

The Fork in the Road

Sometimes the ability to read words in isolation comes in handy.

By Cathy Froggatt

One day, Dr. Goodguess died. The Gatekeeper to the afterlife told him that before entering the afterlife, he would be granted the power to change one thing about his previous life on earth.

“What a wonderful surprise!” Dr. Goodguess exclaimed. “My greatest regret in life was that I didn’t learn to read with whole language. As you undoubtedly know,” he said, “I mainstreamed that philosophy into nearly every classroom in the English-speaking world.”

“Your wish is granted,” responded the Gatekeeper. “From this moment on, you will find that your brain has been altered. Now you will read the whole language way. You must now travel down the path you see before you for a short distance. There, you will find a fork in the road. One path leads to Perdition, the other to Paradise. Signs are posted that clearly mark the paths. Choose carefully, because once you have chosen a path to travel, you can never turn back.”

Dr. Goodguess marched off confidently until he reached the fork in the road. The left fork was marked with a sign that said “Perdition” The road to the right said “Paradise.”

As he stood there, a look of puzzlement and then worry spread over his face. He scratched his head and thought, *They both start with ‘P.’ Now what do I do? I’ve always been a risk-taker, but this is a frightfully important decision. I cannot make a mistake.*

Just then, another founder of whole language, Dr. Sampler, died and came to stand before the Gatekeeper. “The hallmark of my life,” he told the Gatekeeper with pride, “was the widespread influence my theories have had on reading instruction. I only wish that I had actually learned to read in a manner consistent with my theories: you know ... naturally ... without being forced to learn those low-level phonics sub-skills.”

His wish was immediately granted, and in a moment he joined Dr. Goodguess at the fork in the road. “Thank goodness you’re here, Dr. Sampler,” exclaimed Dr. Goodguess. “I am in dire need of some cooperative learning.”

“Why, Dr. Goodguess, what is the matter? You look very distraught! What has happened to your self-esteem?”

“Well, Dr. Sampler, it’s these darn words in isolation. You’d think there would be at least one picture clue somewhere!”

“Hmm, I see what you mean, Dr. Goodguess. Oh, no! Both signs have words that start with the same letter, and the words are about the same length.”

Drs. Goodguess and Sampler then cried out in despair, “What we desperately need is more context!”

Just then, they heard the soft voice of a child. A six-year-old boy walked up to them, looked at the sign on the right and said with great pride, “I was taught to read with explicit, systematic phonics. I can sound out any word. The sign on the right says ‘Paradise’ and that’s the way I’m going.” And off he went.

Drs. Goodguess and Sampler looked at each other with knowing smirks. Their need for context had surely been met. Dr. Goodguess whispered excitedly, “Did you hear him say ‘explicit, systematic phonics?’ The path he took must be the road to Perdition! Quick, let’s take the other path!”

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