Don't Talk to Me About Vowels:

A Resource Book on Sounding Out Words Based on the Experience of Community Literacy Programs In and Around Metro Toronto (excerpt) Reading 13

by Guy Ewing

The following chapters are excerpted from Don't Talk to Me About Vowels, *published by Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy in 1994, as part of the* Sounding Out Words Project. *This book examines how phonics work is done in community-based literacy programs.*

The running text provides background information for tutors and facilitators. Along with this text are Case Studies, which can be read in conjunction with the text or by themselves. For students and their tutors/facilitators, there are Working Ideas Boxe, which present specific ideas for ways of working with phonics information, raise questions, and provide the basis for negotiation between students and tutors/facilitators about ways of working

Chapter 3: Phonics for Adult Beginning Readers

In this chapter, I describe specific techniques for presenting phonics information to adult beginning readers that are used in community literacy programs. The techniques provide ideas about that tutors, facilitators, and learners can do in working with phonics guidelines.

People in the community programs that I talked with during this project warned me not to create a resource which simply presents innumerable techniques for phonics work. During the Sounding Out Words Project, I encountered ways of working with phonics that, if not innumerable, were at least many and various. It would not be useful for me to present all of this information. But the many techniques that I observed and discussed were actually variations on three basic techniques:

1. **Working with word families.**

2. **Working with contrastive pairs of words.**

3. **Working with key words.**

In this chapter, I concentrate on techniques for phonics work with adult beginning readers. In the next chapter, I show how this beginning phonics work can lead to more independence in reading.

Working with Word Families

Case Study

East End Literacy Training Video (from Chapter 1)

In an East End Literacy tutor training video, Michael, a staff person, works with two students, Stu and Ron, in an unrehearsed tutoring session. Michael, Stu, and Ron talk about the day Ron moved into Stu's place. Michael writes a story of the move from what Stu and Ron have told him. Then Michael helps the students read the story back. Ron is a stronger reader than Stu, so he works with Michael to help Stu. In this excerpt from the video, Stu is reading the sentence: All of Ron's stuff (clothes, stereo, games,) fit in the back of the car.

Michael: (Pointing to ALL) That's a hard one for you. It doesn't sound like it looks. It's "all"

Stu: All of Ron's ... sss

Ron: Keep going.

Michael: "All of Ron's ... "

Stu: ... stuff.

In this example, Stu illustrates "sounding out words". He identifies the word "stuff" with the help of a letter-speech sound correspondence, the correspondence between the letter S and the speech sound "sss". This speech sound gives him the starting point for using the context of the story to identify the word. Michael rereads the beginning of the sentence containing the problematic word to help him. Because of Stu's familiarity with the story, and because Stu is good at using context in reading, he is able to identify the word with the help of only one letter-speech sound correspondence. He does not use sounding out the word as an exclusive strategy. His familiarity with phonics guidelines does not have to be extensive.

Later in the video, we see Stu have trouble identifying the word "fit". Michael covers up the F, and asks Stu to read what's left over. Stu reads "it". Then Michael tries to get Stu to put a "fff" sound in front of the "it" to produce "fit". When Stu has trouble doing this, Michael gets Stu and Ron to give him a list of words ending in the sound "it".   They come up with the following list:

> fit
> pit
> sit
> bit
> spit

In eliciting and writing down this list of words, Michael has chosen a guideline about letter-speech sound correspondences which he thinks might help Stu to sound out words by putting initial consonants in front of letter sequences he that he can already identify, like IT.

In this case study, the facilitator and the students work with the following rhyming word family.

> fit
> pit
> sit
> bit
> spit

In this rhyming word family, the sight pattern -IT is matched to corresponding patterns in articulatory information, sound information, and handwriting information.   The facilitator evokes the sound pattern by asking the students to think about words that end in the sound "-it". He engages the students with the corresponding articulatory pattern by getting them to say words ending in "it" as they think of them. He presents the corresponding sight pattern, the pattern that one of the students, Stu, does not know, by writing the words in a column on the flip chart. In this example, the facilitator does not engage the students with the corresponding handwriting information.

Other, non-rhyming kinds of word families are possible. For example, Claudia, a staff person at Street Haven, often works with word families with corresponding articulatory, sound, sight and handwriting information for initial consonants, such as:

> scratch
> scrape
> screech
> scribble.

In the following case study, the facilitator constructs word families to work with words the begin the M/"m", then with words that begin with MA/"ma".

Case Study

The Interesting Group

The Interesting Group at St. Christopher House Adult Literacy Program got its name because the students think that what they do in the group is interesting. The students discuss the world around them and their own lives, write about issues that concern them, and read what other students have to say.

Often, students who are just beginning to learn how to read and write will dictate their ideas and stories to Nancy, the facilitator. Nancy will write what the students say on a flip chart or on a piece of paper, and use these written versions of what the students say as texts for reading. At other times, the students will study writing by other students at the St. Christopher House Program, or by adult students from other programs. Or they will work from Nancy's flip chart notes of a discussion in the group.

The phonics work that they do is embedded in this interesting work. One evening, ten minutes may be devoted to phonics; the next evening, perhaps half an hour. The next evening, there may be no phonics work at all, because an important issue has come up for discussion.

When the students in the group do phonics work, they use written and spoken language from discussion, reading, and writing as raw material. Their phonics work does not start with speech sound and letters, but with language in use.

In the six years that Nancy has worked as the group's facilitator, she has introduced phonics in a variety of ways. She tries to suit her approach to how the particular students that she is working with at the time seem to learn best. She experiments. She pays attention to how the students respond. She adjusts her approach as she goes.

For example, at one point, Nancy used handwriting to help the students to notice speech sounds at the beginnings of words. She did this in conjunction with work on word families. Suppose a word came up in the group, like "Maggie", the name of a group member. Nancy might take this opportunity to work on the sound "mmm" for the letter M. She would open the dictionary to the letter M, and read out familiar words:

> mud
> meat
> microphone

She might throw in a phrase or two like "mad as hell". She would show the students how to make the letter M in handwriting.

m

"And, at the same time as they're handwriting it, and trying to get the flow, I'm just talking to them, and chattering away, and going on about all the other words starting with M." Then she would ask them to listen for "mmm" in a list of words, and tell her which words begin with the letter M.

> milk ✓
> Milton ✓
> Sunday
> Monday ✓

At the next meeting of the group, she might take the first two speech sound and letters in "Maggie", "mmm-aaa" for M-A, and look for words beginning with these speech sounds and letters. Perhaps this time, instead of choosing familiar words from the dictionary, she would choose words beginning with "mmm-aaa" from material that the students were reading or from a story that someone dictated:

> macaroni
> mangle
> man

She would show the students how to join the letter M to the letter A in handwriting.

ma

She would ask the students to listen to words beginning with "mmm", and to indicate which of these words begin with "mmmaaa":

math ✓
magpie ✓
miracle
sack

Then she would work through words beginning with M-I in the same way. Finally, she'd ask the students, "Okay, 'mitt', is that M-A or M-I?'"

