chapter 5

UNIT: First Words

Decoding

TAYLOR CAME INTO OUR READING CLINIC AS AN EAGER FIRST grader. She could proudly name any letter–sound we gave her in seconds. But sitting at the table trying to decode the word *cat* went something like this:

Text:	*This*	*is*	*my*	*cat.*
Taylor:	This	is	my	/c/ /aaaa/ /t/,
				/c/ /aaaa/ /t/,
				/c/ /aaaa/ /t/,
				/c/ /aaaa/ /t/.
Tutor:	Okay, now say it faster, Taylor. Put them together. Bulldoze them.			
Taylor:		/c/ /aaaa/ /t/,		
		/c/ /aaaa/ /t/.		
Tutor:	What does it say?			
Taylor	*Take?*			

Perhaps you have seen a student like Taylor grasp onto the ending sound in a word and take a stab? The situation can be maddening, but as with all instruction, the problem is in the instruction, not the student. Taylor didn't have the necessary knowledge to fully blend a word like *cat* together, so that interaction gave us the information we needed to provide some targeted explicit instruction.

We started with showing her how to take a simple two-phoneme word like *at* and put the sounds together (/a/ /t/, *at*). This was easier because the word started with an open mouth (as all vowels do) and there were only two sounds to put together. She could "bite down" on that word as she opened her mouth to say the vowel and then close down on the consonant. After she got the *at* word chunk, we started having her add initial consonants to it to build words like *cat, bat, hat,* and *fat,* a research-supported approach to reading first words (Treiman and Kessler 2005; Ziegler and Goswami 2005).

Four weeks later, Taylor was reading a book and this is what happened:

Text:	*The*	*cat*	*ran*	*away.*
Taylor:	The	c|c-at|cat	run	away.
Tutor:	Almost. Something tricked you [points to *run*].			
Taylor:	The	cat	/r/ /u/ /a/, /r/ /a/ /n/ ran	away.

"I got it!" Taylor beamed. This was it! The oh-so-cool-to-be-a-teacher moment when the lightbulb goes on and you know that if you had not been there it would not have happened. This moment had cost four weeks of focused, purposeful instruction and support, but it was well worth it. Taylor now really understood something new, something that would take her to the next level.

Learning to fully decode words is a game changer. When students can do it, they can reliably read words without a sentence context or teacher telling them the word. They can attack a word with no prior exposure. Seemingly overnight they can unlock literally hundreds of new words (e.g., *got, hot, rot, in, pin, fin, tin, win*) because they possess a reliable new strategy that differentiates them from readers guessing at words, memorizing idiosyncratic word features, or using only the beginning sounds. For the child, decoding is liberating but it doesn't happen by just telling kids to "say it faster" or "sound it out." It doesn't happen with flash cards or worksheets. It doesn't happen by rereading texts over and over. It happens when teachers observe students and then bring them "just right" instruction with plenty of practice. This chapter focuses on how to bring students joyfully to this literacy milestone.

Decoding Cements a Word in Memory

"Words? Reading words?" remarked one kindergarten teacher near the end of the year. "They already know words, a bunch of them. Their names, some high-frequency words, environmental words. They know words." This is true. Children like Taylor, even when they struggle to decode, do learn to recognize words very early, and it is very rare to encounter even the most novice learner who cannot read at least *some* words. However, often children at this stage will have word knowledge that is insecure. One day they know the word; the next day they don't. Sometimes they might know the word in one context (e.g., a big book) but not in another (e.g., a word card). At

times they may seem to know a word but then confuse it with another (e.g., *took/look, it/in/is*). This insecure knowledge is due to the way that the early learner is storing and retrieving information. Remember when I talked in the Introduction about phonics instruction being about setting up a file system? When learners have insecure word knowledge, their file system is unsophisticated and imprecise, so they are not storing information as well as they could be. Since there are actually several ways to recognize words, readers might be able to pronounce them but might not retain critical details. In order to properly store, retrieve, and eventually automatize words, readers need to be able to decode.

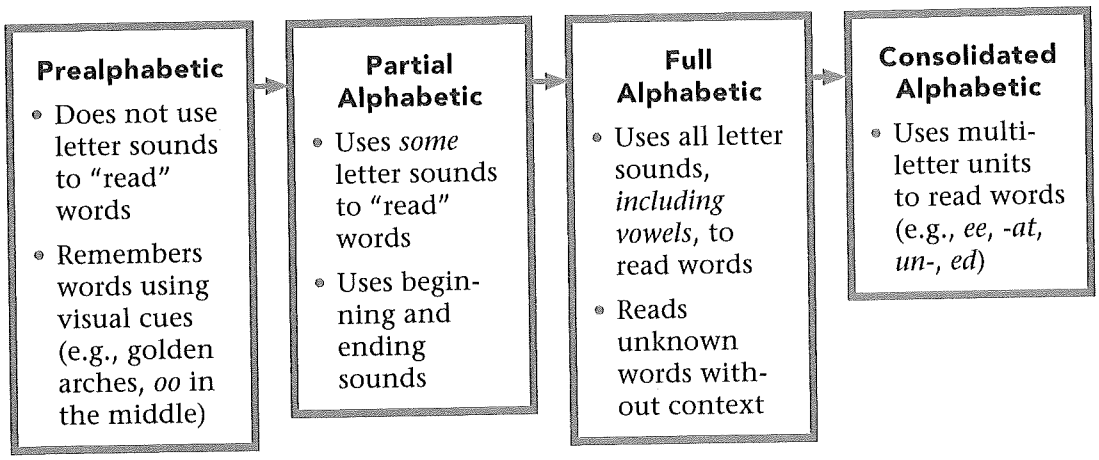
In the very early stages, children recognize words holistically, using idiosyncratic features and prediction. When they know some consonant sounds, they will also use that knowledge. How does the transition from memorizing whole words to decoding happen? To the unobservant (or the observer of a child to whom this comes unusually easily), it seems like one day a child is learning letter–sounds and the next the child is reading words in what appears to be a natural progression. Oh, that this were true!

For most readers, there is a developmental progression that occurs depending on a child's knowledge and application of alphabetic knowledge.

- In the **pre-alphabetic phase**, children do not use letter–sound information to recognize words. These students are learners who need Letter Lessons.
- In the **partial alphabetic phase**, during the Letter Lessons units, children use beginning sounds, often in combination with pictures, to recognize words.
- Once children learn vowels, they can fully decode simple words with the consonant-vowel-consonant (c-v-c) pattern in the **full alphabetic phase** (Ehri 2005). The First Words unit is focused on this essential phase.
- After mastering mostly one-to-one correspondences, children consolidate multi-letter units in the **consolidated alphabetic phase**. They learn relationships with two-to-one patterns (e.g., *sh, str, ea*). Students learn these in the Beyond First Words unit.

Eventually words become cemented into memory once student have decoded them repeatedly. Then the words are accessed via automatic recognition without conscious attention. Think about it: As a skilled reader, how many words do you stop and decode? Automatization of word recognition is essential so that the reader can devote the lion's share of attention to the meaning of a text as passage lengths increase and ideas and stories become more complex.

Phases of Alphabetic Knowledge



Research tells us that when learners *decode*, they store and retrieve words more easily (Share 1995). This is because the learner has used a very precise, letter-by-letter "filing" system. Words like *look*, *took*, *book*, and *hook* will not be confused when stored letter-by-letter nor will a reader require a picture to "read" a word. In fact, decoding activates a "self-teaching" mechanism that supports students in more quickly acquiring new words during text reading, even when a teacher is not present (Share 1995).

How Should I Teach High-Frequency Words?

"But what about sight words?" Elva, an experienced teacher at a workshop asked me. "You've got to teach those Dolch words and those are not easy to sound out. You've just got to memorize them." Elva was partially right. Children do need to learn the very common, frequently occurring words that may have complex patterns (e.g., *the, go, to, for*). However, memorizing them using visual memory and rote approaches is not recommended.

High-frequency words are those that occur a great deal across all texts, no matter what grade level or content (Dolch 1936; Fry 2004). They are the most frequently occurring words in the English language, and scientists have determined this by sampling words in books and putting them in order from those that occur the most (e.g., *the, of, and, to, in, is*) to those that occur the least (e.g., *evaporation, mammal*). High-frequency words kick-start book reading. In order for beginners to read books of any sort, they need to learn a handful of words like *the, of, and, to, in, is, you, that, it, he, was, for, on, are,* and *with.*

In many classrooms, people call these high-frequency words "sight words" and teach them differently than other words. Reasoning that these words must be learned "visually" and "by sight" due to their irregularities, teachers encourage rote memorization or visual learning without attention to letter–sounds. Sometimes these words are taught in prekindergarten or kindergarten before children have solid letter–sound knowledge or understanding of the alphabetic principle. However, this is not effective. Using the term "sight word" for high-frequency words is not accurate. Technically, "sight words" are any words that a reader can read automatically, not

just high-frequency words (Ehri 2005; LaBerge and Samuels 1974). Once a reader has decoded a word multiple times and properly stored it, the reader will access that word by *sight* without conscious attention.

In this book, high-frequency words are not introduced in a systematic way until readers know about 21/26 letter–sounds, because without letter–sound knowledge, storing words is difficult. The final unit in Letter Lessons, Word Building, introduces these words.

Essential Principles for Teaching High-Frequency Words

- **Teach high-frequency words along with phonemic awareness, individual letter–sound relationships, and concept of word.** High-frequency word instruction should not be given a great deal of attention until the child has a concept of word, some phonemic awareness at the beginning sound level, and knows *most* letter–sounds. Without these basics, storage and retrieval of words will be unsystematic and inefficient.
- **Ask students to use letter–sound knowledge to read high-frequency words** (Ehri 2005). At every possible turn, ask children to apply all their letter–sound knowledge when reading these words. For example, a child who is solidifying consonant sounds can at least use the initial sounds, using the /g/ in *go*. Many high-frequency words are very easy to sound out (e.g., *at, in, can*). Even for words that are not spelled using common letter–sound correspondences, teachers should still tell children the letter–sounds. For example, for the word *was*, teach that *w* says /w/, say *a* say /ă/.
- **Teach high-frequency words in groups that have similar patterns.** Try to group words with similar patterns together. In Word Building in Chapter 4, for example, the words *go, so,* and *no* are taught together. Even words that are thought of as "rule breakers" can be taught together (e.g., *some, come, above, love*).
- **Use high-frequency words to help children learn to decode new words.** A child who has learned *at*, for example, can use the part to build other words. In one study, children were taught high-frequency words with little attention to the letter–sounds or with extensive attention to letter–sounds (Ehri, Satlow, and Gaskins 2009). Children taught the words with letter–sound analysis could more easily apply their knowledge of word parts to new words (e.g., *strong, long*).
- **Practice reading high-frequency words in sentences and books.** High-frequency words are most applicable in book

reading. Children should analyze these words individually, but they must also practice them in sentences and books.

