

Decoding Strategy

1. Circle prefixes
2. Circle suffixes
3. Underline vowels
4. Use a line to divide the word parts*
Prompts (as needed): "Each word part has one vowel sound." "Look for recognizable parts."
5. Say each word part
6. Blend the word
7. If it doesn't sound like a real word, try different vowel sounds

(Adapted from Archer, Gleason & Vachon, 2000)

** We had one student who found it helpful to add another step here. After she divided the word into parts she would write out the parts with space in between them, to make them visually more accessible.*

For example: **pre dis po si tion**

Classroom poster:



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Directions for teachers

Overview

- The purpose of this strategy is to retrain students to see words as a series of word parts instead single letter sounds.
- We are also retraining them to stop skipping words or guessing at them.
- We want students to be able to use the strategy on their own whenever they come to a word they need to decode.
 - At first this will require teachers prompting them to refer to the checklist repeatedly, but over time they should implement it with minimal to no teacher prompts.
 - *It may take as many as four to eight weeks before any given student is ready to implement the strategy without prompting. Be patient!*
 - After they begin to implement it on their own, they may require additional prompting to generalize the strategy to new materials/settings.
- *Important note for teachers:* We chose not to use the term “syllable”, because we are not following standard syllable division rules. Our goal is to help students identify common word parts, and to develop an understanding that the same word parts occur in many different words.
 - If a student sees the letters *con* at the beginning of a word and they circle it as a prefix, even if it doesn’t function as a prefix in that word, we are okay with that. (E.G. in the word *continue*.) However, we do label those words as “exception words” in order to help them understand that *con* carries meaning in many words.
 - We are also okay with them dividing words into “convenient” parts, not according to syllabication rules, as long as they can decode the parts. For example, the word *substandard* could be divided as *sub/stand/ard* or *sub/stan/dard*. Either would work. Our goal here is to be efficient, and to move the students to independent decoding as soon as possible.
- Avoid using the term “*words you don’t know*” when referring to words that students have difficulty decoding. Students will be hesitant to admit that they “don’t know” a word and will often guess at it. Instead, use the term “*words you’re not sure of*.” We have found students will be more honest when you use that term. 😊



Directions

1. Teachers should begin with a review of the concepts of *prefixes*, *suffixes*, and *vowels*. Don't begin the decoding strategy until you are sure students have a clear understanding of these concepts.
2. Begin by doing a think aloud with a simple, familiar word such as ***unlocking***.

THINK ALOUD

"When I come to a word that I'm not sure of I like to use this strategy to break it down."

- Step 1: I look for prefixes and I circle them. (Model circling *un-*)
- Step 2: I look for suffixes and I circle them. (Model circling *-ing*)
- Step 3: I underline the vowels. (Model underlining *o*)
- Step 4: I divide the word using lines to show the word parts. I know there is one vowel sound in each word part, so I would divide it like this:
(Model dividing the word *un/lock/ing*)
- Step 5 (optional): I write all the word parts, leaving space in between to make them clear. (Model writing: *un lock ing*)
- Step 6: I say each word part, (Model reading each segment separately: *un lock ing*)
- Step 7: I blend them into a word. (Model: *unlocking*)
- Step 8: If it doesn't sound like a real word I try a different vowel sound. I don't need to do that here, because *unlocking* is a word I know.
- I like this strategy! It's easy to use, and I can do it anytime I get to a word I'm not sure of.

un lock **ing**

3. At this point, teachers can begin using the Warm-Up activities, but at first these activities need to be teacher led. Over time, as students begin to use the Decoding Strategy independently, they will complete the activities on their own.
4. During this time, we suggest teachers also give direct instruction on the target affixes and vowel patterns for each unit.
5. Teachers may need to prompt students on some or all of the following elements:
 - a. Look for familiar word parts in Step #4 (E.G. *part* in *participant*)
 - b. Split compound words between the words
 - c. Split words between double consonants
 - d. If a vowel sound is wrong but they don't recognize it, prompt them to try a different one.
 - e. If students are omitting word parts, have them touch each part (with finger or pencil) and say it.
 - f. Remember they can also rewrite the word parts with space in between them if it's helpful.

Here's what the Think-Aloud looks like with a more difficult word: **predetermination**.

(Step 6 is a NON-example this time.)

