Fishtank Plus K–5 ELA Publisher's Response

Our Approach

At Fishtank Learning, we firmly believe that every student deserves access to challenging, knowledge-rich, and engaging learning experiences. These experiences are crucial for developing critical thinking, effective communication, and the essential skills needed to thrive in an ever-evolving world. Our vision is to empower all students to become critical thinkers, problem solvers, and agents of change.

Our English Language Arts curriculum is thoughtfully crafted to honor the expertise of teachers while ensuring that every student has access to high-quality, research-based, grade-level materials. As a team of former teachers and school leaders, we recognize that a lesson plan alone cannot capture the myriad instructional decisions teachers make each day. We also recognize that teacher preparation programs aren't always sufficient to relay current research to practitioners, and seek to create both plans and supportive materials that develop teachers' content and pedagogical expertise in best classroom practices.

In sum, two core values impact every decision we make: *we believe in students* and *we trust teachers*. We have designed our curriculum to empower teachers to make informed instructional decisions, allowing for diverse teaching styles and instructional routines within the bounds of research-based best practice. Ultimately, this approach ensures that all students have access to what truly matters: grade-level texts and tasks that challenge and inspire.

This document offers our response to The Reading League's review (hereafter, the Review) of our K-5 Fishtank Plus curriculum. While we fully support and agree with the majority of their recommendations, we also believe it is essential to clarify the intentionality behind several aspects of our design:
- The role of **independent reading**.
- Our research-based approach to **vocabulary instruction.**
- The deep emphasis on and support for **teacher intellectual preparation and development of content expertise** that exists within our materials.

We welcome the opportunity to share these perspectives, grounded in both research and classroom practices, as part of our ongoing commitment to designing curriculum that advances literacy and equity for all students.

First: Notes on Publishing Timeline

The Review raised concerns about "inconsistencies" in Writing, Language, and Literacy Knowledge, as well as misalignment in our Independent Reading recommendations. We would like to clarify that these concerns pertain to outdated versions of our units and Teacher Tools, not our current materials. Specifically:

- **Independent Reading:** Our guidance has already been updated to align with current research, reflecting the consensus that independent reading is appropriate only for fluent readers and should not replace foundational skills instruction in early grades.
- **Writing & Language:** All of our early units (those in use in Fall/Winter 2025) have already been revised to include our enhanced Writing and Language approach. By February 2026, the entire K-5 suite will be fully updated and aligned with the latest research, in time for the teaching of each unit during the 2025-26 school year.

Because we believe teachers deserve access to the most current materials without waiting years for a new edition, we release updates on a rolling basis. This means that teachers always have access to the most up-to-date version of our curriculum.

Publishing Timeline Snapshot:

	Kindergarten	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade
Unit 1	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available
Unit 2	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available
Unit 3	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available	October 2025
Unit 4	Available	October 2025	Available	October 2025	September 2025	December 2025
Unit 5	Available	December 2025	November 2025	Early 2026	Early 2026	Early 2026
Unit 6	November 2025					
Unit 7	Early 2026					
Unit 8	Early 2026					

This approach is aligned with another one of our core values: *we listen, learn, and adapt.* We continuously improve and refine our resources by drawing on research, collaborating with partners, and actively seeking feedback from our users.

Independent Reading

The Review raised concerns about Fishtank Plus ELA's guidance on independent reading, suggesting that we endorse a discredited reader's workshop model and that we recommend using "a significant portion" of the ELA block for independent reading.[1] This does not reflect our current approach. In fact, several of the citations in the Review reference outdated versions of our materials.

