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Syllable Types

A Strategy for Reading Multisyllabic Words

Mary Knight-McKenna

with multisyllabic words. Lacking strategies for decoding longer words, these students stop reading and seek help from an adult or a more accomplished peer rather than tackle the mysterious words themselves. Confounded by lack of knowledge and confidence in their ability, struggling readers typically do not make attempts to break longer words apart to determine whether there are portions they could read by themselves. As a result, they freeze at the point of encounter with the multisyllabic word rather than moving forward in the text. Each multisyllabic word becomes a confirmation that reading is too hard for them, too complex a puzzle to solve. Word recognition, fluency, and comprehension evade these students, leaving them with a negative view of reading and themselves as readers.

Explicit Strategy Instruction

Explicit strategy instruction is often recommended for students who have difficulty learning to read (National Reading Panel, 2000; Taylor, 2007). Torgesen (2004) describes explicit instruction as teaching “that does not leave anything to chance and does not make assumptions about skills and knowledge that children will acquire on their own” (p. 5).

Multisyllabic words can stymie struggling readers. Students rely on others for help or feel defeated before even trying to decode a long word. Giving students a strategy for figuring out multisyllabic words promotes fluency and independent reading. By “chunking” words according to six syllable types, students learn clues to determine whether the vowel is long or short. When students master quick and accurate recognition of the syllable types, they can decode long words in a systematic manner. By using context in conjunction with this decoding strategy, students are supported in achieving full comprehension. Adding this technique to a comprehensive literacy program benefits students who lack independence for reading multisyllabic words.

Carolyn Borrows, an elementary school special educator, sighed when Jeremy looked to her for help during a reading assignment. She had worked with Jeremy since he was in first grade. Now in fourth grade, he could read and understand simple text, but automatically turned to her for help with lengthy words. Carolyn told a colleague she considered this attitude learned helplessness.

“Ms. Borrows, what’s that word?” asked Jeremy, pointing to a three-syllable word in the text. Carolyn said the word for him, and he returned to the reading assignment. She was discouraged that his reliance on her made him stop reading as soon as he saw a long word.

Apprehension is the immediate reaction of students like Jeremy when faced

What the Research Says

- Syllable types help struggling readers to decode long words (Bhattacharya, 2006; Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004; Moats, 2004; Shefelbine, 1990).
- Syllable types belong in a comprehensive literacy program for English Language Learners who are at risk for reading problems (Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, & Francis, 2005).
- Knowledge of syllable types is included in the expertise needed to effectively teach reading (Moats & Foorman, 2003; Spear Swerling & Brucker, 2003, 2004; Spear-Swerling, Brucker, & Alfano 2005).

With explicit strategy instruction, teachers guide students to gradually master a means for independently decoding long words. Several strategies are useful for this purpose, including chunking word parts by looking for affixes (prefixes and suffixes; Archer, Gleason, & Vachon, 2003) and phonograms (word families; Johnston, 1999). Although these techniques are beneficial, another strategy is powerful for teaching students to tackle long words on their own. Syllable types instruction teaches students to attend to patterns in the English language and, when mastered, enables them to decode lengthy words unaided. This research-based strategy is part of an effective curriculum for teaching reading (see box “What the Research Says”).

Syllable types, also called syllable patterns, are common configurations of letter sound correspondences (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2000). In this method, the teacher identifies and describes six syllable type for students. Each syllable type gives a clue about vowel sounds, thereby aiding more accurate, independent decoding. Accurate and fluent decoding supports comprehension (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Thus, mastery of syllable types has the potential to improve reading skills on several levels.

Description of Syllable Types

Mastering the six types of syllables is the goal for students with syllable type instruction:

1. Closed
2. Open
3. Vowel-consonant-silent e
4. Vowel teams (also called vowel pairs)
5. R-controlled
6. Final stable

See Table 1 for definitions and examples of the syllable types.

Closed syllables have a single vowel followed by one or more consonants. The vowel is closed in by the consonant and is generally short. Most three-letter words (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC words) are closed syllables (for example, “cat”), but there can be more than one consonant following the vowel (“best”) and there need not be an initial consonant (“up”). Many long words are made up of two or three closed syllables (pic/nic, pup/pet, wit/ness, fan/tas/tic). Students with reading difficulties will be excited about decoding long words after learning only one syllable type.

Confounded by lack of knowledge and confidence in their ability, struggling readers typically do not make attempts to break longer words apart to determine whether there are portions they could read by themselves.