Organize Instruction Around Patterns in Words

When teaching high-frequency words or even when teaching letter–sounds, there is a tendency for teachers to use random, unrelated words. Instead, let a clear developmental scope and sequence be the *driver* of phonics content, rather than using a serendipitous approach. Use teachable moments for emphasizing *learned* patterns found in books, poems, stories, and charts, not as a way to introduce new patterns. In some schools it can feel a little taboo to teach phonics with words explicitly and individually. However, analyzing isolated words is important. Do not excerpt random words in a random order from books as a way to teach phonics. For example, do not pull the word *cat* from a book on Tuesday and then pull *it* from a book on Wednesday and then *pen* on Thursday. This will not lead to learning, because information will be disjointed, unpracticed, and disorganized to the child. Children need time over many days to practice sounding out words. Below are some "dos."

- Use teachable moments to call attention to known patterns as you are reading: "Wow, look, I see an *-at* word right on this page. Can you see it?"
- List words in groups on charts (e.g., "*-an* Words We Found While Reading").
- Use a whole-part-whole approach. Using a scope and sequence, find books with target patterns. Introduce the target pattern (e.g., *-at*) in a text and then teach the pattern in isolation, returning to the book to read and apply.
- Use decodable texts or phonics readers.

First Words Unit: Scope and Sequence

The First Words unit is about the pivotal transition from partial alphabetic word reading to really sounding out words in the full alphabetic stage. How does a teacher know when readers are ready to "sound out" words by themselves? Children who are ready for the First Words unit can easily name 21/26 letter–sounds within five seconds.

The scope of First Words is short vowel sounds in single-syllable words as well as consonant blends and digraphs. See Figure 5.1. In addition, the unit embeds 50 high-frequency words from the pre-primer and primer levels of the Dolch list. The base of the unit is learning how to read a word with a short vowel sound, and then consonant blends and digraphs are added.

Subunit 1: Letter–Sound Review

The First Words unit takes twenty-four to twenty-six weeks depending on whether or not you do the Letter–Sound Review. It is usually a good fit for children in mid to late kindergarten or the beginning of first grade, but this will depend on how you differentiate. If the unit starts at the beginning of the year, the first subunit, Letter-Sound Review, targets specific letter–sounds that children need to solidify after a long break from school. The content is based on the specific letter–sounds that are unknown, as assessed on the Placement Test. This unit is entirely optional based on the students. If after two weeks, a student is not automatic with nearly all the letter–sounds, it may be necessary to go back to the Letter Lessons: Letter Cycle 3 subunit.

Subunit 2: We Are Family (Short Vowel Word Families)

The next subunit, We Are Family, presents first words using short vowel c-v-c word families or rimes in a ten-week unit. Children learn how to blend the two-sound word family (e.g., *-at, -ig*) and then add initial consonants to the word family (e.g., *cat, bat, rat*). This word family approach is especially useful at the beginning of sounding out words because children have to retain only two sound units. In Weeks 8 and 11, short *e* and short *i* words that have the double *ll* at the end are added.

For different groups of students, the We Are Family ten-week subunit might require extension or compression. Some children catch on to short vowel sounds very quickly. If that happens, you can shorten the two weeks allocated for each short vowel sound to one, but *make sure to teach the common rimes* marked with an asterisk in Figure 5.1. For some groups, the unit might need to take twelve weeks, with tougher patterns reviewed. If a long holiday break comes in the middle of this unit, add a week or two. Always let the responses of the students and your professional judgment be the driver. Use the *sequence*, but speed up or slow down as necessary.

The order of the sounds (i.e., *a, i, o, u, e*) separates those that are really similar so they are not taught adjacently (e.g., /e/ vs. /i/). As defined in Chapter 1, a word family or rime is the vowel in a word and all that comes after it (*-at, -og, -ick*). Instead of asking a child to sound out a word sound-by-sound (e.g., *g-o-t*), we introduce decoding by showing students how to blend the two sounds in the word family (e.g., *-ot*) and then add a consonant to that unit (e.g., *g-ot*). However, after that first step, students will also practice sound-by-sound decoding; fully segmenting and blending short vowel words letter-by-letter requires full analysis, and this firmly impresses each letter of the pattern into memory (Ehri 2005; Hulme et al. 2002; Muter et al. 1998).

The word family starts things off for three reasons:

1. *It's easier at first.* The easiest way to decode first words is to have children retain the word family "chunk" (e.g., *-og*) and then change the initial consonant (i.e., *hog, dog, fog*). Changing the beginning sound in a word family (e.g., *f-an, t-an, r-an*) is easier than blending three sounds together (e.g., *f-a-n*).

2. *It matches how children develop awareness of sounds (phonology).* Children can hear the word family unit more easily than they can hear individual sounds. The ability to hear larger units (e.g., words, syllables, rimes / word families) develops before the ability to hear smaller ones (e.g., individual sounds) (Lonigan and Shanahan 2009).

3. *It is more natural.* When it comes to the parts of words, children can more naturally *break down* the parts of a rime / word family (*b-et*) but must receive more instruction to break down the separate sounds (e.g., *b-e-t*) (Carroll et al. 2003). When decoding instruction builds on rimes, it is more successful initially (Treiman and Kessler 2005; Ziegler and Goswami 2005).

In each week, the first activity is to blend the sounds in a word family and add a consonant (e.g., *b-at, c-at, f-at, h-at*). Word wheels or flip books (see Figure 5.7) are good strategies for this stage. For word families with an asterisk (see Figure 5.1), using word wheels is a good idea because you know that there will be a lot of words to make with a wheel.

A great activity to do at this stage is Word Building, where you start with a word family and then go up the ladder changing sounds (McCandliss et al. 2003).

In the second week, additional word families are added (*-ap, -ad, -am,*) and the instruction should move to letter-by-letter decoding. Word families are a great first step, but they are not enough. Children must move on to fully segmenting and blending all letter–sounds in words, not just a beginning sound and a rime. They must understand that *hog* has three units represented by three sounds—/h/ /o/ /g/—and not two units (e.g., *h-og*). If decoding and spelling instruction does not go beyond word families, children will confuse units that end with the same letters, like *-ag* and *-og*. In fact, if children learn the first 3,000 words in their reading books using *only* word families, they will actually have to learn *more* information, not less. There are 400 different word families / rimes in those first 3,000 words rather than 44–45 sounds (Ziegler and Goswami 2005). So breaking words down by individual *sound* and corresponding *grapheme* is essential.

Starting in Lesson 6, the second week of a word family introduces a contrast where words all have the same last letter but different middle vowels (e.g., *-um* vs. *-am*, *-it* vs. *-at*, *-ot* vs. *-it*). After teaching the word families for the week, you should have children read words from previous lessons *along with* a word family of the week. When children practice reading words like *sit, sat, bit,* and *bat,* they must pay attention to the middle sound and fully decode the word. Comparison activities can include sound and letter boxes in which students hear sounds and then spell them in the boxes. Word sorts are also useful. Dictation, Word Building, and Making Words are other activities that help students spell words letter-by-letter. (For descriptions, see the "Activities" section on pages 104–127.) These activities will help children retain information and transfer their knowledge to new word families (Hines et al. 2007).

FIGURE 5.1

Week	Letter–Sound Pattern	Example Words	High-Frequency Words
1. Letter–Sound Review			
1	**Missed letter–sounds**	The content in this section is letter–sounds students did not know. Use assessments to identify letter–sounds for review.	
2	**Missed letter–sounds**		
2. We Are Family (Short Vowel Word Families)			
3	**Short *a* (-at*, -an*)**	Step 1: Blend together /a/ /t/, then add consonants to the *-at* family. **-at*** bat, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat Step 2: Do Step 1 with -the *-an* word family, then compare to *-at* words. **-an*** can, fan, **man**, pan, ran, tan	two
4	**Short *a* (-ap*, -ad, -am)**	**-ap*** cap, lap, map, rap, sap, tap **-ad** bad, dad, **had**, mad, pad, sad **-am** ham, ram, jam	have
5	**Short *i* (-ip*, -in*)**	Step 1: Blend together /i/ /p/, then add consonants to the *-ip* family. **-ip*** hip, lip, rip, sip, tip, dip, nip, zip Step 2: Do Step 1 with *-in* family, then compare to *-ip* words. **-in*** bin, fin, kin, pin, sin, tin, win	into
6	**Short *i* (-it*, -ig, -ill*, id)**	**-it*** bit, fit, hit, kit, lit, pit, sit, wit, zit **-ig big**, dig, fig, gig, pig, rig, wig **-ill*** bill, fill, gill, pill, sill, **will** **-id** bid, did, hid, kid, lid, rid Contrast: *-it* vs. *-at* bat, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat	saw, was

Week	Letter–Sound Pattern	Example Words	High-Frequency Words
7	**Short *o* (-op*, -ot*)**	Step 1: Blend together /o/ /p/, then add consonants to the *-op* family. **-op*** cop, hop, mop, pop, top Step 2: Do Step 1 with *-ot* word family, then compare to *-op* words. **-ot** dot, got, hot, lot, **not**, pot, rot	my
8	**Short *o* (-ob, -og)**	**-ob** cob, job, mob, rob, sob **-og** hog, jog, log, fog, dog Contrast: *-ot* vs. *-it* **-it** bit, fit, hit, kit, lit, pit, sit, wit, zit	on, all
9	**Short *u* (-ug,* -un)**	Step 1: Blend together /u/ /g/, then add consonants to the *-ug* family. **-ug*** bug, hug, jug, mug, pug, rug, tug Step 2: Do Step 1 with *-un* word family, then compare to *-ug* words. **-un run**, fun, sun, bun	are, for
10	**Short *u* (-ub, -ut, -um)**	**-ub** cub, nub, rub, sub, tub **-ut but**, cut, gut, hut, nut **-um** gum, hum, sum Contrast: *-um* vs. *-am* **-am** ham, ram, jam	pretty, what
11	**Short *e* (-et, -eg)**	Step 1: Add a consonant to the *-et* word family. **-et** bet, **get**, **let**, jet, met, net, pet, **set**, wet, vet, yet Step 2: Add a consonant to the *-eg* word family, then compare to *-et*. **-eg** beg, leg, peg	help, yes
12	**Short *e* (-ed, -en, -ell*)**	**-ed** bed, fed, led, **red**, wed **-en** men, hen, den, pen, **when** **-ell*** bell, sell, **well**, **tell**, Nell, fell Contrast: *-eg* vs. *-ig* vs *-og* dig, fig, gig, pig, rig, wig hog, jog, log, fog, dog	out, our

