



Chapter 7

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Teach students to flexibly use a variety of strategies as they read.

How Do I Teach Students to Recognize and Spell Unknown Words?

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Aurleigh never really thought about how she figured out unknown words in her reading. Now that she's enrolled in a reading methods class and completing a placement in a first-grade classroom, she has become very interested in how people figure out words they don't know automatically. Aurleigh decided to keep track of what she did when encountering unknown words. Using her organic chemistry textbook, Aurleigh discovered that sometimes she skipped the unknown word and used context cues to figure out what might make sense. Sometimes she looked for parts of words that she recognized and sounded out the unknown words as she broke the word down into parts.

Aurleigh realized by engaging in this activity that as a reader she used a variety of methods flexibly as she read. There wasn't one method that always worked better than the others. Aurleigh decided that she needed to teach her students a variety of strategies and how to use them independently so they could be equipped for figuring out unknown words.

When you come to a word you don't know in your reading, what do you do? For example, you may have encountered some words or terms in previous chapters of this book, such as *miscues* or *phonemic awareness*, that were unfamiliar to you. What did you do when you encountered these words? Did you approach each of these terms the same way?

As a skilled reader, you have several strategies for reading unknown words, which is called **word recognition strategies**. You probably don't remember how you learned these strategies because that was so long ago. You might remember, however, that at times you need to read unknown words by **chunking** the words by looking at word parts. For some words you may need to apply **phonics** by figuring out the sounds that letters and letter combinations make and saying the sounds out loud to hear the word. At times you may have skipped an unknown word, read the rest of the sentences, and then went back to try to figure out the word. All of these strategies are automatic for you as a mature reader, but these strategies need to be taught to beginning readers.

Word recognition requires a sophisticated combination of strategies that encompass phonics, structural analysis, meaning cues, and syntax. In this chapter, we describe the strategies your students will need to help figure out unknown words in reading, writing, and spelling.

How Readers Figure Out Unknown Words

When readers and writers try to figure out unknown words, they use different types of information or cues to help them in that process (see Chapter 2 for a description). One type of cue relies on the letter and sound relationships. This cueing system is called the **visual** cueing system. It is sometimes called the **graphophonic** cueing system because readers look at the letters and figure out the sounds they represent. We can also use meaning or semantic cues to figure out unknown words. **Meaning cues** include using context clues, asking yourself, "what would make sense?" and considering what you already know that might help you figure out the unknown word. Meaning cues also include pictures or graphics that can help you figure out an unknown word. The **structural (or syntactic)** cueing system focuses on the structure of the English language such as word order, rules and patterns of language (grammar), and punctuation. Each of these cueing systems can help you figure out unknown words, and although they can be used individually, the cueing systems can be very effective when they are used in combination (Ayra & Feathers, 2012).

Let's think about how Aurleigh might use the cueing systems in combination as she is reading her chemistry textbook. Here is a short passage in her assigned reading:

The ions we have discussed so far are called monatomic ions because they are ions formed from only one atom. We also find many polyatomic ions.

When Aurleigh encounters the word *monatomic*, she tries to sound it out by using **visual cues**. She comes up with *mon-at-om-ic*, and she doesn't recognize that as a word so she decides to read the rest of the sentence to see if the book will give her any **meaning cues** she can use to figure out the unknown word. As she reads the sentence, she sees that the textbook has provided the meaning of the word, "ions formed from only one atom." She then goes back and looks at the word again and uses visual cues to see that she can break it apart into two parts—*mon* and *atomic*—which means one atom. As she continues reading, Aurleigh sees the unfamiliar word *polyatomic*, and she uses **structural cues** to determine that the word describes atoms. She then recognizes that she can use visual cues to break that word into two parts—*poly* and *atomic*. She uses meaning cues to predict that the meaning of those two parts which leads her to infer that the word means multiple atoms. She uses meaning cues to ask herself, "Does that sound right?" and "Does that make sense?" She decides it does so she continues reading. By using the cueing systems flexibly and in combination, Aurleigh is able to figure out two of the unknown words in her chemistry reading assignment.