In this case study, we see an experienced facilitator working dynamically with word families. Nancy starts with a word family that begins with a particular consonant. Then, when she has worked in several modalities with this word family, she moves on to a word family that begins with the same consonant and a vowel.   And then to a word family that begins with the same consonant and different vowel.

This case study indicates some of the advantages of working on phonics with word families.

- **Work on word families can be integrated into meaningful language work.**
  Word families are lists of words. These words can be the names of group members, familiar words from the dictionary, words from books students are reading, words from stories that students have written. The tutor or facilitator can use word families to present specific phonics information which she has identified in advance as potentially useful, but the words that are sued to present this information can be chosen spontaneously, from whatever language work is going on at the time. Because the phonics work uses words from the meaningful language work, the phonics work always stays connected to meaningful language, through these words.

- **In word families, the basic language unit is the word, which is a recognizable, memorable, pronounceable unit of language.**
  This point about working on word families is related to the first point. Words are meaningful, while individual letters and speech sounds are not. because each word is meaningful in itself, it can be recognized in the flow of language, and remembered. Words that are important in a student's language and experience will be particularly recognizable and memorable.   Also, words are pronounceable units of language, while some individual speech sounds are not easily pronounceable in isolation. (Try producing a "b" sound without a following vowel.)

- **Word families give learners the opportunity of discovering patterns in the flow of speech for themselves, in different sensory/motor modalities.**
  For example, in the case study, the students discovered that "Maggie", "muscle", "meat", and "microphone" all begin with the same speech sound, and that "Maggie", "macaroni", "mangle" and "man" all begin with the same two speech sounds. They discover this through listening to words that they know, and through cursive handwriting, which, like speech, is a sequence of connected but distinguishable elements. Patterns of this kind are not immediately obvious to non-readers. A number of studies have shown that it is not easy for adults to notice individual speech sounds in the flow of speech, unless they are used to seeing them represented in an alphabetic writing system. Learning phonics information through word families is learning new information about speech sounds and corresponding letters from old information: familiar words.

- **Word families are flexible.**
  Words can be grouped to emphasize any number of patterns. When a learner is having difficulty with a particular kind of sequence of letters or speech sounds, a word family with that sequence of letters or speech sounds can be created, using words that are familiar and relevant to the learner.

The Value of Rhyming Word Families

Despite the flexibility of word families, and their potential diversity, there is one kind of word family which predominates in phonics work in community literacy programs. This is the rhyming word family. This is the kind of word family that was used in the East End Literacy example: fit, pit, sit, bit, spit.

We can specify exactly what a rhyming word family is by defining it as follows:

> A **rhyming word family** is a list of one-syllable words that rhyme, and that have the same spelling for the rhyme.

It would be possible to create rhyming word families with multisyllable words, and with different spellings for the same rhyme, but experienced tutors and facilitators that I talked with told me that rhyming word families are more effective with one-syllable words and consistent spellings for rhymes.

Why, of all the possible kinds of word families, are word families of this particular kind so widely used? There are several explanations:

- **Rhyming word families present sound information in a way that is noticeable and memorable.**
  Although individual speech sounds are difficult to hear in the flow of speech, particularly for adults who do not use an alphabetic writing system, rhymes are relatively easy for most adults to hear, whether or not they can read and write in an alphabetic writing system.

- **Rhymes are easy to articulate,**
  unlike some individual speech sounds, which are difficult or impossible to produce in isolation. (In "bat", it is easier to articulate "-at" by itself than to articulate "b" by itself.)

- **Rhyming word families highlight individual consonants.**
  In a rhyming word family, the only difference between the words is that they have different initial consonants, or consonant clusters.

  <div align="center">

  bake
  cake
  take
  make
  shake

  </div>

  What makes "bake" and "cake" different words with different meanings is the difference between the "b" and "c" as sound information and as articulatory information. Listing words of this kind together, as a word family, helps a learner to notice consonants as individual speech sounds, in hearing and articulation, and to pay attention to the exact differences between them.. So, in holding an easily noticed, remembered, and pronounced unit of language constant, the rhyme, rhyming families can be used to focus a learner's attention on what is difficult to notice, remember, and pronounce, individual speech sounds, in this case, consonant sounds.

- Using the definition above, **a rhyming word family matches a rhyme to a single spelling, creating a noticeable spelling pattern to match a noticeable rhyme.**
  The look of -AKE, and the way it repeats itself as a handwriting pattern at the end of a word, calls attention to the rhyme in the same way that its sound and articulation does. Rhyming word families match patterns in different sensory/motor modalities which are easy to notice in each of the modalities. This maximizes the possibility of learners with different strengths and weaknesses in the different modalities noticing the pattern in at least one of its sensory/motor forms.

- **Rhyming families help learners to focus on initial consonants visually and in handwriting, as well as in hearing and articulation.**
  In a rhyming word family, consonants and consonant clusters are isolated visually at the beginnings of words. They are what visually differentiates the words in a rhyming word family. The are also the distinctive handwriting movements at the beginning of each word, before the repetitive rhyme.

- Following the above definition, **rhyming families are made up of one syllable words, and one syllable words in rhyming families reappear as syllables in longer words.**
  A student who has learned SAKE from a rhyming word family will be able to use the sound information and

articulatory information for "sake" to sound out FORSAKE.

- **Rhyming word families help to make sense of the English writing system.**
  The English writing system does not lend itself to broadly generalized phonics guidelines, but it is not totally arbitrary either. One way that a learner can make sense of the system is to learn it as a set of overlapping and partially contradictory spelling patterns that have developed during the history of written English. This is how rhyming word families portray the system. MEAT and MEET may be pronounced the same way, but they are in two different spelling patterns.

MEET		MEAT
FEET	and	FEAT
BEET		BEAT
		SEAT

For every pattern of this kind, there is a word family. By learning rhyming word families, a student is learning phonics guidelines which actually reflect the historical reality of the English writing system. These are phonics guidelines which create some degree of order out of the apparent chaos of English spelling, without portraying more consistency than actually exists.

Working Idea

Working with rhyme

Do you like rhyming poetry and songs? Do you have a good ear for rhymes? If so, you may want to learn how to spell rhyming words. Make a list of rhyming words with your tutor. Use words where the rhyming part is spelled the same way in each word. Once you have learned how to spell the first word, you will know how to spell part of all of the other words on the list.

tip
sip
lip
rip
grip

Dealing with Conflicting Patterns

By not portraying more consistency than actually exists in the English writing system, rhyming word families introduce learners to the sad truths of English spelling relatively early. Even so, within each rhyming word family, there are consistent letter-speech sound correspondences. It is natural for a beginning learner, just starting to work on word families, to begin hoping for more consistency in English spelling than there actually is. Then, at some point, the learner will make the disillusioning discovery that the rhyme in a rhyming word family can be spelled in different ways.

