Literacy skills are the cornerstone upon which students’ knowledge, self-esteem, and future educational opportunities are built. But far too many teachers lack the time, materials, and specialized knowledge required to address these skills adequately. To that end, *Climbing the Literacy Ladder* is a one-stop shop for teachers in need of a plan and rationale to differentiate literacy instruction for all students from prekindergarten through 5th grade.

Literacy educator Beverly Tyner presents plans for small-group instruction that addresses elementary students’ six developmental stages of reading and writing: Emergent, Beginning, Fledgling, Transitional, Fluent, and Independent. To help teachers support students’ literacy development, this book also provides:

- Characteristics of readers and writers at each stage.
- Lesson plans that target each of the research-based instructional components (fluency, word study, vocabulary, and comprehension).
- Authentic classroom scenarios and conversations.
- Practical classroom strategies and activities.
- Advice for when to move students to the next stage.

If students cannot read with comprehension by 3rd grade, then their educational future is cast in doubt. *Climbing the Literacy Ladder* will not only help you grow as a competent and empowered literacy teacher but also ensure that your students continue to travel a clear and unobstructed educational road.
CLIMBING the LITERACY LADDER

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After I finished writing this book, I asked myself, “How much of this information is truly necessary to give teachers the tools they need to be effective literacy teachers for all students?” With that guideline in mind, I proceeded to reexamine each chapter and take out all of the “fluff”—the material that’s nice to know but not necessary for busy teachers to wade through. And here we are.

But more important, here you are, starting another book about literacy instruction. What knowledge do you hope to gain from this book? What are you looking to learn? Let me be frank. If you’re looking for a book that reviews research in painstaking detail, this may not be the book for you. Research is important, but there are many high-quality resources already available that support the strategies presented in this book. If you’re looking for theory or pedagogy that you must translate into practical classroom practice, then I suggest you choose a book written by “experts” who have never darkened the door of the classroom (or haven’t in a very long time).

This book is intended to be a “one-stop shop” for teachers in need of a plan, rationale, and materials to differentiate literacy instruction for all students in prekindergarten through 5th grade. You will gain knowledge of the six stages of reading and writing development along with the research that supports the models. You will also find lesson plans,
strategies, and activities that support each stage of development, and you will be given access to all of the materials through my website (www.beverlytyner.net) so you can save time and energy. First and foremost, though, my hope is that this book will continue to grow you as a competent and empowered literacy teacher.

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing emphasis on elementary literacy instruction focused on struggling readers and writers. I think it’s safe to say that educators have made some accomplishments with our ability to target and teach to our most struggling readers and writers, and that’s certainly a fantastic achievement. All too often, however, on- and above-level students have often been sidelined or neglected in the process. Unfortunately, the gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers has continued to be stubbornly wide and stagnant over the last 10 years (NAEP, 2017). It’s clear there is still much to be accomplished for all of our students.

So many books have been written about struggling readers that I want to make it clear that this is a book about all students and their growth in literacy. Today’s standards and assessments hold teachers accountable for growth in every student: students with special needs, English language learners, “gifted” students who are above grade level, and every child in between. Most teachers work hard because they are passionate and want to focus intentionally on instructional practices that support below-, on-, and above-level readers and writers. In my many years of experience in schools across the country, I have found that there is generally a four- to six-year range in proficiency levels among readers and writers in any given elementary classroom. So many teachers walk into their classrooms every day faced with the daunting task of meeting the needs of this incredibly diverse range of students—while also teaching grade-level standards. No wonder teachers are burning out!

Literacy skills are the cornerstone upon which knowledge, self-esteem, and future educational opportunities are built. In my opinion, the biggest obstacle teachers face in advancing literacy skills is addressing this range of readers and writers without the time, materials, or specialized knowledge required to address all students’ needs. Research tells us that if students cannot read with comprehension by 3rd grade, then the instructional road in front of them is cast in doubt (Hernandez, 2011). Beginning in 3rd grade, the content standards become so dense that teachers have little time to address literacy deficits or challenge students who already meet the standards. Literacy skills are truly an “open sesame” for acquiring knowledge to read and write about almost anything!