continues

Week	Letter–Sound Pattern	Example Words	High-Frequency Words
3. Two for One (Consonant Digraphs)			
13	**sh- (at the beginning)**	**sh-** shed, ship, shack, shut, shin, shock	she, see
14	**-sh (at the end)**	**-sh**, fish, dish, wish **-ash*** dash, cash, rash, mash, hash, lash	one, come
15	**th-**	**th- that**, **this**, **then**, thin, thick	with, three
16	**ch-**	**ch-** chat, chin, chip, chill, chop, chum	there, where
17	**-ck**	**-ack*** back, jack, pack, rack, sack, tack **-eck** deck, neck, peck **-ick*** kick, lick, pick, sick, tick, wick **-ock*** dock, lock, mock, rock, sock **-uck*** buck, duck, luck, muck, suck, tuck	they, here
4. Beginning Blends (Consonant Blends at the Beginning)			
18	***r*-blends (fr-, br-, cr-, dr-)**	**fr-** frog, fresh, frill, fret **br-** brim, brag **cr-** crab, crash, crop, cross, crib **dr-** drum, drip, drill, drop, dress	brown, down, now
19	***r*-blends (gr-, pr-, tr-)**	**gr-** grab, grip, grass, grill **pr-** prom, prop, press **tr-** trap, track, trick, trim, trash	soon, too
20	***l*-blends (bl-, cl-, fl-, gl-, pl-)**	**bl-** blot, bled, blush, bless, **black** **cl-** clap, clip, club, class, clock, club, clam **fl-** flag, flat, flap, flop, flip, fled, floss, flash, flush **gl-** glad, gloss, glass, glob **pl-** plan, plot, plum, plug, plus	say, play, away
21	***s*-blends (sc-, sk-, sl-, sm-)**	**sc-** scab, scan **sk-** skip, skim, skin, skit, skill **sl-** slam, slap, slip, slim, slop, slip **sm-** smack, small, smell, smash	please, who

Week	Letter–Sound Pattern	Example Words	High-Frequency Words
22	**s-blends (sn-, sp-, st-, sw-)**	**sn-** snap, snob, snug, snack, sniff **sp-** spot, spell, spit, spat, span, sped **st-** stack, stem, step, stop, stuck **sw-** swam, swan, swell, swim, swat	yellow, funny
5. Final Blends and Digraphs (Consonant blends at the End)			
23	**-st**	**-est*** best, rest, test, nest, west, pest, chest, vest **-st** fist, list, mist, mast, fast, cast, last, **just**, **must**, dust, bust, rust, gust, crust, trust, past, blast, mast	new, blue
24	**-ing*** **-ng**	**-ing*** ring, sing, bring, thing, wing, sting, sling, fling, swing, **-ng** rang, rung, hung, bang, sang, slang	good, find
25	**-nk**	**-ank*** bank, tank, Hank, prank, crank, blank **-unk*** bunk, hunk, trunk, spunk, junk, stunk, sunk, plunk **-ink*** think, mink, sink, link, pink, rink, stink, drink, wink, blink	ate, came, make
26	**-nt** **-mp**	**-nt** bent, rent, tent, dent, **went**, hint, mint, lint, hunt, punt, runt, rant, pant, **want**, chant **-mp** stamp, **jump**, camp, ramp, chimp, limp, chomp, stomp **-ump* jump,** bump, lump, mumps, hump, dump, stump, pump, plump, slump	ride, white, like

Notes: Example words have been carefully chosen as optimal "teaching words." They include *only* target letter–sounds or letter–sounds previously taught in this scope and sequence. Use these words in Decode-It and Spell-It lesson sections. The lists are not exhaustive.

High-frequency words are specifically chosen to be taught alongside the subunit. Often (but not always), these match a letter–sound pattern being taught. Sometimes these words are grouped together by pattern (e.g., *ate, came, make* | *ride, white, like*), but sometimes they have been chosen to match previously taught patterns.

Bold words in the "Example Words" section are also high-frequency words.

* Word families marked by the * are in the list "37 Most Common Rimes" by Wylie and Durrell (1970). These will generate many new words and are essential to teach. First Words covers 21 of the 37.

Subunit 3: Two for One (Consonant Digraphs)

The Two for One subunit teaches common consonant digraphs (e.g., *th, sh, ch*), two letter–sounds that represent one sound, in a five-week subunit. In this subunit, these sounds are added to the beginning or ending of words with short vowels. The *sh* sound and *ch* sound can be difficult to distinguish. Say those two sounds and you can hear how close they are. It can be helpful with these two sounds to show the children how the *ch* sound creates a burst of air and the *sh* does not. I like to say that *ch* ch-ch-chugs and the *shhhhhhhh* is quiet. (Note: In the First Words unit, some of the words include double consonants that retain the same sounds [e.g., *-ll, -ss*]. These are not explicitly taught in the book, so you may have to slow down and do a little extra teaching.)

Often this subunit goes very fast because many children already know these digraphs and simply need to add them to word families. Also, these letters become unitized and quickly applied. After teaching traditional consonant digraphs, the subunit presents, in the last lesson, a series of short vowel words with *-ck* at the end. Students usually learn this pattern very quickly. In this collection are 4 of the 37 most common rimes (i.e., *-ack, -ick, -ock, -uck*).

Subunit 4: Beginning Blends (Consonant Blends at the Beginning)

The next subunit, Beginning Blends, provides a six-week focus on consonant blends at the beginning of short vowel words. The *r*-blends (e.g., *fr, tr, br*) and the *s*-blends (e.g., *st, sl, sk*) get the most attention. For many children, especially for blends at the beginning of words, the insight about how these patterns work can come very quickly. Often if a child gets one *r*-blend, for example, *fr-*, and then others almost do not need to be taught—the insight just comes.

Subunit 5: Final Blends and Digraphs (Consonant Blends at the End)

The last subunit addresses final blends (e.g., *-st, -ng, -nt, -mp*) in a four-week period. The patterns in this subunit are very important because several are useful rimes that will generate many new words (e.g., *-est, -ing, -ank, -unk, -ink*). The *-st* lesson also includes the common rime *-est*, which will generate a great number of words. Other lessons include the common rimes *-ing* and *-ank*. Note that for *-ing* and *-ank* the vowel sound is not really a short sound. For the *i* in *-ing* the sound is more of a long *e* sound, and the *a* in *-ank* also takes more of a long sound. These two patterns, however, are important and really accelerate the word learning that will support text reading.

Lesson Framework and Activities

The lesson framework includes the following five parts: Letter or Word Practice, Hear-It, Decode-It, Spell-It, and Read-It. Here is a brief explanation of the specific goals for each part of the lesson.

Letter or Word Practice

- **Review letter sounds or words.** Children review challenging letter–sounds (e.g., *h, y, w*), words from previous lessons (e.g., *-at* words), and high-frequency words.

Hear-It

- **Identify rhyming words (orally).** As part of the early work with word families, students practice hearing words that rhyme and generating both real and silly rhyming words. This primes them for understanding word family decoding.
- **Segment and blend words into two parts: beginning (onset) and word family (rime).** Students segment and blend words using onset and rime parts. For this section, the reader should be able to segment a word into a beginning sound and rime (e.g., *t-ip*) and then should be able to blend that word together (e.g., *g-ot = got*).
- **Fully segment a word into each sound.** Beginning at Lesson 6 in We Are Family, phonemic awareness moves from hearing the larger sound unit in the word family unit to fully segmenting words into *each* sound (e.g., *b-a-g* vs. *b-ag*). This skill builds capacity for decoding (Nation, Allen, and Hulme 2001; Muter et al. 1998).
- **Identify the two to three sounds in a consonant blend.** When consonant blends are the focus, phonemic awareness moves toward identifying the sounds in consonant blends (e.g., *gr-, str-, gl-*), often using pictures. When students can hear these sounds, they can usually access them to read and spell words.

Decode-It

- **Blend the sounds in a c-v-c word family and add consonants to the family.** The child first blends the sounds together in a word family unit (e.g., *-og*) and then adds consonants to the beginning (e.g., *h-og, b-og*).
- **Blend individual sounds in c-v-c words with single consonants or consonant blends.** Beginning with Lesson 6, where contrasts are introduced, decoding focuses on blending all three sounds in a short vowel word together. Students are given words with different medial vowel sounds so that they must pay close attention to each vowel and correctly pronounce that sound. This is challenging.

Spell-It

- **Accurately spell words with short vowels, blends, and digraphs.** This task requires synthesis. The teacher dictates a word from the family and the child assembles the letter–sounds to spell it. In order to do this, the student must get each sound in the word family in the correct order.

Read-It

- **Read words in decodable books.** Students practice reading texts containing taught short vowel word families. The text reading supports transfer of knowledge. Students are held responsible for fully decoding words.

The lesson framework for First Words applies to all subunits and is shown in Figure 5.2. Note that for Hear-It and Decode-It there are two options. The boxes that are shaded identify content that is taught later in First Words (after Lesson 6). In the Hear-It section, early lessons focus on onset-rime and rhyming, and later lessons focus on fully breaking a word (see shaded part). In the early lessons for Decode-It, the focus is blending a c-v word family (e.g., *a-t*) and then adding a consonant to it (e.g., *m-at*). In Lesson 6 and later lessons, Decode-It focuses on fully sounding out individual sounds (e.g., /m/ /a/ /t/) (see shaded part). Figure 5.2 provides an overview of the parts of the lesson with content, sample language, and activity choices. Following the figure is a more detailed discussion of each part with a description of specific activities. For several very powerful activities (i.e., Unifix cubes, word sorting, Word Building, and Elkonin boxes), detailed directions are provided in the "Activities" section (see pp. 173–175).

