

Tips for Teaching Older Students How to Read

As a teacher or tutor or concerned parent, etc., these notes might help as you come alongside a struggling reader to help them in their quest for fluent literacy.

These tips may also be helpful in teaching English as a second language.

I have had requests for guidance for these types of situations – from struggling primary-level students to adult illiteracy. These pages represent my response.

- Joy D.



When might we say there is a “problem”?

Naturally, your child will begin to show an interest in reading likely in their “preschool” years. He might recognize his name on “his stuff”. She might like to know what a label says on a cereal box. He might try to read road sign words. She might be noticing store names. They might begin reading pictures in a book to tell a story page, by page to themselves or a baby sibling. Calendar words might hold some interest or other wall hangings with words to read. This is an excellent time to begin teaching your child literacy skills!

According to my mom, a former well-experienced schoolteacher with special interest in early literacy, if a child is grade 1 (approximately age 6) AND has begun lessons for learning how to read but is still struggling to read sentences by Christmas-time, you should definitely consider adding or changing to another method to see if it is more effective and less frustrating for your child. “School” should be fun at this age and young kids are relatively quick learners for lots of stuff. So if your child is picking up other things quickly, you should be able to hear him or her read you a simple story by Christmas.

If general learning is not going well within those first few months, be sure to have your child’s eyes tested by an optometrist (or hearing abilities tested if speech is not as clear as you’d expect).

If your current reading method isn’t effective or fun within the first half of your year, try other methods/curriculum with a fresh start (e.g. in January). Try that second method until early spring. If that method isn’t a happy one either, I’d try another curriculum for late spring and keep going through the summer (obviously with some breaks for family vacations, etc.). You don’t want this issue to drag all the way through the primary levels if it is simply a quirky kid who needs a certain style of learning.

For that grade 2 year, if your child isn’t ready for grade 2 yet, just have another year of grade 1, and pay extra close attention to figure out how your child learns best. If your child doesn’t begin to progress very well AND you have also been spending the time into this situation, THEN, perhaps you should consider “special needs” type of testing that fall (when he or she would normally be in grade 2) because something is really not normal.

(Yes, it might be still considered “normal” in the public system for a grade 2 child to not be reading anything much but a big part of that is that things can get missed in a large class. As a homeschooling family, you don’t have a large classroom and you are with your kids so much that you really aren’t missing it.)

The exceptions to the above: if there was a major crisis in the child’s life; then you’d give some extra time for that to be sorted through. And boys could be about a half-year difference/later than girls, in my understanding. Kids who have a birthday in November or December and could be up to a year behind in grade-level development compared to a kid with a January birthday.

Regarding Peppermint Stick Learning Company's levels for reading skills....

Let Me Read: Step 1, Step 2, and Step 3 are approximately the same level of material that my mom covered in her grade 1 classroom of average Canadian kids back in the mid-century. (She taught mainly in farm and town areas in Southern Ontario plus one year in the city in addition to her experiences through teacher's college.) Step 3 would perhaps include the first bit of a grade 2 level back then. This was when there was no or very little reading taught in kindergarten. By the time she taught me at home for one kindergarten year, Step 1 and 2 would essentially be the stuff she covered in kindergarten. However, my grade 1 teacher considered me and a few other students too advanced for reading lessons in her classroom so sent us to the library instead for that period. We have chosen to stretch out my mom's "one year" into 2-3 years of material to make it easy to begin in JK. This is because most parents have children who want to learn to read early and if they can grasp this skill, it makes it so much easier for a homeschool mom to multi-task in her home with other children and necessary daily work. But our program can begin at any stage/age and is self-paced. We are marketing our titles (both currently available ones and upcoming ones) as follows to include a variance of abilities/situations:

Let Me Read: Step 1 – designed for JK, ages 4-7 years old

Let Me Read: Step 2 – designed for SK, ages 5-8 years old

Let Me Read: Step 3 – designed for grade 1, ages 6-8 years old

- If a child knows the "sound alphabet" really good (e.g. single consonant sounds), reads just a few sight words, and is considered by the parents to be struggling with reading in grade 1 or grade 2 or grade 3 or grade 4, I'd suggest that you begin with Step 2 (not 3). There is a lot of foundational material in Step 2 for early reading skills which is not emphasized in Step 3. You might be able to do both Steps 2 & 3 that year.
- If a child reads sentences, picture storybooks, and short paragraphs but is struggling with reading chapter books, small novels, then I'd suggest either beginning with Step 2 OR Step 3 (if phonics has been fairly strongly grasped but he or she is still chugging along slowly with reading). Step 3 includes spelling lessons, whereas Step 2 does not.
- If a junior-aged child reads "sort of" fluently, has a fair-sized amount of vocabulary that he or she can read and write but avoids reading assignments, reading on their own, reading aloud smoothly in chapter books or brochures with paragraphs in them or similar (e.g. Bible passages), then I'd suggest a reviewing of literacy concepts with Step 4 or Step 2. Step 4 has more complex phonics in comparison to Step 3. (Step 3 would be OK too but you may need to "tweak" or explain a bit since the lessons are designed for primary children and are "cutesy" in style.) Step 2 has fewer "cutesy" graphics in comparison to any of our literacy programs and so Step 2 would be the program suggested for older children or adult literacy. However, Step 2 was still primarily designed for young children and so still retains the appeal for early childhood.