Open syllables end with a single vowel that is usually long. The vowel is not closed in by a consonant; it is left open. Several common single syllable words are open syllables (so, my, be, no). Unfortunately, exceptions to this pattern include common words. The words *do* and *to* do not have long vowel sounds and must be learned as sight words. There are not many two- and three-syllable words with only open syllables (ba/by, Ju/ly, po/ta/to); however, students can learn to read two-syllable

words with both closed and open syllables (fro/zen, ro/bot, pre/tend, ba/con, fan/cy).

Vowel-consonant-silent e syllables are familiar to many students. Students have experience with this pattern for single-syllable words (mine, bike, late, pole), but need instruction to recognize this pattern in two- and three-syllable words (com/pose, rep/tile, con/fuse, ro/tate, tex/tile, val/en/tine, com/pen/sate, mi/cro/wave). Students can mark this syllable type by crossing out the silent *e* and drawing an arrow from the silent *e* to the vowel to demonstrate that the vowel becomes long. Once students learn that the silent *e* triggers the long vowel sound, they have a means of decoding words with this type of syllable.

Vowel team syllables have two adjacent vowels. This syllable type has two major categories. This first has two vowels representing the long vowel sound of the first vowel. The saying, “When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking” is used to teach this category of vowel teams (rain, say, boat, meat, slow, rail/road). The second category of vowel teams is when two vowels represent a variant sound, or in “student friendly terms,” a “whiny” sound (oil, law, now, few, moon). Students learn that the consonants *w* and *y* also function as vowels.

R-controlled syllables have vowel sounds that are neither long nor short; the letter *r* changes the vowel sound. This syllable type is sometimes called “bossy *r*.” Students need to search for the pattern of a vowel preceding the letter *r* and recognize how this letter influences the vowel. When the vowels *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* are followed by *r*, they can all represent the /er/ sound (dollar, her, first, word, turn). The *ar* and *or* letter combinations also represent other *r*-controlled sounds (car, mar/ket, tar/get; for, hor/net, pop/corn, in/form).

Final stable syllable types are found in multisyllabic words and have several different configurations. One set includes syllables that end with consonant -le (ta/ble, daz/zle, pur/ple); consonant -al (glo/bal, re/gal, den/tal); and consonant -el (duf/fel, ker/nel, man/tel). These final stable syllables

Table 1. Syllable Types

Name of Syllable Type	Characteristics of Syllable Type	Examples of Syllable Type
Closed	A syllable with a single vowel followed by one or more consonants. (The vowel is <i>closed</i> in by the consonant.) The vowel sound is generally short.	cab dog in dish <u>letter</u> <u>begin</u> exceptions: find, cold
Open	A syllable that ends with a single vowel. (The vowel is not closed in by a consonant; it is left <i>open</i> .) The vowel is usually long. (Note: The letter <i>y</i> acts as a vowel.)	hi me go sky open <u>begin</u> exceptions: to, do
Vowel-Consonant-Silent <i>e</i>	A syllable with a single vowel followed by a consonant then the vowel <i>e</i> . The first vowel is usually long and the final <i>e</i> in the syllable is silent.	bike skate note close <u>behave</u> <u>compete</u> exceptions: love, give, explosive
Vowel Teams	A syllable that has two consecutive vowels. Vowel teams can be divided into two types: (1) Long Vowel Teams: two vowels that make a long vowel sound, and (2) Variant Vowel Teams: two vowels that make neither a long nor a short vowel sound, but rather a variant or “whiny” vowel sound. (Note: The letters <i>w</i> and <i>y</i> act as vowels.)	(1) Long Vowel Teams meat road mail say <u>contain</u> <u>window</u> (2) Variant Vowel Teams stew paw book <u>amount</u> <u>turmoil</u> exception: bread (short vowel sound)
<i>r</i> -controlled	A syllable with one or two vowels followed by the letter <i>r</i> . The vowel is neither long nor short. The <i>r</i> influences or <i>controls</i> the vowel sound.	car her fir for fur dollar <u>effort</u> <u>turmoil</u> exceptions: fire, <u>admire</u>
Consonant <i>le</i> (-al, -el) Also called final stable	A syllable that has a consonant followed by the letters <i>le</i> , <i>al</i> , or <i>el</i> . Often this syllable is the final one of the word. This is the only syllable type without a vowel sound.	<u>table</u> <u>bridle</u> <u>uncle</u> <u>local</u> <u>medal</u> <u>chapel</u> <u>rebel</u>
Other final stable syllables	A syllable that is usually at the end of words and can be taught as a recognizable unit such as <i>sion</i> , <i>tion</i> , <i>ture</i> , <i>sure</i> , <i>age</i> , <i>cious</i> , <i>tious</i>	<u>tension</u> <u>nation</u> <u>culture</u> <u>composure</u> <u>rampage</u> <u>gracious</u> <u>infectious</u>