Several of the experienced staff people that I spoke with during the Sounding Out Words Project stressed that it was important for tutors and facilitators to deal with a student's thoughts and feelings at this disillusioning moment. Claudia plans ahead for this moment. This is how she describes what she does:

> You move into a different stage then, by looking at the differences, as opposed to the similarities in sound. So, if they've hit that point of confusion, I try and suggest, "Okay, maybe at your next lesson, you'll go and look at the differences, and just marvel at them for a while. Don't necessarily try and learn them all." You know, and that usually leads to a good bitch session about the English language not saying exactly what it means. Then we start looking at the ways that a spelling can sound, and check out the differences. You'll usually start with something like TOUGH or THOUGH and place them in different spots on the chart, so you can look at it and say, "Okay, look, it's not just you that's confused." You know, "The English language is confused."

huff	so	you
puff	sew	yew
tough	show	blue
	though	through

Different ways of spelling rhymes

Do the different spellings for the rhyming parts of words bother you? You're not alone. People have been complaining about this for hundreds of years.

One way of dealing with different spellings is to keep a list of words for each spelling. You may not remember which word goes into which list, but at least you can learn what some of the possible spellings are.

meat	meet
beat	beet
feat	feet

Different Media for Working with Word Families

The most common medium used for work with word families in the community literacy programs is **pencil-and-paper**. This is the cheapest, most available medium. However, there are other relatively cheap and available media. For example, a **highlighter felt pen** can be useful for emphasizing spelling patterns as visual patterns.

Writing word families on **cards** allows tutors/facilitators and students to study words in different orders, to physically move words in and out of different word families, and in and out of sentences. Cards give written words a physical life which they cannot have when they are stuck in a particular place on a particular piece of paper. On cards, words are harder to identify than in lists or sentences on a piece of paper because they can appear unexpectedly, in various unpredictable orders, and in unpredictable places. They can be used, by tutors/facilitators or by students, to create new lists and new sentences in creative, unexpected ways.

As well as allowing for flexibility in the short term, cards provide a long term record of words and word families that have been words on. This long term record can help learners and tutors/facilitators to assess progress, set goals, and make plans.

Scissors can be a useful enhancement of paper-and-pencil or cards. Cutting up parts of words, such as rhymes and initial consonants, and putting them back together again can be useful.

In some community literacy programs, students have access to an electronic medium for cutting up words, and moving words and parts of words around: the computer. Student who want to learn word processing can work with word families at the same time, moving words into columns by means of the tab key or a mouse, breaking up words with the space bar, etc. Brenda, a literacy librarian at Parkdale Public Library, has found an effective technique to use in the computer group for adult literacy learners she facilitates. (See Working Ideas Box.)

Working with rhyming word families on a computer

Are you working with a computer? If so, you have probably already learned some of the ways that you can move words and letters round on the computer screen.

Some students like to study how to break up words and put them together again using the computer. As they learn how to use the computer, they are also doing work that can help them to sound out words. Here is an example: Use the space bar to break into words:

bancanfanrantan
baggaghaglagnag
cabdabgabjablab
billfillhillmillpill
tenmenbendenpen
cogjoghoglogfog

Working with Contrastive Pairs of Words

Sometimes, a phonics guideline can become more focussed by means of a comparison between two words. A tutor/facilitator can point out the contrasting speech sounds in words, and their spellings, by putting the words next to each other, using the various media described above: pencil-and-paper, highlighter, cards, scissors, computer.

We may explicitly define a contrastive pair of words as follows:

> A **contrastive pair of words** is a pair of words that are the same, except for a contrasting letter/sequence of letters, and a corresponding contrastive speech sound/sequence of speech sounds.

Here are some of the ways that people in community literacy programs told me that they used contrastive pairs of words:

1. To work on difficult to hear/say sound differences, like the "i" and "e" sounds in "bit" and "bet".

2. To work on silent E and the vowel differences in pairs like PIN and PINE.

3. To work on pairs which relate letters and sounds in unique ways, like WOMAN and WOMEN, WHO and HOW.

The use of contrastive pairs of words is illustrated in the case study which follows.

Case Study

An Evening at the Pharmacy Adult Basic Learning Centre Drop-In

When I walked into the drop-in, several students and a tutor were sitting around talking. As in many community literacy programs, it was difficult to tell who was a tutor and who was a student. It was just a group of people sitting around talking.

The people at the drop-in didn't know who I was, and Sam, the staff person, wasn't there to introduce me, but I was accepted, no questions asked. Effortlessly, I became one of the people taking part in the small talk.

More people came in. Eventually, there were about ten people sitting around the table.

Sam had been talking in another room with Jane, a tutor. When Sam and Jane came in, the work began. Sam reminded the students of the ongoing discussions about love that the group had been having. Then Sam handed out copies of the following poem, "I Have Lived and I Have Loved", and led the students in the reading of the poem.

> I have lived and I have loved;
> I have walked and I have slept;
> I have sung and I have danced;
> I have smiled and I have wept;
> I have won and wasted treasure;
> I have had my fill of pleasure;
> All these things were weariness,
> And some of them were dreariness.
> And all these things - but two things -
> Were emptiness and pain:
> And Love - it was the best of them;
> And Sleep - worth all the rest of them.
> <div align="center">*Anonymous*</div>

Starting with Sam, everyone around the table read a line, tutors and students. People helped each other out. The poem was read three times. Because the number of lines in the poem didn't match the number of people.

Sam asked Jane to write "lived" and "loved" on the flip chart. Jane got up and did this, while Sam stayed sitting with the group. He asked the students what was the same and what was different about the two words. One

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student pointed out that the words were the same except for one letter. She said that "lived" was spelled with an I, while "loved was spelled with an O. Jane put a rectangle around the second letter in each word to highlight this difference.

```
l i v e d
l o v e d
```

Another student pointed out that both words ended in -ED. Sam mentioned that -ED indicated "past tense". Then he asked, "What have you noticed about the word endings in the poem?" When no one responded, he pointed out that the whole poem was in the "past tense". Several of the students nodded when Sam said this.

The next two words that Sam asked Jane to write on the flip chart were "treasure" and "pleasure". One student pointed out that the first two letters were different in the two words. As before, Jane highlighted the difference with a rectangle.

```
t r e a s u r e
p l e a s u r e
```

Sam described these consonant pairs as "consonant blends".

The next pair of words that Sam asked Jane to write on the flip cart was "weariness" and "dreariness". One student pointed out that these words had the same ending, -NESS. Sam asked what the "root word" for WEARINESS would be. One student said, "weary". Same asked how "weary" is spelled. The student wasn't sure. Jane spelled it on the flip chart.

```
l i v e d
l o v e d

t r e a s u r e
p l e a s u r e

 w e a r i n e s s        w e a r y
d r e a r i n e s s
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Sam asked how the root word as changed when -NESS was added. No one answered, so Sam pointed out that the Y was changed to I.

Then Sam asked Jane to write "happy" on the flip cart, and asked the students to spell "happiness".

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 w e a r i n e s s        w e a r y
d r e a r i n e s s


                          h a p p y
```

Several of the students called out the spelling of "happiness". Jane wrote this down.