By the time children get into Step 5, they have become quite confident in literacy and fluency and more independent in studying words and stories. Step 5 and beyond focuses more on deeper comprehension concepts and expression.

Please note: Our "Peppermint Stick" style reading and writing standards are higher in comparison to average classrooms today and may even be higher than traditional homeschool curriculum because we feel kids given the right tools to be literate can truly soar! If you have already begun homeschooling for a year or more and want to jump into our reading program, the above guidelines should help you figure out where to begin. Everything is self-paced and more than one level in a year could be completed at some point.

Example: A student who finished grade 1 last year with weaker reading skills, might be in grade 2 math, SK Reading (Step 2), and Grade 1/2 Printing. The following years could combine Steps 3 & 4 or 4 & 5 in one year.

Example: A student who finished grade 3 last year but still really struggles with reading skills, could be in grade 4 math, history, science, and Step 4 and 5 for Reading.

“Grade” indicates a level of achievement, not a person’s physical age, not a person’s ability to be a lifelong learner, not a lack of great personality. Homeschoolers can be in several different grades (achievement levels) in the same year.

A note about the “Delayed Learning” philosophy: Occasionally parents have decided to purposely refrain from “formal” lessons until a child is 8-12 years old. On one hand, our curriculum can be adapted to these older beginners because everything is self-paced. On the other hand, I don’t recommend this as a preferable plan because it adds the pressure of “catching-up” to pre-teens (and in turn, teens) who at those ages, have other interests and pressures. I prefer early learning with “school” in the kindergarten years, however, our oldest child did fine with very little schoolwork in her kindergarten years since we were in transition of moving and building.

We use larger print size (fonts) in the beginner levels. Anyone, including adults (ESL or illiterate), *could* use PSLC curriculum however, it will remain to be have a layout that is designed for young children in keeping with our approach to encourage young students.

Do your curriculum choices or educational approach really matter? YES!

Educational approaches is something that most people try to avoid giving a strong opinion about. It could be about delaying “school” until an older age or drilling phonics or just reading lots of literature, etc.. As moms (myself included) don’t want to offend someone to say that a particular method might not be the easiest to produce a fluent reader and we want to “give the benefit of the doubt” to other people in a homeschool association group or a new friend. It is very difficult to be tactful and indeed, it might not be a wise idea to make a personal comment about an idea that sounds like it could cause trouble down the road in a friendship. Unless you know the person very well and you feel you can bounce ideas back and forth with that person, sometimes, it is best to say nothing and wait and see – maybe it WILL work out in the end. And maybe we’re the ones who are wrong for a method and the other folks are correct in how to teach a particular skill. Or it just may be perfect for that family but not yours.

Yet, in the role I have here in wanting to help families who didn’t expect to struggle with reading but who are, I will put down a couple of things to think about for the sake of the homeschoolers who are just beginning and considering some methods they have heard about and for the sake of homeschoolers who are realizing this problem early on and want to nip it in the bud. I am not directing my comments to any single individual since this is a problem that is actually quite common. At the same time, I will also put here that I appreciate every curriculum vendor that I’ve met at conferences and each table has had at least something I consider of value to offer. So yes, this will speak against some of my competitors’ products but no, I am not trying to devalue the people I work with in these situations. I believe they are all truly doing what they have seen work and I admit that their approach, though different than what I might or might not promote, does really work for some families very well. I do encourage you to research the methods which interest you to figure out what will be best for your family.

However, as a curriculum vendor at past home school conference settings meeting with concerned parents, on the phone or talking in-person with various people who are dealing with literacy struggles, as a daughter of schoolteachers who helped some homeschoolers with this issue many years ago and often discussed curriculum methods at home, and as someone who learned to read as a homeschooler myself (before entering a public grade 1 classroom), I have a generalized understanding about how some of these problems begin in the first place. And this entire article is trying to help people avoid or correct problems.

There are various styles of teaching literacy. There are advantages and disadvantages to each one although I believe that a balanced mix of these styles, especially when taught with a variety of types of activities is generally the most effective and takes the least overall effort from both the student and teacher for solid literacy skills.

(Beyond the obvious of neglecting to teach reading at all), there are a few educational approaches/styles which teach literacy in a certain way that does not reach a significant number of children effectively. And if your child happens to be one of those who do not grasp the skill of reading in that approach, you'll have to change your approach (or have him/her taught by some who will be able to do so) to fix it. If the problem is ignored, it usually does NOT go away on its own. The longer it is ignored or struggled with, the longer it can be to "catch-up" and the child will become discouraged.

I put that above paragraph here for the moms who believe so strongly in a certain approach, maybe because their friends are doing it and found it successful or maybe because the marketing of it sounded so attractive or maybe because they keep being told "don't worry – everything will work out since you are homeschooling". Whatever the reason, they are determined to stay with a certain approach to learning. Moms, for your child's sake, **you might have to change your approach if your child's education isn't going well**. Remember, you have agreed to take on the responsibility of raising them and looking after their academic guidance instead of giving that responsibility to a classroom teacher. You might need a tutor or family friend to help. Yes, you might be dealing with a learning disability such as dyslexia **but you might just be dealing with a style of teaching that doesn't fit your child**. Please don't let this go on year after year just hoping that it will get better on its own naturally or assume that your child won't ever be a good reader because they must have some sort of disability or inability. Please don't ignore or underestimate the value of the skill of reading well.