Our current Teacher Tool for Independent Reading says:

> Research does not recommend dedicating time to independent reading for students until they have become somewhat fluent readers, able to independently decode and make meaning from grade-appropriate texts. For that reason, we do not recommend independent reading time in Kindergarten through 2nd Grades, or for students in upper grades still developing their foundational reading skills.
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> Ideally, students in Grades 3-5 have a dedicated independent reading block of 20–30 minutes in their daily schedules. Since studies consistently reveal a positive relationship between the amount of independent reading and reading proficiency—"the best readers tend to read the most" (Shanahan 2018)—we also recommend that students be encouraged to read at home. These additional opportunities for independent reading outside of the ELA block are crucial components of student literacy development, helping students access a large volume of complex texts, build knowledge, and develop a love of reading.

In addition, when Independent Reading is used as an in-class instructional strategy for engaging with the text (see our Teacher Tool on Reading Routines: Independent Reading), we state that independent reading should only be used for 10–15 minutes in the latter half of Grade 2 through Grade 5, and only for texts or sections of text that are not particularly complex. Notably, this tool also emphasizes independent reading as an opportunity for fluency support and practice: "Every time that students read independently they are working on building fluency. This includes reading a section of text for the first time or rereading sections of text."

Fishtank Plus ELA's current approach to independent reading is informed by research and provides teachers with clear guidance on how to leverage independent reading for students who would benefit from it.

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[1] Red Flag Practice 3.1: Students are asked to independently read texts they are unable to decode with accuracy in order to practice reading comprehension strategies (e.g., making inferences, predicting, summarizing, visualizing)

Fluency

Although Fishtank Plus ELA is not a foundational literacy skills program, we recognize the research that suggests a critical connection between fluency and reading comprehension. As such, we have built a robust set of supports for teachers, ensuring this essential element of skilled reading is embedded into core literacy instruction.

Starting in Grade 2, every Fishtank unit is accompanied by a Fluency Assessment, and Foundational Skills Supports are built directly into relevant lesson plans, offering opportunities to progress monitor or practice the specific fluency demands of this assessment. Notably, this Fluency Assessment is designed as a test of oral reading fluency using an excerpt from a core unit text. Teachers are instructed to use our [Fluency Rubric](#), which includes categories for Prosody (Expression & Volume, Phrasing, Smoothness), Rate (Pace), and Accuracy. To provide further guidance, our [Assessing Reading Fluency Teacher Tool](#) directs teachers to the [normed Hasbrouck-Tindal oral reading fluency charts](#) to understand the target Rate (Words Per Minute) for each grade level.

The Review, however, flagged our use of the term "running record" to suggest we support outdated and harmful methods of coding fluency errors according to meaning, syntax, and visual cues. This is not the case. When it appears in the curriculum, the term "running record" is used interchangeably with "test of oral reading fluency." Nowhere in our materials do we suggest accepting incorrectly decoded words if they are close in meaning to the target word, nor do we use running records based on whole language or cueing strategies.[23]

Fishtank Plus ELA does not reference such scoring methods. Our assessments and guidance are fully aligned with the latest research and best practices, always directing teachers toward normed, evidence-based fluency evaluation and instructional tools.

Vocabulary

Again, in accordance with the research, Fishtank Plus ELA recognizes the critical importance of vocabulary to literacy development. As an explicitly knowledge-building curriculum, words matter, both for the acquisition of new, important content and to support students' ability to write and speak about that content. Our vocabulary structures, therefore, are thoughtfully designed not only to identify important words but to spiral practice with those words using a variety of evidence-based methods, pulled notably from our team's work with the English Learners' Success

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[2] Red Flag Practice 1.44: Fluency assessment allows acceptance of incorrectly decoded words if they are close in meaning to the target word (e.g., assessment based upon the cueing systems, M/S/V)

[3] Red Flag Practice 5.7: Foundational skills assessments are primarily running records or similar assessments that are based on whole language or cueing strategies (e.g., read the word by looking at the first letter, use picture support for decoding).

Forum (ELSF), *The Reading Comprehension Blueprint* (Hennessy, 2020), and *Bringing Words to Life* (Beck, 2002).

