

In closing our monograph, *Fact checking the Science of Reading: Opening the Conversation*, we stated:

We hope that our examination of these claims contributes to a respectful consideration of the issues related to learning to read. Beyond the fact-checking, there may not be agreement with everyone on all issues; in fact, we are not always sure we agree with one another with some of our recommendations for moving forward. That's healthy. ... We hope these discussions help to open a conversation....

Claude Goldenberg challenged us to do just that and pursued our engagement with his perspective on the Science of Reading (SoR) via zoom and e-mails. He also requested that we post on the Literacy Research Commons (<https://literacyresearchcommons.org>) a link to his critique of the Fact Checking monograph. Consistent with our invitation, we were enthusiastic about the possibility that we might all fruitfully engage in a conversation about our agreements and differences.

One acknowledgement as a preface to our response: Claude started his critique soon after we published the open access on-line document on April 1, 2024. Thus, the Executive Summary, including the chart at its end, which we posted in early June, was not examined as he developed his review. That's important to this conversation because we readily admit that feedback received—from Claude, others, and ourselves—prompted us to tinker with the ways in which we stated and warranted the claims as they originally appeared in the monograph. Indeed, a big breakthrough for us was organizing our claims into a chart with three versions (each a column in our chart: *the Headline Version*, *the Academic Version*, and *our Revised Version*). Had he seen this movement on our part from the April Monograph to the June Executive Summary, he might have responded differently. But we'll leave it up to him to answer that question.

A major concern of Claude's is that we have engaged in precisely the behavior for which we criticize some of the champions who adhere closely to the Science of Reading; namely "putting words in the mouths of others" by asserting a version of a claim that no serious advocate of the Science of Reading accepts. As an example, he notes that in Claim #1, we say that Science of Reading advocates assert that "Phonics is **THE** key to early reading success," rather than **A** key, along with other elements of a comprehensive curriculum." He also points out that we did not link our paraphrased version of the claim to a specific individual or class of individuals, leaving us vulnerable to the "inventing straw persons" critique. Claude is right to take us to task on this score. We should have been more careful, reserved, and specific in asserting what the champions of the SoR claim.

As we noted earlier, if one examines our treatment of the 10 claims in the Executive Summary and the 3-column table, we recast overall claim (the science is settled) and the 10 specific claims into 3 categories:

- The headline version that often appears in social or print media.
- The research-based version that is stated or implied in academic, research-based discourse regarding the issue, and
- Our (Rob and David's) version—a revision of the claim that we could live with, given our reading of the research and the impact of the claim on policy and practice.

In the table that appears at the end of our Executive Summary, our three claims regarding phonics look like this:

- **Headline version:** Phonics-first instruction should be a uniform policy.
- **Academic version:** Teaching phonics is necessary, but not sufficient, for success. It is best embedded in a comprehensive reading curriculum, wherein phonics instruction is

one of many key pedagogical supports. While some contend that it should be taught synthetically, there are many ways to learn the code, and it is better learned early rather than later on.

- **Our version:** We concur that phonics is a crucial component of reading, but so are various other elements. We don't see an appropriate level of nuance and flexibility reflected in recommendations for teaching and learning phonics, especially in some state policies and legislation.

In one sense, we began to take Claude's concerns about vague referents and straw persons seriously even before we read his critique because we also noted that shortcoming. And we are currently in the process of revising even the already revised Executive Summary version of the claims. And we plan to return to the full monograph to do likewise. We would note, in passing, that revisions of this sort are so much more feasible with online than print books. We don't have to wait for the printing of the next edition to correct an error, misstatement, or infelicity.

A major point in Claude's critique is that in problematizing the increasingly widespread influence of science on reading policy and practice, our work

“speciously perpetuates unnecessary rifts, pretending there is no agreement anywhere; instead they give the impression of an eternal battle centering “on the question of whether the earliest emphases should be on cracking the code or on reading for sense-making” (p. X)...” (p. 2)

He singles out three of our claims for critique: The privileging of early phonics, the reliance on the Simple View of Reading to guide pedagogy, and the overstated case for de-emphasizing meaning cues for word identification. His hope is that his account of how we mishandled those will serve to illustrate how we do mischief to all ten.