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 w e a r i n e s s        w e a r y
d r e a r i n e s s

 h a p p i n e s s        h a p p y
```

Jane asked what the Y "sounds like" at the end of a word. There was no response, so Jane told the students, using "weary", "dreary", and "happy" as examples. Then she asked what Y "sounds like" at the beginning of a word. Again, there was no response. Jane gave examples, "yes" and "yellow". There was still no response, so Jane told the students that it "sounds like yuh".

The next pair of words that Sam asked Jane to write on the flip chart was "rest" and "best". After Jane had written these two words on the flip chart, she asked the students for other "rhyming" words. The students gave

her a list of words, which she wrote on the flip chart.

```
        r e s t
        b e s t
        n e s t
        w e s t
      c r e s t
        v e s t
      g u e s t
```

Next, Sam handed a list of words that the students had come up with the week before to describe "love".

Love is ...

sad	special	serious
a pain in the neck	money	obsessive
beautiful	respect	enduring
happiness	blind	warm
forgiving	kind	greetings
tenderness	sweet	honour

Sam asked everyone to read one of the words in the list. When everyone around the table had read a word, Sam started it again. The list was read three or four times, with each person reading a different word each time. Then Sam read out each word, and asked if anyone had questions about what it meant. One of the students, whose first language was not English, asked about "a pain in the neck". Another student asked about the word "obsessive". Sam, the tutors, and the students all helped to demonstrate the meanings with examples. (Later, in a discussion with me, one of the students said that she was "obsessive" to improve her reading and writing.) Sam asked what the root word of "enduring" was. No one answered, so he told the students. Then he told the students that the "past tense" of "endure" was "endured". Meanwhile, Jane was writing these words on the flip chart.