The Reading League Review suggests, incorrectly, that "teachers are responsible for designing their own vocabulary review structure, as no specific instructional sequence is provided for distributed, cumulative, or interleaved practice." This observation obscures the intentional design of the vocabulary words we choose to include in each unit, and when we choose to introduce them. Each K-5 unit is designed such that ~20 vocabulary words are identified and taught throughout each unit. Words are chosen based on their centrality to students' ability to understand, write, and/or discuss the content of the text in service of arriving at the unit's enduring understandings. After being introduced, these words are intentionally spiraled in subsequent lessons through authentic practice as students recall, discuss, and write about unit content. By both explicitly and implicitly teaching the identified words, prioritizing questions that ask students to apply their knowledge of the word, and encouraging students to use the taught vocabulary words in their written and oral language, Fishtank ELA promotes a deep understanding of vocabulary words.

For example, consider Grade 1 Unit 3, which is described in the Vocabulary section of the Review. In Lesson 2, the vocabulary words *predator* and *prey* are explicitly taught in the Lesson Launch. These words then intentionally reappear in future lessons, as built-in opportunities for teachers to spiral student understanding. In Lessons 4 and 9, these words appear in the Comprehension & Vocabulary Review portion of the lesson, where teachers are directed to give students a scenario and then ask students to apply their understanding of the vocabulary words: "The bald eagle soared above, using its eyes to scan the ground for a mouse to catch" (Lesson 4) and "A lion crouches low in the tall grass, watching a herd of antelope and waiting for the right moment to chase one" (Lesson 9), then, "Which animal is the prey? Which animal is the predator?" In Lesson 6, practice with the word *predator* is also built in, this time in the Lesson Launch when students examine a sentence that uses a conjunction to join ideas: "The tail breaks off because a predator grabs it." Similarly, in Lesson 10, students apply their understanding as they practice generating adjectives about the behavior of other animals towards their predators or their prey. In each of these instances, in addition to several more that occur throughout the latter portion of the unit, the vocabulary words are bolded to make it visible to teachers that they are intentionally spiralling practice.

Besides the intentional design in the lesson plans themselves to spiral vocabulary practice, Fishtank Plus ELA also provides a suite of vocabulary resources, including activities, word cards, and glossaries. While the Review suggests that "Fishtank Plus ELA's planned opportunities for student practice are limited, particularly with vocabulary,"[4] Fishtank ELA provides both in-lesson

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[4] Red Flag Practice 2.7: Vocabulary worksheets and activities are used with little opportunity for deep understanding of vocabulary words.

opportunities as well as a suite of additional resources to provide ample practice and promote deep understanding of unit vocabulary.

The Review also suggests that Fishtank ELA does not provide explicit vocabulary instruction.[5] Specifically, the Review says that "resources for the explicit vocabulary routine and implicit instruction are not embedded within the lesson, requiring educators to utilize resources outside of the lesson plan." While this is somewhat true, it is also by design, and in keeping with the research that suggests that students acquire new words when they can make connections to their existing oral vocabularies. When appropriate, opportunities for implicit instruction of vocabulary words are embedded within the Language Supports connected to the Key Question associated with the vocabulary word.

Every Fishtank Plus ELA lesson that introduces new vocabulary words directs teachers to either leverage an explicit instructional routine using guidance from the Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Teacher Tool or to teach the word in context when it comes up in the text. This Teacher Tool includes specific routines teachers can use to teach vocabulary words, but does not specify precisely what this should look like. This is intentional: we know that word and world knowledge varies significantly based on students' funds of knowledge and lived experiences, and research shows that the ability to incorporate new words into vocabulary comes from making connections to existing words and funds of knowledge (Jenkins, Stein, & Wysocki, 1984; Beck, 2002). Therefore, it is impossible for a lesson plan to capture the single way a teacher might draw upon their students' unique funds of knowledge to make connections to a new vocabulary word. It is imperative that teachers intellectually prepare and make decisions about vocabulary instruction with knowledge of their particular students.