If you’ve ever been an intermediate grade teacher, you know exactly what I’m talking about. No matter what content is covered on high-stakes assessments,
Small-Group Differentiated Reading and Writing

students who can read and comprehend will score higher than struggling readers. As teachers, we often spend countless hours on test prep in hopes that it will benefit our students. I am often asked, “What is the best way to prepare my students for the state assessments?” Although I do believe that some moderate test prep is appropriate, especially as it relates to test formats, a majority of classroom time must be spent advancing reading and writing skills in a variety of subject areas that support grade-level standards. In other words, differentiating reading and writing instruction while still addressing grade-level standards is essential.

Many grade-level skills can be easily taught at a variety of text levels. Teachers can be confident that while their students are expanding their reading and writing abilities, they’re also addressing grade-level standards. With this in mind, teachers need a strong voice in making recommendations concerning school purchases, including leveled texts that address those standards. In short, students won’t get better at reading unless they read a lot! Our students’ futures are all but determined by how well they learn to read and write.

Although teachers know a great deal about reading and writing processes, they often still have many questions about the most effective methods to use when addressing various students’ needs. I have encountered far too many teachers who are frustrated and feel they have been led astray by basal textbook programs and boxed materials that claim to differentiate instruction for all students—but fail to meet those promises. Moreover, many teachers often claim they were poorly prepared to meet the needs of a wide range of readers and writers.

The truth is, if teachers have the correct training—along with a wide variety of leveled texts—they truly have all they need to be effective literacy teachers. Too often, I feel we make things too complicated. In this book, I want to strip down the process and look at the basic knowledge upon which teachers can continually build throughout their careers. A teacher who was trained in and used the models in this book once said to me, “Why didn’t someone tell me how it worked before?” My goal is to share this information with you.

Let’s be honest: I do not have all the answers. Instead, what I offer in this book are two things. First, I want to show you how a reader and writer develops from a nonreader to a late 5th grade level so you understand the “why” behind the lesson plan models I present. Second, I want to provide you with all the strategies and materials you will need to implement the models effectively. As busy teachers, we want to be confident about the instructional models we are using and have the required materials at our fingertips.

My interest in developing these models was a result of my work with Dr. Darrell Morris, professor of reading at Appalachian State University. Using a one-on-one
intervention model with 1st graders (known as Early Steps: Learning from a Reader), research in both rural and urban settings showed great success (Morris, Tyner, & Perney, 2000; Santa & Hoien, 1999). My thought was that if this model showed success in intervention, then why wouldn’t it also work for small groups in the classroom? I have since published five books centered on small-group differentiated reading for students from kindergarten through middle school, but I wanted to create one book for elementary teachers that addresses not only reading but also writing as it relates to reading comprehension (see Tyner, 2004, 2009; Tyner & Green, 2009). My apologies for not including middle school teachers, but if we can meet the literacy needs of all elementary students and help them reach their highest capabilities in reading and writing, then I count that as a success for both elementary and middle school teachers.

Allow me to share how this book is different from my previous books. This book encompasses PreK through 5th grade. In retrospect, I think it was a mistake to split the prior books as K–2 and 3–8. Elementary teachers need all the materials in one book so they can accommodate all levels of literacy they will encounter with their students. You will also notice that I have created a writing component in this book as it relates to reading comprehension. Writing is a natural extension of reading because, developmentally, the two are very similar. We can’t expect students to write about things they can’t read. Additionally, the lesson plans are more detailed and include suggested activities for students to complete during independent practice. Finally, all the support materials discussed in this book are easily downloadable from my website (www.beverlytyner.net) for free!

**Differentiating Reading and Writing Instruction**

As many schools continue to adapt to an increasingly broad range of learners, it has become more important than ever to develop instruction that responds to these academically diverse students. Differentiating reading and writing instruction for elementary students is a critical step to appropriately address the academic diversity that exists in virtually every classroom. In other words, we need to modify our instruction based on our students’ readiness. Whole-group instruction is not enough to meet the needs of this wide range of readers and writers; differentiated small-group instruction enables teachers to plan strategically and meet the needs of students at both ends of the spectrum (and everyone in between). Think of differentiated instruction as the individual steps necessary to reach successively higher levels of literacy development. With this in mind, differentiated
reading and writing instruction in small groups gives every student the opportunity for literacy growth.