```
      e n d u r [i n g]
      e n d u r e
      e n d u r [e d]
```

Next, Sam introduced a sheet of lyrics for "I Will Always Love You", as sung by Whitney Houston.

If I should stay
I would only be in your way
So, I'll go,
But I know
I'll think of you every step of the way
        And I ... will always love you,
        will always love you
You, my darling, you
bittersweet memories, that is all I'm taking with me...
So, good-bye,
please don't cry,
We both know, I'm not what you, you need
        And I ... will always love you,
        I will always love you

I hope life treats you kind
and I hope you have all you dreamed of
and I wish you joy and happiness
but above all this
I wish you love ...
        And I ... will always love you,

> I will always love you ...

Again, everyone read a line. Again, the sheet was read several times around the table. Then Sam asked the students to read along on the lyrics sheet while listening to a tape of the song.

He told the students that the way singers phrase words to the music sometimes helps you to hear syllables in words. He asked the students to pay particular attention to what Whitney Houston did with "only" and "always".

After playing the tape, Sam asked, "What did she do with ONLY?" One student said, "She made it into a compound word. Sam said, "No, close." Another student said, "She divided it into syllables." Sam said, "Yes. How many syllables?" The student said, "One." Sam said, "No." Another student said, "Two." Sam suggested to the students to beat the syllables out while listening to music, as this can help you to hear them.

At this point, the students broke up to get individual help from Sam and the tutors.

In this case study, facilitators use contrastive pairs to focus on individual speech sounds and their corresponding letters, in "lived" and "loved", "weariness" and "dreariness", "treasure" and "pleasure".

This work with contrastive pairs in embedded in a language activity which they like, reading a poem which deals with a topic which they have been discussing.   It is not highly repetitive. It was accompanied by other phonics work, including work with a rhyming word family.

The contrastive pairs are also presented in ways that allow student to study them in different modalities. First the students say the rhyming pairs in the poem. The do this as they look at the words on the page. Then they look at the words on the flip chart as they listen to a facilitator say the words.

This case study points to the importance of presenting phonics information in ways that allow for learning in different modalities. This is particularly important in drop-ins, where the students will be diverse and new students drop in unpredictably. In a drop-in, a facilitator never knows exactly who he will be working with, so, in working with phonics information, it is particularly important to five the students experience with the information in as many modalities as possible.

Working Idea

Annoying pairs of words

What is the most annoying pair of words that you know? When and went? Will and well? Who and how? Of and off?

Most people have at least one pair of words that drives them crazy, because thy just can't remember which is which.

Have you tried to sort this out? Is there anything about the different meanings of the words that could be a clue to their different spellings? Perhaps you can remember that there are two Fs in off because it's very important to turn the stove off. There are ways of remembering these differences. Why not brainstorm ideas with your tutor?

Working with Key Words

A final basic technique for working with phonics in the community literacy programs is the use of key words. We may define "key word" as follows:

> A **key word** is a memorable word which a learner uses to remember a phonics guideline.

Key words are a very old technique. They are the principle behind alphabet books, which match pictures, words

that refer to the pictures, and the beginning letters of the words.

In alphabet books, key words that are considered to be interesting to children are chosen. The key words that are used in the community literacy programs are words that come from discussion with the adult students, or words that are important in the learner's lives. So, as with word families, key words can be a way of linking phonics work to meaningful language.

In the community programs that work with ESL literacy students as well as students whose first language is English, key words are used extensively by the ESL literacy students. Word families are harder for students who are just beginning to develop their English vocabulary.

At the Self-Directed Studies Program in Scarborough, the staff person, Alimamy, usually works in the following way with a new ESL literacy student.

1. He identifies words that are important to the student. For example, a person who is trying to get into Ontario Housing, and who needs to fill out the application forms, may be interested in words like NAME, ADDRESS, PHONE NUMBER, and other application form words. She may also be interested in words like HOUSING, APARTMENT, etc.

2. He helps the students to identify the words. He works with them on sight words.

3. He helps the student to identify sequences of letters that correspond to syllables: NUM - BER.

4. He uses the words as key words for easier-to-hear sounds. What is an easy-to-hear sound will vary according to the student's first language. But, for example, NUMBER might become a key word for the phonics guideline N = "n".

5. Sometimes students find it useful to associate a visual image with the key word, for example, the number on the apartment door with NUMBER.

In work with students whose first language is English, the systematic use of key words is not common, but it can be an important technique for beginning readers. For example, a student who had difficulty identifying letter shapes until he learned these shapes by studying key words in a picture dictionary. One literacy worker has discovered that, for people who work well with sound information, it is sometimes useful for her to make audio tapes of letter names and letter sounds for key words. On these tapes, she will say a letter name, then a sound for that letter, then a word beginning with that sound. Sometimes, she will leave room on the tape for the learner to record himself reading this sound information.

From these examples, it can be seen that, like working with word families, working with key words will involve different uses of information for words by different learners. The picture dictionary technique emphasizes sight information, using visual images, pictures for words, to elicit sound information for words. The audio tape technique emphasizes sound information, and, when students speak into the tape, it also uses speech information.

The most frequent use of key words in community literacy programs is the spontaneous use of relevant, important words to help students to remember phonics information, or to introduce phonics information. These relevant, important words will come from group work, from discussion about issues in the students' lives, and from students' work with written language. An example of this is in the earlier case study, Nancy's use of "Maggie", the name of a student in the Interesting Group, as the starting point for work on words beginning with M and words beginning with M-A.

Working Idea

Words to work on

Where do you get words to work on? From something you have written? From something you have said? From something that is important to you, like the *Driver's Handbook*?

Are there other important words that you would like to know now? Does your tutor know what words you would like to know? If not, why not discuss this with your tutor?

Working with a Plan

In this chapter, I have described three basic techniques for phonics work. These basic techniques underlie much of the phonics work in the community programs which I learned about during the Sounding Out Words Project.

As the case studies how, **these techniques can be combined**. In the case study from the Interesting Group, the facilitator used both rhyming word families and a key word "Maggie", to introduce phonics information. In the case study from the Pharmacy Adult Basic Learning Centre drop-in, the facilitators worked both with contrastive pairs of words and with a rhyming word family.

The case studies also show that **these techniques are adaptable to a wide range of learning situations**. In the Interesting Group case study, we see students who are just starting out with their reading and writing learning some very basic phonics information: how to write the letters M, A and I, and how to recognize speech sounds for M, A, and I in the flow of speech. In the Pharmacy case study, most of the students are further along in their reading and writing. They spell words, help create word families, identify root words. In both of the case studies, the facilitators adapt the techniques to different sensory/motor modalities.

The basic unit in all three techniques is the word. **The actual words used in these techniques can be chosen spontaneously, with an eye to what is appropriate at any particular situation.** In the Interesting Group case study, Nancy chooses a student's name to start working on. This will be a familiar starting point. In the Pharmacy case study, Sam chooses a word from the poem that the students are reading to create a rhyming word family. This word is important to the meaning of the poem, so it will be memorable.

But at the same time, underlying all of the creative combinations, adaptations, and spontaneous choice, the case studies show experienced facilitators working with plans. Nancy introduces the students to an initial consonant, then a vowel, then a second vowel, in a step-by-step progression. Sam systematically focuses on word endings, -NESS and -ED, during the drop-in, mainly for the benefit of several students who are further along than the others. For these students, the work on the rhyming word family is review, while for most of the students, it is new information. Sam plans the drop-ins so that everyone can benefit, everyone can move a little bit further, and so that no one will feel bored and left out.

During the Sounding Out Words Project, one staff person described the role of planning in phonics work as follows.