Our Teacher Tools are designed to highlight this for educators. For example, the Explicit Vocabulary Instruction Teacher Tool reminds teachers that not all words we identify may need to be taught in the first place: "While Fishtank ELA lessons identify priority words for a text, teachers may find additional words worth studying as they complete their intellectual preparation process. Teachers then have to decide which words they want to focus on based on their knowledge of students, knowledge of the text, and recommendations from Fishtank." We do, however, acknowledge that teachers need support in understanding what a customized vocabulary routine might sound like. As such, we include a sample script in this same Teacher Tool using the word "despair."

Clearly, Fishtank Plus ELA prioritizes and provides plentiful resources to support student vocabulary acquisition as they engage with complex texts. We advocate for customized vocabulary instruction for students, recognizing that existing knowledge varies.

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[5] Red Flag Practice 2.9: Tier 2 words are not taught explicitly and practiced; students are not given opportunities to use them in their speech, see them in print, and use them in writing.)

Intellectual Preparation

At Fishtank ELA, we believe that excellent teaching is rooted in thoughtful [intellectual preparation](#). The Review notes that "Fishtank Plus ELA emphasizes teacher planning and preparation" and "places a significant demand on educators." We agree, and hold that this is critical for effective literacy instruction.

We understand that meaningful instruction does not come from simply following a script. Instead, it is the result of teachers internalizing lesson plans, making informed choices based on their students' needs, and drawing on their own creativity and knowledge. Research consistently shows that high-quality professional development, directly connected to curriculum and content, leads to better student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). That's why we provide comprehensive guidance and resources to support intellectual preparation, while trusting teachers to make decisions that fit their unique classroom contexts.

Our approach is validated by teachers themselves. In a recent survey, over 82% of users reported that Fishtank Plus ELA helps them adapt instruction to meet their students' diverse needs. As experienced users shared:

- "I love that I can make each unit thematic and teach it all day. Mostly, I love that I am not micromanaged. Fishtank respects teachers and allows them to adjust the program to fit the needs of the students" (Fishtank Impact Survey, 2025).
- "This is a well-thought-out and engaging program. The students love it, and it has really raised their level of reading, writing, and academic discourse. It's a phenomenal program. It's also a program that allows (and encourages) some flexibility that allows us to best meet our students' needs" (Fishtank Impact Survey, 2025).

Rather than attempting to script every instructional move, we provide leader training, embedded professional development, and a robust suite of Teacher Tools that help educators internalize content and personalize instruction. For example:

- We offer a [Fishtank ELA Launch](#), a comprehensive, five-module on-demand series designed to empower teachers and instructional leaders to bring Fishtank ELA to life in their classrooms. The ELA Launch is designed for both independent and collaborative learning on the most important elements of the Fishtank Plus ELA curriculum. For school and district adoptions, we also provide Train the Trainer and Leader Development Series to support literacy coaching using Fishtank Plus ELA.
- Each unit is accompanied by a [Unit Launch](#) that offers comprehensive guidance to ensure teachers have a deep understanding of the complexity present in each unit text, the key reading and writing standards students are expected to master, and how students will

demonstrate mastery on assessments. This work supports teachers in understanding how unit standards build on previous learning and prepare students for future success.
- We offer a robust library of [Teacher Tools,](#) available for independent study and directly linked in relevant lesson plans when explicit routines are recommended. Rather than filling lessons with step-by-step procedures teachers may already know or need to adapt for their students, our lesson plans help educators build a skill set in research-based best practices.

Teachers don't need scripts; [teachers need support](#). This approach supports culturally responsive teaching, ensuring that every classroom experience is both relevant and meaningful, while also keeping a high bar for rigor.

Future Revisions

As part of our ongoing commitment to continuous improvement, many of the points raised in the Review are already priorities in Fishtank Plus ELA's current and upcoming revision cycles. Staying true to our research-driven approach, we are collaborating with leading organizations to ensure our revisions are not only best-in-class but also reflect the latest research and direct feedback from educators and stakeholders. Specifically, we are partnering with Student Achievement Partners to develop stronger practices regarding **Morphology** and **Progress Monitoring & Assessment**.