The research-based Small-Group Differentiated Reading and Writing Models presented in this book were created with students’ individual developmental literacy needs in mind. Teachers are presented with easy-to-implement lesson plan models that support any student in any given elementary classroom—including special education students and English language learners (ELLs).

Differentiated instruction begins when children first enter school, whether that’s in a prekindergarten or kindergarten program. Beginning this journey requires teachers to assess each student’s literacy knowledge and provide instruction that will appropriately advance the child’s literacy learning. Students enter a typical prekindergarten or kindergarten classroom with very different levels of printed-language knowledge, and instruction must be adapted for these differences. Some educators feel that small-group reading and writing instruction is inappropriate for young children. On the contrary, I firmly believe that young children deserve the same literacy opportunities as older children.

For example, students entering school with solid alphabet and letter-sound knowledge should progress to the next logical instructional step—which would typically target standards addressed in late kindergarten or 1st grade. On the other hand, numerous young children are often left behind when they fail to acquire foundational skills and knowledge critical to literacy development, such as alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, and the ability to track print. We need to simultaneously meet the needs of these two very different groups of students. This is the essence of differentiated instruction.

Low- and high-performing students in the upper elementary grades face an even greater gap. Many teachers are frustrated by the conflict of teaching specific skills to small groups versus grade-level standards in whole-group instruction. This is not an either-or scenario. Standards can be taught in whole groups using modeled and shared reading and writing strategies and then applied in small groups with leveled materials that students are capable of reading and understanding. Small-group differentiated literacy instruction builds foundational skills students may be lacking, or it may accelerate growth for students who already meet grade-level standards.

This book, then, provides concrete examples that address grade-level standards with materials that are appropriate for below-, on-, and above-level students, including special needs students and ELLs.
The Development of Small-Group Differentiated Reading and Writing Models

So now we come to the nuts and bolts of the models. Teachers are often told to do specific things in the classroom, but they typically aren’t given the why behind those directives. I’m probably not going to buy into something unless it makes sense to me, and I’m sure many of you are the same way. So follow along while I try to show you why these models work.

At their core, the models presented in this book use research-based components and strategies embedded in developmental frameworks that recognize the stages through which readers and writers naturally progress. Reading and writing are not all-or-nothing skills; alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics, print-related knowledge, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension are all integral parts. This, then, is the basis for the small-group differentiated reading and writing models presented in this book. As students are assessed to determine their literacy strengths and weaknesses, teachers will group students strategically and deliver instructional strategies to accommodate for these differences. As a result, all students will move forward in their literacy journeys.

The models include a variety of reading and writing strategies and activities that are based on the developmental needs of individual readers and writers—not on students’ age or grade level. Although accommodating for differences might be difficult at times, they must be recognized and addressed. If we are sincere about having students achieve at their highest literacy potential, and if we have our students’ best interests at heart, then we must differentiate literacy instruction. Students have different starting points, and we must provide the most appropriate level of challenge to increase their literacy learning.

Few educators would argue that effective reading and writing instruction includes a combination of strategies to teach all children to become proficient readers and writers. A differentiated approach that includes the best research practices will more likely meet a much wider range of learners (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). The models in this book attempt to capture the best instructional practices for elementary readers and writers through the integration of carefully differentiated instructional strategies at each stage of development. Rather than relying on one approach or another, each strategy has been carefully weighed in relation to research and its importance to the reading and writing processes.

Most literacy researchers and practitioners acknowledge that the teaching of reading and writing is multifaceted; there are no quick or easy fixes. There is,
however, a recognized set of components that is imperative to reading and writing instruction. The most current and comprehensive examination of these was completed by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000). The panel reviewed the reading research for the foundational years of kindergarten through 8th grade to identify the components that consistently relate to reading and writing success. These five components were identified as (1) phonemic awareness, (2) phonics, (3) fluency, (4) vocabulary, and (5) comprehension. These components are, therefore, included in the lesson plan models.