> When you are tutoring or working with a group, you fill boxes. Because you have a box, a skeleton in a way, because you know what a person needs to communicate, or read well, or write well. But that is only the skeleton. And after that, you fill some of the boxes with plans for tutoring, you see? You fill in the skeleton. You can't be inflexible, but you need the skeleton to start with.
> *- Lira, staff person, Alexandra Park Neighbourhood Learning Centre*

How do experienced tutors and facilitators develop plans for phonics work? Part of what they do, and what every new tutor and facilitator has to do, is to experiment. Introduce new information in new ways, see how the student responds, ask the student to help with modifications, modify, adjust, try again. As the process of experimentation and adjustment proceeds, a workable plan that is right for a particular student or a particular group begins to take shape. As one experienced tutor said, literacy tutoring is not like arriving in a new city with a map and a guidebook. It is like walking out into the city and following the streets until you know here you are going.

But, at the same time, over time, experienced tutors and facilitators notice some patterns, and can incorporate these patterns into their planning, always recognizing that learning does not always follow general patterns. Here are two patterns that are widely recognized in community literacy work.

1. **Words are easier to learn than parts of words** (word endings, roots, etc.).

2. **Consonants at the beginning of words are easier to learn than consonants in other positions.**

3. **Consonants that can be prolonged indefinitely ("m") are easier to work with at first than consonants that cannot be pronounced without a following vowel sound ("b").**

4. **Individual consonants are easier to work with than consonant clusters.**

In Appendix 1, I outline a detailed approach for sequencing work on consonants, according to how a particular student works. This detailed approach is one way of working, but acknowledging the above general patterns and being open to experience are the main prerequisites for planning phonics work.

I close this chapter with a case study which shows how one small gourd facilitator uses a long-range plan to direct her work. Like the facilitators in the previous case studies, this facilitator combines the basic techniques described in this chapter in ways that respond to the particular student that she is working with at the time. Like them, she incorporates these techniques into meaningful reading, writing, and discussion.

Case Study

Working from a Long-Range Plan for Phonics Work

In her small learning group at the Peel Literacy Guild, Anna follows a plan in presenting phonics. Anna follows a definite order and style of presentation. The timing is flexible. The material that students work with varies, because it comes from their reading, writing and discussion. Different learning styles are respected. But always, at the back of her mind, Anna keeps track of a sequence of phonics guidelines.

When students first join Anna's group, they become involved in discussion, dictating stories, and reading back what they have dictated. They will work this way until they are comfortable recognizing words on the page. Anna says that there is no way of specifying in advance when this will be. What is important is that Anna and the students feel comfortable, and ready to move on.

When Anna and the students are ready to move on, Anna will bring phonics into the foreground for a while. She will ask students to listen for speech sounds at the beginnings of words. She starts with consonants that can be prolonged in speech, like "m", "l", and "s". (For a full list of consonants that can be prolonged in speech, see Appendix 1.) She will use words from someone's writing or from a discussion. For example, after a discussion about street maps, she might say, "Can you hear the 'mmm' in 'map'?" After she has worked on two or three consonants in this way, she will add two or three short vowels, for example, the "a" in "map". Then she will work with the students until they can build words with these sounds. For example if the students know "at", she'll tell them that you can put "m" in front of "at" to create "mat". Then she'll ask the students if they can create any other words with "m". Or perhaps she'll ask them to create a rhyming word family starting with "mat". Or she might ask the students what word you would get if you changed the A in MAT to an E.

Once Anna and the students feel comfortable with this word building activity, phonics work will get moved into the background again, as an adjunct to the language experience work.

Anna doesn't feel that it's necessary to work extensively on every single consonant and vowel. She believes that once students are exposed to some guidelines, they can usually figure out the rest from experience. "Reading is exposure," she says. But the phonics work continues to go on in the background, and can be sued to help individual students with specific problems.

After introducing guidelines for initial consonants and short vowels, Anna will introduce other guidelines, in a particular order. She will introduce these guidelines when she feels that students are ready and willing to move on with their phonics work. Her order for introducing these guidelines is as follows.

1. Some initial consonants and short vowels.

2. Digraphs (TH, SH, CH, etc.) and blends (BR, PL, SPL, etc.).

3. Silent letters.

4. Long vowels.

The students in Anna's group like her step-by-step approach. They also like the variety of work that goes on in the group, and they like the way members of the group work together on phonics. Here is what they had to say about this approach on the day that I visited the Peel Literacy Guild.

William: If every week you're doing the same piece, you just get bored with that, and you just give up. If we done the same Q-U words each week, you'd get sick of that, you know?

Hubert:	So you do a round, and you come back to the same thing again, right? You do part of it, and you go round, and then the next few weeks, and then you come back to it.
Linda:	Two weeks, then you come back.
Hubert:	So then it's like a step. Step-by-step, you know.
Linda:	And you're taking one more step.
Kim:	You're going step-by-step, always.
William:	Just keep trying it. If you keep working it down, you're bound to get it, you know?
Hubert:	Keep trying, and then sometime, when the others come in, then you can get it.
Linda:	Then you can get it.
William:	If there's a group like this, one of us will get the first letter, and then someone will probably get the other, and then someone gets it. In a group, I think it's easier. Because if it's one-to-one, some people get embarrassed. The get frustrated because they don't know the answer. In a group, you can sot of say, you know, everyone' trying to get it, and eventually. someone's going to say it. And everyone says it after. So then it's much easier to do.
Hubert:	Working with the gorup, one helps the other, you know, one learns from the other. The things that you don't understand, the other person understands it. YOu can't make that sound, the other person sounds it, so you pick it up from him. And he picks it up from you, too. You are not alone. You work together.

Learning to Do Phonics Work with Adult Beginning Readers

In this chapter, I have presented techniques for working on phonics with adult beginning readers. My presentation has been based on the information and ideas which I gathered in the Sounding Out Words Project. This chapter is about how phonics guidelines are actually learned in the community literacy programs.

The information and ideas which I encountered have been interpreted by me. They cannot replace experience. But they make other people's experience explicit in a format which is useful for learning how to be a tutor or facilitator, or thinking about the direction of one's work, and improving this work.

I hope that, by identifying three basic techniques, this chapter makes these techniques more open for discussion and experimentation.,   I hope that the case studies have put enough clothes on the bare bones of these techniques to shoe how they look in real life, in actual community literacy work.

What the case studies do, at least, is to suggest the infinite variety of work which the three basic techniques allow. For a new tutor or facilitator, it may be intimidating to think about such infinite variety. On the other hand, it may be reassuring to realize that, reduced to its bare essentials, any particular technique will probably involve some variant of at least on of the three essentially simple basic techniques that I have described. By studying these basic techniques, a new tutor of facilitator will learn simple but powerful tools.

In the next chapter, I show how working with the three basic techniques leads to further phonics work, as students become progressively independent readers and writers, using phonics information that they learned as beginning readers to sound out new words by themselves. So the power of the three basic techniques extends beyond what has been discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Becoming an Independent Reader

In the previous chapter, I described kinds of phonics work that beginning readers do in the community literacy programs. In this chapter, I describe how this work eventually helps students to become more independent readers. I will also describe techniques that are used to work on phonics as students become better able to work with information about language.

Independence as a Goal

When adult students start out in community literacy programs, they are usually given strong, personal support by tutors, facilitators, and other students. A student's decision to learn how to read and write as an adult is often a difficult, emotionally charged decision. For many students, failing to learn to read and write as children is a painful memory, associated with hardship and turmoil. At the beginning, adult literacy students need an environment which tells them that they are okay, that their decision to become a student again is okay, that they are able to learn to read and write, and that they are respected as adults.