FIGURE 5.2

		Lesson Part	Content	Sample Language	Activity Choices
1	5 minutes	**Letter and Word Review** (Practice)	Read words. Practice difficult letter–sounds.	Teacher: Please get out your word ring and whisper read each word.	Word Rings or Cards Games (Bingo, Go Fish!) I'm Thinking (see page 121 for a link to a video of children playing this game)
2	5 minutes	**Hear-It Early (Onset-Rime)** (Analyze) Rhyming Onset-Rime Segmentation	Say rhyming words. Say beginning sounds + word families. b-ag c-an b-ig ch-ug d-ish th-at	*Orally* identify words that rhyme. Teacher: *Bag*, /b/ / ag/. What rhymes with *bag*? *Gag*? Yes! *Lag*? Yes! *Hag*? Yes, *-ag, -ag, -ag. Bag, gag, lag, hag,* they all have *-ag*. What rhymes with *fig?"* Student: *Dig.* ——— *Orally* blend words using onset and rime (e.g., *c-at* = *cat*). Teacher: *N-ap, n-ap.* What word is that? Put the sounds together. Student: *Nap.* ——— *Orally* break words into onset and rime (e.g., *c-at, d-ig*). Teacher: *Bet.* How can you break the word *bet* into two parts? Student: *B-et.*	Chugging Sounds Unifix Cubes Rhyming Words Secret Word Note: This is *all oral.* Manipulatives can be used such as blocks or markers, but letters are not used.

continues

	Lesson Part	Content	Sample Language	Activity Choices
2	5 minutes	**Hear-It Later (Segment Fully)** (Analyze) Phonemic Segmentation	Orally break a word into each sound (*lit* = /l/ /i/ /t/). Orally blend *each* sound in a word together (e.g., /s/ /a/ /t/ = *sat*).	(Early) Teacher: *Ship*. How can you break the word *ship* into three sounds? Student: /sh/ /i/ /p/. --- (Later) Teacher: *Grin*. What sounds make up the /gr/ part of *grin*? Student: /g/ /r/. Teacher: Which of these pictures start with *gr*? *Gate* or *grill*? Student: *Grill*.	Elkonin Boxes Order: • two-phoneme words with vowel at beginning (*at, in*) • two-phoneme words with vowel at end (*go, no, see*) • three-phoneme words with continuants (*sssssit, mmmman*) • three-phoneme words with stops (*tttip*) Picture Sorts for Blends

		Lesson Part	Content	Sample Language	Activity Choices
3	10 minutes	**Decode-It Early (Word Family)** (Analyze) Decode	Read word families. pit sit	*Sound out* the word family. Teacher: Let's build this word family, /a/ /g/. Put it together. /a/ /g/? What does it say? *-ag*. You do it. Student: /a/ /g/, *-ag*. *Sound out* a whole word. Teacher: Here's a cube that has *-ag*. Here's a cube with /w/. Push them together and say the sounds. /w/ /ag/ | /w/ /ag/ | /w/ /ag/. What is it? It says *wag*. You do it. Student: *W-ag*. *Wag*. --- *Compare* two word families. The teacher displays the words in two columns: *hog hot* *fog got* *log lot* Teacher: Read the *-og* words and put them together. Read the *-ot* words. How are they different?	Unifix Cubes with Word Families Word Building Silly Words Follow-the-Path Games Word Sorts Picture-Word Matching Word Wheels Flip Books Note: Make sure to blend the two-letter word family first, then add consonants.

continues

		Lesson Part	Content	Sample Language	Activity Choices
3	10 minutes	**Decode-It (Later, Individual Sounds)** (Analyze)	Decode each sound in a word.	Teacher: Let's sound out two different words, one with *a* and one with *e*. Pay attention and see if you can get that middle sound. Here's one word [*sat*] and another one [*set*]. [Teacher does not pronounce the words.] Student: /s/ /a/ /t/, *sat.* /s/ /e/ /t/, *set.*	Options are the same as above with emphasis on decoding each sound.
4	5 minutes	**Spell-It** (Synthesize) Dictation	Spell words letter-by-letter.	Teacher: I want you to write the word *hit*. /h/ /it/. *It*. That's my family, /i/ /t/. I will write that first. Here I'll write an *i* and now /t/, *t*. Now *h-it*. What sound do I hear at the beginning of *h-it*? Oh, /h/, *h*. I'll write *h*. Student: [Uses pen or letters to spell word.]	Alphabet Arcs Word Building Change words at the beginning (*bat, hat, cat*). Change words at the end (*fan, fat*). Magnetic Letters Dry Erase Boards
5	5 minutes	**Read-It** (Apply)	Read a connected text with some patterns	Teacher: Let's do a book walk [see video on p. 118] and find words that have short *e*. Here's one [*red*]. Can you read it? Student: *Red.* [Reads the book independently.]	Decodables

First Words Lesson Template

The First Words lesson template in Figure 5.3 can be used to plan lesson for all the subunits in First Words.

FIGURE 5.3 First Words Lesson Template

First Words Weekly Lesson Template

Subunit: _____ **Lesson #:** _____ **Letter/Sound Focus:** _____

	Word Review *(Practice) 5 min.*	Hear-It *(Analyze) 5 min.*	Decode-It *(Analyze) 10 min.*	Spell-It *(Synthesize) 5 min.*	Read-It *(Apply) 5 min.*
Monday	Activity:[1]	Activity:[2]	Activity:[3]	Activity:[4]	Title:
	List new high-frequency words:	Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Decodable words:
					High-frequency and content words:
Tuesday	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Title:
	List new high-frequency words:	Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Decodable words:
					High-frequency and content words:
Wednesday	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Title:
		Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Decodable words:
					High-frequency and content words:
Thursday	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Title:
		Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Decodable words:
					High-frequency and content words:
Friday	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Activity:	Title:
		Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Words/Notes:	Decodable words:
					High-frequency and content words:

1 Word Review Activities: Word Rings, Bingo, Go Fish! Find It

2 Hear-It Activities: Rhyming Circle, Unifix cubes, Sit Down, Secret Word, Tapping Sounds, Chugging Words, Picture Sorts, Tommy Tiger, Which One? Share a Sound, Robot Talk, Mother May I?

3 Decode-It Activities: Unifix cubes, Silly Words, Word Sorts, Word Match, Word Wheels/Flip Books, Side-by-Side, Cutting Up Words

4 Spell-It Activities: Dictation with Dry-Erase, Word Building, Making Words, Alphabet Arc

For a downloadable PDF of this template, go to http://hein.pub/letterlessons-login.

Now that you have a basic understanding of the parts of the lesson and the goals for each part, the following sections provide details about what to do in each lesson part, including a series of activities and games to use.

Letter or Word Practice

During this section of the lesson, children practice reading 15–20 words that are new to them. The purpose is to review recently learned words that children know but have not yet securely stored cognitively. The practice section gives the teacher a quick moment to remind children what they learned and solidify learning (e.g., "Now, that word has a part from last week. Look, /i/ /t/. Remember that? *It*?"). The sources for these practice words are

- patterns from previous lessons (e.g., *it*: *sit, hit, fit*)
- high-frequency words from previous lessons (e.g., *the, she, he*) (see the Dolch pre-primer through second-grade list in Figure 5.4)
- words from books
- words that children themselves identify.

At the beginning of the lesson, children practice reading these words, play games like Go Fish! or other games to participate in group activities. In the group game I'm Thinking, all children have the same words on cards out and the teacher gives "clues" to help the children find the word that the teacher is thinking about. For example, "I'm thinking of a word with two letters. It has the sound /a/ at the beginning. It has the sound /t/ at the end." This game is engaging because it naturally employs inductive tension (see p. 50 for a video of this game). There are literally dozens of fun games for practicing words, many at Sightwords.com (which is misnamed but does reflect some research on high-frequency word learning). But do not turn this part of the lesson into a mindless drill in which you do the same thing every time with fifty word cards. Remember our emphasis on multiple exposures in multiple contexts. Repeat the words but not always in the same context. This will support overlearning and transfer.

Two of the most important questions that teachers have are "How many words?" and "When do I retire words?" Fifteen to twenty words at a time is sufficient. Children do not need to practice reading, for the one hundredth time, a word that they know very well. Each week add in about five words, including the week's two to three high-frequency words and two to three words representing a previously taught word family. Try to make the word family words the more challenging ones (e.g., *mat* instead of *cat*).

To tame the beast of a mountain of needlessly drilled words, build a routine to "retire words." Set up a criterion for "owning" a word (e.g., read correctly five times). You can ask students to have a partner, parent, teacher, or friend "check off" a word on the back of the card when it has been read correctly. After five check marks, it's ready to

be retired. (Some teachers like to do a final check and have children read their retired words before officially retiring them.) Retiring a word can actually be a fun routine in which children display a sense of accomplishment. They can put the retired words into a big transparent container or jar labeled "Words We Own!"

FIGURE 5.4 **Dolch Words by Level (Pre-primer–Second Grade)**

Pre-primer Most Frequent		Primer		First Grade		Second Grade	
a	look	all	out	after	let	always	or
and	make	am	please	again	live	around	pull
away	me	are	pretty	an	may	because	read
big	my	at	ran	any	of	been	right
blue	not	ate	ride	as	old	before	sing
can	one	be	saw	ask	once	best	sit
come	play	black	say	by	open	both	sleep
down	red	brown	she	could	over	buy	tell
find	run	but	so	every	put	call	their
for	said	came	soon	fly	round	cold	these
funny	see	did	that	from	some	does	those
go	the	do	there	give	stop	don't	upon
help	three	eat	they	going	take	fast	us
here	to	four	this	had	thank	first	use
I	two	get	too	has	them	five	very
in	up	good	under	her	then	found	wash
is	we	have	want	him	think	gave	which
it	where	he	was	his	walk	goes	why
jump	yellow	into	well	how	were	green	wish
little	you	like	went	just	when	its	work
		must	what	know		made	would
		new	white			many	write
		no	who			off	your
		now	will				
		on	with				
		our	yes				

Adapted from "A Basic Sight Word Vocabulary," Dolch 1936.

Hear-It (Early, Onset-Rime): Rhyming and Onset-Rime Phonemic Awareness

This section of the lesson is all oral. The goal is to practice hearing rhymes and then breaking words into onsets and rimes (e.g., *b-ag, p-it*). Keep in mind, as well, that rhyming and breaking words apart will be part of the ongoing whole-group, teacher-guided practices. These are described in Chapter 3 in "Shared Reading with Print Referencing," "Interactive Writing," and "Language Play for Developing Phonological Awareness". In early Hear-It lessons, a teacher says words, emphasizes their word families, and then helps children say more rhyming words (e.g., *cat, bat, fat*). As children work to say rhymes, the goal is fluency, so calling out is okay! Even silly words are okay, because the idea is to *hear* rhyme and it can be hard to find a real word quickly that rhymes with a target. In fact, silly words are helpful in that they tell us that the child is really rhyming rather than having simply memorized various rhyming pairs or series. There are literally hundreds of rhyming word games and rhyming. Do choose words with the * on the scope and sequence (see Figure 5.1). Remember, these are some of the most frequently used rimes, and they will generate a lot of rhyming words.

After children can hear and produce rhyming words, Hear-It moves to onset and rime. The easier activity is to blend, or take two parts and put them together (e.g., /g/-/ot/ = *got*). The harder activity is breaking a word into parts (/g/ /ot/). A variety of activities present this content to children through games. See Figure 5.5. Examples are Unifix Word Parts, Chugging Sounds, Sit Down, and Secret Word (all described in Figure 5.5) and Robot Talk. When children analyze sounds without letters, they can focus on the "sound" part of the letter–sound relationship first. I find that when children struggle with letter–sounds, decoding, or spelling, it always helps to *back up* and just work with the sounds.

