The Issue: To make decisions that have a positive impact on children’s literacy outcomes, leaders need a keen understanding of literacy itself. But literacy is a complex concept and there are many key misunderstandings about what, exactly, literacy is.

Unpacking Literacy Competencies
In this memo we focus specifically on two broad categories of literacy competencies: skills-based competencies and knowledge-based competencies.

Why Is This Distinction Meaningful?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental Processes</th>
<th>Skills-Based Competencies</th>
<th>Knowledge-Based Competencies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Typically mastered by 3rd grade</td>
<td>Develops from infancy through adulthood</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional Implications</td>
<td>Highly susceptible to relatively brief instruction</td>
<td>Requires sustained instruction, beginning in early childhood</td>
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With adequate instruction, skills-based competencies are mastered by 3rd grade for the average student. Yet the development of knowledge-based competencies must be supported with good instruction throughout schooling. For many children, especially from academically vulnerable populations, knowledge-based competencies are more likely to be key sources of academic difficulties.

What Competencies Does a Reader Need to Make Sense of This Passage?

**High-Speed Trains**
A type of high-speed train was first introduced in Japan about forty years ago. The train was low to the ground, and its nose looked somewhat like the nose of a jet. These trains provided the first passenger service that moved at a speed of one hundred miles per hour. Today, similar Japanese trains are even faster, traveling at speeds of almost two hundred miles per hour. There are many reasons that high-speed trains are popular.

- Map sounds onto letters (e.g., /s/ /p/ /ee/ /d/) and blend these to form a word (speed)
- Recognize spelling patterns (e.g., the “-igh” family found in the word “high”)
- Read fluently – about 115 words per minute

Skills-Based Competencies

- Understand the meaning of words in this context (e.g., “service” has 37 possible definitions!)
- Make meaning of the text using relevant background knowledge (e.g., conceptual knowledge about trains and jets and travel)
- Use cognitive strategies (e.g., when reading the second sentence, if the child initially pictures a human nose, he must be able to adjust when the comparison to a jet’s nose is read)

Knowledge-Based Competencies

Find this memo and others at [http://langlit.gse.harvard.edu](http://langlit.gse.harvard.edu)