- Step 1: I look for prefixes and I circle them. Oh, I see two prefixes in this word! (Model circling *pre-* and *de-*)
- Step 2: I look for suffixes and I circle them. (Model circling *-tion*)
- Step 3: I underline the vowels. (Model underlining *e*, *i*, *a*)
- Step 4: I will divide the word using lines to show the word parts. I know there is one vowel sound in each word part, so I would divide it like this: (Model dividing the word *pre/de/ter/min/a/tion*)
- Step 5: I write all the word parts, leaving space in between to make them clear. (Model: *pre de ter min a tion*)
- Step 6: I say each word part, (Model reading each segment separately. This time, use a NONexample, by saying "mine" instead of "min".
- Step 7: I blend them into a word. (Model blending it incorrectly: *predeter mine ation*)
- Step 8: That doesn't sound right to me. What other sound can I try? Instead of long-i, I will try the short sound. (Model it correctly)

pre **de** ter / min / a **tion**



Coaches: What to Look For

Quality Indicators

A teacher using the Decoding Strategy effectively will do the following things:

- Whenever possible prompt students to think rather than giving them corrections:
 - *What other sound can that vowel make?*
 - *Do you see any familiar word parts in there?*
 - *What is another way that suffix can be pronounced?*
- Refer students back to the Decoding Strategy poster:
 - *Where can you look if you're stuck?*
 - *What do you do next?*
- Focus students' attention on decoding:
 - *Say the vowel sound first then the word part*
 - *What sound does "er" make?*
 - *What is another sound that letter can make?*
 - *Take off the first letter, now read it again*
- Scaffold the blending of more difficult words:
 - *Teach two-syllable words first, then systematically teach three, four syllables, etc.*
 - *If a student can read the parts but is struggling to blend them together, have student cover up part of the word to facilitate blending.*
 - *E.G. **irresponsible**. Cover **ir** and **ible**. Student reads "response".*
 - *Most students will be able to blend the shorter word, then add the other word parts back on one at a time.*
- Comparing difficult word parts to words the students know:

Target Word	Difficult Word Part	Comparison Word
improbable	prob	Rob
famished	fam	Family
commander	mand	hand
indestructible	struct	Strict
consumption	sump	Lump



Common Pitfalls

Some common mistakes teachers will make with this strategy are:

- Letting students just read the word, rather than using the strategy to break it down. Make them “show their work” so we know they aren’t guessing.
- Not providing enough Think Time for students. Give them time to look at each part and read them on their own before they read them aloud. (Whisper read or read silently)
- Correcting students instead of prompting them.
 - *That should be “fam” like in family, not “fame”.*
 - *Use the other sound for that—long i.*
 - The goal is to prompt THEM to do the thinking. E.G. “*What can you try here?*”
- Allowing students to omit steps.
 - One common way this happens is that students blend the word before they segment it.
 - That may work with one word, but on the next one it may fail. We want them to work through ALL the steps so they internalize the entire strategy.
- Not reinforcing the strategy long enough.
 - In order for students to establish this strategy as a permanent tool that they can apply on their own, teachers must make a long-term commitment to teaching and reinforcing it. The teacher must consistently model the use of the strategy, refer students back to the strategy, and hold them accountable for its use over a long period of time, probably the entire school year! *You will most likely have to provide more support every time students generalize the strategy to more difficult materials.*

Final notes

- This strategy doesn’t explicitly teach syllable types. We made this choice consciously because we wanted the strategy to be *flexible*. We want students to know how to get close to the correct decoding, and to provide them options to help them figure it out on their own.
- As an organizing tool, prefixes and suffixes are taught in meaning clusters where feasible. (E.G., negative prefixes *non, dis, ex.*)
- Many irregular word parts are taught as sight words (e.g. *cious, tious, tial, cial*) since they are not decodable. Game-based practice is recommended to build automaticity.
- *Use the Observation Protocol to guide your evaluation of teacher implementation of the Decoding Strategy!*

Multisyllabic Word Decoding

The demands on students to be able to read difficult informational text increases dramatically as they get older. By the time students reach middle and high school, they are expected to independently read grade-level, subject-specific textbooks to learn new information. Struggling older readers, who have experienced years of low school success and frustration with reading tasks, often avoid or stop reading texts that contain long words, even when those words can be decoded.

Many remedial programs targeted towards younger students focus on basic phonics skills in low-level text, however, this may not be an effective or efficient use of precious instructional minutes in secondary settings. Secondary students reading low-level text can become demoralized, negatively comparing themselves with their typically achieving peers. To avoid this disheartening outcome, teaching decoding skills within more complex age-appropriate texts can help students build confidence that they can be successful readers. It is recommended that older struggling readers learn word study methods that help them tackle longer, multisyllabic words more commensurate with the grade level texts they are expected to read. Additionally, for older kids it is especially important to work on decoding these words in multiple contexts, first in isolation then embedded in authentic, age-appropriate content (Boardman et al., 2008).

The LA Intervention Project teaches a systematic decoding strategy for multiple syllable words. The strategy is taught explicitly and practiced both in isolation and in grade-level text. Students are taught to recognize common word parts, including affixes and roots/bases, with specific meanings, and also basic syllabication rules that help them chunk words into decodable parts.

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