The small-group differentiated literacy models presented in this book are differentiated in two important ways. First, through the six stages of developmental reading and writing: Emergent, Beginning, Fledgling, Transitional, Fluent, and Independent levels are clearly differentiated as students progress toward increased independence. Second, the research-based instructional components—fluency, word study (including phonemic awareness and phonics), vocabulary, and comprehension (expressed through both speaking and writing)—are differentiated according to each student’s stage of development. In the following section, we look at each of these components and their place in small-group instruction.

**Research-Based Lesson Plan Components**

Each of the instructional components is discussed below, along with the rationale for including it in the small-group models.

**Fluency**

Fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with enough expression to understand the text’s message. In other words, it means reading comfortably and without struggle. In my opinion, accuracy is the most critical part of reading fluency. The ultimate purpose of reading is to understand a text. If students truly understand what a text means, it must be read at a high degree of accuracy. So it makes sense that speed would follow when students can accurately recognize the words.

I have begged teachers to put the stopwatches down and stop grading the speed part of fluency! Unfortunately, the response is usually “We are required to.” I have also come to believe that expression is not necessary to understand text. Think about those 4th grade students who read like robots and have the highest comprehension scores in the class. Perhaps expression belongs more in the realm of “drama”! Without question, fluency is an important gateway to reading
comprehension; when students struggle to read words correctly, it is difficult for them to focus on comprehension.

The differentiated models in this book will ensure that all students practice fluency at levels that appropriately support growth in this essential process. Knowing that fluency must be supported by appropriately leveled text, it is therefore best developed during small-group time or independent practice. By design, texts read in small groups should be at an appropriate instructional level—neither too easy nor too hard. With teacher support, students can read and comprehend the text successfully. As students reread, it should be at an independent level that builds fluency. As students enter the independent stage, fluency is generally discontinued in small groups because these students are fluent readers and can maintain this skill in independent practice.

**Word Study**

The study of words included in this book includes phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, phonics, word features, prefixes and suffixes, syllabication, multisyllabic words, and Greek and Latin roots. Students learn that spelling patterns are recognizable and help them decode unfamiliar words and unlock meaning. Word study provides students with the opportunity to investigate and understand patterns in words and how word parts affect meaning. Traditionally thought of as spelling, word study is a different concept and does not support the type of drill and practice that leads to random memorization and a weekly spelling assessment.

Word study develops hand in hand with reading and writing, and there are opportunities in both the whole group and small groups to address these important skills. Research supports the idea that the study of words increases comprehension as it supports decoding and increased vocabulary knowledge (Kamil, 2004).

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that the sounds of spoken language work together to make words. I want to emphasize that this is a listening skill—not a writing skill. A student can have phonemic awareness and not be able to read or write words, but to benefit from phonics instruction, a student needs to demonstrate good phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is a subset of a larger category called phonological awareness, which includes identifying rhymes, syllables, and manipulating sounds. These are addressed in Stage 1A, the emergent reading and writing stage. A sequence of lessons supports students in developing these important foundational skills and will be fully discussed in Chapter 4.

I have observed students who are reading but still lack basic phonemic awareness. These students often struggle with phonics, which can eventually lead to
poor decoding skills that affect their ability to access more difficult text. Explicit instruction and monitoring of phonemic awareness has been primarily taught in whole-group settings. In a small-group setting, teachers can provide support to meet individual students’ needs or advance students who have already mastered these skills and need to move forward in phonics instruction.

The ELFS (Early Literacy Foundational Skills) lessons presented in Stage 1A include a specific lesson sequence that gamifies the process of developing phonemic awareness skills and also includes recognizing and producing alphabet sounds, hearing initial consonant sounds, blending sounds to make words, segmenting sounds, and discriminating rhyming words. The Beginning and Fledgling stages also include activities that support the development of phonemic awareness while also focusing on recognizing beginning consonant sounds and distinguishing short vowel sounds in one-syllable words. For many students, the supported small-group setting allows them to focus on and build these important skills.