We appreciated his critique of the phonics claim, and, as we said, we have already taken steps to clarify our statement of the claim and to bolster the evidence for our warrants. And the reason we took 12 pages of text to revisit already well-trodden ground was to gather in one place as many of the meta-analyses and syntheses (and syntheses of syntheses) as we could, with special emphasis on those from outside the USA. For the SVR claim, we think he misunderstood our intention: All we were trying to do was to point out that its utility as a straightforward way of categorizing and managing all the complexity of reading should not extend to its use as a model of pedagogy, an assertion that even Gough and his colleagues have endorsed over the years. On using 3-cueing (or any number of meaning cues,) to inform word identification, we don't read the evidence the same way as Claude—so we'll have to agree to disagree.

While we are happy to post Claude's critique and consider responses by others to our work, in the spirit of open discourse, we want to point out a few differences that may—or may not—be reconcilable. We're not sure, and only further discourse will tell if they are permanent or only temporary impasses. Here are three: (a) What counts as reading, (b) the role of personal, perhaps derogatory, statements, and (c) his suggestion that we would have been better off to have examined a different set of claims; namely those put forward by G. Reid Lyon in 2023.

**What counts as reading.** As near as we can tell, Claude accepts the intentionally narrow definition of reading, put forward by Rayner and his colleagues in the classic 2000 paper (see claim #3), that reading is the ability to identify and understand words that are part of one's oral language repertoire. Rayner and his colleagues go on to argue that most things social, cultural, or contextual, even motivational, are better regarded as a part of literacy as it brings reading into

interaction with the world outside of the act of reading. We disagree and argue that reading cannot be explained or taught well without connecting it to this broader array of factors.

**Getting personal in refuting the arguments of others.** Despite our protestations, Claude's review includes, in the form of links to other articles, what we regard as remarks that are personal, and in our view, derogatory in nature. We are not challenging his right to make those statements, but we question their value and appropriateness. We don't think they help us negotiate consensus or difference across strongly held positions. When we encouraged him to avoid statements about who had the better reputation and publication record (implying that their positions merited greater credibility), he maintained that such statements are fair game in academic discourse. He even suggested that we too could attempt to impeach or enhance the credible of claims, including his, with similar data. He also rightly pointed out, in one email exchange, that we had made at least one such attack in our monograph, citing our comment about Emily Hanford's *Sold a Story* podcast series (on page xii in the preface of our book). In that statement, we noted, as one of the reasons for writing the book, was...

A mean-spirited tone in her rhetoric, which bordered on personal attacks directed against the folks Hanford considered to be key players in what she called the Balanced Literacy approach to teaching early reading. (p xii)

If one supposes that accusing a writer of engaging in a personal attack is, in and of itself, a personal attack, then we are guilty. The truth is that we thought we had stated the criticism in a way that didn't make it personal or ad hominem; apparently, in Claude's eyes, we failed.

We'd like to work out a truce on this sort of activity, reserving our sharpest critical lenses for the ideas, arguments, and evidence—not the people who assert them. As near as we can tell, all the folks engaging in this discourse space have the best of intentions: everyone wants to improve the skills and opportunities for kids to be able to use reading as a tool for learning. Impugn our logic and our rhetoric, even tell us we are wrong, but don't question our motives. Besides, the “bona fides” of an individual should not be the basis of the credibility of their statements; instead, the quality and validity of their arguments should carry the day.<sup>1</sup>

**Fact-checking claims worthy of our effort.** The paper closes with the suggestion that the field would have been better served had we chosen a more viable set of claims about the Science of Reading for our fact-checking. As an alternative, he recommended the ten maxims put forward by G. Reid Lyon in 2023.

We disagree. We wanted to fact-check the claims we saw as driving policy and practice in the media and statehouses in the US and several countries. To that end, we encourage that you compare his alternatives to what we offered and summarized in the Executive Summary.

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We close by reasserting our hope that neither our views nor Claude's view, nor those of others, are the last word. As we, Claude, and others have emphasized, the science is not settled

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<sup>1</sup> While we don't think perceived reputation or publication records should be the basis of one's right to enter the dialogue, we need to point out that those whose positions he questions come with well-established professional expertise, accomplishments, and regard. In his response, we found the links to articles in which he questions the credibility of Steve Strauss and scholars associated with the California Association for Bilingual Education problematic and unnecessary. Steve Strauss has strong credentials as a neurologist and linguist as well as a history of engagement in studies of reading. The CABE personnel are highly regarded scholars of multilingual literacy education, with a history of involvement in research, translating research for policy and practice, and working directly with school-based educators. All these are strong warrants for engaging in this important conversation.

and should be discussed vigorously and respectfully among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in the interests of students, parents, and teachers.