

Brügelmann, Hans

## **Red and blue is my reading book... Is it really helpful to mark syllables by color in beginner reading books?**

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### **Kontakt / Contact:**

peDOCS  
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation  
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung  
E-Mail: [pedocs@dipf.de](mailto:pedocs@dipf.de)  
Internet: [www.pedocs.de](http://www.pedocs.de)

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## Red and blue is my reading book...

Is it really helpful to mark syllables by color in beginner reading books?<sup>1</sup>



In many materials for early elementary school instruction in Germany, syllables are colored blue and red in alternation (see Fig. 1). Such graphic coding divides words into more manageable units. This coding is intended to make it easier for beginning readers to leap from synthesizing the individual letters to reading the whole word. The background: It has long been proven effective in teaching „dyslexics“ to divide multisyllabic words into smaller units by placing arcs under the syllables or by inserting gaps or hyphens between the syllables (e.g. Scheerer-Neumann 1981). In

recent years, this idea has been incorporated into many primers and implemented as a color change with each new syllable- even in shorter words.

Children's book publishers have now also adopted this format. Some even change the color when one monosyllabic word follows another (see Fig. 2). Colorful little bites that are supposed to make the leap from letter to word easier. But it's not that simple.



<sup>1</sup> To be published in German in: ESELSoHR, February 2026.

Even 100 years ago, educators criticized so-called “syllable barking,” the monotonous intonation with which children read aloud, for example, “*Die Mädchen singen besser als die Buben*” („*The girls sing better than the boys*“). Phonetically correct, but without understanding the meaning of what they were reading. This is because dividing words into syllables visually breaks apart meaningful morphemes: *lau-fen* [wal-king] instead of *lauf-en* [walk-ing], *Fah-rer* [dri-ver] instead of *Fahr-er* [driv-er]. This fragmentation of words is reinforced when – in some schools – children also change colors with each new syllable when writing, i.e., after *lau* they put down (or turn) the blue pen and continue with *fen* in red...

Looking at reading (learning) research, there is no convincing evidence of a positive effect of syllabic color changes on reading performance (see our summary in the paper <https://t1p.de/silben-farbe> and the English literature mentioned below). The conclusion, also including research from other countries: Some studies confirm the benefits of syllabic coloring for first graders, but not for older children. And even for early teaching, there are neutral or even negative findings alongside the positive ones.

But what about those children who have particular difficulties in learning to read and write? In a small study, we asked 21 „dyslexic“ children in second and third grade to read short stories silently, with and without syllable coloring. We then asked them whether they preferred to read texts in black print or whether they found it easier to read when the syllables were colored blue and red alternately. The answers varied widely: some children said that the coloring helped them, others did not notice it at all, and still others felt disturbed by the color change. At the same time, we compared reading performance in terms of reading speed, reading errors, and text comprehension. In this respect, too, some children benefited from syllable coloring, while others were more disadvantaged.

Conclusion: Taken together, the findings of our and other research on syllable coloring do not give a clear picture. Two conclusions, however, are relevant for publishers and libraries:

1. Only some children benefit from a color change; many are even distracted by it when reading. It therefore makes no sense to use the common

blue-red typography throughout texts, especially for words with fewer than three syllables.

2. Above all, even those who benefit from color changes when deciphering sentences and texts word by word benefit from the format only temporarily. Extending it beyond this phase, even until the third or even fourth grade, also hinders these children in reading fluently and meaningfully.

Overall, the results of the studies suggest that syllable coloring should only be used selectively: for *specific (groups of) children*), limited to *certain phases* (transition from sounding out words to reading words fluently), and in general only for words with *three or more syllables*.

In this situation, digital texts have a major advantage: they not only allow individual choice of font size and type. Thanks to the flexibility of the technology, different types of highlighting can also be offered, so that each child can decide for themselves what helps them read. Just like us as adults with our e-readers...

## Literature

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