I must say that I asked my mom about her students who would learn to read quite well by Christmas-time of their grade 1 year with her (while other students the same age under a different teacher and method were much slower in their literacy skills). Did Mom have the "smarter kids" in her group?

"No," she replied, "The classes were not divided like that. I had an average group of kids – some smart, some not so smart – a wide variety of backgrounds and abilities. Same as the other teacher. But mine learned to read quicker in my class and were more excited [and confident] about reading as a result."

In her recollection, only one student of hers in 10 years of teaching, never learned how to read properly at a reasonable pace of development; he was a very mentally-challenged older student who did not seem to be able to learn in any subject yet loved his teacher immensely and had a good personality.

I do think there ARE **more** learning disabilities such as dyslexia, autism, and others in today's generation in comparison to back in the 1950's-1980's so I don't want you to think that these don't exist. They do. (If this is truly your situation, I suggest seeing our small page about "Special Needs" and then getting more detailed help on more qualified websites than ours.) However, I don't think one needs to put kids who can't learn with one or two methods into a disabled category and go that route for help unless there are also other strong indications for such. If I had done that, my oldest child would have been thought of as having a learning disability which would be far from the real truth. Actually, most (or all) of my children simply cannot learn well under certain methods or with certain resources we've tried out from a number of other publishers over the years. (We did this in one subject or more each year partly to help our kids understand how other homeschoolers were being educated.) But **if I change the method**, the "lightbulbs" in the brains flash "on", the lessons stick for the long-term with much less effort, and the smiles return. ☺

What follows here is hopefully a helpful chart to describe the various approaches/styles and how to deal with some common reading problems.

Educational Approach Descriptions with Help for Avoiding & Correcting Reading Problems

The Blended Method - (or “Blended-Blended Style” - JOY’S FAVOURITE!)

Simply put, it is a combination of styles put together (so that it reaches the widest audience possible).

What it might look like in real life... a combination of a few or all of the following:

- blended phonics and sight words lessons
- practicing with old story readers like Dick and Jane style (which are a see-and-say style of stories with lots of repetition throughout the storyline – repeats characters, single words, and builds more of them)
- rebus words (that is using little pictures to represent a word in a sentence)
- environmental print (that is vocally drawing attention to words in the environment such as wall décor, road signs, cereal boxes, mail, name labels, etc.) A person is ready to learn to read when he/she is noticing these things and when he/she is “reading” pictures in a story book to tell a story)
- context cues (that is using the other words and pictures around the new word to help figure out what it is).
- Visual memory cues such as word shapes (e.g. the word “look” – the oo can represent glasses to look through; trace around the shapes of tall and short letters) and spelling patterns (e.g. phonograms/word families, looking for little words within big words such as the word “tea” in “teach”.)

What reading materials are used (typically):

The blended style reads below a child’s level, at a child’s level, and above a child’s level – **lots** of different things to practice and learn from. But typically, novels with adult plot lines that are relatively meaningless to a child’s maturity level, are avoided in this approach. Any novels that are included would have plot lines which are relevant to a child. The themes tend to be appealing to a child’s life and include a variety of fiction and non-fiction genres.

What it is and what it isn’t

You can think of this style as an almost-eclectic approach. (Eclectic means making your own combinations of variety but without much structure; the blended style often has some structure, even if it is sometimes a flexible structure.)

To be “blended”, I am defining it as a combination of teaching reading skills with at least 2 aspects of these 4: phonics, sight words, context cues, and visual memory shapes/patterns. (If it’s just blended a “little bit” of 2 aspects, my personal opinion is that it isn’t as effective as blending all aspects but rather could end up confusing children. Just like a salad, how something is blended and incorporated together into something which makes sense to children – that point very well could make a huge difference in a program’s success.)

- A blended approach might be “just written worksheets” or “just hands-on kits” that teach at least 2 of the 4 aspects/styles. Example: A phonics and sight words program that has mainly written work for the student in a series of workbooks.
- A blended approach might also have additional built-in variety with hands-on, visual, written, and oral methods. Example: Peppermint Stick Learning Company’s “Let Me Read”. So I call that a “blended-blended” style if I want to be precise. It speaks a child’s language in being meaningful and fun!