There are distinct stages in word study development that are addressed in the small-group lesson plans. Students at different stages of proficiency attend to and represent different patterns and features in their reading, writing, and spelling—from simple to complex. These skills also build on the foundational knowledge in previous word study lessons to progress to more complex patterns. Word study is guided by simple spelling/meaning assessments that help the teacher place each student at an appropriate instructional level. Instruction is deliberately sequenced so students can build word knowledge that propels them in their reading and writing development. The activities that support word study require students to become word detectives who are engaged in ongoing attempts to make sense of word patterns and their relationships to one another. Spelling “rules” are not dictated by the teacher for students to memorize. Rather, students discover spelling patterns and generalizations on their own.

If word study is only addressed in the whole group, struggling readers will very likely miss foundational pieces of the sequence, especially phonics. At the other end of the spectrum, students who have already mastered the grade-level skills need to be presented with an appropriate level of challenge. These small-group differentiated lessons embrace the notion that differentiating word study heavily supports the advancement of reading and writing in general.

**Vocabulary**

Many students come to school with a limited oral vocabulary and need a language-rich classroom filled with words: in stories, in conversations with adults and other students, in rhymes, and in the environment around them. Since a lack
of vocabulary knowledge is a contributing factor to poor comprehension, it must be front and center in all small-group instruction (Glende, 2013). Early readers first master basic high-frequency words (as their initial focus on vocabulary). After students have mastered these words, the focus then moves to words that support understanding of the text. Vocabulary development should be naturally differentiated according to words selected from the leveled texts read in the small groups.

**Comprehension**

It is an understatement to say that we all read to comprehend. It is the only reason we read. Teaching reading comprehension is a fine art, and a deliberate, well-thought-out lesson plan developed prior to instruction is essential to successfully guide students' comprehension as the lesson unfolds.

Traditionally, basal reading instruction focused on one comprehension strategy each week. I often hear teachers tell students that they are reading the text to find, for example, cause-and-effect relationships. This statement is somewhat troubling and certainly not conducive to a thorough understanding of the text. A more realistic scenario would be to use this strategy in a way that students can personally connect to. This naturally comes in the form of a question such as, “Why did John act that way when he got the test back?” (In other words, what was the cause for the way that he acted?) When we make a strategy more personal, true comprehension can be taught. We must begin to show students that readers adjust strategies based on what they are reading, and multiple strategies work together as meaning is constructed. As good readers, we don’t naturally begin reading a story with the intent of looking for cause-and-effect relationships.

Teachers routinely tell me that their students’ biggest reading issue is comprehension. Comprehension does not stand alone but is intertwined with fluency, vocabulary, and decoding. Students who can’t read at an appropriate speed will certainly struggle to understand the text. Students who don’t understand what words mean will also struggle. Poor decoding skills can affect both vocabulary and understanding. We must be aware of all the pieces that make up comprehension. For that reason, the lesson plan models in this book include the development of fluency, word study, vocabulary, and comprehension simultaneously.

The early stages of reading and writing are heavily focused on the decoding process, and there is a gradual transition toward more intentional comprehension instruction in each subsequent stage. Although texts at the early levels are so simplistic that they require few higher-order skills to comprehend, teachers should still have students make simple predictions, summarize, and ask questions. As students progress to more advanced stages, comprehension becomes the primary
focus of small-group instructional models and is explicitly taught before, during, and after reading.

Reading and writing relationships begin when reading and writing start (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Although reading and writing are closely connected, writing that supports comprehension has been often overlooked in the past. However, it is now at the forefront of both standards and assessments. The research is clear that writing instruction can raise reading achievement (Shanahan, 2015). Writing about texts is effective because it requires students to consolidate and review information. This written comprehension, as I call it, requires students to organize and integrate ideas. Translating a text’s meaning into one’s own words is the ultimate summarizing activity. Additionally, students are gaining knowledge from their own reading and writing. In my observations, writing improves when students can actually read the text they are writing about. Much of the writing discussed in this book is framed and supported in small groups but takes place independently after the teacher carefully discusses the focus of the writing through guided questions.

