



# Reading, not Guessing: Why Three-Cueing Should Be Removed from Alabama Classrooms

Three-cueing is a disproven and incorrect instructional approach that teaches guessing, not reading. It teaches students to identify unfamiliar words by relying on context, pictures, and sentence structure rather than using phonics to decode letters in a word.

**Despite being discredited**, this approach has been used for decades and still persists in some Alabama classrooms. It is contrary to the science of reading and has contributed to persistent literacy gaps across our state and country.

**Banning three-cueing is a necessary step to strengthen the Alabama Literacy Act and ensure that all students receive instruction grounded in phonics and the science of reading.**

## What is it?

Three-cueing teaches students to use **three types of cues** when encountering an unfamiliar word:

- Meaning: Does the word make sense in the context or match the picture?
- Structure: Does it sound right grammatically?
- Visual: Does it look like the word (often limited to the first letter)?

Instead of teaching students to systematically sound out words using phonics, educators prompt students to “guess” words that fit the context. When the pictures go away, our students are left behind.

## Why Three-Cueing Is Harmful

1. **It teaches guessing, not reading.** Research shows that proficient readers identify words by rapidly and accurately processing letters and sounds, not by guessing from context. Three-cueing encourages students to bypass reading the word itself, undermining the foundational skill of decoding.
2. **It creates the illusion of progress.** Students taught with three-cueing may appear to be reading because they can approximate words in predictable texts. However, this masks serious gaps in word recognition that become evident as texts grow more complex and pictures disappear.
3. **It discourages systematic phonics instruction.** When students are taught to rely on context clues and pictures, explicit instruction in phonics and sound-symbol relationships is minimized, delayed, or skipped altogether. This leaves students without the tools they need to read unfamiliar words independently.

4. **It entrenches bad habits that are difficult to undo.** Guessing strategies learned early can become ingrained, making later remediation more challenging. Students must often be taught to abandon cueing habits before they can successfully learn to decode.

5. **It disproportionately harms struggling readers.** Students with dyslexia, students with limited background knowledge, English learners, and students from low-literacy households are especially harmed by approaches that rely on context rather than explicit instruction. These students need clear, systematic teaching—not strategies that depend on inference.

## The Evidence Is Clear

Decades of cognitive science and reading research demonstrate that:

- Reading is not a natural process and must be explicitly taught.
- Accurate and automatic word recognition depends on phonics and decoding.
- Context is useful for comprehension, not for figuring out what a word is.

**Three-cueing is based on outdated theories of reading that have been repeatedly contradicted by evidence.**

## Why do we need to ban three-cueing?

**Allowing three-cueing to persist in classrooms perpetuates ineffective instruction and contributes to low reading proficiency rates. Banning three-cueing:**

- Aligns instruction with the science of reading
- Protects students from ineffective practices
- Creates clarity for educators, preparation programs, and curriculum developers
- Supports stronger literacy outcomes

**Three-cueing is not a harmless strategy; it actively interferes with how children learn to read.**

**In 4th-grade reading, Alabama moved from 49th in 2019 to 34th in 2024 on the Nation's Report Card. Help Alabama continue to build on the success of the Alabama Literacy Act by removing three-cueing from Alabama classrooms.**