FIGURE 5.5

Activities for Hear-It: Orally breaking words into two parts (Early, Onset-Rime)

Rhyming Circle

Have the children sit in a circle. Say a word and then invite each child to say a word that rhymes with it, going around the circle. (Silly words are okay!) Build fluency with rhyming. Choose words that have one of the 37 most common rimes, from the word families marked with the * on the scope and sequence (see Figure 5.1). This will ensure a lot of possible words for the game.

Unifix Word Parts (Onset-Rime)

Use two cubes, one to represent the onset and the other to represent the rime. Children move the cubes together, saying the sounds and then blending them together (e.g., /c/-/at/, /c/-/at/, *cat*).

Which One?
Children use their fists to represent the two parts of the word. They make a gesture for each part of the word (e.g., /g/-/et/, g/-/et/), bringing their fists closer and closer together until they touch, and they blend the word (e.g., *get*).
Sit Down
Have two children stand in front of two empty chairs. They each say a part of the word and sit down as they say it (e.g., /c/ /at/).
Secret Word
The teacher says the secret word in parts (e.g., /b/ /ig/) and then the children blend the word. (Blending is easier than breaking words down.) Once children can blend words together, they can take turns "being the teacher" and breaking down a secret word for their peers. (See the video on p. 121.)
Which One?, Tommy Tiger Likes to Eat, Share a Sound, Mother May I?, Robot Talk?, Beginning Sounds Bingo
See Chapter 3, p. 42.

Hear-It (Later, Segment Fully)

After Lesson 6, the Hear-It part of the lesson, especially when there are contrasts, focuses on breaking words into *each separate sound* and blending them back again. See Figure 5.6. Robust research indicates that the two phonemic skills that are most closely associated with success in reading are (1) the ability to identify the initial sound in a spoken word and (2) the ability to break a word into individual sounds or phonemes (Hulme et al. 2002; Muter et al. 1998).

One of the best activities for this is Elkonin boxes. The directions for Elkonin boxes (see p. 173) provide a list of words and a sequence to use. The easiest way to start boxes is to use two-letter words, first those beginning with a vowel (e.g., *at, it, in*) and then those beginning with a consonant (e.g., *so, see, me*). After two-letter words, use three-letter words. Caution: Boxes seem deceptively easy, but they are not easy. The approach takes time and practice but pays off in big dividends.

FIGURE 5.6

Activities for Hear-It: Orally breaking words into two parts (Later, Fully Segment)
Orally Segmenting Each Sound in a Word
Elkonin Boxes See directions on page 173.
Unifix Word Parts (Each Sound) Use three cubes, with *each* cube representing *each* sound in a word (e.g., *b-e-t*). This activity is described in detail on page 168.
Tapping Sounds with Fingers Children use their fingers to represent *each sound in the word.* They tap for each part of the word (e.g., *g-e-t, g-e-t*).

Decode-It (Early, Word Family)

In this lesson section, the focus is reading first words by adding a consonant sound to a word family (e.g., *-at, -in*). See the box "Three Ways to Sound out a C-V-C Word." In the scope and sequence for We Are Family (see Figure 5.1) are two lessons for each sound (two for short *a* families, two for short *o* families, etc.). In the first of the two lessons, the first step is to blend a short vowel family together (e.g., /o/ /p/ = *op*) and the second step is to add a consonant (e.g., *mop, pop, top*). Below are the details of these steps:

1. **Blend the two sounds of the word family together.** The teacher shows how to put the vowel sound and ending consonant together (e.g., *-oooooop, op*). This first step is very important (and rarely taught as part of word family work). When you teach a child to sound out the word family, you draw attention to each part of the word family: the vowel and the ending consonant. It is easier to decode a vowel-consonant pattern because your mouth starts out open with the vowel and then closes down when saying the consonant. (Note that this is the first step in Method 1: Three ways to sound out a c-v-c word.)
2. **Add consonant sounds to the word family.** Once the word family is built, then the child can add consonants to it, pronouncing the word family as a unit (e.g., *-op*) and then adding consonants (e.g., *p-op, m-op*). Word wheels can be used as well as flip books. If the child gets confused about the word family, then redirect the child to Step 1.

After children learn how to read words with word families, they will compare words with the same short vowel but different ending (e.g., *-op* vs. *-og*). This comparison is very important because it challenges the reader to pay attention to each part of the word's architecture. Let's say a child has learned *-op* words and *-og* words, but when she comes to *hog*, she says "*hop*." She is not paying attention to the last part of the word, the *-g*. When students have to compare words, they have to pay attention to that last part.

Activities for the early part of Read-It are shown in Figure 5.7.

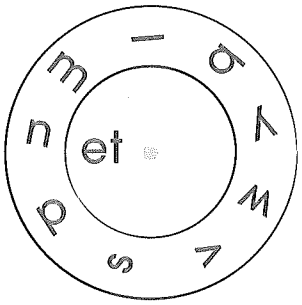
FIGURE 5.7

Activities for Decode-It: Decoding words (Early, Word Family)

Reading Words

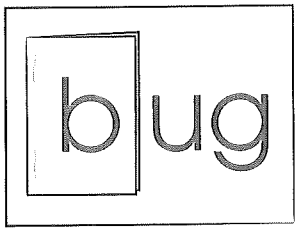
Word Wheel

Word wheels have a word family that stays the same in the center and initial consonants that "spin" around the word family to make new words. They are an easy and fun way to practice reading words. Be careful which consonants you put on the outside of the wheel. Some consonants create silly words and others may create words that aren't appropriate for school.



Flip Books

Flip books are easier to make than word wheels and operate on the same principle that word wheels do. A series of beginning consonants are put on the front of a word family and students practice reading words.



continues

Activities for Decode-It: Decoding words (Early, Word Family)

Matching Words in Text

After students read decodables with the target sound, they can find words in their decodables that match. Many teachers will ask students to keep a list and then tally how many times they find a word.

Boxes

Elkonin Boxes and a variation, word boxes, is another great way to practice reading words with word families. (See Elkonin (Sound) Boxes and Letter Boxes). In the *First Words* subunit, divide words into two parts, onset and rime. Let one box represent the consonant at the beginning and

Comparing Words

Word Sort

Students compare two words with the same middle vowel sound (e.g., *ug-ub-un*).

bug	tub	sun
hug	rub	fun
tug	sub	gun
pug		run
rug		

Side by Side

Place two words side by side and ask students to whisper read each word to themselves and then to the teacher. To get the most out of the activity, teachers pair up words ahead of time. Below are different levels of the game.

Same word family	rug	hug
Different word family/different first sound	tug	run
Different word family/same first sound	tub	tug

If students are having a difficult time, ask them to highlight the word family at the end to cue them to pay attention to the vowel.

Activities for Decode-It: Decoding words (Early, Word Family)

Cutting Up Words

Give each child a set of word family words. Ask the children to cut off the first sound of each. Then the children put the words back together and read them. To make this activity more complex, the entire word can be cut apart and reassembled.

b	ag
r	an

Decode-It (Later Individual Sounds)

In the later parts of We Are Family and in other subunits decoding moves toward reading three-phoneme words by blending the sounds together. This is an important step, because as mentioned, using word families is only a first step. Using a variety of strategies readers blend real words and "silly words." Once readers can reliably blend three sounds together, they are ready to read words with blends. Usually the acquisition of consonant blends is fairly speedy in comparison to learning to blend a short vowel word, because once a reader understands one *r*-blend like *tr-*, adding others (e.g., *gr-*, *br-*) is easier.

FIGURE 5.8

Activities for Decode-It: Decoding words (Later, Individual Sounds)

Word Sort

In Lessons 6, 8, and 10 students compare two words with different middle vowel sounds (e.g., *-et, -it*). Do word sorts with different middle sounds (see p. 169). Make sure to stretch the word and then hold it in the middle (e.g., *beeeeeeet*) to help hear the sounds.

bet	**hit**
get	bit
net	sit
met	lit
wet	fit

continues

Activities for Decode-It: Decoding words (Later, Individual Sounds)

Side by Side

Place two words side by side that have the same beginning sound and the same ending sound but different middle sounds. Ask students to whisper read each word to themselves. (Start with words that contain one of the 37 most frequent rimes; see the word families marked with the * in Figure 5.1.) Below are examples of words:

run ran

fun fan

tun tan

Ask students to highlight the word family at the end to cue them to pay attention to the vowel.

Cutting Up Words

Give each child a set of cards and scissors. Ask the children to cut the words into individual letters and then put them back together.

b	a	g
b	u	g

Three Ways to Sound Out a C-V-C Word

Method 1: Take off the beginning sound. See Figure 5.9.

FIGURE 5.9

Word	Actions	Teacher Language
sit	Cover the first sound. *sit* Blend the remaining sounds. /iiiiiiiiiit/ *it*	"Cover the first sound in the word. What do you have? An *i* and a *t*." "Let's put those two sounds together. What do we get? /iiiiiit/, *it*. The word family *it*."
	Add the first sound back. /s/ /it/	"So we have *it*. Now let's put the sound /s/ on *it*. /s/ /it/."
	Decode the full word. *sit*	"/s/ /it/. The word is *sit*."

Method 2: Take off the last sound. See Figure 5.10.

FIGURE 5.10

Word	Actions	Teacher Language
sit	Cover the last sound. *sit* Blend the remaining sounds. /siiiiiiiiii/	"Cover the last sound in the word. What do you have? An *s* and an *i*." "Let's put those two sounds together. What do we get? /sssssiiiiii/."
	Add the last sound back. /siiiiii/ /t/	"Put the last sound back on the word and put the sounds together. So we have */ssssit/*. Now let's put the last sound with that t/t/."
	Decode the full word *sit*	"/siiiii/ /t/, *sit*. The word is *sit*."

continues

Method 3: Figure the word out sound-by-sound. See Figure 5.11.

FIGURE 5.11

Word	Actions	Teacher Language
sit	Point to the first sound. Point to the second sound. Point to the third sound. Blend all sounds.	"Let's say each sound. /s/." "/iiii/." "/t/." "Together, /sssssiiiiiit/."
	Decode the full word. *sit*	"/siiiiitt/, *sit*. The word is *sit*."

Spell-It

This is one of the most important and challenging parts of the lessons. During this section, children spell words with families that they have been learning. As discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter 3, phonics instruction is about word architecture, understanding how a word is built. By manipulating the letter–sounds in a word—putting it together and taking it apart—learners solidify their knowledge. Students are expected to spell the words completely correctly because they have been taught the letter–sounds. To help, the teacher should model how to say the words slowly, hearing each sound, and then write the letter–sounds. We like to say to children, "To spell a word, say it!" The box "To Spell a Word, *Say* the Word" (on p. 160) explains why. There are different ways to do the spelling section, including writing words on dry erase boards, using magnetic letters, or doing word building. See Figure 5.12.

