

Tips for Word Work

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The Case for Encoding Before Decoding

There are two ways to approach systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics: *decoding* (reading words) and *encoding* (constructing words). **Herron (2008) argues that phonics instruction should focus first on students constructing words before reading them.** This *encoding* process requires students to pronounce words first, which is more compatible with the way our brains are wired. Decoding and encoding involves two different sequences of brain activation. To *decode* a word the brain moves from print to speech, while *encoding* moves from speech to print. Therefore, for the following reasons, encoding is a more powerful place to start:

- When we hear a word, pronunciation and meaning are immediately activated because the student must pronounce the word he or she wants to build.
- The student segments phonemes by using the motor system of speech, with its superior capacity for sequencing and memory.
- Constructing the word involves sound to symbol associations.
- Activities involve all students in meaningful interactions with text – using letter tiles, keyboard, magic slate or pencil to write dictated words or sentences.

According to Herron, phonics instruction should change in these ways.

- We should refer to letters and letter combinations more frequently by the sounds they represent than by their names.
- When students are writing or building words, they should pay attention to how their mouths are moving as they pronounce each word. They are more likely to remember the association of sound to letter.
- Systematically teach letters and letter combinations to represent each of the basic 40 sounds.
- Avoid having students copy sentences; they should be attempting to encode the words. Move beyond visually identifying blends and digraphs - **STUDENTS SHOULD BE BUILDING OR WRITING WORDS.**
- When dictating words, move beyond word families: bag, tag, nag, to words with different beginning and endings: bag, tag, bat, bash, slap, stamp etc. Children will need to pay close attention to how their mouths are moving.
- After students have written a list of words with similar sounds, they practice reading them.
- Encourage spelling by analyzing words. When a student asks how to spell a word, have him pronounce it carefully and analyze how his mouth is moving. Children can learn to spell multisyllabic words with confidence: *vacation, fabulous*

Reference:

Herron, Jeannine. 2008. Why Phonics Teaching Must Change. *Educational Leadership*. September, 77 – 81.

Phonics Terms

Phonetics – The science of the sounds of speech and the symbols (letters) used to represent them. **Phoneme** – refers to the smallest part of spoken language. **Grapheme** – the smallest part of written language that represents a phoneme.

Short Vowel sounds – vowels sounds heard in *cat, bed, big, dog, bug*

Long Vowel sounds – vowel sounds represented by: *ai, ay, ee, ea, ei, ey, ie, igh, y, oa, oe, ow, ui, ue, oo, ew*

Consonant Blend - A group of letters representing a sound created by blending consonant sounds together.

Initial consonant blends include: *bl, br, cl, cr, dr, fl, fr, gl, gr, pl, pr, sc, sl, sm, sn, sp, st, sw, tr, tw, scr, spl, spr, str*. Blends with a digraph – *shr, thr*.

Final consonant blends include: *ct, ft, ld, lf, lk, lm, lt, lp, mp, nce, nd, nk, nt, pt, dge*.

Final consonant blends with a digraph: *nch, tch. lch*

Digraph - A group of two letters representing one sound.

Consonant digraphs include: *sh, th, ph, ch, wh, qu, gh, ck, ng, kn, wr*.

Vowel digraphs (commonly called long vowels) include: *ay, ai, ee, ea, ei, ey, ie, oa, oe, ui, ue*.

Diphthong – The vowel diphthongs include: *au, oi, oy, ou, oo*

Other letter combinations commonly referred to as diphthongs include: *ow, ew, aw*

R- Controlled Vowel – A sound represented by a vowel sound combined with the r sound.

These letter combinations are: *ar, arr, err, air, are, or, ore, our, ir, er, ur, ear*

Schwa – a phonemic symbol, (ə - upside down e) used to indicate certain unstressed indistinct vowel sounds.

again, even, captain.

Phonics Instruction

What are Vowels and Consonants?

