

Multi-Syllabic Word Work

“To help students learn to read polysyllabic words, teachers can use both syllable- and morpheme-based approaches.”

Devin M. Kearns & Victoria M. Whaley, 2019

“So, yes, teach syllabication, but expose kids to the exceptions and teach them to use these divisions conditionally and flexibly. Approach words both through decoding and spelling. Focus considerable attention on the morphological units within words as well.”

Tim Shanahan, 2021

Definitions

1. A *syllable* is a word or word part which includes one vowel sound and a corresponding letter or letters. A syllable sound is an uninterrupted unit of sound.
2. A *morpheme* is the smallest unit of meaning within language. Greek and Latin prefixes and suffixes are common morphemes. Their spellings and meanings are usually consistent, but pronunciation often differs.

Research and Pedagogical Assumptions

-How the consonants and the vowel are sequenced in a syllable affects the sound of the vowel. Syllables must be divided into parts that follow English rules about the location of letters in words. This means that syllables cannot begin with consonant clusters that could not start a word (e.g., ck, rt, nd) or end with clusters that cannot end a word (e.g., str, gr, bl) (Taft, 1979).

-Multi-syllabic words can be divided into smaller syllabic and morphemic units to assist spelling and reading. Many big words can be logically divided in a variety of ways.

-When putting together syllables, students’ decoding and encoding choices are informed by their oral English-language lexicons. English-language learners do so as well, especially if their primary language features an alphabetic code with similar letter-sound correspondences.

-Knowing Greek and Latin prefixes and suffixes is key to reading, spelling, and accessing the meaning of multi-syllabic words. The spellings and meanings of these affixes are quite consistent; however, their pronunciation varies.

“Prefixes and suffixes are longer than graphemes. When students divide words using morphemes, there are fewer parts than with graphemes. This makes decoding easier. Thus, morphemes are helpful for reading and also for spelling” (Kearns & Whaley, 2019).

-Breaking apart multi-syllabic words for conventional spelling and accurate pronunciation is not best achieved via application of hard and fast rules (many have limited applicability).

“However, do teach the syllable types and common syllable divisions. Knowing the syllable type gives students a statistically-informed guess about which vowel sound to try first. Of course, the vowel and consonant sounds don’t always conform to the common patterns, but knowing the common syllable types provides a starting point to flex the vowel sound (set for variability)” (Shanahan, 2021). Dr. Tim Shanahan recommends no more than 2 or 3 hours of syllable types and division instruction per year.

“Students should be taught to recognize syllable types so that they know how to pronounce the vowel in the syllable” (Holly B. Lane, 2021)

-Students need lots of practice, not just “how to” strategies. Extensive modeling, exposure, and practice of syllable types, syllable division guidelines, common syllable patterns, prefixes, suffixes, vowel and consonant accent shifts, and conventional spelling rules all contribute to a bank of problem-solving choices for decoding and encoding.

-Knowing which syllables include the primary vowel accent and which syllables are unaccented aids pronunciation and spelling. Some conventional spelling rules necessitate this knowledge.

-Explaining etymological reasons for the spelling and pronunciation of some words can build students’ understandings of the complexity of the English language and assist in pronunciation and spelling. However, spending too much time explaining word origins can be counterproductive.

-Both speech to print and print to speech methodologies can be integrated into reading and spelling multi-syllabic words. The **Say It! Spell It! Read It!** instructional approach incorporates both approaches.

“Moreover, teachers may sometimes include words they think are totally unfamiliar to students. In these cases, we suggest that teachers begin their lessons by telling students how to say the words they will teach (without presenting them visually), giving brief definitions, and having students repeat the words aloud (Ouellette & Fraser, 2009).

“Students can also benefit from practice reading words that are definitely not part of the spoken lexicon, as students will also encounter more of these words as they read more advanced texts. Therefore, some practice with unknown words—even made-up words, called nonsense words—may be appropriate. When students read nonsense words, it can help students learn to make their pronunciations more fluid and natural, particularly by using appropriate stress patterns (Heggie & Wade-Woolley, 2017).

-Multi-syllabic instruction is most successful when integrated with a systematic instructional sequence for phonics and spelling.

Prerequisites for Teaching The Multi-Syllabic Strategy

- Students can hear, distinguish, and count phoneme and syllable sounds. If unsure about mastery, administer the five quick [Syllable Awareness Assessments](#).
- Students must have mastery of single syllable decoding and encoding.
- Students need to be able to identify common prefixes, suffixes, and syllable patterns in multi-syllabic words.
- English-language learners will need visuals to support meaning and decoding (cognates, etc.).

Speech Articulation and Focus Sound-Spelling Review

Researchers Kearns and Whaley (2019) suggest brief warm-ups to review focus sound-spellings prior to multi-syllabic decoding and spelling practice. Sound walls provide both speech articulation guidance and the common sound-spellings helpful to rehearse quickly prior to instruction.