Now that we know what the cueing systems are that readers can use to figure out unknown words, we can do a deeper dive into each of them. We start with the visual cueing system which focuses on letter–sound relationships and includes **phonics** and **structural analysis**.

How Readers Use Visual Cues to Figure Out Unknown Words

When you use the visual cueing system, you look at the letters and consider the sounds the letters make. In other words, this cueing system relies on the ability to use phonics to **decode** or break apart words using letter–sound relationships to figure out unknown words. A simple definition of phonics is understanding that letters have sounds, and that those sounds fit together to make words. Let's think about this with an example where you encounter the word *clorx* which is not a real word, but how would you say it? Go ahead and say the word *clorx* aloud. Look at *clorx* and consider how you thought about tackling the word. Because you are a proficient reader, you probably didn't have to spend more than a few seconds on *clorx* before you said it. Maybe you started with the first two letters *cl* and thought about how you can hear both of those letter sounds at the start of the word, such as in *clean*, *cloud*, and *clam*. Next, you probably thought about the sound *or* makes, such as in *fork*, *horn*, and *cord*. Perhaps you then thought about *x* making a sound like *ks* because you know words that end in *x* make that sound, such as *flex*, *box*, and *lynx*. Finally, you put all the sounds together to say the word. In other words, you used **decoding skills** to identify the unfamiliar word because you used your knowledge of letter sounds as you looked at the letters and thought about how those letters worked together. If we asked you to spell the word *clorx*, you would probably have gone through a similar process. Instead of reading it on the page, you would have said the word to yourself and written letters to represent the sounds you heard. Reading and spelling require knowledge of phonics. Sometimes we even refer to phonics and spelling as two sides of word recognition; in **phonics** we decode or break apart a word that we see in print, and in **spelling** we encode or write a word using what we know about the sounds we hear and the letters and letter combinations that make up the word.

As noted previously, “phonics is the study of the relationship between sounds and letters” (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 2). This may sound easy but think about the processes you went through to figure out how to say the word *clorx*. Although the English alphabet has 26 letters, you must be able to recognize the uppercase and lowercase forms of those letters. However, simply memorizing what each letter looks like and the name of those letters is not enough for students to learn to read because you also must consider the **sounds** that can be associated with each letter. Some letters are associated with one sound, such as *d* says /d/ as in *duck*. Some letters are associated with more than one sound, such as *c* in *cat* and *cent* and *g* in *gum* and *gym*. Some letters are associated with completely different sounds when they are paired with other letters, such as *s* and *h* making the /sh/ sound instead of /s/ and /h/. **Vowels** (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*, and sometimes *y*) are especially tricky because they each have multiple sounds, depending on the letters surrounding them. For example, *a* has a short sound in *map*, a long sound in *late*, but has different sounds in *car*, *chair*, *call*, and *learn*.

Phonics is not something that students learn overnight; it is complex because English is not a completely phonetic language. Some languages have a one-to-one correspondence or relationship between letters and sounds, but you know that we have many letters that have more than one sound.

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Phonics involves printed text or the act of writing, with attention to letters.

English Learners (ELs) in particular may be used to languages in which each letter makes a distinct sound, regardless of letter combinations. Learning the different sounds associated with each letter and the different sounds for various letter combinations takes good teaching, time, and practice. You might feel overwhelmed with all this information, and you might be worried that you can't remember everything there is to know about phonics. Take a deep breath and know that this chapter provides you with a review of phonics terms, complete with examples. This chapter also guides your thinking about how to teach the other **cueing systems** as well as other aspects of **word recognition**. In addition, you will learn more about **phonics** and how the English language works throughout your teaching career.