Many of the components associated with writing—grammar, text conventions, organization, mechanics, topic-centered sentences and paragraphs, word choice, sentence structure, paragraph organization—can be addressed as students respond to texts. As teachers continue to struggle with time limitations, incorporating these skills in authentic writing (rather than with isolated workbook pages) will not only save time but also teach the skills with a specific purpose.

Starting in 3rd grade, most states require students to take standardized writing assessments that are generally based on one or more texts. The scoring rubrics for these assessments include mechanics, structure, and how well students respond to a comprehension prompt. Therefore, writing must be an integral part of reading comprehension in the small-group models—from the very earliest developmental stages—if students are expected to meet these demanding standards.

**Developmental Stages of Reading and Writing**

Research shows that reading and writing are closely aligned (Shanahan, 2015). In fact, reading and writing depend on some of the same skills and strategies. Please pay close attention to this section; it should clarify the why behind the developmental stages of reading and writing instruction and how they relate to the differentiated lesson plan models presented in this book. Understanding brings power and confidence to your literacy instruction. I often have teachers tell me that their school’s principal says, “I don’t want you to do this or that.” I respond by asking, “Do you agree or disagree?” Rather than simply complying, be empowered by
knowing why you are doing what you do in literacy instruction. Be ready to have a fact-based conversation that demonstrates your depth of knowledge about your instructional decisions.

To guide the reading and writing processes effectively, there must first be an understanding of the associated developmental stages—and of the demands placed on readers and writers at these different stages. The six stages—Emergent (i.e., a nonreader), Beginning, Fledgling, Transitional, Fluent, and Independent—end at a 5th grade level. Students advance through these stages as they build upon their knowledge and move forward at their own pace. Each stage will be thoroughly discussed in Chapters 4–9.

Although appropriate grade-level designations are given to each stage for reference, students will be assessed to determine their actual stages of development. This instruction centers on a text selection that is at an appropriate level for the group—that is, text that students can read with 90–95 percent accuracy and understand with the support of the teacher (Rasinski, 2010).

A lesson plan model has been carefully developed to accommodate the literacy needs of students in each developmental stage, with instructional focuses in fluency, vocabulary, word study, comprehension, and writing. These models can be found in the relevant chapters and are carefully weighted at the appropriate developmental level to address the needs of a specific group of readers and writers.

**Differentiating Time Spent in Small-Group Instruction**

As discussed earlier, small-group differentiated reading and writing provides an opportunity for all students to grow. In addition, it presents struggling readers with an opportunity to make the gains needed to close achievement gaps. Struggling readers particularly need ample exposure to appropriately leveled text choices to provide those growth opportunities. During small-group differentiated instruction, it is important to address each essential reading component (fluency, word study [including phonemic awareness and phonics], vocabulary, comprehension, and writing that supports text comprehension). Many struggling students might also be a part of the school’s intervention program. The additional small-group time in the classroom should be carefully orchestrated to complement and solidify skills taught in intervention.

Those students who successfully read grade-level text are not exempt from small-group instruction. They also need additional text selections and instruction at an appropriate level to hone their literacy skills and continue to flourish.
opportunity to reflect and share in a small-group setting allows students to think more deeply about their reading. Although these grade-level readers may not need to work in small groups daily, a sensible goal would be for them to do so every other day.

Above-level students also require support to navigate more complex text. If these students are limited by the grade-level texts presented in whole-group lessons, it is difficult for them to grow to their full potential. A wide variety of genres—in both literary and informational texts—should be included to address the needs of these more accomplished readers and writers. Many times, teachers continue to present thick chapter books as a way to address the needs of advanced readers, but longer books do not necessarily produce better readers and writers. I am often reminded of a student who was placed in an advanced reading group. She told me in no uncertain terms, “Just because we are good readers does not mean we like thicker books.”