Children need to know the difference between vowels and consonants. The easiest way to help them learn the difference is to learn the vowels first and then whatever is left over are the consonants. They easily understand *a, e, i, o* and *u* are vowels but *y* can be tricky because *y* is sometimes a vowel and sometimes a consonant. The rule to help them understand this is: When *y* represents a *yuh* sound, as in *yellow, yard, and yahoo* – it is a consonant. Otherwise it is a vowel as in *cry, party, bicycle, boy, play*. The vowel *y* can represent different sounds on its own (*cry, party, and bicycle*) and also is used in combination with other vowels: *ay, oy, ey, uy*.

Teaching Sound - Letter Relationships

When you are teaching students to spell or read words tell them the sound first and then tell them what letters represent that sound. Example: instead of saying, “*ch* says...” say the sound first “*ch*.” Then say, “*we show that sound with these two letters – ch.*” Having students encode words before reading them is a more powerful way to introduce sound – symbol associations.

Slide the Sounds

Using the term *slide the sounds together* is a good way to help students understand how to look at letter combinations or syllables and then put the sounds together to form the word. Coach them to start at the beginning of the word and look all the way through to the end of the word. Struggling readers often look only at the beginning part of a word and then guess the rest. When students practice encoding (building or writing words) before decoding them, they are more likely to remember the sound to letter association.

Segmenting Words

Instruct children to pretend they are talking turtles who say every word very slowly so you can hear every sound. Young children enjoy ***Turtle Talk***, and some move their heads forward when they say each phoneme.

Note: When you are saying the sounds for segmenting words, it is okay to exaggerate the vowel sound but do not exaggerate the consonant sounds. For example, **do not say, “*du – o- gu for dog.*”** Students may think you are saying a vowel sound with the consonant and will spell words with an extra vowel – eg. *prowl – parowul, or sprint – sperint*. Say the consonant sound quickly. Also, Use a separate kinesthetic gesture for segmenting sounds and segmenting syllables. Example – tap fingers for sounds, clap hands for syllables.

It is very important for students to be able to hear separate sounds and syllables in words. This practice teaches students to look at letter combinations in words and then to slide them together to read the word. This practice is also important for spelling words. Teach students that when they are spelling words, they should say the word carefully, listening for each sound and try to spell them in sequence.

- Beginning readers benefit from practice in segmenting the sounds in words. Teach them to tap with the fingers for each sound. The term ***Turtle Talk*** is useful for describing this process.
Examples: The adult segments the word: *d – o – g* and the student slides the sounds together to say *dog*.
 - words with consonant blends: *b – l – a – ck.*
 - words with digraphs or vowel combinations: *ch – o – p, or s – m – ar – t, or b – e – n – ch.*
- Children should be introduced to phonics by building words with letter tiles or writing them. The teacher dictates words, students segment the word into sounds with ***turtle talk*** and build it or write the letters to represent the sounds in the correct sequence. Then they read their lists of words or the teacher points randomly to words on a chart.
- More experienced readers benefit from practice in segmenting words into syllables. Teach them to clap their hands for each syllable. Examples: Clap hands for each syllable: *chop – stick, re – mem – ber.*

Model how to Spell and Read Words

To model spelling and reading, provide the “play by play” that explains how you are getting the answer.

For example, to spell *wind*, stretch the pronunciation, and spell it phoneme by phoneme, with a dialogue something like this: “*Now I am going to try turtle talk. Let's see, /w/ is the first mouth move, that's letter w. /wi/, the second sound is /i/. I'll spell /i/ with an i by itself. Wind, I hear /d/ at the end, that's d. But there was something before the d: winnn . . . n goes before the d.*” To model how to read a word, start with the vowel. For example, to model how to read *spill*, you might say, “*I'll start with the i; i by itself shows /i/.*” Then model how to *slide the sounds together* starting from the beginning, through the middle to the end.

Word Families and More

Reinforce that many words can be read and spelled from one phoneme – word families. Examples: *ant* – *plant, chant, slant* or *ea* – *beat, heat, meat, seat, bleat, cheat, wheat*. **However, be aware that spelling and reading only word families may encourage students to swap in letters without looking further into the spelling and reading.** It's important to provide practice in building or writing words that involve different beginnings and endings: *a* – *rant, slang, tramp, flap, fast*.

