.

Important Understanding	Potential Misconceptions	Supports
Students should be able to make an accurate inference about Tree-ear's character trait(s) or personality. Specifically, they should be able to name his compassion or kindness for others, appreciation or gratitude, his determination, or his intelligence.	Students name Tree-ear's feelings, which are transient, rather than his traits or personality. Students use inaccurate trait words, or use words that are overly generalized or basic (ex. "nice" "good").	Distinguish between traits and feelings by defining and providing examples of each. Refocus students on Tree-ear's actions and what that says about him as a person. Provide students with a list of common character trait words, or generate one as a class or small group. Refer students to specific moments in the text where Tree-ear interacted with another character. Ask: Which of these words best describes his action? Or What would you call a person in real life who acts this way?

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Note: This figure demonstrates a structured approach to and teacher guidance for progress monitoring for 5th Grade ELA Unit 1 Lesson 5, focusing on character analysis through interactions.

Figure A2

Unit-Level Summative Assessment Instructional Guidance

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTION PLAN

Use the information about the upcoming unit to proactively plan to address gaps.

Next Unit: Unit 2: Exploring Human Rights: The Breadwinner

Content Knowledge Connections	In Unit 1, students learn: • <i>It is important to show up for other people because you never know when your support will be needed most; it is the right and honorable thing to do.</i> • <i>People achieve their dreams through hard work, persistence, and never-ending hope or optimism.</i> These ideas will support student understanding of how and why people like Malala Yousafzai are working for change. In Unit 1, students learn that <i>having the support of another person sometimes means everything: from literal survival to the fortitude to carry on through tough challenges</i>. This connects to the Unit 2 Essential Question, "How can family relationships and dynamics influence a person's actions?" and helps students understand how the people and characters featured in this unit are able to advocate for change.
Vocabulary Connections	<i>resentful</i> is a Unit 2 vocabulary word that students should be familiar with from <i>A Single Shard</i>: Tree-ear was resentful of Min for much of the book. <i>decency</i> is a Unit 2 vocabulary word that can be tied to the Unit 1 word <i>honorable</i>. Unit 1 words <i>endeavor</i> and <i>arduous</i> can be used to support student discourse & writing about Unit 2 themes.
Skill Connections	Unit 2 Key Reading Standards: RL.5.2 & RL.5.3 → These are <i>the same</i> as the Key Reading Standards for Unit 1. There is additional emphasis on setting and more in-depth work on comparing and contrasting characters. Unit 2 Writing Focus Areas: Opinion Writing - students will build on their familiarity with how to write a paragraph from Unit 1 to now write explicitly opinion paragraphs in Unit 2. There is new instruction on concluding statements, which requires a strong foundation in writing topic sentences, introduced in Unit 1. Narrative Writing - students will build on the narrative writing they learned in Unit 1 to do so again in Unit 2, this time staying within the bounds of the unit text to write from another character's point of view.

If students need additional support with...	... leverage this lesson...	...by doing the below:
Determining theme from recurring ideas	Lesson 16	At the end of this Discussion lesson, ask students to develop some possible themes about hope the author might be communicating through this story. Write or display these possible theme statements for the class, then workshop them to ensure they meet the criteria introduced in Unit 1 (Lesson 20): themes should not include specific characters' names or details, and should apply to other situations or stories.
Understanding the impact characters have on one another	Lesson 8	Adjust the Target Task response to specifically be about Parvana's character (rather than offering choice) and how the other characters' responses and reactions have impacted her own feelings, actions, and motivations.
Writing a strong topic sentence to begin a paragraph	Lesson 15	For the Target Task, instead of requiring students to write a full response, simply ask them to craft a topic sentence that clearly states their opinion. Review the criteria for strong topic sentences from Unit 1 (Lesson 6): clearly addresses the prompt and includes a valid idea.
Planning a clear narrative arc and sequence of events	Lesson 17 (Day 2)	Emphasize the planning students do on this day, spending extra time providing feedback and conferring with students who struggled to write a cohesive historical fiction story in Unit 1. Use a sequence of events or beginning - middle - end graphic organizer, and pre-populate it if needed, since students are using a familiar story. Pay special attention to the way students are concluding the story - students tend to overly focus on the beginnings without thinking about their endings.

Note: This figure provides an instructional guidance for teachers after analyzing summative assessment data from Unit 1 (Shaping Dream: A Single Shard). It seeks to elevate places in Unit 2 (Exploring Human Rights: The Breadwinner) to support students with key knowledge or skill gaps as revealed by the summative assessment. The guidance outlines content knowledge connections, vocabulary bridges between units, and skill progressions in reading standards RL.5.2 and RL.5.3.