Progress Monitoring & Assessment: We recognize the Review's observation that "Fishtank Plus ELA lacks educator support on how to respond to and follow up with students who require more support." In response, for the 2026–27 school year, we are developing a comprehensive suite of tools for progress monitoring and responding to student data, all centered on the vital content and standards students need to master. Prototypes of these supports, including instructional guidance for lesson-level progress monitoring and unit-level summative assessments, are already in development (for examples, see Appendix A).

Morphology: The Review notes that "explicit instruction in morphology is not present, and Fishtank Plus ELA does not feature a morphology scope and sequence; work with roots and affixes is tied to the vocabulary word of study." In reality, explicit morphology instruction is already embedded in several units (for example, Grade 1, Unit 2; Grade 3, Unit 1; and Grade 5, Unit 3), and our lesson plans routinely integrate word parts as part of vocabulary routines. For example, in [4th Grade Unit 1 Lesson 2](#), students learn the word impulsive in the context of their reading. Teachers are guided to: "review with students the meaning of the prefix 'im-' and the suffixes '-less' and '-ful' and challenge students to look for words that use the different affixes."
In fact, in an analysis of the 849 text-based vocabulary and explicitly taught roots and affixes already present in the K-5 curriculum, we discovered that only a handful of important roots and

affixes are missing from our complete scope (Beck et al., 2013; Bowers & Kirby, 2010; Moats, 2010; Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

However, while Fishtank Plus ELA does teach a wide array of vocabulary words, we concede that we do not yet have a clear morphology scope and sequence. Given the critical link between word knowledge, fluency, and skilled reading, we are prioritizing the development of a robust, explicit scope and sequence for roots and affixes, ensuring that teachers can intentionally and systematically build this knowledge with their students across all grade levels.

Conclusion

Fishtank Learning is committed to providing teachers and students with high-quality curriculum materials. Our resources are intentionally designed and grounded in research and our core values. We are committed to continuing to revise and refine our product to ensure students have access to high-quality materials in their ELA classrooms, and we appreciate the work of The Reading League in thoughtfully evaluating our materials and affirming our research-based approach to literacy instruction.

Appendix A
Instructional Guidances

Figure A1
Lesson-Level Progress Monitoring Instructional Guidance

5th Grade ELA
A Single Shard

Progress Monitoring Lesson Guidance: U1 L5

Target Task: Choose one: Crane-man, Min, Min's wife, or the villagers. How does the author develop Tree-ear's character through his interactions with this character?

Standard for Progress Monitoring: RL.5.3: Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

Alignment to Assessment: Warm Read Assessment #s 4, 6, 7 - all these items ask students to make an inference about a character's personality or to make inferences about their actions.

Why this task is essential for progress monitoring: Students have been getting to know Tree-ear as a character for the past several lessons, and have been doing this by noticing his actions, thoughts, and dialogue. In this lesson, they practice the final piece: noticing what his interactions with others reveal about his character.

How to monitor student understanding:

Below are understandings necessary for the Target Task question and potential misconceptions. Suggested supports can be used to intervene with individual students during the lesson, or if a majority of the class has a misconception, they should be used to modify a portion of an upcoming lesson.

Important Understanding	Potential Misconceptions	Supports
Students should be able to make an accurate inference about Tree-ear's character trait(s) or personality. Specifically, they should be able to name his compassion or kindness for others, appreciation or gratitude, his determination, or his intelligence.	Students name Tree-ear's feelings, which are transient, rather than his traits or personality. Students use inaccurate trait words, or use words that are overly generalized or basic (ex. "nice" "good").	Distinguish between traits and feelings by defining and providing examples of each. Refocus students on Tree-ear's actions and what that says about him as a person. Provide students with a list of common character trait words, or generate one as a class or small group. Refer students to specific moments in the text where Tree-ear interacted with another character. Ask: Which of these words best describes his action? Or What would you call a person in real life who acts this way?