Teaching Short Vowel Sounds

The Vowel Sandwich - Using the term 'vowel sandwich', when referring to a short vowel sound provides a strong visual image for students. To create a visual image for students, draw a sandwich to demonstrate: placing the vowel as the filling of the sandwich. The generalizations that hold true most of the time are:

- When there is a single vowel in a short word and that vowel has consonants on either side, it will most often represent a short vowel sound. Examples: *black, hop, sum, etc.*
- **Closed syllable** - If a syllable within a longer word has a single vowel with consonants on either side, it will represent a short vowel sound. Examples: *rat-tle, sim-ple, pan-ic.*
- When a vowel is by itself at the beginning of a word or syllable, it is most likely representing a short vowel sound. Examples: *at, if, am-ple, ig-nore.*
- Exceptions – words like *bold, grind, prove, lose.*
- Sometimes the vowel represents the schwa sound such as in *even, again*

When to Teach Chunking Words

For older students begin teaching how to chunk words at the same time as reviewing short vowels. A useful sequence: *ing* endings (*lifting*), *er* endings (*batter*), *le* endings (*battle*). You will be teaching chunking between double letters at the same time (*letter, bitter, nuzzle,*), or between syllables (*sample, insect, dentist*).

Teaching Long Vowel Sounds

There are many vowel sounds represented by combinations of letters. Teach students the long vowel sounds – **when the vowel says its own name** and that these sounds are represented with many different letter combinations:

ay ai a_e ei ee ea ei e_e y ey ie igh y i_e oa oe ow o_e u_e ui ue ou oo, ew.

- **Vowel Partners:** It can be confusing to teach the rule: *When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking*, because the only combinations that follow that rule are *ai, ay, ee, oa, oe, ui, ue, ey*. It is better to teach children that vowels work together to represent different sounds. They can be called **vowel partners**.
- Initially teach or reinforce each long vowel sound separately. Students can begin by spelling words with combinations that represents the long vowel sound. Eventually students should understand that one long vowel sound can be represented in many ways. Completing a chart like the one below will help them understand this.

u_e	ue	ui	ou	ew	oo
cube	true	fruit	group	chew	scoop
tube	glue	suit	through	flew	swoop
spruce	continue	bruise	youth	jewel	gloom
salute		cruise			foolish

- **Bumper E, Pinching E, Magic E, Bossy E or Super E:** When two vowels are partnered, but separated by one consonant, the first vowel will represent the long sound. Examples: *tube, place, nose* etc. This is often called the *silent e* rule. It's better to call it other names rather than *silent e* because words such as *house, more, dance* are not examples of this rule even though the *e* is silent. The *e* is silent in words such as *blame, flute, strike* which are examples of this rule. This is another format for vowel partners, except that the vowels are separated by a consonant. This rule is one that holds true most of the time.
- **Open Syllable** - When a vowel is by itself at the end of a syllable, it is called an *open syllable* and will have a long sound: *be, she, go or be-hind, re-lax, fo-cus.*
- Sometimes the vowel combination represents the schwa sound such as in *captain*.

Vowels - Short or Long?

- Being able to quickly recognize whether the vowel sound in a word will be short or long is a key skill for students and considerable time should be spent on this. Examples: *pill - pile, can - cane, struck - true, night - stick*. Students should be able to look at a word and determine if the vowel is in vowel sandwich (*snack, struck*), if there are two vowels working together (*strike, steam*), or if another vowel combination represents a long vowel sound (*night, snow*).
- For some words it is difficult to know whether the vowel sound is short or long because it depends on where the word is segmented into syllables. Example: *sat-in*, and *ban-ish* have **closed syllables**, while *po-lar* and *regal* have **open syllables**. Generally these words can be solved by using the context or readers can try the word both ways to see which makes sense. Example: *spi-nach* or *spin-ach*.

C or G followed by E

Silent E after the letters C and G “soften” their sounds, Examples: *glance, dunce, package, huge* (in *huge*, the *e* has two jobs – to make the vowel show the long sound and to cause the *g* to represent the *soft g* sound).