The spelling section is very diagnostic because often a child will be able to read a word or even hear parts but not spell it accurately. In one classroom, we watched a girl easily read *-ag* words, but when she was asked to spell them, she had letter order issues (e.g., *bga* for *bag*). Without doing the spelling we would have never known that she was confused. (See the box "Letters Out of Order? Here's What to Do," p. 160.)

FIGURE 5.12

Activities for Spell-It: Spelling words
Dictation
Identify two to three words from the lesson to dictate. Children should correctly spell each word.

Making Words and Word Building

Making Words and Word Building are two activities for spelling. (See p. 171 for more information.) In a Making Words lesson, children use five to seven magnetic letters or letter cards to spell words.

Word Building is similar, but the format is a "ladder" where one letter in a word is changed each time. For *early lessons*, change letters at the beginning and end.

c	a	t
f	a	t
f	a	n

For *later lessons*, change letters in the middle or change single consonants to blends at the beginning or end.

c	a	t	
c	o	t	
c	o	s	t

Don't wing it. Plan the words that your students will spell. (See "Making Words or Word Building Lesson" on p. 171.)

Pulling Down Letters from the Alphabet Arc

Children "pull down" lowercase letters from an alphabet arc to spell words. To keep this activity organized and efficient, ask children to place letters on the arc within two minutes.

To Spell a Word, *Say* the Word

When children are spelling words, they must say those words to themselves as they are writing. Why? There are three reasons. First, spelling is the process of taking speech sounds and putting each into a visual/written code. It is natural in the beginning stages to say each sound of the word, search for the correct letter, and then write it down. This is the rich and challenging process that really helps children internalize phonics. Second, spelling is so hard for young children that they need a process to use when they have to do it. The process is to say the sounds and then write them. Without this process, children will flounder, often randomly writing down letters that they remember, frequently in the wrong place (e.g., a student might write "*bga*" and explain, "That word *bag* had a *b* and a *g* and an *a*. I put those down."). Teachers must remind them, "Say the word. Slow it down. What sounds do you hear? Say it." Third, children must do the work of saying the word or else they will not own or use the strategy when they are writing independently. Teachers sometimes do this part of the spelling for children, not realizing that they are doing half the work of spelling. A teacher might need to model saying the word at first, but eventually the children must do it.

Letters Out of Order? Here's What to Do

In the early stages of reading, students often write a word and produce a spelling with the correct letters in the incorrect order. This provides a great chance to emphasize the alphabetic principle and how letters work. When students create a disordered spelling, first ask them, "What does that say?" Sometimes a student will look at the spelling and see that the letter–sounds are not in the correct order. If this does not work, it might be useful to point to the letters in the student's disordered word and say the word, asking "Does this say *cat*?" If that doesn't do the trick, you can say, "Pretty close but listen to me read what you have written. /c/ /t/ /a/. This says /c/ /t/ /a/. It doesn't say *cat*. The word *cat* has /c/, but listen, then it has /aaaaaa/ and then /ttt/. It is /c/ /aaaaaa/ / tttt/. Where is the /a/ part in *ccccccaaaaaat*?"

Read-It

After listening for sounds, reading words, and spelling words, the final activity is reading the words within the context of a book. During First Words, use books with some level of decodability with multiple examples of words taught in lessons as well as high-frequency words. (See the box "Fear Not the Decodable: Why? When? How?")

The routine for Read-It is very similar to the routines used for book reading in Letter Lessons. As shown in Figure 5.13, the steps are preview (teacher planning), book walk, first reading, second reading, praise and practice, and rereading. The key differences in reading at this stage are the expectations around decoding and the focus of the book walk.

FIGURE 5.13

Read-It Routine

Before the Lesson: Preview the Book

Never use a book without previewing it.

To preview, check to see that *the majority* of words in the book would be "decodable" to the children, usually following the c-v-c or c-c-v-c pattern. These should be words that have word families taught in the current lesson *or earlier.* I also look for words that are taught as high-frequency words as well as decodable words that might have unknown meanings (e.g., *figs, hag*). Ask yourself, "Does the book have taught word families? Does the book have taught high-frequency words?" In addition, look for difficult-to-decode content words. If there are difficult-to-decode content words, such as *iguana*, preteach them and do not expect independent decoding. Hold children responsible only for sounding out patterns they know.

Don't expect 100 percent of the words to meet these criteria. Watch for books that sound like tongue twisters (e.g. Thad had a rad wag).

Step 1: Book Walk

The purpose of the book walk is to quickly review a few tricky decodable, content, or high-frequency words in the book *before* reading. It usually takes about three minutes.

During the book walk, call students' attention to target families: "Oh look, here's a word with the *-og* family. Let's practice reading that word. Here's another one on the next page."

Call attention to high-frequency words.

Define decodable words with unknown meanings. For example, "Look at this word [*hag*]. How would we read that? *Hag*? Do you know what a hag is? It's usually a name for a witch or mean woman."

VIDEO 5.1

Book Walk with a Decodable

See the video for a book walk with a decodable.

continues

Step 1: Book Walk

Note: A book walk is not a picture walk. A picture walk is a review of all the pages in the book focusing on the pictures and the story. A book walk alerts the readers to high-frequency or decodable words and gives them a chance to practice those words. With hard words, the picture might be used, but the focus is not reviewing *all* the pictures and retelling the story.

Caution: Don't feel the need to go through every page and every picture in a book, especially if it's a long book. Doing so gives the story or information away. This provides less reason to read the book. According to K. A. D. Stahl (2004), picture walks may not support comprehension as much as we think.

Step 2: First Reading

In the Word Building subunit in Chapter 4, I described three ways to do a first read. When books are decodable, there is a fourth: student independent reading.

- Teacher read (hardest books): Read the whole book to the students as they point.
- I read / you read: Read and point to a page and then ask the students to do it. Try to hang back and pause and allow the students to decode if they can.
- Choral read (easier books): Read and point the book all together. The teacher's voice stays in the mix and scaffolds through harder words.
- Independent read (easiest books): This method is for books with words that students can decode very easily. The students read on their own without the teacher's voice.

Step 3: Second Reading

Each child reads independently.

Decoding words is the point, so make sure it happens. Watch and listen for accurate decoding and help when a student is struggling to decode.

Use the methods described in the box "Three Ways to Sound Out a C-V-C Word," p. 157.

Don't turn Read-It into a phonics lesson. If the child cannot decode the word fairly quickly, provide three quick prompts and then move on. (See "Word Prompting: What to Say When They Struggle on a Word," page 64.) The first prompt is pausing and waiting; the second prompt is saying, "Something tricked you"; and the third prompt is based on the child's letter–sound knowledge. If these three prompts don't get the child to the word, model the word and move on.

Step 4: Praise and Practice

At the end of the book, praise something the students have done well.

"When you came to the word *had*, you stopped and were not sure. Then you said the first sound and put that word together. Good job! What is that word [*had*]? [Pointing to word.]"

Then practice something that was difficult.

"When you came to *hat*, you said '*ham.*' Then you stopped and you reread the sentence and you said '_____' [let the child fill in the correct word]. You used your letter–sounds to read that word."

Step 5: Reread

After the children have read the book once by themselves, I ask them to reread the book to other teachers, cafeteria staff, counselors, family members, and friends. I like to say, "If you read it once, you should read it six more times!"

When choosing texts with some level of decodability, remember that it is not decodable *to children* if they do not know the letter–sounds. Make sure to choose decodables by coordinating with the scope and sequence. Many texts will tell you the focal pattern. The box below provides insight about decodability.

Fear Not the Decodable: Why? When? How?

"Ugh! Are you kidding? Figs, pigs, wigs, and jigs! No, thank you! Reading is about meaning!" protested one first-grade teacher when asked about decodable texts. "What good is it to teach kids to 'sound things out' if there are not words to sound out in a text?" countered another teacher. And so goes the typical conversation about decodable text, a worn-out love/hate debate that seems to swing back and forth with the early literacy pendulum. But dwelling in hyperbole almost never helps kids, so I would like to suggest that we step back from extreme responses to take a more measured, middle-ground approach with respect to decodables. Decodable text can be a limited but useful tool. To properly use decodables, a teacher must know why, when, and how to use decodables.

Why?

Decodable text is a type of beginning reading material in which the words have been controlled to contain letter–sounds and high-frequency words *that the learner has been taught*, a feature called lesson-to-text-match (Mesmer 2001). The reason to use decodables is that they allow the reader to apply letter–sound knowledge or automatic word recognition to *independently* decode or recognize words in text. Although there has been some attempt to ensure that decodable texts match 80 percent of the words that have been taught, close analysis has proved this percentage to be unattainable in the most "decodable" materials (Foorman et al. 2004).

If you are like the first teacher quoted earlier, you might be wondering why anyone would use decodable texts. There are three reasons—to bridge an important developmental transition in word reading, to provide a field for the transfer of letter–sound knowledge to reading, and to encourage beginning readers to decode. You might also be wondering what research support there is for the benefits of decodables. What the research tells us is that texts with some level of decodability encourage students to use letter–sounds to decode,

continues

help them read words more accurately, and enable them to better read words they have not seen before (Cheatham and Allor 2012; Compton, Appleton, and Hosp 2004; Juel and Roper 1985; Mesmer 2001, 2003; Vadasy, Sanders, and Peyton 2005).

When?

One of the reasons that people have questions about decodable texts is that the issue of *when* has not really been well addressed. When to use decodables is based on development, not grade. I see decodable sets with hundreds of sequential books that stretch over an entire year! I do not think that is necessary at all.

I first discovered this material in working with a second grader who, after a year in a one-on-one tutoring program, was still reading at the very lowest levels. Despite having letter–sound knowledge, the child was actually using a "partial alphabetic" approach to reading words in books (Ehri 2005; Mesmer 1999). She would use beginning sounds along with pictures and memory to guess at words. The approach would have been fine in early first grade or late kindergarten, but it was not appropriate in second grade. She needed to move into "full alphabetic" reading, or fully sounding out words, including the vowels. I soon realized that the books I was using did not support this transition. She would come to words in text like *hair* and *grouchy*, and she did not have the knowledge to decode these. When I used texts with a greater degree of decodability, she began to *use* what she knew about letter–sounds to sound out words in text. It was empowering and amazing to see the "I can do it!" smile spread across her face when she would pause at a tough word and work it out. Use decodables when students need to practice their phonics skills in connected texts.

How?

I offer the following directions about how to use decodables.