end with a blend sound rather than a vowel sound. Another set of final stable syllables includes syllables that can be taught as recognizable units such as *-sion* (ex/plo/sion, con/clu/sion, il/lu/sion); *-tion* (na/tion, va/ca/tion, con/fed/er/a/tion); *-ture* (ad/ven/ture, cul/ture/ rup/ture); *-sure* (in/sure, com/po/sure, pres/sure); *-age* (band/age, ad/vant/age—another pronunciation is gar/age, mir/age); *-cious* (gra/cious, pre/co/cious, un/con/cious); and *-tious* (ram/bunc/tious, in/fec/tious, con/ten/tious).

Exposure to and experience with the various syllable types allow students to become more familiar with them and more adept at recognizing them in multisyllabic words. Quick, accurate recognition of all six syllable types aids decoding of longer words.

Teaching Syllable Types

Although some students learn to recognize syllable types with wide reading experience, others need to have syllable types explicitly taught to them. Rather than teaching syllable types all at once, each type should be introduced, explained, practiced, and mastered before moving on to the next. Blevins (2001) suggests the following instructional sequence: closed, open, vowel-consonant-silent *e*, vowel team, *r*-controlled, and final stable syllables.

Following are steps for explicitly teaching syllable types.

Step 1: Recognize the Characteristics of the Syllable Type

When introducing the characteristics of each syllable type, use manipulatives, such as letter chips. Manipulatives “provide support as learners begin to apply and internalize reading skills and strategies” (Coyne, Zipoli, & Ruby, 2006, p. 164). For example, to teach open syllable types contrast them with closed syllables by taking away a letter chip. The vowel changes from short to long (hit -> hi; bed-> be; met-> me; got-> go). The characteristic of closing in or opening up the vowel becomes associated with short and long vowel sounds. Encourage students to learn this principle rather than specific words. Put charts

up in the classroom outlining the characteristics of each syllable type as you introduce them. Students need to be familiar with the characteristics of each type in order to identify them quickly.

Step 2: Read Numerous Single-Syllable Words With the Syllable Type

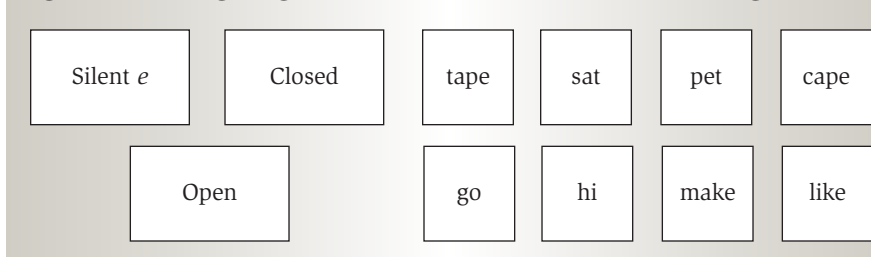
Students need to demonstrate mastery at the single syllable level before moving onto multisyllabic words. By practicing with single syllable words, students gain confidence in applying the principles for decoding words exemplifying the syllable type. This practice need not be boring. An enjoyable way to practice is to have students sort single syllable words by types. Word sorts help students to improve both their spelling and reading skills (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008; Joseph & Orlins, 2005). Once students have learned closed, open, and vowel-consonant-silent *e* syllable types, have them sort single syllable words into the three categories. Materials for this activity are shown in Figure 1.

An enjoyable way to practice is to have students sort single syllable words by types.

After students sort, have them point out that the silent *e* words all have the vowel-consonant-silent *e* pattern, and they all have a long vowel sound. Students need to note that open syllables have a long vowel sound and closed syllables have a short vowel sound. Instruction should include opportunities for students to demonstrate this knowledge in writing as well.

Have students work at their desks or tables with letter chips or cards to spell and read words of the syllable type they

Figure 1. Sorting Single Syllable Words Into the Three Categories



are learning. Again, they can contrast syllable types after they have learned two or more. For example, students can use letter chips to show how the closed syllable word *cap* becomes the vowel-consonant-silent *e* syllable word *cape* by adding an *e* to the word. A list of words that can be changed from closed syllables to vowel-consonant-silent *e* syllables is listed in Figure 2.

Have students review which syllable type has a short vowel sound and which has a long vowel sound. Learning patterns rather than individual words is central to mastering the syllable type strategy.