What it isn’t? Curriculum can present a variety of methods in the sense of hands-on, written, oral but if it doesn’t teach a combination of reading skill approaches, then it ISN’T a “blended style”. Example, you could find a sequential phonics program that has a variety of stuff like hands-on phonics, written phonics, and auditory phonics components but this is not really a “blended” style because it doesn’t try to teach new words in anything other than phonics. In this scenario, the style you would be looking at would not be a “Blended Style” but rather a “Sequential Phonics Style” that has some variety in activities.

| <p style="text-align: center;">Problems/Disadvantage to Using The Blended Method</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Corrections to Try</p> |
|--|---|
| <p>Children may learn to read so early and go too fast through sentences that they might miss some little words with big meaning. This can result in having to re-read to get better answers in reading comprehension passages if the child is “skimming”.</p> <p>If the child reads so early, it may be difficult to find good reading material for their maturity and interest level at a higher level of sentence structures.</p> | <p>Rather than just enjoying the treat of an early silent reader, encourage oral reading aloud where the child MUST slow down to read clearly every word. An old-fashioned teacher’s rule from the 1950’s for reading aloud: “If a child misses/skips or goofs up on any word on a page in a reader, they should go back to re-read that page again until it is 100%; occasionally, one mistake may be allowed. If it is 2 words or more, the child does not go on to the next chapter until he or she has conquered the missed words fluently.”</p> <p>Encourage the child to help you read the Bible in your family devotion time. This will also reinforce the idea of slowing down to catch each word and you can discuss the meaning together too.</p> <p>Singing also slows down a fast reader to catch <u>every syllable</u> in a word. Practice this with a songbook on a regular basis so that the child sees the words (and is not just singing a memorized song). Slide your finger along under the words and syllables (not jumping jerkily) or just put a plain bookmark under to allow the eyes to slide along the lines.</p> <p>Keep looking for materials that will keep their interest alive – for example, “chapter books”, large-print novels or adapted stories from an original, more detailed piece of literature. You could also consider science topics to read about; these are non-fiction and cover a very broad number of topics and interests yet can be presented in a variety of reading levels.</p> |

The Sequential Phonics Method

This method is almost exclusive of sight words and focuses on sounds...

Example: Take one sound a week, word list drills, memorize phonics rules (written or hand signals), read phonics readers such as “Jan ran by a can”, work a lot with word families (phonograms) to show similarities of ate, rate, skate, etc. The child can become a great speller eventually if spelling rules and exceptions are also taught.

This method was especially popular in traditional schooling in the 1800-1900’s. I’ve heard that a sequential method is also popular in classical schooling if it is combined with reading and discussing “the classics”.

(I do agree with the point of knowing the sound alphabet and sounds of combinations of letters. Spelling patterns can also help when a child sees a little word inside a big word or a combo like “ate” in the word “agitate” to read an advertisement for a washing machine. Phonics is a part of the “Peppermint Stick” style but only a part. And it is not as sequential or drill-based as traditional methods.)

| Problems/Disadvantage to Using The Sequential Phonics Method | Corrections to Try |
|--|--|
| <p>This method often moves very slowly (although it is very detailed compared to methods below) and can hold a child back if lessons are just about reading lists rather than stories right away.</p> <p>The lists might be nonsense part-words such as ba, ca, da, fa. The lists might limit a child to one-syllable words.</p> <p>There is not as much freedom to just read any book or move at one’s own pace because the idea is that a child must master a specific stage <u>first</u> before moving on. Example: they must recognize all <u>alphabet</u> letters well, then all single sounds including long and short vowels, then all 1 syllable words, then can eventually move on to 2-syllable words, etc.</p> <p>This method also teaches the child to only “think within the box of phonics rules” so there can be challenges when facing a word in English (of which there are several) that doesn’t follow typical phonics rules.</p> <p>This method needs a very much involved teacher and often has a fair amount of <u>written</u> practice, tests, drills, and memory work.</p> <p>Because it moves at a slower pace, the child will need others to read lessons for them in other subject areas and will be <u>less independent</u> until they are fluent enough. However, the pace can suddenly pick up when a “lightbulb goes on inside the head” when all of the rules suddenly make sense. Then the child can zoom ahead and has a very solid foundation to read many words (and write them too).</p> <p>Here’s the detailed story mentioned a few pages ago: Two grade 1 teachers taught similar students in a town school that had mainly farming kids in the 1960’s. One teacher used the sequential phonics method with the same Dick and Jane readers. She did basically a letter a week, word list drills and her class were reading</p> | <p>Allow lessons to be completed quicker and out of “order” of a sound if the child desires it.</p> <p>Skip over some of the copious amounts of writing and <u>teach reading by actually reading</u> (not necessarily writing). In fact, you and your child could take an extra afternoon to just sit and look through the entire lesson book to get the big picture.</p> <p>You could post a table of contents or letter sounds to be learned on a wall or bulletin board and watch how fast it is learned.</p> <p>Add sight words by posting word flashcards on the back of a door.</p> <p>Provide easy-to-read books or articles alongside the basic reader you are trying to use in order to give extra practice opportunities and motivate with a child’s interest in reading by offering something on a topic of his or her interest.</p> <p>Teach about sliding a finger or bookmark under the words rather than pointing and jerking. This aids in better fluency flow, combining the words together rather than just watching single words or single syllables.</p> |

in the first primer (of 3 primer books for the school year) by Christmas time and studying the letter “w”. Her co-worker used the blended method with some visuals and ear training (e.g. put your hand on your head when you hear me say the sound of “mmm” – “rabbit, sock, sun, come”. She taught non-sequential letter sounds (consonants first) according to and how frequently they exist in words (e.g. R, S, T, etc.), taking a day for each letter sound (i.e. about 26 schooldays). At the same time, she introduced sight words in order of being mentioned in the reader they were using – about one each day by writing them on a calendar page. At the same time, she taught them to slide their finger across to read rebus sentences that they could relate to and had repeated words, for example, to practice the words “look, at, my” –