So beginning adult literacy students get emotional support from the other participants in their program, through discussion, encouragement, and respect. They also begin to work on reading and writing in a way that provides a support, and makes failure almost impossible. Tutors, facilitators, and experienced students will keep an eye on the new student, ready to help the minute he stumbles. When the student works on reading, someone usually sits with him, coaching, helping him with what he does not know, reading what he cannot read. Many beginning students work on writing through dictation, dictating their stories to a tutor/facilitator, who writes them down as the student tells them, and uses this written text for further work. Working in this way, students are encouraged by their ability to "write", that is, to express themselves in language that becomes written, before they have mastered the mechanics of producing written language.

It is in the context of this supportive kind of teaching that the student first works with phonics information. The techniques for beginning readers described in the last chapter are used in this environment.

Meanwhile, because of these techniques and all the other reading and writing work that the student's ability to work with written language grows. It becomes possible for the student to be more independent in his use of written language. With respect to his phonics work, it becomes possible for the student to be more independent in sounding out words.

And this is the object, for the student to become an independent reader. The supportive environment which was created for the student at the beginning was not meant to keep the student in a cocoon of dependency, relaying on other people to help him to read every difficult word and to forever transcribe whatever he wants to say in written language. This environment was meant to make itself unnecessary, to disappear.

It is sometimes difficult for a tutor/facilitator to look beyond the present to the more independent future, but this is what experienced tutors/facilitators will do. As one experienced tutor said:

> As a tutor, my task it eliminate myself.
> *- Ann Marie, volunteer tutor, Parkdale Project Read*

Ann Marie went on to explain that a tutor should become conscious of exactly what she is doing to help the student, then teach the student to do this for himself, without the help of a tutor. This applies to all of the various kinds of support which tutors provide, from helping a student to recognize contextual clues to helping a student to sound out words.

How can the use of the techniques that I described in Chapter Three, in a supportive learning environment, lead to the elimination of the tutor/facilitator, that is, to more independent reading and writing by the student? To answer this question, I will look at how the techniques described in Chapter Three lead to more independent reading. Then, I will look at how a tutor/facilitator can facilitate this process.

Applying Previous Knowledge and Experience to Sound Out Words

In the last chapter, I mentioned that one of the benefits of working with rhyming word families is that it provides lists of one-syllable words and rhyming chunks of words which occur, as pronounceable parts of words, throughout the language. I gave the example of a student who has learned SAKE from a rhyming word family, BAKE, CAKE, TAKE, etc., and then comes across the word FORSAKE.

More specifically, there are two ways that this student's work with the rhyming word family could help her. First, she might have studied the word SAKE as part of the rhyming word family. In this case, she would recognize the S-A-K-E in FORSAKE as a pronounceable sequence of letters. Students, tutors, and facilitators will often say, in this situation, that the student has discovered a "word" within the larger word. Actually, the student has discovered more than this. She has transferred her ability to pronounce a word, SAKE, to the pronunciation of a sequence of letters that is not a word, an meaningless syllable. She has transferred what she learned work with meaningful units of language to a more abstract task, the simple decoding of a sequence of letters in an unfamiliar word. In doing this, she has taken a step toward independence as a reader. Now, without the coaching of another person, she can identify a written word for herself, the first time she sees it.

There is a second way in which working with the rhyming word family could help the student to sound out FORSAKE. Perhaps SAKE was not actually one of the words that the student studied in the rhyming word family with the rhyme spelled -AKE. Even so, the rhyme itself, =AKE, could give the student the clues that she needs to sound out the last syllable of FORSAKE. If she recognized the letter sequence for this rhyme at the end of FORSAKE, she might well be able to use the S as the cue for an "s" sound, put this "s" sound in front of "-ake", and arrive at "sake".

In either case, once this student has sounded out SAKE, she will probably be able to put "for" in front of it, since FOR is another "word" within a word. Like SAKE, FOR is not actually a word in FORSAKE, but, it is the same sequence of letters as a common word of English, a likely sight word in the student's repertoire. Once again, the student can transfer knowledge developed to work with meaningful units of language to the more abstract decoding task required to sound out FORSAKE at sight.

Let me list the types of work that led the student to this point:

1. Work with one-syllable words in word families.

2. Work with rhymes in word families.

3. Work with contrasting initial consonants in word families.

4. Other work with sight words.

What about working with the other basic phonics techniques? This work leads in the same direction, since it involves becoming familiar with sequences of letters, in key words and contrastive pairs of words, that can occur as parts of larger words. This work also focuses on individual letter-sound correspondences in words and pairs of words, giving a student a repertoire of phonics guidelines for individual letters that she can apply in sounding out unfamiliar words.

Whichever route a student takes with the tutor/facilitator, there is a logic which leads form the use of the basic techniques, used in the context of meaningful language work, to the student's ability to sound out words independently.

But this logic does not unfold by itself. It requires a push by a tutor or a facilitator. The student has to know that she can apply her knowledge in this way. The tutor/facilitator has to tell the student that she can do this. Sometimes, the tutor/facilitator can provide tools that help. and the tutor/facilitator can encourage a student to take this step toward independence.

Helping Students to Apply Previous Knowledge and Experience

Part of what tutors and facilitators can do to help students to apply previous knowledge and experience is simply to recognize this role. Like beginning students, students who have progressed to a point where they can sound out

words independently do not always know what they know.

One thing that students often know without knowing it is how to pronounce many sequences of letters that occur in larger words. As I explained, in the previous section, this knowledge come from work with smaller words, phonics work as well as learning from reading experience to recognize words at sight.

For Roland, a former adult literacy student who is now a tutor, being shown that he already knew parts of longer words was a breakthrough.

> I learned the smaller words. Then I found out how you can put them together and make big words. It's remembering the smaller words, and then, in big words, sort of connecting the smaller words by separating them.
> *- Roland, volunteer tutor, Parkdale Project Read*

Roland believes that a tutor/facilitator should take the initiative in pointing out to students the parts of unfamiliar words that they already know how to pronounce. He even does this in shorter words. For example, when he talked to me, he had recently helped a student to read DASH by pointing out to the student that he could already pronounce the last three letters.

That the pronounceable parts come from small words has the advantage of providing the learner with the possibility of questioning his own attempt at sounding out the word. If the student says to himself, "Well, the last part of this word, A-S-H is 'ash', he can check this against his own memory of how the word ASH is spelled.

> When they sound it out, it makes them know that they've got it correct, whereas if they're sort of in pace just making a sound, they don't know that they're actually right.
> *- Alexis, staff person, YMCA Learning Opportunities Program*

But, as in Roland's example, it does not matter if the pronounceable sequence of letters in a word is in the larger word. As Adela, a staff person at St. George's Adult Literacy Program, says:

> Encourage people to find something they recognize, no matter what it is.
> *- Adela, staff person, St. George's Adult Literacy Program*

Adela has developed an interesting technique for helping people to find pronounceable sequences of letters in larger words. This technique is presented in a Working Ideas Box.

Working Idea

Finding parts of words

Are you having trouble breaking down big words? Here's one method for finding readable parts in big words.

Draw a small frame on a piece of see-through acetate. Put this frame over a word that you are trying to break down, and move it along until it frames a group of letters that you can read. The frame should be big enough for about 3 letters at a time.

$$\boxed{\text{r e a}}\ \text{c t i o n}$$

$$\text{r}\ \boxed{\text{e a c}}\ \text{t i o n}$$

$$\text{r e}\ \boxed{\text{a c t}}\ \text{i o n}\qquad\text{------------> } \textit{aha!}$$

One step along the way, to help students to recognize that there are words within words can be to work with compound words, like SOMETHING. This usually involves sounding out a compound word by recognizing the smaller words that it contains. In an interesting twice, Jackeye, a staff person at the Regent Park Learning Centre, encourages students to make up their own compound words. This work is explained in a Working Ideas Box.

Working Idea

Making new words

Tired of breaking up words? How about putting words together?

In your reading, you have probably come across words that are made up of two smaller words, like these:

homesick	=	home	+	sick
housework	=	house	+	work
something	=	some	+	thing

Why not try making up you own lists of words made up of smaller words? For example, how many words can you put together with "sick"? You might want to list words that you've heard, like these:

love	+	sick	=	lovesick
sea	+	sick	=	seasick

Or you might want to invent new words, like these:

welfare	+	sick	=	welfaresick
work	+	sick	=	worksick

Further Steps