Use at the right developmental point.
Decodables should be used once children are extremely solid with all letter–sounds and are ready to fully decode. They should have a solid concept of word and be able to accurately point to both single-syllable and multisyllabic words in a predictable text, using beginning sounds to help them. Children should know about 20 high-frequency words so that they can power through the words in text that are not as regular. Children should be able to decode a simple c-v-c word *prior* to using decodables. (Don't use the decodable as a *way* to teach letter–sound relationships or decoding. That work needs to be done with isolated words. Decodables provide a place to apply and practice.)

Use after a phonics lesson to practice the target word family or sound.
The most obvious time to ask children to read a decodable is right after a lesson in which they have had instruction on a specific pattern. When children see words that they have decoded in text, they understand that the work they are doing has a real application. Put the book in children's hands, and let them do it! You can also have children use decodables to find words that match patterns.

Do not use exclusively.
I do not recommend using highly decodable texts exclusively for two reasons. First, the sounding out that children have to do in a decodable is substantial and can be tiring. Second, there are other types of books that children benefit from—in particular, texts that integrate decodability with engagingness, natural language, and a paced repetition of words, often called multiple-criterion texts. (Note: The feature that is overwhelmingly missing from today's beginning reading texts is programmatic repetition of words [Hiebert 2005; Foorman et al. 2004]. In 2000, programs presented between 32 and 95 new words per week compared to 15 new words per week in 1980 [Hiebert 2002].)

Pay attention to the level of decodability.
I believe that instead of thinking of books as "decodable" or "not decodable," we should simply think of "decodability" as a continuum, with some books having words that are more or less decodable to some readers depending on the scope and sequence used. In *more decodable* books there is a really tight level of control with many words having specific letter–sound patterns. For example, here is some text from a Bob Book:

> Dot had a dog. The dog is Mag.
>
> Mag took the bag. Dot got Mag.

Notice that the *-ot*, *-og*, and *-ag* families are all represented *throughout each line*. To decode the first line of print, the reader has to shift between several word families, first *-ot* (*Dot*), then *-og* (*dog*), then *-og* again (*dog*), and then *-ag* (*Mag*). I like to use books like this *near the end* of short vowel instruction, when readers have gotten fluent with decoding short vowels and can handle these shifts pretty seamlessly (in the Beginning Blends subunit). These books are a challenge. If you are using a decodable and the reader is slowing down at every third word to sound it out, the book is likely not quite right. At the beginning of decoding instruction, when the focus is on word families and adding a beginning sound to a family, I like to use books that I call *somewhat decodable*. Below is an example:

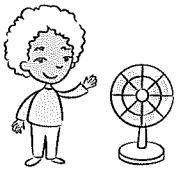
> I like to win.
>
> I like to pin.
>
> I like to sip.
>
> I like to dip.

continues

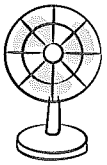
I like to hop.
I like to pop.
This is me!
All I can be!

In this example, there are decodable words, but they are at the end of each sentence. In order to read this book, the reader can use the repeated sentence and the high-frequency word *like*, and then do the decoding work at the end of the sentence. The decoding work is not too overwhelming, and the reader can apply letter–sound knowledge without taking too long. I like to use this type of book in the early stages of decoding instruction, when students may not know all the short vowels. Further into instruction, I like "multi-criterion" texts, which have some level of decodability (Menon and Hiebert 2005). These texts also have a paced introduction of high-frequency words. Below is an example of a text like this. Note that decodable words are in different positions in this text, not just at the end of sentences.

Text with Some Decodability



Tim has a fan.

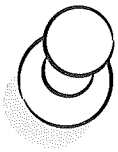


His fan is big.

- Simple words with taught letter–sound patterns (e.g., *Tim, fan, big*)
- Words with different letter–sounds (e.g., *big* vs. *fan* vs. *has*)
- Words clustered and repeated within a story
- Decodable words in different parts of the sentence to discourage memorizing
- Words match what the reader knows about letter–sounds
- High-frequency words (e.g., *is, his*)

Know when to stop.

I believe that decodables are most useful for propelling children through the period in which they are learning to decode words or blend sounds together. They should be used when single-syllable word decoding is the goal. Once a child can quickly and easily blend words with taught patterns, decodables may not be necessary.



Catchphrases for First Words throughout this unit:

- *Use your letters. Use your sounds.*
  What sound goes with that [letter]?
- *(Move away from asking for letter names.*
  Don't ask, "What letter is that?" Go straight to the sound.)
- *How would you say that word?*
  (Resist decoding for the child.)
- *Look at this [letter / word part].*
  What is the sound?

When spelling a word:

- *Say that word.*
- *What sounds do you hear?*
- *What letter would you use?*

To decode a new c-v-c word:

- *Take off the first sound. Now add it back.*

  or
- *Take off the last sound. Now add it back.*

Chapter Summary

This chapter started with Taylor, a student who at first struggled to use letter–sounds for word reading but, with focused instruction, persevered and became an empowered reader. All the details and steps introduced in this chapter can be a little bit overwhelming. Take it step by step and stay the course and your students will be able to do amazing things once they finish the First Words unit. They will surprise and delight you and actually surpass your expectations. Students who read their first words become "word monsters," as first-grade teacher Carol calls them. She explains, "I tell them they are word monsters because they are unstoppable and kind of crazy. They like that! But they do just devour words all around them. They are like little beasts. Like the other day, a little girl came up to me while I was passing out papers and said, 'That word on your paper says *camp*!' Another one said to me, 'I know how to write *grub* and you didn't even teach me.'"

The First Words unit, perhaps more than any other unit, will unlock reading for your students. This unit really shows students how to *apply* letter–sound knowledge. They really need instruction in how to use that information because most kids just will not figure this out on their own. But once they have completed the unit, they will have confirmation that they are indeed *real* readers. They will know that they have what it takes to unlock words. They will feel lit. Success and knowledge are incredibly exciting. What's really important for teachers at this stage is to realize that some children will get it really quickly and others will need more practice and rehearsal. Do not give up. A child who is not figuring it out right away usually needs a patient teacher and more practice. Learning to sound out words is an essential developmental step on the path to becoming a good reader.

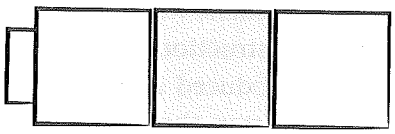
Activities

Note: This section has detailed instructions for a handful of powerful strategies that can be used across most subunits. These pages can be used by an instructional coach or reading specialist to support teacher professional development on a specific strategy.

Using Unifix® Cubes for Hearing Sounds and Decoding Words

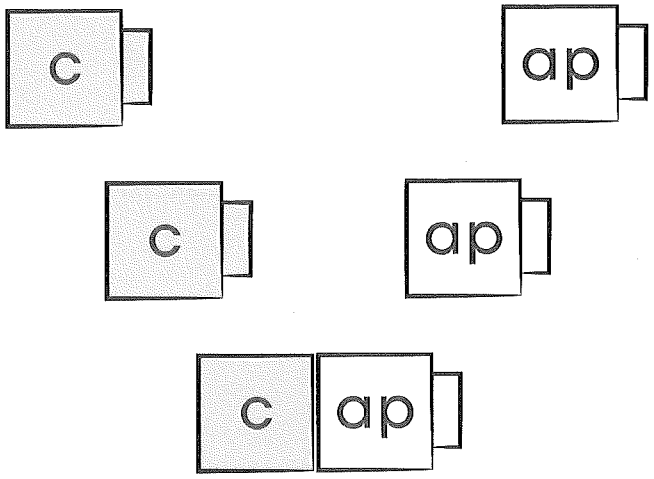
Why It Works Unifix cubes are not just for math. They are useful for reading too! Cubes make the parts of words concrete and children can manipulate them. They can be taken apart and put together. Use cubes to show children how to put sounds together or how to bring letters together to decode. Use plain colored cubes without letters when hearing sounds in words and use cubes with letters written on them when decoding words. The Unifix cubes pictured have preprinted letters, but teachers can use a permanent marker to write letters on existing cubes.

Phonological Awareness The Hear-It part of the lesson focuses on orally breaking words into onset and rime or individual phonemes. Have children move cubes to show sounds in words being segmented (e.g., *c-a-t*) or blended (*cat*). Use different colors to reflect each different sound. The three cubes below might be used to break down a three-phoneme word or put them back together.

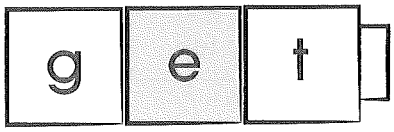


When the focus of the lesson is onsets and rimes, teachers can use two cubes, one to represent the onset (*c-*) and one to represent the rime (*-at*). Break the cubes apart as you segment and say the sounds. Move the cubes together as you blend or combine the sounds into a word.

Decoding Onsets and Rimes In Read-It, children practicing decoding words. Use a cube with a word family and a beginning sound, and show the reader how to put a beginning sound on the word. Move the two word parts closer to each other while saying the sounds until they are snapped together and the full word is blended (see pictures below).



Decoding All Three Sounds To blend three sounds, use color-coded cubes, like the ones below, to draw the reader's attention to the vowel. Use the cubes as you show the three ways to sound out a word, as described in the box on p. 157.



How to Do a Word Sort

Source: *Words Their Way* (Bear et al. 2000)

Why It Works Word sorting mimics the way that the human brain makes sense of information by sorting and categorizing. When students compare two or more patterns, they pay close attention to the letters in them.

Steps

Preparation

Choose at least two patterns to contrast (e.g., *-ug, -ub, -un*). Prepare word cards with these patterns. Identify anchor words for each pattern, using well-known and easily read words (e.g., *bug, tub, sun*). See Figure 5.14. Create different numbers of words for each category. (This prevents students from guessing at the end of the sort.)

FIGURE 5.14

bug	tub	sun
hug	rub	fun
tug	sub	gun
pug		run
rug		

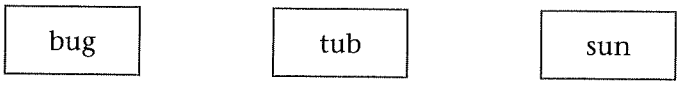
Step 1: Read the Words

Word sorts are done with *known* words. Ask students to read each word. Put aside the words that cannot be *easily* read.

Step 2: Model the Sort

See the routine for word sorting, which appears at the end of this step. To model the sort, use a different set of words than those that the students have. For example, model with *dug, cub,* and *bun.* Set up the key words at the top of each column; in this example, the key words are *bug, tub,* and *sun,* as shown in Figure 5.15.