“Look at my  ! [rebus shoes]

Look at my  ! [rebus hands]

Look at my  ! [rebus dog] ” so that the children gained confidence and remained eager to read. By Christmas, the same 3 primer readers for the grade 1 year were done and they could read other stories for the remaining months and learn more. She believes it was more fun and more motivating for her students to become more independent learners earlier and as a teacher, saw the other method as boring. You see, that teacher had been a young grade 1 student years earlier – actually “homeschooled” due to a bad illness for most of that year, with her teacher sending schoolwork to her to study – which were boring, drilled word lists. And she was determined that if she grew up to be a grade 1 teacher, she would teach her students differently!!! That determined little girl who wanted something fun became that effective teacher... and MY mom! 😊

With a sequential phonics method, sometimes basic traditional readers are used as reading material with simple language and sometimes, the classic novels are used instead for read alouds and copywork or word study. The basic phonics readers can be quite boring and lack a plot line. The “classics” can be inappropriate for young children because often they contain themes which do not interest or relate to a child’s life (i.e. it’s boring to sit still and listen to a long story without pictures or meaning to a grade 1 child) and sometimes, it introduces values and concepts that older students need to exercise discernment on (i.e. a young child lacks maturity to handle the content).

Older Reader Improvisation (for any method): Instead of sliding a finger along, let’s make two assumptions... that an older reader does not want to sit close like a little child and also has a good number sense to be able to count things pretty good by now. So, he/she can sit elsewhere in the room with a copy of the same reading material, same page, etc. and as the teacher reads at a normal, clear pace, the reader can follow along in his/her copy. When the teacher pauses, this reader can read the word or they can take turns – each reading a sentence (or a paragraph or a page) as the story progresses. A plain (no picture, no text) bookmark can be used to keep under each line of words.

The “Learn By Example” Method

This is the method where the family members who know how to read, read many books aloud. They read and read and read and hope that the younger child will pick up the words as they go. Some will engage in a vocabulary discussion about the meaning of the words (since the words may be uncommon in a child’s language or understanding level) and have them copy out words and sentences from a piece of literature. The child may also dictate words to a story of his own while watching “Mom” write the words down correctly (modelled writing). (Note: “Peppermint Stick” does use modelled writing in our style for teaching writing.)

In other situations, the “learn by example” method is not formally discussed nor written about unless a child initiates this as part of his own self-discovery excitement. Here, the child listens to lots of things being read to him/her but is left to almost read by himself, in hopes that “naturally”, he will understand what he needs to do to be successful. Books and magazines are strewn around to invite interest but no formal goals are set and no adult sits down to begin a word study lesson unless the child shows interest in doing so. An extreme version of this approach is that it doesn’t matter when a child reads – maybe it will be this year or next or later in a few years – “don’t worry about it; eventually” the child will read as he learns to take responsibility for his own education and wants to learn”.

Corrections to Try

If years are going by without literacy coming along naturally, try changing your approach to one of the other ones above. (The blended one moves faster so if impatience is a factor in your situation, the blended one will be more enjoyable than the sequential phonics one.)

Realize that it took a certain amount of time to get to this point and it will take time to get out of the muddy waters. Don’t expect an older student to learn overnight. They might learn quickly but give them time, such as perhaps even 5 years, to be able to read adult-level materials fluently and respond in writing to them at the level of their peers or above.

Motivate them by demonstrating the importance of words in our every day life such as in running errands, shopping, recipes, patterns to build or make something, forms to fill in, driver’s licence books, etc.

Encourage them by taking the time to hear THE STUDENT read to you aloud. For all ages, you can read a page, he/she reads a page, you read the next, then he/she does and so on, taking turns until the end of the section.

The “Guess At It” Method -

This method focuses on context cues to teach reading skills. It may include word wall lists as well.

The idea with this method is partly to avoid demanding “rules” to be memorized and accept attempted spelling without correcting it to the same extent past teachers did (invented spelling) - to encourage students that they are on the right track if they keep guessing at something. The focus is on building self-esteem and on equality of all abilities that “could” be present in a classroom, thus lowering one’s expectations to require less attention to mistakes and avoid the potential of hurting someone’s feelings about the effort put into reading and language arts.

This method may have a bit of phonics but very little – generally only what is considered fun and active. It teaches lots of sight words and may colour code lists of words that have similar spellings. Lots of visuals (sometimes audio-visuals such as computer games) are used to help a student guess, in context, what a word is.

Example: Today’s schools and publishers of levelled readers often have this type of philosophy.

Corrections to Try

Raise your expectations and don’t be afraid to correct kindly when a student makes a mistake.

Organize parts of a literacy program very clearly to avoid a jumbled mess with confused children.

Strongly consider adding phonics to the sight words if you haven’t already done so.

Also strongly consider adding readers/books/stories which repeat the same characters, repeat words more frequently/often throughout the story, rather than just having things told in simple sentences with large varieties of words. This repetitive factor is very helpful, especially if phonics is not taught frequently. It motivates someone to want to know “what will happen next” to the same set of characters and this curiosity encourages a reader to move ahead in order to reach those goals.