PHONICS AND FLUENCY. Phonics is an essential part of learning how to read and spell words. What do you do when you read? Are you just saying the words in the text, or are you reading for understanding? Phonics equips students with knowledge of sounds, letters, and how they work in words. Once students have that understanding, they become more fluent readers because students will not have to stop to figure out each sound in each word. Think about that. What would happen if you had to deliberate over every letter sound in every word as you read? Once you got to the end of the paragraph, you would be exhausted, and you probably would not even remember what you had just read! When students learn phonics, we want that learning to stick so they can apply their learning automatically, every time. For example, if you teach students that the letters *s* and *h* put together in *sh* say /sh/, then you would expect them to instantly say “/sh/” every time they see *sh* in print. You would also expect them to automatically spell /sh/ correctly as they sound out words to write. As students gain automaticity, they become more fluent in their reading and learn to recognize words at sight. Lots of reading of easy materials can help students build sight word vocabulary, confidence, and automaticity. Sight word recognition and automaticity are important for fluent reading, and they are discussed further in Chapter 8.

Fluency is key for comprehension because if you're not stopping frequently to figure out how to say the words, then you are more likely to understand what you're reading. Students need to increase the number of words known at sight so more of their attention can be devoted to comprehension. Isn't comprehension the ultimate purpose for reading? Or do you know someone who enjoys saying words on a page without thinking about the meaning? Have you read a text just to say the words? Obviously not! Because phonics helps with fluency and comprehension, it is important for reading success. Researchers agree on the importance of teaching phonics because it is a foundational skill that is essential for being able to read (Adams, 1990; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Kaye & Lose, 2019).

PHONICS VS. PHONEMIC AWARENESS. Phonemic awareness and phonics are different because phonemic awareness is **oral** with attention to and manipulation of sounds you hear, whereas phonics involves **printed text** or the act of **writing**, with attention to letters. As you learned in Chapter 6, if you're playing with sounds orally, then it's **phonemic awareness**. Once you say a letter name to associate with the letter sound, then it's **phonics**. The word *clorx* from the beginning of this chapter is a perfect example of phonics because it's a printed word that you had to sound out or decode, based on your knowledge of letters and the sounds they make. See the following example that illustrates the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics.

Phonemic awareness: *I'm thinking of the word monkey. What's the first sound that you hear in the word monkey?*

Phonics: *This is the letter m. It says /m/. Monkey is a word that starts with m.*

The easy way to remember the difference is that phonemic awareness concerns **oral sounds**. Phonemic awareness is something you can do with your eyes closed because it involves listening for and manipulating sounds in spoken words. With phonics, you must be able to see the **letters and words** to say the sounds as you read. You must also be able to use your knowledge of phonics components to **spell** words correctly. Indeed, phonics and spelling naturally go together. How good of a speller are you? It seems as if some people find spelling easier than others. Spelling words correctly in any language is a challenge, but spelling English is more difficult than spelling in many other languages. English is not a completely phonetic language, so words are not always spelled the way they sound. There are, however, rules, patterns, and relationships that govern the spelling of many words. In the next section, we highlight **phonics components** and how to teach them. As students learn these components, they often use invented, or developmental, spelling in their writing.

COMPONENTS OF PHONICS INSTRUCTION. Reading researchers (Adams, 1990; Bear et al., 2015; Kaye & Lose, 2019; Morrow, Dougherty, & Tracey, 2019) agree that phonics instruction must address teaching **letter–sound associations**, teaching students **spelling patterns** for various vowel sounds, and teaching students how to use **structural analysis** for decoding unfamiliar words. Our goal is to provide you with an understanding of phonics while giving you real world examples and ideas for how to teach phonics.

Be sure to refer to your state’s English Language Arts (ELA) standards so you can see the phonics expectations by grade level. Regardless of your state, please note that the standards do not tell you *how* to teach. Standards tell you *what* to teach, but it is up to you to decide *how* to teach phonics (and everything else!). Instead of a being a cookbook, standards merely list the required ingredients.

