Explaining my philosophy on literacy evokes so many thoughts and impressions that they are hard to organize. There is even an *emotional* element present because I remember the excitement I felt when learning to read myself. The moment of realization when the marks on paper turned into words that I could *read* was something I’ll never forget. The attraction had begun--there were few things I enjoyed as much as a book. And it is truly fascinating to consider the wide world of readers—some are naturals and some have to work at it. I guess that’s as good a place to start as any.

I believe good readers have a natural understanding of the structure of language. They hardly seem to know they are using decoding strategies when they use them. There are children who don’t even come from literacy rich homes, yet they still have a knack for putting the patterns together and learn to read quickly. So on one level there are the children who learn to read easily, regardless of environment. For them it seems exposure and basic instruction is all that is needed.

For the other readers who don’t catch on as well, there needs to be more intensive instruction. I believe that the best literacy program is one that is a balance of the holistic and phonics approaches. Too much “parts to whole” instruction becomes boring
eventually, yet too much of a holistic approach leaves many readers without a firm enough hold to support independent reading. Phonics and whole language are the yin and yang of reading instruction. You have to have both for full productivity. Each fills the void the other leaves. A teacher with many years experience once delineated the division for me: she described the phonics school of thought as the “structure” of reading instruction, complete with rules, strategies, and attention to patterns. The holistic approach provides the “texture” of instruction. It adds the depth, meaning, and excitement to reading. It is the fascinating literary element.

I have been a reading teacher at a k-5 elementary school the past four years. I also watched my own four children learn to read and write. I am a strong believer in a balanced literacy program because children learn to read in different ways. Some are adept at sounding out words and breaking down the components while others are more adept at learning sight words, and using memory and experience to read. Most of the poor readers I have worked with have had weak decoding strategies. They have not had enough practice in the phonetic realm of segmenting and blending, and studying word patterns.

Within a balanced program, there are several components I think are essential. One crucial element is a focus on phonemic awareness. Early literacy teachers should be well versed in conveying the alphabetic principle, that is, in showing that print represents language by its sounds. I have found the sequence that works best when working with kindergartners is first to practice recognizing a letter, then writing it to help
deepen the connection, and then learning the sound of the letter. Truly, a beginning reader is asked to make sense of many concepts at one time. Teachers should practice the sounds of language by reading poems, nursery rhymes, stories and songs. Word study is another excellent way to help teach phonological awareness. It provides an opportunity to build words and break them down into their separate sounds. Through word study, a student increases their sight vocabulary and develops phonological processing skills. It is an immense help in showing the connection between common sounds and common spelling patterns. I’ve watched children struggle with deciphering a word letter by letter, yet be able to break the same word down by onset and rime. Focus on the onset and rime also gives an easier framework for the difficult vowel generalizations. In addition to all the technical benefits, word study is just fun. “Making words” lessons, word hunts, and word sorts bring a playful element to reading instruction.

Another necessary component to a reading program is daily experience in reading familiar texts. This helps reinforce the vocabulary children already know and builds their confidence as well. It helps increase speed and accuracy and gives them a feel for how “good reading” should sound. Reading often makes recognizing words easier and more “automatic.” All these factors contribute to an increase in fluency.

I believe writing is essential because it complements reading. In reading, the words are broken down bit by bit to decode; in writing the word has to be built up sound
by sound. The language experience approach is an effective practice for fostering a desire
to write because it brings to light the clear connection that writing is a way to
*communicate*. Writing is an extension of talking, and for most kids, that is an exciting
concept. Dictating kids’ statements and stories to display in the classroom, and later
having them write their own, are wonderful ways of encouraging young writers.
Beginning readers should also be given a variety of purposes to write, from a simple note
or message to a formal letter, story, or recipe. Writing has an added benefit in that a
teacher can gain valuable insight into a child’s developmental stage by their spelling.
Encouraging inventive spelling instead of “correct spelling” has been shown to improve
decoding skills as well.

The culminating activity of a reading program is instruction in comprehension.
All the elements heretofore discussed are the building blocks that enable comprehension.
If a child can read the words, but does not understand what he is reading, he is,
unfortunately, not *really* reading. Comprehension *is* the reason we read. To help
students achieve understanding of the texts, teachers need to generate meaningful
conversation about the stories they read. This is where higher order questioning, like Dr.
Beck’s text talk, can be used to lead a child to look for the deeper meaning. Teachers
need to guide readers toward organizing their ideas and talking about them. Story

elements like character, setting, plot, mood, and theme should come under inspection.
Reading should be seen as something that makes sense and provides information.
Learning to read requires a great deal of “mental collaboration.” By focusing attention on daily reading, writing, phonemic awareness, and text comprehension a teacher can ease the way into this complex process. I think literacy teachers by nature are people who love words and love to read. Aside from instructional practice, one would hope above all that a teacher would create a positive association with, and love for books. If you can foster at an early age an appreciation for reading, you’ve given a child a life-long gift.