In order to be effective, this method requires a lot of practice time – reading lots. There isn’t often enough time in a classroom setting to read enough to grasp the skill strongly enough for the average student. To compensate, reading also is encouraged in the evening on a daily basis. If you are homeschooling with this method, “reading” will likely take most of your time and you might feel that you can’t do hardly anything else until a child is a fluent reader or that you have to de-code so many words for your child. If it is getting very frustrating, I’d encourage you to look into other methods. I’d only use this method if the child is quickly mastering independent reading and enjoying it.

Regardless of your age in life, there are basically 4 ways we remember words.

(I like to use a combination of all 4 methods (ways) in my PSLC curriculum. ☺)

1. The Phonics or Word Study Method...

...sounding out letters and combinations of letters in order from left to right. Example: phonics – “ph” says “f”, “o” has a short sound because there is no other vowel next to it and no silent e, etc.

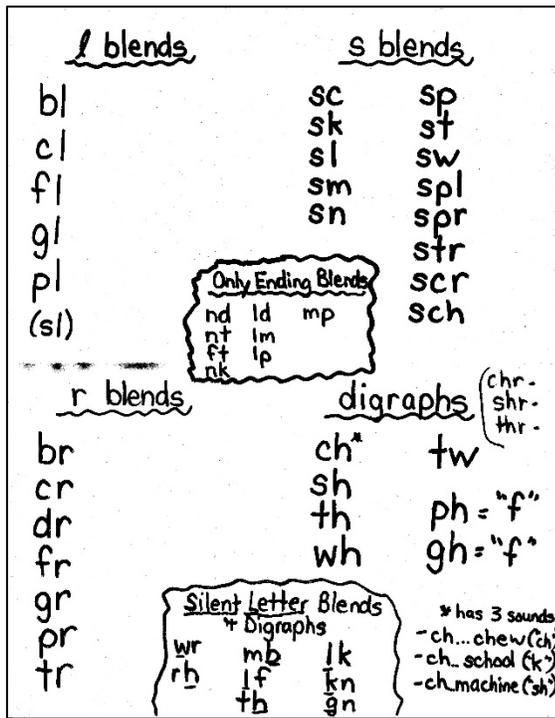
Hint #1: Draw an arrow under a word and move your finger across as you sound out the individual sounds that make up the word. (As you get used to this idea, forget drawing the arrow and just slide your finger and as you get used to that, just slide your eyes.) Example:



Hint#2: Together, print out a summary chart on all the sounds that you have learned and **add to your chart as you learn more** phonics rules. See the below photo as an example. It helps to have the student hand-write this out him/herself instead of just giving them a photocopied piece of paper. I suggest a full 8 ½ x 11” page that is double-sided.

| Consonants | Vowels | Vowels: Special Sounds |
|--|---|--|
| b c d f g h j k l m n p q-qu r s t v w x y z | a - short ä a - long ā e - short ě e - long ē i - short ĭ i - long ī o - short ō o - long ō u - short ŭ u - long ū (y) ĩ e | <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="font-size: small;"> sound alike ar er ir ur or </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> au, aw ou, ow oi, oy oo, ough </div> </div> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Special Letter Combos</u></p> short ě → ea ▷ read <u>for Vowels</u> short ĭ → ui ▷ build long ā → ai ay ea ey eigh a-e long ē → ea ee ey ie ei long ī → ie igh uy ye ei ī-e long ō → oa oe ow o o-e ew ou long ū → oo u-e ew ue ou ui uu oe u |
| <p><u>Soft Consonant Sounds</u></p> ce, cy, ci → "s" ge, gy, gi → "j" <p><u>The Three Sounds of "s"</u></p> S - sun → "s" S - rose → "z" S - tissue → "sh" | | |

Side 1 (when complete)



Side 2 (when complete)

2. Visual Memory Cues Method and Spelling Patterns...

2A...the shape of the word and/or a “photo” in the mind of what a word looks like or where it was seen before.

This was used in many school classrooms in the past. It especially is understood if the student also knows how to form printed letters correctly (e.g. the tall letters, the “basement” letters). It is also the way we remember words such as STOP on an octagonal sign. It reinforces the sounds of tall and basement letters as well, by drawing the eye’s attention to where these letters exist in words and phrases.

Hint #1: Draw or trace an enclosure around single words as you learn them. Using a ruler is great and slows down the process to allow more memorization of the shapes of letters. Cutting around large print words is also an option for people with good-enough scissors skills. Creative versions include things like gluing string or other items around as the border.



Hint #2: Because it is a time-consuming task and it is very effective for learning sight words, only a handful of words (e.g. maybe up to 30) needs to be drawn around for most people to “get the point” and automatically begin to see the shapes of words *without* having the physical line around the word. When this tip of how to learn words is realized, discontinue the drawing of lines before the student becomes bored of it.

2B...find little words within big words; recognize parts of words that are the same in words the student already knows and so can expand his/her vocabulary by understanding the sounds of those letter combos will be the same.