FIGURE 5.15



Turn over the first card to be sorted and *say the word and each anchor.* (This is *critical.*)

Think aloud: "*Cub, bug*? No, *cub* has *-ub* at the end and *bug* has *-ug. Cub, tub*? Yes, they both have *-ub.* But I am going to check this last one. *Cub, sun*? No. *Cub, tub* is right." Perform the last two actions in the routine for word sorting (shown below): check for mistakes and reflect.

Routine for Word Sorting

- Read each word out loud. Pull the unknown words out of the pile. Set up the anchor words.
- Say each word and compare it to the anchor words.
- Check for mistakes.
- **Reflect:** These words go in the *-ug* group because _____ .

Step 3: Practice

Either individually within a small group or with partners, have students sort their sets of words.

Important Reminders

Learners *must*

- be able to read the words
- understand what it means to sort
- say the words as they sort
- check for mistakes
- reflect.

When children say the words, they benefit from hearing the sound and feeling the way that sound works in their mouths. Without saying the word, children will simply sort visually, which they could do without even reading the words. Train students to check for mistakes, and resist the urge to jump in and immediately correct a mistake. Make sure children use the mistake-checking strategy—they should say the anchor word and compare it to each word in the sort. There is amazing learning that takes place when children find their own mistakes.

Learners must state why the words go in different groups. This is important because it allows the teacher to understand what the student notices about the words. For instance, if the student notices that all the *-ug* words end in *g*, this would not be exactly the goal because the word family unit is both *u* and *g*.

Making Words or Word Building Lesson

Why It Works Word Building and Making Words work because they require students to pay attention to each letter–sound in a word. These are excellent activities for solidifying a pattern and making sure that students really "own" that pattern because students must pay attention to letter order (Cunningham and Cunningham 1992; McCandliss et al. 2003). For both students use a set of specific letters (*i, s, r, n, g*). These letters can be magnetic, on cards, or written on a small dry erase board. The teacher dictates words and the students spell the words, usually changing one letter at a time or adding letters (e.g., *in, pin, pig, rig*). In Word Building students create words in a column like a ladder leaving the previous word visible (McCandliss et al. 2003). In a Making Words, the newly spelled word replaces the old one and at the end of the lesson, students use all the letters to make a "secret word (e.g., *spring*)."

This description is geared toward a Word Building lesson with guidance for Making Words offered at the end. Because the Making Words lesson is usually built around a "secret word," the letter choices may be constrained and the words constructed are limited. You must create words using only the letters in *spring*, for example. Word Building does not have these constraints. You can pick a few word families and select

consonants without the additional planning around a "secret word." Word Building can be used when students are just learning new short vowels. Making Words works best once the students have a large repertoire of many different vowel sounds, including long vowels.

Steps

Preparation

For Word Building, identify one or more high-frequency rime or word family, one of those starred in the scope and sequence, Figure 5.1. For example, *-ick* and *-ock*. Then brainstorm 5–7 consonants that could be added to both word families to make words (e.g., *h-*, *s-*, *t-*, *l-*, *m-*). Then plan the sequence (e.g., *lick, lock, sock, sick, thick, stick, stock, mock, smock, smocks, socks, shocks, shock*). Do not wing it! It seems simpler than it actually is.

For a Making Words lesson, start with the "secret word" that the students will make at the end. Then brainstorm additional words that the students can make with the letters in that word. Make sure that the word has the vowels that the student has been taught. Try to identify between ten and fifteen words. If possible, find words that can be rearranged to make a new word (e.g., *tip/pit, was/saw*).

Step 1: Review the Letters

Review the letters and sounds for each letter by having students touch each letter and say the sound.

Step 2: Call the Words

Tell the students the number of letters in the word. Dictate the first word and then ask the students to hold up their ladders, boards with magnetic letters, or dry erase boards

Tell the where the letter–sound will be changed in the word:

- The first word has two letters in it. Listen to the word, *in*. I went *in* the house. Spell the word and hold it up.
- Now we are going to add a letter so that our word has three letters. Make the word *pin*. At the beginning of the word, add *pppp* to *in*. She put a *pin* in her dress where it had ripped.
- Now we are going to change that word at the beginning again. We are going to make the word *pin* into *fin*, like a fish has, a *fin*.

Step 3: Find the Secret Words (in a Making Words Lesson)

If the lesson is a Making Words lesson, ask the students to make the secret word. Make sure to have two to three hints that might help the students think about that word

(e.g., "This is a season. It is usually a warm season. It is the season that comes after winter."). Do not give any hints at first; see if the students can come up with the word on their own.

Important Reminders

Pay attention to the words. There are a number of teacher resource books with premade word ladders or Making Words lessons. These are very convenient, but it's very important to look closely at the words. A word ladder might start with simple one-to-one correspondences (e.g., *bat, bag*) and then move to harder ones that are not appropriate (e.g., *beat*). The activity defeats its purpose if students are being asked to write words that they do not know.

Elkonin (Sound) Boxes and Letter Boxes

Why It Works Elkonin boxes, or "sound boxes," support phonemic awareness, spelling, and decoding. This phonemic awareness strategy helps readers break up words into sounds. It can also be extended to support spelling and decoding. The teacher uses a square box to show each sound in a word. The reader says each sound and at the same time pushes a counter into each box while saying the sounds (Elkonin 1963; Griffith and Olson 1992; Murray and Lesniak 1999; Yopp and Yopp 2000). Because sound boxes have empty squares, the reader is not overwhelmed by trying to remember which letters go with which sounds and instead can simply focus on saying the sound parts and moving counters into each box. After doing sound boxes, readers can do letter boxes by pushing letters into the boxes or by putting letters in the boxes to spell the words.

Steps

Preparation

Making Sound Boxes To make a sound box, glue a picture representing a two- or three-phoneme word on a sheet of paper. (Some two-phoneme words are not easily depicted in a picture.) Under the picture draw a box for each sound in the word. (Note: Pay attention to the *sounds*. Sometimes a word might have three letters but two sounds, like *see*. Some words have four letters but only three sounds, like *ship*.)

Choosing Words Start with two-phoneme words that begin with vowels. Then move to two-phoneme words that start with continuant consonants that can be stretched and held (e.g., *s, m, n*). After students can segment two-phoneme words, have them move to three-phoneme words, first with continuants and then with other consonant sounds. See Figure 5.16.

FIGURE 5.16

2-Phoneme Words (easiest to hardest)	• Beginning with a vowel: *at, add, am, an, as, at, egg, ed, in, if, it, is, on, odd, up, of* • Beginning with a continuant consonant: *low, lie, lay, my, may, me, no, sew/so, say, see, zoo, hi, hay, fee, row, ray* • Beginning with other consonants: *to, toe, tie, who, boo, do, go, no, row, day, doe, die, do, Joe, pay, pie* (Note: Many words with two phonemes have long vowels in them. Some with patterns like *-ow, -ie,* and *oe* would not be good candidates for *letter boxes,* but they are great for helping students hear the sounds in words.)
3-Phoneme Words (easiest to hardest)	• Beginning with a continuant consonant: *fan, fin, hat, ham, hot, hut, jam, jog, lit, lip, leg, mad, mud, mat, map, man, nap, nut, net, neck, red, rat, rug, rip, sit, sad, sack, sat, sub, sun, van, wet, whip, win, wag* • Beginning with other consonants: *bag, back, bat, cat, cab, can, cap, dog, dig, dad, dot, duck, gun, gas, pat, pan, pig, pod, pick, pit, tap, top, tag, tin, ten* (Note: All these three phoneme words have some type of picture that could be generated. These words could be used for the extensions to letter boxes in Step 4.)

Step 1: Stretch the Words

First, practice stretching words orally. The sound boxes activity breaks down when students are not practiced enough in stretching the words and hearing sound differences—a skill that this strategy presumes.

Model how to stretch words: "Let's stretch out the word *sat,* /ssssssaaaaaaattttttt/. I made those sounds longer. Let's try *meat* together, /mmmmmmeeeeeeeaaatt/. See, I can say each of these words the normal way or I can stretch it." (Note that these words both start with continuants.)

Then give each student a word to stretch.

Step 2: Model Pushing the Counters

Once students can stretch words, bring out the sound boxes and the counters and model pushing the counters into boxes while saying each sound. After modeling pushing the counters and saying the sounds, ask the *students* to say the sounds while you push the counters.

Step 3: Students Use Sound Boxes and Push the Counters

After modeling the process, give each student their own sound box. Ask each to first stretch the word and then push the counters in the boxes. Sometimes, students struggle with matching their voices to pushing the counters. Teachers can simplify the task by asking the student to do only one of the behaviors (i.e., pushing counters or saying the sounds). Another way to handle this is modeling the correct procedure with corrective feedback about what went wrong, like this: "When you pushed the counters, you pushed a counter for the sound /ff/, but on the last part, /an/, there were two sounds and you pushed only one counter. On /aaaaan/ you went like this. [Push one counter into the box while saying '/aaaaan/.'] There are two sounds in /aaan/. /aaaaa/ /nnnnn/. Watch me do all three sounds."

If the student cannot do it after the correction, tell the student, "Follow my finger," and put your finger above each box as you are also saying the sound.

Step 4: Letter Boxes

There are two extensions of letter boxes. In the first, students push magnetic letters into the boxes while saying the sounds and then blend the words back together. This approach is used to decode an unknown word. With this approach, the student is given a word without a picture; the student pushes the letters into the box while saying the sounds and then blends the sounds to read the words.

In the second extension, the student does the sound box and then writes the letters in the boxes after using the counters to push and say the sounds.

chapter 6

UNIT: Beyond First Words

Learning Long Vowels and Other Patterns

KAYLA WAS A THRIVING FIRST GRADER SOARING INTO THE end of the year and zipping through every book she was given. Her teacher had done a masterful job. When Kayla entered second grade after a long summer, she struggled a bit. Dale, her second grade teacher explained, "Kayla loved to read and she could get through most books, but she stumbled a lot. She could sound out simple words and she used context, but when words got a little more complicated and the pictures weren't there, she didn't have a lot in her arsenal." After looking at Kayla's writing and giving a decoding test, Dale started to understand.

"Kayla would write every word with a long vowel using a silent *e*," Dale explained. "So *boat* was *bote* and *beat* was *bete*. It was like she knew that you couldn't just put a vowel by itself, but she didn't know exactly what to put. When she was reading, words like *harm, noise, shook,* or *sight* were difficult. I knew that she needed some type of focused instruction on vowels." When Kayla struggled with the word *meat,* Dale placed a sticky note on this page and used it as an example to begin a lesson on long *e* featuring *ea*.

Chart: *The meat was tasty.*
met meat

Dale: Remember when we were reading this sentence, in this book? [Shows book.] This word [points to *meat*] was confusing. You thought it said *met.* You made a sound for each letter, like /me/ /at/.

The word *met* is *m-e-t,* and it looks like this [points to the word *met* on chart].