Another mistake we often make with above-level students is to leave them on their own for independent reading. If I am honest, I often assumed that above-average students did not need my support. I was dead wrong. I now know that they need support at a differentiated level to support their more advanced literacy levels. Growth requires texts that are challenging enough to require the teacher’s support with comprehension strategies. Even students who read at the highest levels need to be guided with in-depth conversations and discussions. Although these independent readers read extensively on their own and will require much less time in a small-group setting, the teacher should still routinely meet with them in small groups.

**Differentiating Text Selections for Small-Group Instruction**

If students don’t have books they can read—and a lot of them—then implementing these developmental strategies will not work effectively. Children only get better at reading when they read texts they can understand with 90–95 percent accuracy. This pertains to books that students can read and comprehend with a teacher’s support in small-group instruction. The most essential component in small-group differentiated instruction is a text that best matches a student’s developmental reading needs. This is no small task.

Clearly, we have come a long way in leveling books according to difficulty level. I still encounter many schools, however, that have insufficient resources to meet the needs of all readers. Teachers need sufficient leveled texts to address literacy levels and content standards that progress in difficulty levels. It is unrealistic to expect a 4th grade student who reads two grades below level to read
and understand a 4th grade level text. Even with strong teacher support and scaffolding, the text would be so challenging that the student would become frustrated—along with the teacher. Although teachers can present these higher-level texts during interactive read-alouds or shared reading, this approach alone is insufficient for assisting these students in literacy growth.

Another concern is the misunderstanding that all leveled texts are created equally—that is, all leveled using the same guidelines. Teachers are the best decision makers in choosing appropriate text selections. Preview the structure, vocabulary, and appropriateness of all texts prior to introducing a new book in small-group settings. Be sure to consider the text complexity as it relates to your readers and the current task.

Although I am a strong proponent of the important place that leveled text plays with struggling readers, I believe that we may need to be more diligent concerning the difficulty levels. In many instances, text selections are too easy for some students, which inhibits their growth. This is especially true with struggling readers. I think we often become so excited that these students are reading well that we linger a little longer than necessary with texts that are too easy. As we begin to address the more demanding standards, we must be vigilant and ensure that the text selections we use represent an appropriate mix of genres and complexity.

**Implications for English Language Learners, Special Needs Students, and Intervention**

Perhaps the most important reason that small-group differentiated reading and writing models are successful is their ability to meet the needs of a wide range of readers and writers. Teachers continue to be challenged with students who have special needs, including those who are learning to speak English. As these teachers more thoroughly understand the stages of reading and writing development, they feel better equipped to meet the needs of these challenges.

English language learners (ELLs) who have developed a good English listening vocabulary are often easy to place in small groups because the lesson plans already allow for differences among learners. Of course, ELLs generally lack the vocabulary of some of their peers. Teachers need to spend extra time developing the vocabulary necessary for good comprehension. This is easier to do when using a model that places students in appropriate reading, writing, and word study levels. School districts have used these frameworks with ELLs with good success, and some have taken the frameworks and translated them into differentiated instruction for developing Spanish literacy.
ELLs with limited English proficiency may lack the vocabulary needed to support their decoding and comprehension efforts. I have found that selecting books with a strong text-to-picture correlation supports both their vocabulary development and their comprehension. Beginning with relatively simple texts also allows ELLs to develop a sense of predictable sentence structure, which is critical to their success. Small-group differentiated instruction provides the environment and components that ELLs need to be successful readers and writers.

Additional intervention outside the literacy block is also important for students performing below expectations. New federal guidelines in the RTI model suggest that early intervention for struggling students be delivered in an explicit and consistent manner outside the literacy block. A prevalent model for delivery of reading instruction and intervention is called the three-tier model. This three-tier model is an attempt to prevent reading failure through early intervention rather than testing and placing students into special education. It consists of three levels of instruction: Tier I includes the basic reading instruction delivered in both whole-group and small-group settings, Tier II includes additional reading intervention that takes place outside the literacy block, and Tier III includes additional intense instruction for students who continue to struggle and have been tested for learning issues.