3. Sight Words Method...

“See and Say”, drill it or practice it in repetitive stories... memorize it – these are typical ways to learn sight words. (PSLC curriculum likes to also use method #2 to help method #3 “stick” better plus a bit more creativity! ☺)

4. The Method of Context...

...looking at surrounding words that he/she knows and the picture nearby to guess at what the new word is. This is also the method that most people learn to recognize his/her own name easily as a child – the child keeps seeing his/her name on anything that belongs to him/her such as a name label on a coat or nametag, a birthday card, a photo on a wall, etc.

At the early level, it looks like a child is only “reading a picture” but this IS part of learning to read words because there is a word/picture association going on in these little minds and this association will help them to remember the new words. In later stages, we guess at words in paragraphs by looking at an article’s accompanying photos or surrounding context of other words we already know. This continues into adult life, for example when we read something new about technology or new products or new political words. We look at a picture to grasp context too.

One of the Easiest Ways to Practice “Guessing a Word”:

ENVIRONMENTAL PRINT: Refer to words in your day-to-day life when your child is noticing them. Point to the word (if necessary) and read it aloud slowly. Your child will naturally pick up a lot of words this way, seeing the words in use in their normal environment!

Examples:

- calendar months (e.g. This word says “October”. Can you find same word on other calendars in our house?)
- food labels, shopping lists, recipes, garden seeds
- name of your church on its bulletin
- names of stores or other community place names (e.g. “Fair”, “Camp”)
- familiar titles: the words “Bible” on a Bible; “Cookbook” on a recipe book; “Phone Book” on a phone book.
- buttons to push on things that say “ON”, “OFF”, etc.
- enter and exit signs in stores
- STOP signs

For an older and/or struggling readers...

- Label items in your home, (beyond just the ordinary labelling of your child’s artwork with a name). Words such as “chair”, “toilet paper”, “mirror”, “coats” (above hooks), can help to expand a child’s vocabulary rapidly and can be like a game.
- You could use narratives (stories) from the Bible. These appeal to all ages, all cultures, and you have the option of adding pictures (so many are available) for greater comprehension and retaining of meaning. Underline key words or phrases as desired and it becomes a highlighted Bible, normalizing the experience for the struggling reader, since this is a normal practice for many people who read it.
- Instead of using teacher or factory-made flashcards, the student could design the artwork with photography or pen and ink drawings or magazine cut-outs AND THEN ALSO type or hand-print the accompanying word of course! If a student can “teach something back” (this assignment is essentially giving him/her the role of being a teacher who is preparing a visual aid), then the lesson should also “stick” pretty good.

More General Tips:

1. Start with what the person already knows. For example, start with words in a familiar environment (home, work, store) or common knowledge such as animals living in Canada rather than a book about African wildlife. Once the person has grasped vocabulary relating to ordinary stuff, then he/she can read to find out about new stuff.
2. To motivate interest...
 - a. Avoid just word lists and word sounds and isolated sentences that carry no real life meaning. Note: Sadly, this is how many traditional teaching material is designed and it is boring. (e.g. Jan ran by a can. A rat is on a cat by a mat. Really?? How interesting (not)! Would we talk that way when we learn to speak? Why would we want to learn to read like that?)
 - b. Aim to read a variety of words, phrases, and sentences right from the start. Try to use reading material that relates to the real life of the person who is learning. Example: Thematic word lists use word association and daily life to easily memorize things together, such as “Breakfast Words”. So pick some relevant themes for your student and teach the words that fit with a theme in the same lesson. Include both big and little words for interest’s sake and motivation due to a sense of accomplishment (“I can read long words, not just single syllable baby ones.”)
 - c. Aim to have the person read stories very soon after he/she knows just a few sight words and he/she has begun to understand basic letter sounds. (This might even be before all alphabet letter sounds are learned.) When a person reads a story, he/she is motivated to continue to find out “what happens next”. Readers such as “Dick and Jane” motivated decades of children partly due to this reason – they wanted to find out what happened to the characters that they had begun to know and identify with. When a story continues with the same characters, there is a stronger motivation to continue to read. But the story does have to be at the level of understanding of the person and his/her lifestyle/stage to work best or it could be too irrelevant and therefore, more likely to be rejected.
 - d. Use incentives if the person is motivated by rewards. Stickers can be motivating to older learners too. How about collecting points towards a larger prize such as a book or magazine or time for a game of bowling or croquet or checkers? Perhaps reward each day of good effort with one guess at a jar of chocolates (better than jelly beans) as to how many are in that jar.
 - e. Keep a fresh variety of things to read – keep moving on to more reading material to practice with – use the element of “surprise” to prevent boredom. Don’t just stay with one basic reader or one basic workbook. If every lesson is predictable (like many boring curriculum materials on the market), then freshness is lost and the eagerness to learn can turn into just a determination to “get through this and get it done”, gritting the teeth because then the goal of reading looks so challenging. Make it an adventure, add a measure of mystery in the sense that the student does not know what exactly the next lesson in reading will hold – will you bring a Family Circus cartoon book, some cereal box labels, a story in a Sunday School paper, a driver’s license handbook, a roadmap, a brochure to a zoo, an application form for a community program (to show how to fill things out, not necessarily using it to sign up for say, hockey lessons), a grocery flyer, a birthday card, a ---- ?
 - f. Don’t be afraid to use pictures and simple text and stories! Pictures help children learn how to read, help adults assemble furniture, and will likely be the kind of books you will enjoy if you still can read as an older senior citizen someday.
3. Aim for a stable home environment: Slow down on how often you change furniture layouts, wall décor, bulletin board displays, etc.. Try to have “school” in a spot in your house that isn’t chaotic in appearance or noise. Declutter. Finish your renos so the environment is less changing or distracting.

