

Teaching for Decoding Strategies

Good readers use a variety of strategies to figure out unknown words. It is not just a matter of knowing phonics. It is using phonics and analogies to problem solve quickly and effectively.

Decoding strategies to teach students who have trouble in this area:

1. **Read and Think: What makes sense?** This is the most important decoding strategy. If students encounter a difficult word (but one they have heard before), and they reread the sentence up to the first few letters of the difficult word, the correct word will often “pop out” of their mouths. If there is a picture on the page that would help, be sure to direct the student’s attention to use that clue, too. Rereading and sounding the first part will work if the unknown word is in the student’s listening vocabulary and the student is thinking about what would make sense.
2. **Cover the ending** and look for a part you know in that word. Sometimes just sounding the first part is not enough to figure out the word. Transitional readers often stop at big words and do not look for a known part. The easiest way to teach this strategy is on words that have an inflectional ending. Teach the students to put their hands over the ending and see if there is a known part.
3. **Chunk** the word into parts. As the student sounds the word in parts he/she should also be thinking about the meaning of the sentence. Students should not become so focused on sounding out the parts of the word that they forget to think about meaning of the sentence. Phonics often gives an approximate pronunciation that must be checked with meaning.
4. **Use an analogy.** What other words do you know that look like this word? Use what you know to help figure out the new word. This is a highly effective strategy. Poor decoders commonly have trouble remembering the rules of phonics. Instead of drawing attention to what they do not know, build on what they know. Help them think of another word that looks similar, and then show them how to make an analogy to figure out the new word.
For example, a student may stop at “shawl”. Say, “Do you know a word that has this part in it?” Write “_aw” on a white board. Usually the student will say, “saw”. Then you say, “Now use ‘saw’ to help you figure out the new word.” The analogy strategy is powerful because the student can apply it to other difficult words they encounter.