



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on January 14, 2015

The Legacy of Rudolf Flesch

Most Americans under fifty, including teachers, have never heard of Dr. Rudolf Flesch, author of that famous book, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About it*, published in 1955. Most Americans have heard the phrase “why Johnny can’t read” but don’t associate it with the title of a book that became a bestseller because it revealed for the first time to American parents why their little Johnnies were having such a tough time learning to read in their schools.



Somehow, those colorful little Dick and Jane books with the lovable dog Spot weren’t doing the job. And Flesch explained why: They were based on a look-say method of teaching reading, a method which required children to learn to read English as if it were like Chinese, an ideographic system rather than a phonetic one.

Flesch wrote: “The teaching of reading — all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks — is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.” He then went on to explain how the professors of education changed the way reading is taught in our primary schools by getting rid of phonics, the proper way to teach a phonetic writing system, and introducing a new sight method that teaches students to read English by memorizing each word by its shape and context. It quickly became known as the look-and-guess method.

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Flesch proved by citing a number of studies that phonics worked better than look-say in teaching reading, and he thought that the educators would realize that they had made a terrible mistake and would return to the teaching of phonics. But what Flesch didn’t know was that these professors of education were not stupid and that the new method of teaching reading was part of a larger conspiracy to dumb down Americans so that they could be led to give up their individualistic freedoms and adopt a socialist form of government.

Indeed, by the 1930s, some educators were quite overt in their espousal of socialism. Professor George Counts of Columbia wrote in 1932:

Historic capitalism, with its deification of the principle of selfishness, its reliance upon the forces of competition, its place of property above human rights, and its exaltation of the profit motive, will either have to be displaced altogether, or so radically changed in form and spirit that its identity will be completely lost.

Eventually, Counts gave up on socialism when he realized that such a system would lead to a cruel Stalinist dictatorship.

Harold Rugg wrote in 1933: “Through the schools of the world we shall disseminate a new conception of government — one that will embrace all the activities of men, one that will postulate the need of scientific control ... in the interests of all people.”



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And in 1934, Willard Givens, head of the National Education Association, wrote: "... Many drastic changes must be made. A dying laissez-faire must be completely destroyed, and all of us, including the owners, must be subjected to a large degree of social control."

Naturally, when *Why Johnny Can't Read* came out in 1955, the professors of education were furious. Flesch had made them seem stupid and mistaken when they were anything but. They were the cleverest, most intelligent subversives in all of American history, and they were getting away with it. And they lost no time berating Flesch. *Time* magazine of January 9, 1956 summed up the reaction of the establishment: "American education closed ranks against Flesch, and when educators were not denouncing the 'Devil in the Flesch,' they were damning the 'Flesch peddlers.'"

Bruce Dietrick Price wrote in his brilliant 2011 tribute to Rudolf Flesch on his Improve-Education.org website:

I suspect Flesch had no idea of the forces arrayed against him. He was focused on reading, but our social engineers were wreaking havoc across a vast front.... Of all the things that educators did during the 20th century, none was more central and more destructive than the war against literacy. The primary tactic in this war was the use of a reading pedagogy that does not work.... So, at this point, the average person thinks, well, okay, maybe it doesn't work, but that was probably just an accident. They meant well. They're educators, right? They couldn't be so depraved that they'd try to make people illiterate.

And that is how they continue to get away with their criminal conspiracy against the people of America. What they are doing is too depraved to be true. Yet here are some of the stupid things some of them have said about teaching reading:

"It is detrimental indeed to have the children spell or sound out their words at this stage." — Professor Guy L. Bond

"Current practice in the teaching of reading does not require knowledge of letters." — Dr. Donald Durrel.

"English is essentially an unphonetic language....The skillful teacher will be reluctant to use any phonetic method with all children." — Dr. Paul Witty

"Little is gained by teaching the child his sounds and letters as a first step to reading. More rapid results are generally obtained by the direct method of simply showing the word to the child and telling him what it is."— Professor Walter Dearborn

In 1981, Flesch wrote *Why Johnny Still Can't Read — A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools*, but the educators virtually ignored it. They owned the colleges of education, and their graduates gained tenured positions throughout the establishment where they could continue to promote the progressive agenda.

It was my reading of *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1959 that got me interested in the literacy problem. At the time, I was an editor at Grosset & Dunlap in New York and a conservative attorney friend of mine created the Reading Reform Foundation as a means to get phonics back in the schools and asked me to become a member of his National Advisory Council. In 1973 I wrote *The New Illiterates* in an attempt to bring the reading problem up to date. In researching that book, I discovered that the originator of the look-say method was the Rev. Thomas H. Gallaudet, teacher of the deaf and dumb. I sent a copy of it to Dr. Flesch, who read it and wrote me the following on Dec. 26, 1973:



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Thank you so much for your book. I read it with avid interest and of course agree with everything you say. The business with Gallaudet is a gem of a historical discovery. I asked myself why I didn't find it, but the fact is that I was much more interested in the scientific comparison studies than in the historical background. Naively, I assumed that once the clear outcome of the 11 or so test studies was known, the battle would be won right then and there. Little did I know what would happen during the next 18 years. Ah well. I've by now arrived at the philosophical conclusion that the end of the American Empire is foreordained, and that Vietnam, Watergate, and our educational catastrophe are all part of the inevitable process of history.

Unlike Flesch, I do not believe that America's greatness is foreordained to end. With a communist in the White House, it would seem that way. But the last election proved that Americans are beginning to wake up in large numbers. They see the danger signs and will expect the new Congress to act accordingly. Flesch died in 1986, but his legacy endures among those of us who are still fighting to get intensive, systematic phonics back in the schools.





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