“I’m so far behind that my child/teen can’t be educated further beyond life skills of working around home!”

A note to the desperate, exhausted moms –

This isn’t a note to tell you that everything will be “just fine” if you are homeschooling. It isn’t a note to say there are “no homeschool failures”. The public education fails sometimes. So do individuals sometimes. That is honest reality.

Many homeschooling moms have felt the stress of struggling to keep up with a planned education for a period of time. Many of us have had seasons in our lives where “school” becomes more practical and not “bookwork” such as during a challenging pregnancy, a period of pressing medical needs that forces us from our normal days to be often on the road for appointments, a construction project such as building a house or renovating one. Some of us have to juggle chronic medical stuff that someone in our home lives with and we have to figure a way to get “school” done around all of that. If it is manageable or relatively short-lived without huge impacts, then we can carry on fairly well.

But regardless of how long or difficult something is, parents needs to rise above, be determined, very prayerful as to what is best for everyone’s future in life, and return to the commitment of being responsible for raising educated children, preparing them well to be able leave our nest. What does that responsibility look like?

For some, the response to difficulties will mean placing them into the public system (e.g. if a talented teacher is working there who can help) or alternative education options or private paid tutoring.

For others, it will mean taking the time (that’s YOUR time) to go back to where your child/teen needs to begin and begin all over again with fresh curriculum and a fresh plan. The time involved can be embarrassing and painfully long but if the struggling student still desires to learn, there is hope for success. And here I am referring to success to be more than producing a happy, respectful, faithful adult. Success here means that he/she will graduate from sufficient education to get them a healthy job with enough wages to live independently, in a different place than the parents’ house. And “healthy” job means one that is not damaging to them physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually.

I truly believe that moms who are struggling long-term with basic academic skills really love their children and want them to be smart and know at least as much as their peers. They know the public system has its problems in being able to always produce literate graduates who can function well in post-secondary coursework or in a long-term career. They are told that to homeschool is always better – and, **often it is but not always.** Your community might have a better teacher who is gifted at helping struggling students. And that’s OK. Really.

Not everyone has a gift of being able to effectively teach (or guide) children with academic or career-related subjects. (Note: I do believe that all Christian parents ARE equipped to spiritually and morally train their children.)

And it isn’t up to the child to begin at the stage of self-discovery and be responsible for his/her own education alone. They need to be nurtured and led. Most of the self-discovery stuff happens after the parent (or other adult) has taken the time to teach them how to learn and it will only happen easily if the foundation has been solid enough.

So if you need to go back and begin again at a foundational level or ask others to help you in the process who are available to do that, please don’t hesitate. No parent is perfect. No classroom teacher is perfect. But each one of us should be humble.

Truths to Ponder When Trying to Help Someone Who Lacks a Skill You Have:

A final note to tutors and teachers (including parents):

- The problem of not being able to read well yet did not just appear overnight. It will take time and diligence to get to a satisfactory level of skill. That means - it will take time. Keep this in mind for your expectations and celebrate small steps of accomplishment.
- Next point: It will take time and it's OK for something to take a lot of time. You likely will have moments of having to repeat things that you thought had already been understood. Expect that. There can be a purpose and benefits in waiting or slowing down to get it right or solid. When Jesus was told that Lazarus was sick, He could have gone immediately but he delayed going so that God's purposes could be realized. Go at the pace that you should.
- God is limitless but we are human beings and are limited; we cannot solve every problem. Nor is it intended that we carry every burden or be able to help every person in need of assistance. We can only do the work that God has called us to do in His strength. Let HIM be the One to carry every burden. He is the One Who can help every person. In other words, you don't have to help everyone or even pray for all of the problems. God is sufficient to meet any need and can send someone else to help someone too – it doesn't have to be "us" to be the helper in a situation we are aware of all the time. We can rest in knowing He cares more for that person than we ever could. We just need to be faithful to do what He has chosen for us to do and not try to run beyond His direction. Taking on more than what God intends for us only causes unnecessary worry, distress, stress, and guilt. This is the same idea of letting God be God, not us – He leads, we follow; He controls, He holds the whole world in His hands; we do not.
- Methods are only methods – we can respectfully disagree and present about "how" to best teach reading (or math or geography, etc.), but we need to remember that the Christian life isn't about fighting over academic methods or using the Bible to claim that "our preference" or style is "in the Bible" and thus, all homeschoolers, if "doing it right", must follow "our choice". The world has what is known as "reading wars" (e.g. over whole language only versus phonics) but for believers in Jesus Christ, a discussion about literacy methods ought to be respectfully helpful and gracious, offering room for another person's freedom to conclude/decide what is a better fit for her/his family/situation, and this has been my intention with these pages of explanation.
- Joy

"We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God."

Romans 15:1-7 (NKJV)

(These pages contain slight updates as of January 2021)