The small-group differentiated reading and writing models play a key role in each of these levels. All too often, the case has been that if students were not progressing in Tier I instruction, then they should be thrust into a different program. On the contrary, these students need extra time in small-group instruction to focus more intensely on fluency, word study, vocabulary, and reading and writing comprehension. This provides the true “intensity” these students need and makes it much easier to track progress and provide extra layers of support.

There is also this notion that if we “drill down” to uncover the deficits these students have, then we can simply work with segmented pieces of the reading process. For example, an assessment might suggest that a student is weak in reading comprehension. A cause could be traced back to a lack of fluency or decoding skills, or perhaps the student lacks the vocabulary needed to understand the text. In my numerous years in focused literacy interventions, it was very rare to see a struggling reader who was only struggling in one discrete aspect of reading, such as cause-and-effect relationships. Reading and writing are holistic processes and cannot easily be broken apart.

One of the most enlightening bits of knowledge I have gained over the years is this: most special education students do not learn to read differently than any other students. I have been successful with students with autism, Down syndrome,
and lower academic functioning. Look no further than differentiated instruction to address the needs of these students. In my opinion, students with special needs deserve “regular” small-group differentiated instruction in the classroom; a smaller, more focused second small group; and a special education setting with one or two other students who share similar levels of proficiency and functioning. In other words, all three groups would focus on the text, word study, and writing at the appropriate instructional level. This provides the intense instruction that every special education student deserves.

Conclusion
Perhaps the biggest challenges teachers face today is the academic diversity present in most elementary classrooms and how to make critical decisions about the most effective methods to deliver literacy instruction to all these students. Differentiating literacy instruction using the small-group models discussed in this book will provide a framework for addressing a wide range of readers and writers. The small-group differentiated reading and writing models presented in this book provide teachers with concrete models that are both developmental and anchored in research.

The lesson plan components outlined in these models provide focused instruction in the basic literacy components. The strategies and activities that support these research-based components are critical. Unlike other small-group models, each of the components is carefully integrated with differentiated strategies that are included as important parts of the daily lesson plan. The reading and rereading of appropriately leveled texts provides the centerpiece for small-group reading instruction. Additionally, developmental word study is addressed with appropriate strategies and activities, and each lesson is inclusive of a strong vocabulary focus. These components, in turn, support both reading and writing comprehension and function congruently to provide a solid foundation for continuous literacy growth.

A Look Ahead
Now that you have read a bit about the rationale behind how the models were developed, let’s take a look at how the rest of this book is structured.

Chapter 2 begins with an in-depth look at each of the reading research–based components and the strategies and activities that support each stage of the small-group differentiated reading and writing models. It also presents literacy extensions that can be completed out of group to support each of the lesson components.
Chapter 3 discusses assessments that can be used in conjunction with the small-group models. Chapters 4–9 are structured similarly and present the six stages of elementary reading and writing development. In each chapter, a brief review of student characteristics associated with each stage is presented along with instructional focuses for that stage. Lesson plan formats that support each stage are also included in each of these chapters. Step-by-step directions are given for implementing the lesson plan, followed by selected teacher and student dialogue that supports the lesson. This dialogue is included to demonstrate the activities in an authentic small-group setting (all student names are pseudonyms). Independent literacy extension activities are interspersed throughout the chapters to provide suggestions for easy-to-implement activities that are appropriate for each lesson plan.
References


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**About the Author**

**Beverly Tyner** has been an educator for more than 30 years, serving as a classroom teacher, a school administrator, a college professor, and an international literacy consultant. Tyner is best known for taking literacy research and transforming it into easy-to-implement classroom strategies. She has published five prior books that focus on small-group differentiated reading instruction and produced several sets of video training materials. Her great passion is her work with teachers and students in long-term professional development that promotes literacy growth for all students. This book houses her continued focus on differentiated reading instruction and developmental writing. Appropriate for teachers of prekindergarten through 5th grade, it is intended to encompass a wide range of readers and writers, including special education and English language learners. Tyner lives in Signal Mountain, Tennessee, with her husband Paul and their dog Skyler. As the mother of four grown children, she enjoys travel and sharing her knowledge of literacy with other teachers.