Focus Sound-Spelling Flex Practice

A second warm-up helps students practice set for variability by flexing the vowel and consonant sounds according to their oral language lexicons, knowledge of syllable types and patterns, and word families. John Sheffelbine (2006), author of the BPST and SIPP program, advocated using nonsense words to help students practice *transforming* sounds, especially between short vowel (closed) and long vowel (open) syllables.

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The Pennington Multi-Syllabic Strategy for Older Students

Say It!

1. “The word is ‘**uninvited.**’ Word?” Students repeat, “**uninvited.**”
2. [Use the word in a sentence.] **The uninvited guests were asked to leave.**

3. “Let’s draw lines for the syllables as we say them together.”

“**un**” is a prefix, meaning **not**.

“**in**” is a prefix, meaning **in or into**.

“**vi**”

“**ted**” The “ed” is a suffix, showing the past. We pronounce the *e* as short /i/ in “ed” when it follows a /d/ or /t/.

/un/

/un/ /in/

/un/ /in/ /vi/

/un/ /in/ /vi/ /tɪd/

Spell It!

4. “Let’s say the syllables and spell them on top of their lines.”

5. “Let’s say and spell the first prefix.” “**un**”

un

un in

6. “Let’s say and spell the next prefix.” “**in**”

un in vi

7. “Let’s say and spell the sounds in the next syllable.” “/v/i/--‘vi’”

Check and correct. “The vowel at the end of a syllable often has a long vowel sound. If you said “vīt” and spelled “vit,” that’s fine; if you said “vīt,” slash (/) through the “t.”

8. “Let’s say and spell the suffix.” “**ed**”

un in vi ted

“What needs to be added before the suffix to make the syllable *sound right*? ‘t’ If you need to do so, add the ‘t’ before the ‘ed.’

The bound base, “vit” means *life*, as in *vitamin*, *nativity*, or *activity*.”

Read It!

9. “Let’s put together the syllables to read the word.”

[Use a straight hand slide underneath prefixes and suffixes. Use *u-shaped* hand swoops underneath the rest of the syllables as you continuously blend their sound-spellings. If some students say the incorrect vowel or consonant sound or syllable division, say “Try another” until they say it correctly. Erase the word.]

un in vi ted

10. “Read the word on your paper as you clap and snap the syllables. Clap the accented and snap (or tap your knees) the unaccented.

Extension: “Now read, clap, and snap this related word: *invitation*

What happens to “i” vowel sound and the accented syllable?”

un/in/vi/ted
in/vi/TA/tion

“Try Another” Sound or Syllable Division

Short Vowel Syllable: A single vowel followed by a consonant or doubled consonant usually has a short vowel sound. Examples: rad/ish, Hob/bit

Long Vowel Syllable: A single vowel ending a syllable often has a long vowel sound.
Example: high/ly

Consonant-Final *e* Syllable: A vowel before a single consonant-final *e* usually has a long vowel sound. The final *e* is silent and is part of the long vowel spelling (a_e, e_e, i_e, o_e, u_e)
Example: gravestone

Vowel Team Syllable: A vowel formed by two letters, making one sound or a vowel formed by two letters, making two sounds stays in the same syllable. Examples: teach/er, joy/ful

Connected Consonants Syllable: A consonant formed by two letters, making one sound (sh, th, ch, wh, ph) or a consonant cluster formed by two or three letters, making separate sounds (e.g. bl, str, nd) stay in the same syllable. Examples: mo/ther, sand/storm

When two unconnected consonants are next to each other, divide the syllables between them. When three consonants are next to each other, usually divide the syllable between the first and second consonant. Examples: sub/mit, com/plete

Vowel-*r* Syllable: A vowel followed by the single letter *r* has an /er/, /or/, or /ar/ sound and stays in the same syllable. Examples for /er/: baker, urgent, dirty, rumor, mortar Example for /or/: glory Examples for /ar/ or /air/: harmful, burglary

Consonant-“le” Stable Syllable: An ending syllable with a consonant-“le stays in the same syllable and has an /ul/ as in *full* sound following the consonant. Example: purple

Other ending syllables with the schwa sound (long /ūh/, short /ŭh/, or short /ĭ/) include “sion,” “tion,” “zion,” “ture,” “cious,” “tious,” and “age.” These syllables have consistent pronunciations.

Schwa Syllable: The schwa is usually found in unaccented syllables and can have a short /uh/ sound (ĭ/tēm) or a long /uh/ sound (ä/bóut).

Read It! On Your Own: The **DUST** Strategy

1. **Divide** the word with slashes (/) after any prefixes and before any suffixes. If reading a book, hide any prefixes with your left thumb and any suffixes with your right thumb. Example: **un/in/vit/ed**
2. For the remaining syllables, **underline** the vowels. Example: **un/in/vit/ed**
3. **Say** the whole word, syllable by syllable. Example: **un/in/vit/ed** (mispronounced)
4. If it doesn’t sound like a word you’ve heard, **try** another sound or syllable division and pay attention to the accent placement. Example: **un/in/VI/ed**