Decorator E

Because there are no English words that end with ‘*v*’ or ‘*u*’ the letter ‘*e*’ is found at the end of these words. Examples: The words *love, have, tongue* would not look correct if they were spelled *lov, hav, tongu*. (Note: exception - *impromptu* which ends with *u*). If students see words like this and wonder why the *e* is there, it can be helpful to think of it as “decorator *e*”. It is there to make the word look right.

Other words not ending with ‘*v*’ or ‘*u*’ but still have a “decorator *e*” on the end include words like: *horse, worse, course, more, store, are*

Note – Words ending in ‘*ce*’ or ‘*ge*’ are not examples of “decorator *e*” words.

That Silent E

To recap – although the *e* is silent at the end of many words, it has many jobs.

- **Bumper E, Pinching E, Magic E, Bossy E or Super E:** This is another format for vowel partners, except that the vowels are separated by a consonant – *rule, strike*. This rule is one that holds true most of the time.
- **Silent E after the letters C and G “soften” their sounds** – *lance, stage*
- **Every syllable must have a vowel.** In words like **andle, pickle, and people**, the final syllable can be pronounced without a vowel, but “in English, every syllable must have a vowel.” (Would we really want to write *pebbl* or *littl*?)
- **Decorator E:** Because there are no English words that end with ‘*v*’ or ‘*u*’ (exception *impromptu*) the letter ‘*e*’ is found at the end of these words – *love, tongue*. Other examples include: *horse, store, are*

Doubling the Final Consonant Before Adding Endings

When the word contains a short vowel before the ending consonant, double the final consonant before adding the ending: *bragged, beginning, digging, slammed* etc. It’s important that students understand the **Super E** rule (also called **Bumper E, Pinching E, Bossy E or Magic E**) because if the final consonant is not doubled, the vowel now has the long sound – *brag* becomes *braged* (long *a* sound). Teach students that the consonant is doubled (*bragged*) because we want to keep the *e* away from the vowel, so it will not have the long vowel sound.

When not to double the final consonant before adding an ending

When the word ends with a **Super E** (also called **Bumper E, Pinching E, Bossy E or Magic E**). The rule is to drop the *e* and add the ending (in the words *hoped* and *hoping* – the *e* has been dropped and the endings *ed* and *ing* have been added.

like - liked, liking

bake - baked, baking

shake - shaking

mope - moped, moping

R- Controlled Vowel Sounds

Students also need to know that vowels work with consonants to represent sounds (r-controlled vowels and diphthongs). Children understand and relate to the phrase **Bossy R**. The *r* is the boss and changes the vowel sound. R – controlled vowel sounds – *ar air arr err are or ore wor our ir er ur*.

Diphthongs

These are sounds represented by the following combinations – *au aw ew oi oy ou ow oo*. Generally, students find the sounds represented by *oi, oy, ow*, and *oo* easier than *au, aw*, and *ew*.

Games and Activities for Word Solving

Sort the Sounds

This building or writing words activity should be part of most Word Work sessions. If time is limited, be sure to include writing or building words as often as possible.

- Students draw lines on their papers to create columns, or provide them with prepared sheets to save time. At the top of each column, they write a letter or letter combination along with a key word that contains that sound. **It works best to focus on the sounds represented by vowels.** Eg. – short vowels, r-controlled vowels, long vowel sounds etc.
- The teacher will determine the number of sounds to be practiced according to the skill level of students. The teacher dictates words to be encoded, which students write in the correct column. Students who find writing words too laborious can build words with letter tiles.
- They practice *Turtle Talk* as they write or build the words.
- This is also an opportunity for them to practice printing skills, so take this opportunity to reinforce: sticking the letters on the line, letters that are tall or short (appropriate size for letters) and letters which have tails below the line.
- After encoding words, students practice reading them from a teacher- made chart. The teacher points to words from any column in a random fashion.

