



# Decoding Strategies

Decoding is the ability to apply knowledge of letter-sound relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns and morphology (word parts) to accurately read written words.

Understanding these relationships enables students to build a bank of words that they can read by sight and to decode words that are unfamiliar.

**Keywords:** *letter sound relationships, graphemes, decode, blending, literacy development*

Decoding is the foundation on which all other reading instruction builds. If students cannot decode words, their reading will lack fluency, their vocabulary growth will be limited, and their reading comprehension will be compromised.

## Pre-requisites for students to decode words:

- Recognise the letters in the word
- Associate each letter with its sound
- Hold these sounds in sequence in memory
- Blend these sounds together to determine the word

## Skills underpinning decoding:

<b>Segmenting and blending</b>	If a student does not know how to blend sounds into a word, they will not have the necessary skills to decode unknown words. Similarly, the ability to segment a word into sounds is crucial for spelling and for 'memorising' a word by mapping the relationship between the sounds in a word and the letters used to spell each sound.
<b>Letter-sound relationships</b>	Understanding of relationships between letters and sounds, including single letter spellings, digraphs (e.g., sh, th), and commonly doubled letters (e.g., ff, zz).
<b>Syllabification</b>	By locating vowels and syllable divisions, students are able to break words into chunks, allowing for ease in decoding larger words.
<b>Identifying affixes, suffixes, and base words</b>	In addition to breaking a word into syllables, the ability to locate and understand affixes, base or root words is a critical part of reading and spelling more complicated words. This understanding is often essential for spelling and accurate pronunciation of words.
<b>Meaning</b>	Meaning is not used by skilled readers to identify or read individual words. However, it can help readers to self-monitor and confirm.



The ability to sound out new words accounts for about 80% of the variance in first grade reading comprehension and continues to be a major factor in text comprehension as students progress through the grades (Foorman, Francis, Shaywitz, et al., 1997).

### **Teaching and Scaffolding Strategies**

Students who are having difficulty decoding age-appropriate words may benefit from some combination of the following teaching and scaffolding strategies to assist them in using decoding skills to successfully read year-level texts.



### Successive blending

- Cumulatively or successively blending sounds together while reading can be helpful for students who have difficulty blending sounds together to read a word. To do so, blend in one sound at a time, rather than saying each sound individually before blending (e.g., /k/.../kæ/.../kæt/ for the word 'cat').
- Reduces the load on working memory.
- Can help students to hear meaningful parts of the word as they are decoding.

### Decoding with syllables

- Knowing how to divide words into syllables can help students read multisyllable words more accurately and fluently.
- Provide practice dividing words into their syllables.
- Provide practice reading multisyllable words using flexible pronunciations by 'flipping' vowel sounds or syllable emphasis to see if a new word is created that makes more sense.

### Visual prompts for strategies

- A visual prompt is a simple strategy that can first be modelled by a staff member, then used to cue students to use a specific decoding strategy (e.g., blend successively, say each sound, break the word into syllables, etc.).
- For predictive readers who guess words based on the first few letters, be conscious of avoiding strategies that prompt 'guessing'. More systematic decoding strategies based on letter-sound relationships, syllables, and word parts (morphology) are likely more appropriate.

### Explicit teaching of word parts (morphology)

- Knowledge of word parts (prefixes, suffixes, base words) can help readers know where to divide multisyllable words.
- Teach the meaning and spelling of different prefixes and suffixes.
- Teach students to break words into prefixes, suffixes, and base words/roots.
- Bring attention to word endings (e.g., '-ing, -ed') during reading modelling.



### Want to learn more?

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Website: [languagedisorder.org.au](http://languagedisorder.org.au)

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