Step 3: Read Two-, Then Three-Syllable Words of the Syllable Type in Lists and Then in Connected Text

Having students read two-, then three-syllable words made up of a familiar syllable type allows them to gain mastery for decoding longer words. After learning to decode closed syllables in single syllable words, for example, older struggling readers should read words that are two or three syllables in length containing closed syllables (ab/sent, ran/som, sat/in, mag/net, bas/ket/ball, es/tab/lish, pun/ish/ment). Learning to decode words of this length in connected text is a critical step because students need to focus on the construction of meaning while decoding fluently.

Step 4: Read Two, Then Three, Syllable Words of Mixed Syllable Types in Lists and Then in Connected Text

After each syllable type is mastered, students should read multisyllabic words that combine the syllable types they know. For example, after students have learned closed, open, and vowel-consonant-silent *e* syllable types, they can read words such as: frozen (fro/zen: open/closed), secret (se/cret: open/closed), complete (com/plete: open/silent *e*), confuse (con/fuse: close/silent *e*), and humane (hu/mane: open/silent *e*). This has enormous appeal for struggling readers who fear reading longer words. Knowing syllable types gives them a strategy for chunking parts of words and determining the vowel sound for each syllable. They are then able to blend the syllables in a word and decide if it is a meaningful word. When reading connected text, they can use context to help them determine the actual word.

Varying Practice of Syllable Types

Students enjoy playing games involving syllable types, but it is important not to limit instruction to the word level. As students learn to recognize more patterns and read more multisyllabic words, they should read stories, newspapers, magazines, and textbooks. In this way, students learn not only to decode words, but to construct meaning as they read. If they have age-appropriate vocabulary skills, the syllable type technique will help them to decode many words they know and contribute to their fluency and comprehension. Students who have low-level vocabularies need to learn word meanings as they decode longer words. It is best to have them learn to decode words they will see in connected text during the lesson. In this way, decoding, vocabulary, flu-

Figure 2. Changing Closed Syllables to Vowel-Consonant-Silent *e* Syllables

can, cane	tap, tape	bit, bite	hat, hate	pin, pine	mad, made
rip, ripe	kit, kite	hid, hide	dim, dime	cub, cube	tub, tube
mop, mope	hop, hope	pan, pane	not, note		

Figure 3. Manipulating Syllables on Individual Cards to Arrange Them Into Words



ency, and comprehension can all be addressed in the lesson.

Blevins (2001) recommends that students practice syllable speed drills. These are timed drills of common syllables in random order. The teacher times the student for 1 minute while he or she reads a set of syllables such as re, der, bout, gle, tion, un, dis, num, ture, age, pro, ment, ex, im, sub, est, ack, ness, lo, sion. Speed drill should only take about 2 to 3 minutes of a lesson. If students respond positively to the drills, it offers them another opportunity to practice syllable types. Should this practice cause a student anxiety, it can be dropped from the lesson plan.

Gillingham and Stillman (1997) propose that students manipulate syllables on individual cards to arrange them into words. Students read the word parts on the cards and move them around until they have a real word (Figure 3)

A variety of kinds of practice will help students to become proficient in recognizing syllable types. Wide reading is the most important kind of practice. The greater ease students gain with word recognition, the better their fluency and the more likely they are to build comprehension (Snow, et al., 1998).

Syllable Division

After students have gained proficiency in recognizing a variety of syllable

types, they need to learn how to put this skill to use when decoding multisyllabic words. When faced with a multisyllabic word, they need to divide it into syllables. There are several syllable division rules, but two are the most productive for students to learn.

1. When two consonants are between two vowels (VCCV), generally the syllables are divided between the consonants (for example, the word “napkin” is divided: nap/kin).
2. When there is only one consonant between vowels (VCV), the consonant generally is part of the syllable to the right (for example, the word “paper” is divided: pa/per). If this does not produce a recognizable word, then the student would try the consonant as part of the syllable on the left (e.g., the word “cabin” is divided: cab/in).

Cheyney and Cohen (1999) recommend a “spot and dot” syllabication strategy. Students look for the vowels in words; that is, they “spot” them, and then put a dot on top of each vowel. The dots are then connected with a line. The dots are then connected with a line. Students are instructed to look below the line to see the number of consonants between the vowels. If there are two consonants, the syllable will likely be divided between them. If there is

only one consonant, the syllable will likely be divided before the consonant. However, if pronouncing the word this way does not result in a real word, the syllable will be divided after the consonant. A chart outlining these steps (Figure 4) will help students to learn the “spot and dot” syllable division strategy.