Example:

ow – snow	ow – wow	ou - loud	oy – boy	oi - oil
show	cow	cloud	toy	boil
window	plow	pound	annoy	spoil
bowl	allow	proud	destroy	avoid

Circle or Underline the Focus Letter Combination

After students have spelled a series of words with a particular letter combination, they should underline or circle the focus combination, reading each word as they go (see the Sort the Sounds chart above). This will further reinforce their automatic recognition of the sound represented by that combination of letters.

Examples: *beat*, *beast*, *treat*, *team*, *dream*, *scream* or *chart*, *started*, *sharp*, *charm*.

Beat the Teacher

Students love to compete against the teacher and will almost always be successful when they compete as a group. For any activity that involves encoding or reading, have one of the students keep a tally of the number of times students encode or read a word correctly. When a student is not correct, the teacher receives a tally point. This activity motivates students to focus their attention and to think carefully before answering.

Be the Leader

Children take turns leading activities. They enjoy being the leader and must listen carefully to their ‘students’ to determine whether an answer was correct. Allowing students to take a leadership role provides time for the adult to observe and take notes on how well each student understands the concepts being addressed.

Sounds Scatter

Use this activity when you are working with letters or letter combinations that represent a category of sounds (short vowels, blends, digraphs, long vowel combinations, r controlled vowels, diphthongs etc.).

- **Before engaging students in this activity, they should first encode words with the particular phonemes** (see Sort the Sounds above) that will later be reinforced using the Sound Scatter activity. This encoding will help them to associate the sound with the symbol.
- The Sound Scatter activity isolates the letters or letter combinations that represent the sounds and provides practice for students to see, hear and produce the sounds in isolation. Often, students who experience difficulty with phonetics do not understand that sounds are represented by combinations of letters (example *ch*, or *au* or *str*). Sometimes they view these as separate letters rather than combinations. It is very important that students see a combination of letters as a unit that represents a particular sound.
- **The practice from the Sounds Scatter activities helps train their eyes and brains to group the letters together and to see and process them as representing one sound.**

Note: It’s not necessary to work with all the letter combinations at the same time. Depending on the abilities of the students – the sounds can be introduced a few at a time.

Directions

- On the board or chart paper, scatter the letters or letter combinations – repeating each one a few times. If the group of letter combinations is large, attempt only a few at a time and continually add more as students demonstrate their knowledge. Note: You might find it useful to create a sound scatter for word families as well as vowel combinations.
- For most of the sound categories you should provide a key word for each sound representation. This allows students hook a sound to a familiar word. Write these words beside the scatter formation for student reference. For example, if you are working on the consonant digraphs – the key phrases might be ‘sh as in *ship*’, ‘ch as in *chop*’, th as in *think*’.
- Some letter combinations represent more than one sound – *oo*, *ow*. When looking at these combinations, students should say both sounds.
- There are a few ways to engage students in this activity. The leader for these activities can be the adult or a student, with students taking turns in the leader role. Students enjoy being the leader and they must listen carefully to their ‘students’ to assess whether an answer was correct. Allowing students to take a leadership role provides time for the adult to observe and take notes on how well each student understands the concepts being addressed.
 - The leader points to a letter combination one after the other and the students say the sound.
 - The leader says the sound and the students point to the correct letter or letter combination.
 - The leader can also say a word with one of the sounds and a student uses a ruler to point to the correct letter or letter combination.

ship					
chop	sh	qu	th		
think	ch			sh	
phone		ph	th		
quit	ph	qu	ch		

cat					
pet		o	i	e	
it	a				u
hop	i	o	u	o	u
sun		u	i	a	
	e				

car	for				
fur	sir	ir	ur	air	er
		or		are	
her	care	are	ir		
fair		air	ur	or	er

	igh	ite		
eam			eat	ain
	ake	ame		
ane			ink	
	ack			
ite		ank		
	aid		ing	

Smack Down

Note: This activity involves competition between pairs or small groups, and should be used with students with a similar ability level.

Use this activity when you are working with letters or letter combinations that represent a category of sounds (short vowels, blends, digraphs, long vowel combinations, r controlled vowels, diphthongs, word families etc.). Before engaging students in this activity, they should first **encode** words with the particular phonemes that will later be reinforced using the Sound Scatter activity or Smack Down. This encoding will help them to associate the sound with the symbol.