When student find pronounceable sequences of letters within words, or, in compound words, actual words within words, they are beginning to open up the internal structure of words. Some students find it useful to open up the internal structure of words further, and work with prefixes, suffixes, and syllables. This work may not be for everybody, but it can be helpful.

Prefixes and suffixes are recurring sight information in words. This sight information is matched with recurring sound information. A seeing learner may be familiar with a particular prefix or suffix from sight. A hearing learner may recognize the familiar sound of -ING or -TION.

> "Close your eyes," I tell them. "Listen to this I-N-G: singing, seeing, walking."
> - *Nancy, staff person, St. Christopher House Adult Literacy Program*

So a student can add to the pronounceable parts of words that she knows by paying attention to common prefixes and suffixes. Learning meanings for these prefixes and suffixes is not necessarily useful at first; it is often better to point out the sight/sound/articulatory/handwriting patterns before analyzing them for meaning. Dharini, a staff person at ALFA, points to the complexity of knowing when a particular sequence of letters is a prefix/suffix, or when it is simply a sequence of letters. For example in UNWISE and UNDONE, UN- is a prefix, but in UNDER, it is not.

U N W I S E

U N D O N E

U N C O O L

U N E M P L O Y E D

U N D E R   --------------------> *???*

Dharini says that, for most students, it is the pronounceability of a recurring word part, rather than its meaning, that is important at first. The analysis of what suffixes and prefixes ad to meaning can come later.

Some students find it useful to work with syllables. For these students, who are presumably good at working with sound information, it helps to learn a word FREEDOM syllable-by-syllable, as FREE-DOM. Even though the

-DOM has no meaning, it can be remembered by people who work well with sound information. Most of the tutors and facilitators that I spoke with do not work with syllables. However, in the programs that work with ESL literacy students, staff people told me that work with syllables was important, partly because it helps the student to hear the English words.

Putting it All Together

Working with the basic techniques which I described in the last chapter, a student will learn one-syllable words, and, by means of phonics guidelines, letter sequences for rhymes, and letters for individual speech sounds. Then, at some point, perhaps with a nudge from a tutor, a facilitator, or another student the student will begin to work with pronounceable sequences of letters within words. Tutors and facilitators encourage this work. They also introduce techniques to enhance it, including techniques for finding the recognizable sequences, working with compound words, working with prefixes and suffixes, and working with syllables.

I will close this chapter with two descriptions of how students ant tutors/facilitators can work together to focus a learner's previous knowledge and experience on developing the skill of sounding out words independently. The first description is from a student's point of view. The second is from a staff person's point of view.

> I think that once you see a little word like CAN in a word, or RUN in a word, or something like that, then you can sound out the rest of the letters. And then there's always the meaning. If it's "We're all voting for that ..." and then it's C-A-N, you can figure out that it's CANDIDATE.
> - *a student*

> So you're looking at PEPPERONI, right? And you can't read it. You really fell you don't want to try it. But I'll say, "Well, try it." And you'll try it, and I'll ask, "Which part of that word do you feel that you're having trouble with?" and, usually, you'll know which part of the word you're having trouble with. "Well, I can get the P-E-P, 'pep', but I'm having trouble with the P-E-R-O-N-I." Okay, so we'll bring it down to the P-E-R-O-N-I.
> - *Victor, Staff Person, East Mall Literacy*

As these quotes suggest, when a student begins to recognize that he now has knowledge and experience with written language that he can use to sound out words, he enters into a new, dynamic, and progressively equal relationship with his tutor/facilitator.

Appendix 1:

Some background Information for Tutors and Facilitators on Sequencing Phonics Work

During the Sounding Out Words Project, a number of tutors and facilitators asked for ideas about ordering their phonics work. What is a good place to start? How can the difficulty of the work be increased incrementally?

These are questions that are difficult to answer in general terms. If, as this book advocates, you are focussing on the student, instead of on Language, you will be creating rhyming word families from the written language that the student is reading and creating, you will be choosing key words based on the student's interests and goals, and you will be choosing contrastive pairs based on the particular difficulties which the student is encountering. The set of words that you have to work on will not have been chosen for the sole purpose of illustrating phonics guidelines in a logical sequence, but because these words are important to the student.

But, given this set of important words, there are still choices to be made. Which of these important words will you work with first? When you are working with these words, which letter-sound relationships will you work with first?

What follow is a list of factors which can make some phonics guidelines easier to work with than others. Let me stress the word "can". Whether a factor *will* make things easier for a particular student with a particular learning style at a particular time in her learning will have to be ascertained by you and the student. No matter how knowledgeable we become about the mechanics of English, the spelling system, and human learning and perception, we will never be able to substitute knowledge for creativity in responding to individual learners.

1. **Consistency.** Short vowel sounds and consonant sounds are spelled more consistently than long vowel sounds, so it is easier to learn phonics guidelines for these sounds.

2. **Consonant-Vowel Sequences.** Consonant-Vowel sequences are easier to hear, pronounce, and learn how to spell than sequences that include groups of consonants, like STR.

3. **Frequency.** Letter sequences that occur frequently as rhymes in one-syllable words and a pronounceable chunks in larger words are encountered more often, so they are easier to learn. This is particularly the case if the letter sequence occurs as a freestanding word. Here is a list of such sequences.

Letter sequences that occur frequently as rhymes in one-syllable words and as pronounceable chunks in larger words. (Letter sequences that also occur as words are in bold print.)

AB	cab, grab ...	absent, fabulous ...
AD	sad, glad ...	advocate, Trinidad ...
AN	ca , plan ...	ant, annual ...
AP	tap, flap ...	application, rapid ...
AT	hat, flat ...	atlas, Saturday ...
END	bend, spend ...	defend, extend ...
ENT	cent, spent ...	government, extent ...
IN	pin, sin ...	income, opinion

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4. **Detachability at the Beginning of a Word.** As I mentioned in Chapter 3, vowel sounds are relatively difficult to hear in the flow of speech. The initial consonant sounds in rhyming word families can be easier to hear. But there is much variability in how easily initial consonant sounds can be detached from their following vowels. Four main factors come into play:

   a. **Can the consonant sound be prolonged?** That is, can you prolong the consonant sound, as with "s"? Or do you have to either pronounce the sound quickly, as with "y", or add a dummy vowel with it, as with "b"? It is usually easier for a student to perceive a consonant sound that can be prolonged.

   b. **Is the consonant sound released by moving the lips apart?** This is something that a student can see. Watching someone release a "m" with their lips while moving on to a following vowel will often help a student to recognize the "m" as a detachable sound in the flow of speech.

   c. **Can you hear the consonant sound being released?** It is easier to hear the release of consonant sounds that are pronounced without vibrating the vocal chords, the "voiceless" consonants. Three voiceless consonants, "p", "t", and "k", even produce small puffs of air when they are released.

d. Is the consonant sound loud in itself? Some consonant sounds are relatively loud and easy to hear at the beginnings of words.

Of course, these factors can co-occur in consonant sounds. The consonant sounds that have more than one of these factors are particularly detachable. For example, "m" can be prolonged, it is released by moving the lips apart, and it is loud. It is no accident that two of the case studies in Chapter 3 use key words that begin with "m".

Following, there is a chart which shows which consonant sounds have which factors. By counting the number of factors that each consonant sound has, we can score the consonant sounds for detachability.

In general, we can say that the consonant sounds with the highest scores are the easiest to detach from the flow of speech, and so the easiest consonant sounds to use for phonics work. But, of course, different factors will be more or less useful to different students. A student who is good at using sound information may find it easier to hear consonants being released. Another student may learn best from prolong consonant sounds themselves, hissing "s", humming "m", growling "r", etc. If you are working with a group that includes learners with different learning styles, the scores can help you focus on sounds that are detachable in several different ways, and so more likely to be of use to any one particular learner. But if you are working with a single student whose strengths and weaknesses you know well, you may want to ignore the scores, and start with the kind of detachability which that student can work with most readily.

Factors Affecting the Detachability of a Consonant at the Beginning of a Word

Sound	Prolonged?	See Release?	Hear Release?	Loud?	Score
m	✓	✓		✓	3
f	✓	✓	✓		3
s (c in cell)	✓		✓	✓	3
sh	✓		✓	✓	3
n	✓			✓	2
v	✓	✓			2
th (thistle)	✓		✓		2
ch (church)			✓	✓	2
p			✓	✓	2
r	✓	✓			2
th (this)	✓				1
z	✓				1
b		✓			1
t			✓		1
k (c in cat)			✓		1
w		✓			1
l	✓				1
h					0
j (g in gist)					0
d					0
g (get)					0
y					0

= t in some dialects

= d in some dialects