It is not advisable to spend a significant amount of instructional time on teaching syllable division rules (Venezky, 1999). The goal is to have students quickly and accurately identify syllable patterns so that word recognition becomes more fluent (Carreker, 2005). Instead of repeating rules, spend time having students look for recognizable parts of longer words. Dividing syllables between two consonants (provided the consonants are not a digraph), needs to become a habitual response in students’ word attack repertoire. Speed and accuracy in identifying syllable types should be emphasized.

Instead of repeating rules, spend time having students look for recognizable parts of longer words.

The Schwa Sound

As students begin to read more multisyllabic words, they need to learn about the schwa sound. This is a neutral sound often used to replace a vowel sound in an unaccented syllable of a multisyllabic word. The schwa is similar to the short /u/ sound as heard in the word /pup/. It can replace any of the vowel sounds. For example, in each of the following words the schwa sound replaces a vowel sound:

- the *a* in company
- the *e* in synthesis
- the *i* in politic
- the *o* in eloquent
- the *u* in support
- the *y* in syringe

Sometimes the short *i* sound is used as a way of reducing vowels. This is a variation of the schwa sound (Moats, 2000). Examples of this include:

Figure 4. Spot and Dot Syllable Division

1. Spot and dot the vowels.	trump [•] et [•]	pup [•] il [•]	riv [•] er [•]
2. Connect the dots.	trump ^{—•} et	pup ^{—•} il	riv ^{—•} er
3. Look under the line. How many consonants do you see?	2	1	1
4. If there are two consonants, divide between them.	trum ^{—•} /pet		
5. If there is one consonant, divide before it. If this does not sound right, divide after the consonant.		pu [•] /pil	riv [•] /er

Note. From *Focus on Phonics: Assessment and Instruction* (p. 40), by W. Cheyney and E. J. Cohen, 1999, Bothell, WA: The McGraw-Hill Companies. Copyright 1999 by W. Cheyney and E. J. Cohen. Adapted with permission.

the *a* in human
 the *e* in blanket
 the *o* in apron
 the *u* in voluntary

It is useful to teach the schwa, because it is the most common vowel sound and accounts for 20% of all vowel sounds (Yule, 1996). Have students try the schwa or its variant when short and long vowel sounds do not produce a recognizable word. This gives students greater flexibility when decod-

ing longer words. If their pronunciation is close to the actual word, and they learn to use context to help them decode, they can determine the correct word. (See Figure 5 discussing Jeremy's use of syllable types and context to decode a word.)

Conclusion

Syllable types is one technique, among several, that has the potential to help struggling readers become more fluent

and more independent in their reading. Rather than facing multisyllabic words with apprehension and inadequacy, students who learn this strategy have a means for breaking apart the word, identifying the parts, blending them, and reading the word. As students read longer words with greater ease, they grow in confidence and, hopefully, improve fluency and comprehension.

This strategy can supplement a well-designed comprehensive reading program that includes vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, and the practice of wide reading. Students who learn to quickly and accurately recognize syllable types can break the habit of turning to an adult to decode a longer word for them. If they recognize known syllable patterns within a word and make use of context, it is likely that effective independent reading and the enjoyment of reading are considerably improved.

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Figure 5. Jeremy's Use of Syllable Types and Context to Decode a Word

A few weeks ago, Jeremy would have looked up as soon as he came across a long word he did not recognize and immediately ask for help. As Jeremy learned about syllable types, he began making attempts to decode longer words himself.

For example, while reading a short novel, Jeremy came across the word “expensive.” He used the “spot and dot” strategy for syllable division (see Figure 4) to determine that the first syllable was /ex/—a closed syllable with a short vowel sound. He quickly figured out that the next syllable was /pen/. He found this closed syllable easy to decode. Jeremy had some difficulty with the final syllable /sive/. Even though he had been taught that consonant *-ive* is an exception to the silent *e* syllable type; he did not recall this information. Jeremy read the last syllable with a long /i/ vowel sound.

Jeremy blended the syllables and said the word “expensive” with a long *i* sound, which he realized was not a real word. He thought the word sounded like “expensive.” Looking back at the sentence in the novel, he read, “Jen could not afford the expensive ring.” Jeremy was able to use the context to confirm that the word was “expensive.”

Jeremy's special education teacher, Carolyn Borrows, watched and listened to him throughout the process of decoding the word using syllable types. She made a note to have Jeremy review the *-ove* and *-ive* exceptions to the silent *e* syllable type the next day during word study time. She also congratulated Jeremy on successfully reading a word he would have asked for help decoding only a few weeks ago.

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