Note: This figure demonstrates a structured approach to and teacher guidance for progress monitoring for 5th Grade ELA Unit 1 Lesson 5, focusing on character analysis through interactions.

Figure A2
Unit-Level Summative Assessment Instructional Guidance

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTION PLAN
Use the information about the upcoming unit to proactively plan to address gaps.

Next Unit: Unit 2: Exploring Human Rights: *The Breadwinner*

Content Knowledge Connections	In Unit 1, students learn: ● *It is important to show up for other people because you never know when your support will be needed most; it is the right and honorable thing to do.* ● *People achieve their dreams through hard work, persistence, and never-ending hope or optimism.* These ideas will support student understanding of how and why people like Malala Yousafzai are working for change. In Unit 1, students learn that *having the support of another person sometimes means everything: from literal survival to the fortitude to carry on through tough challenges.* This connects to the Unit 2 Essential Question, "How can family relationships and dynamics influence a person's actions?" and helps students understand how the people and characters featured in this unit are able to advocate for change.
Vocabulary Connections	*resentful* is a Unit 2 vocabulary word that students should be familiar with from *A Single Shard*: Tree-ear was resentful of Min for much of the book. *decency* is a Unit 2 vocabulary word that can be tied to the Unit 1 word *honorable*. Unit 1 words *endeavor* and *arduous* can be used to support student discourse & writing about Unit 2 themes.
Skill Connections	Unit 2 Key Reading Standards: RL.5.2 & RL.5.3 → These are *the same* as the Key Reading Standards for Unit 1. There is additional emphasis on setting and more in-depth work on comparing and contrasting characters. Unit 2 Writing Focus Areas: Opinion Writing - students will build on their familiarity with how to write a paragraph from Unit 1 to now write explicitly opinion paragraphs in Unit 2. There is new instruction on concluding statements, which requires a strong foundation in writing topic sentences, introduced in Unit 1. Narrative Writing - students will build on the narrative writing they learned in Unit 1 to do so again in Unit 2, this time staying within the bounds of the unit text to write from another character's point of view.

If students need additional support with…	… leverage this lesson…	…by doing the below:
Determining theme from recurring ideas	Lesson 16	At the end of this Discussion lesson, ask students to develop some possible themes about hope the author might be communicating through this story. Write or display these possible theme statements for the class, then workshop them to ensure they meet the criteria introduced in Unit 1 (Lesson 20): themes should not include specific characters' names or details, and should apply to other situations or stories.
Understanding the impact characters have on one another	Lesson 8	Adjust the Target Task response to specifically be about Parvana's character (rather than offering choice) and how the other characters' responses and reactions have impacted her own feelings, actions, and motivations.
Writing a strong topic sentence to begin a paragraph	Lesson 15	For the Target Task, instead of requiring students to write a full response, simply ask them to craft a topic sentence that clearly states their opinion. Review the criteria for strong topic sentences from Unit 1 (Lesson 6): clearly addresses the prompt and includes a valid idea.
Planning a clear narrative arc and sequence of events	Lesson 17 (Day 2)	Emphasize the planning students do on this day, spending extra time providing feedback and conferring with students who struggled to write a cohesive historical fiction story in Unit 1. Use a sequence of events or beginning - middle - end graphic organizer, and pre-populate it if needed, since students are using a familiar story. Pay special attention to the way students are concluding the story - students tend to overly focus on the beginnings without thinking about their endings.

Note: This figure provides an instructional guidance for teachers after analyzing summative assessment data from Unit 1 (Shaping Dream: A Single Shard). It seeks to elevate places in Unit 2 (Exploring Human Rights: The Breadwinner) to support students with key knowledge or skill gaps as revealed by the summative assessment. The guidance outlines content knowledge connections, vocabulary bridges between units, and skill progressions in reading standards RL.5.2 and RL.5.3.