Some states have ELA standards for PreK. Typically, PreK standards consider what should be accomplished to prepare young students for the kindergarten curriculum. Follow the link in Margin Note 7.1 to see how New York aligned their PreK ELA standards with kindergarten standards.

PreK teachers shouldn’t be the only ones looking to see what the standards are for the grade level ahead. Teachers of every grade level should do this to see what’s called vertical alignment. Vertical alignment helps you understand what students were supposed to learn in the previous grade level, which is useful in considering how to provide review and build on that prior learning. Vertical alignment also helps you understand what students are supposed to know for the next grade level, which is useful in considering how to get students ready for those expectations.

Margin Note 7.1:
Prekindergarten to
Kindergarten Standards
Alignment ELA

[http://www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/standards/documents/Prekindergarten toKindergartenStandards AlignmentELA_000.pdf](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/standards/documents/Prekindergarten%20toKindergartenStandardsAlignmentELA_000.pdf)



Connection to the Field: ELA Phonics Standards

If you are in a K–3 placement, ask your mentor teacher to discuss the ELA standards and curriculum materials with you. Ask your mentor teacher how they use ELA standards to guide their teaching of phonics. Also, ask if there is a vertical progression guide for phonics so you can see how students’ learning is expanded upon at each grade level. If you are in a PreK placement, ask your mentor teacher to share the required literacy curriculum and how that guides their teaching of phonics.



Regardless of your ideal grade level or your placement grade level, be sure to review the explanations of phonics components below so you understand what they mean and how they progress across grade levels. We cannot predict which grade levels you will teach during your career. If you

are hired to teach above third grade, you will still need to know how to teach phonics because you will have some readers who may be struggling with phonics. Remember that every student is on their own trajectory to becoming a reader and a writer, so be sure you keep the developmental stages in mind while considering why students may be struggling.

LETTER-SOUND ASSOCIATIONS. Letter-sound associations refer to seeing a letter and knowing its name and the sound(s) that letter makes. As proficient readers, we do this constantly without thinking. Learning letter names and the sounds of each letter can be difficult because they look like squiggles on a page until we point out what they are and the differences between them. These **uppercase (capital)** letters have similar shapes: C/G/O/Q, E/F, I/L, M/N, U/V/W, K/X, S/Z. Brainstorm a list of **lowercase** letters that have similar shapes and think about how you could explain the differences to young children. As students write, they may confuse letters that look similar. Providing time to practice identifying letters as you read with students and noting how they are different will help clear up the confusion. Reminding students about the differences between those confusing letters before they write will help as they think about spelling the words they sound out.

Letter-sound associations include **consonants**, **digraphs**, and **blends**. See Figure 7.1 for definitions and examples of these terms.



Lesson Planning: Explicitly Teaching Digraphs

This lesson idea demonstrates how to teach one specific element of phonics, the *sh* digraph. Phonics could be taught one skill at a time, building from individual elements to larger pieces of text. Once students grasp an element, then you could use a contrasting approach where you contrast the known element to a new one. For example, once students understand *sh* you could introduce *th* and consider how those digraphs are alike and different.

Standard: Know common consonant digraphs.

Objective: Students will be able to identify the letters *sh* for the /sh/ sound and produce a word that starts with *sh*.

Lesson Idea: Select a phonics element to teach. This lesson idea focuses on the *sh* digraph.

1. Write the element on the board (*sh*).
2. Tell students, "The letters *sh* stand for the /sh/ sound."
3. Ask students to say /sh/ as you point to the letters.
4. Present words that start with *sh* (*sheep, she, shop, shoe*) and emphasize the sound /sh/ as you say the words.
5. Ask students to say words that start with *sh* and write them on the board as they offer ideas.

Assessment: Have students write the digraph *sh* and a word that starts with *sh* on their papers. They could draw a picture of the word. If students are unsure of words that start with *sh*, repeat the lesson and point out *sh* words throughout the day.

Scoring Criteria:

Incorrect	Correct
The word does not start with <i>sh</i> .	The word starts with <i>sh</i> .