1. Decide which sounds will be reinforced and make sets of cards for each player:

Example: combinations for long vowel sounds: *ee*, *ea*, *e_e*, *ey*, *ai*, *ay*, *a_e*, *oa*, *ow*, *o_e*, *ie*, *i_e*, *igh*, *ui*, *ue*, *ew*, *u_e*, *oo*.

Each player scatters the cards in front of him. Then, as the teacher says the sound or word that contains the sound, each player grabs the appropriate cards that represent that sound and smacks them down in front of him, raising his hand when finished.

Example: for the long vowel sound of *a*, the players should be finding *ai*, *ay*, *a_e*. The first player to smack down all the appropriate cards wins a point.

2. Another way to play this game is to provide a large chart with the sounds to be reinforced. Each sound should be represented 2 or 3 times on the chart. Two or three players may play at a time. The teacher produces the sound or a word with the sound, and the players compete to see who can be the first to locate the letter combination and smack it.

3. A final version of this game can be played by providing each player with a smaller version of a chart with the sounds to be reinforced. The teacher produces the sound or says a word containing that sound, and each player smacks the represented sound on his own sheet.

Word Sorts

This activity is similar to sort the sounds (see previous page), but now the words with the element to be studied are written on cards. Examples: short vowels, digraphs, ‘r’ controlled vowels etc. Then students sort their cards into categories. An open sort involves students deciding the categories. For a closed sort, the teacher provides the categories. This activity focuses students on the particular grapheme being studied.

Word Detectives

Some students develop the habit of looking only at the beginning of a word and guessing the rest without really learning to look the word all the way through to the end. This activity provides practice in looking at all parts of a word.

- Write words with more than one syllable leaving one syllable out but represented by a blank for each letter. Students look carefully at each part of the word and try to determine which letters are missing.
Examples: re ___ ber (remember) e ___ _ ment (equipment), ___ _ rest (forest), expecta ___ _ (expectation).
- Look at words with more than one syllable, and then ask what will happen to the word if one syllable is removed.
Examples: am – bu – lance. What happens when we remove the *bu* syllable? This helps students understand that words can be broken into parts and that a reader needs to look at all the parts of a word.

Make Words Square

sh	u	d	p
u	nch	m	b
l	e	a	o
tch	i	dge	w

For this activity, place letters or letter combinations in the *Make Words Square* and challenge students to make as many words as they can. They might also use their words in sentences or try to use as many of their words as possible in one sentence. The number of squares in the *Make Words Square* can be modified according to students’ ages and abilities.

Around the World

This activity involves competition between students and should be used only when all the students in a group demonstrate a similar level of ability. If there are any students who are not able to compete successfully, this activity should not be used. One student begins as the challenger and stands beside the first student next to him. They compete to be the first to read a word successfully. The winner moves to the next student and continues until someone defeats him. If someone successfully defeats all other group members, he has made it “Around the World”.

Note: Because natural reading behaviour entails some tentative processing, it should be expected that students will not always be correct on the first try, but they should self-correct when they look more carefully at the word. If a student calls out a word without really looking at it carefully, and does not self-correct, he will not win that challenge. This rule will discourage students from guessing without really looking at the word.

Unanimous Spelling

To begin, create a list of words for encoding. Separate students into small groups and provide each group with a set of letter cards, tiles or pencil and paper. If letter cards or tiles are to be used, watch for repeated letters within words so that each group has enough letters. Explain that each student in the group will take turns spelling a word that you dictate. When a player takes his turn to spell a word, the others may help him or correct it, but they cannot speak. When all members are satisfied the word is correct, they raise their hands together. The teacher will call on the first group with hands raised and have the group spell the word aloud. If it is correct, that team receives a point. If not, the play continues until the word is spelled correctly. A new word is then announced. As the final step, the teacher shows a chart of the dictated words and points to random words as the students practice reading them.

NOTE: One excellent source for computer software is *Essential Skills Software*. www.essentialskills.net