

Using the Six Syllable Types to Teach Word Attack Skills

Mary Kay Sherman
Houston Baptist University

Abstract

Reading fluency is one of several components of an effective reading program. One way to increase a student's reading fluency is teaching word attack skills as a way to break words down into smaller parts. Strategies, such as direct teaching of word attack skills, can make it easier for students to read unknown words. Understanding and applying the six syllable types to unfamiliar words can help readers successfully decode unknown words. Fluent reading leads to better comprehension of the text. The purpose of this paper was to define the six syllable types, identify common syllable patterns, and provide tips and suggestions for incorporating this information into an existing curriculum.

Keywords: *dyslexia, reading, fluency, syllable types, syllable patterns, word attack skills*

Introduction

Being able to comprehend what is being read is the goal of reading (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Reading fluency is defined as accurate, quick, and smooth reading for the purpose of understanding (Shaywitz, 2003). Fluency can have a direct impact on reading comprehension. For some who are struggling to learn to read, fluency can be hard to obtain, especially if the reader relies on sounding out words that are not familiar to them. Many times, beginning readers or students who are struggling to learn to read may stop when they come to a word they do not know. These readers may employ several techniques while trying to figure out the word. A reader may try to sound it out or look for clues in pictures. Guessing or waiting for the teacher to provide a hint or say the word are also ways that readers use to identify words they do not know.

The National Reading Panel (2000) reported that reading fluency and comprehension were two areas necessary for effective reading instruction. Since then, additional research has supported their conclusions and indicated the need for explicit and direction instruction. Teachers should not assume that students automatically know the sounds that letters make (Torgesen, 2009). Shaywitz (2003) contended that teachers should address phonological awareness and phonemic awareness throughout the reading curriculum. Moats and Sedita (2006) also stressed the importance of recognizing patterns and understanding syllable types as a way to break a word into smaller, more manageable parts in order to comprehend it. With this in mind, teachers should provide students who struggle with reading acquisition explicit and direct instruction for the six syllable types (Knight-McKenna, 2008; Torgesen, 2009).

Six Syllable Types

Some words cannot be sounded out. These words, often known as sight words, are not decodable because the sounds do not predictably correspond with the letters in the word (Light & McNaughton, 2012). Sight words, such as *said*, *who*, *come*, *does*, need to be memorized because they cannot be sounded out. However, most English language words can be broken down into smaller parts, making these words easier to read. There are six syllable types that make this possible: closed, open, silent e, vowel pair, r-controlled, and final stable syllable.

Every word has at least one vowel. Single-letter words, such as *I* and *a*, are vowel-only words. Every syllable has one vowel sound. Single-syllable words, like *clump*, *she*, and *fine*, each have one vowel sound. Therefore, words with multiple syllables will have one vowel sound for each syllable. Examples of multisyllabic words are *define*, *program*, *children*. One vowel sound is heard in each syllable. Each syllable type is related to the sound the vowel will make. Words with more than one syllable may have the same syllable type, such as in the word *napkin*, or more than one syllable type, such as in the word *complete*. By determining the vowel sound in each syllable type, the reader can use this knowledge to decode unknown words.

The alphabet consists of 26 letters, five of which are always vowels: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. All vowel sounds are made with the mouth open. With an open mouth, the sound is not blocked or cut off in any way (Neuhaus, 2016a). A syllable is a word or a word part that makes the mouth open and contains one vowel sound (Moats & Sedita, 2006; Neuhaus, 2016a).

A closed vowel has a short vowel sound. There is a consonant after the vowel. Students can learn the following author-created chant: “A consonant after a vowel make the vowel short.” While teaching this chant, the teacher should

hold up two fingers in the shape of a *v*. Then, the teacher should bring their hand down while saying the word *short*. Examples of words that have a closed syllable are *hat*, *stomp*, *in*, and *plant*.

An open vowel syllable type has a long vowel sound. These words have only one vowel in the word and no other letters after the vowel to stop the sound. Students can learn this author-created chant: “An open vowel is long because it has nothing to stop it.” While teaching this chant, the teacher should hold up two fingers in the shape of a *v*. Then, the teacher should move their hand to the left while saying the word *long*. Examples of words that have an open syllable are *so*, *me*, *hi*, and *she*.

A silent e syllable type has a soundless *e* at the end of the word that makes the first vowel long and creates a vowel-consonant-*e* spelling pattern. Teachers often refer to this syllable type as “magic *e*” or “sneaky *e*” since the final *e* gives its voice to the other vowel (Moats & Sedita, 2006). Examples of words that have a silent e syllable type are *game*, *hope*, *ripe*, and *stale*.

A vowel pair syllable type, also referred to as a vowel team or a vowel diagraph, has two vowels next to each other in a word (Carreker, 2005). Usually, the vowels combine to make one sound, such as in the words *team*, *week*, *pail*, and *goat*. A common instructional phrase for teaching vowel pairs is, “When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking.” Although that may be true in some instances, it is not correct with every word. Examples of words that have a vowel pair syllable type that make two separate sounds are *diet*, *poem*, and *oasis*.

With the R-controlled syllable type, the vowel sound is neither long nor short. This syllable type is difficult for some students. The letter *r* makes the vowel sound distorted or bends the sound when it immediately follows a vowel (Carreker, 2005). There are three instances when the vowel sound is the same: *er*,

ir, and *ur*. Although the spelling is different, each spelling sound is pronounced by making the sound /r/, such as in the words *her*, *bird*, and *turn*. Words containing *ar*, such as in *start*, *far*, and *arm*, have the vowel sound /ar/. Words containing *or*, such as *fork*, *storm*, and *born*, have the vowel sound /or/.

The sixth syllable type is final stable syllable. Teaching what each of these three words mean can help in remembering this syllable type (Carreker, 2005). The word *final* means last, so it will always be the last syllable

in a base word or a word with no suffixes. The word *stable* means unchanging, so it will always be the same. The word *syllable* means a word or a word part with one vowel sound. Final stable syllable include these endings: *-ble*, *-fle*, *-gle*, *-dle*, *-ple*, and other word endings. Examples of final stable syllable words are *stumble*, *ruffle*, *giggle*, *candle*, and *sample*. Similar to the r-controlled syllable type, words with a final stable syllable do not have a true vowel sound. Table 1 shows each of the six syllable types, along with examples.

Table 1

Six Syllable Types

Closed	Open	Silent e	Vowel Pair	R- Controlled	Final Stable Syllable
vc	v->	vce	vv	vr	-le
gal	go	rope	meet	clerk	ramble
help	she	slate	peak	bird	dazzle
stamp	hi	theme	steak	yarn	dimple
rock	so	tide	bread	whirl	handle
bill	be	tube	toast	stork	sniffle
tug		while	claim	perch	battle
fish		home	stray	burn	jungle
glass		spade	toe	firm	ankle

Syllable Patterns

Once students are comfortable with determining syllable types in one-syllable words, recognizing syllable patterns in multisyllabic words is the next step. In multisyllabic words, the most common syllable patterns are vc|cv, v|cv, vc|v, and v|v (Carreker, 2005). There are also vc|ccv or vcc|cv syllable patterns; however, these are not as common.

Teachers can instruct students to identify syllable patterns with the following steps:

1. Find the vowels in the word.
2. Underneath each vowel, place a dot or a small v.
3. Identify the syllable pattern.

For instance, the word *tarnish* has two syllables. It is a vc|cv pattern since there are two consonants (i.e., *r*, *n*) between the two vowels

(i.e., *a, i*): tar|nish. The first syllable type is r-controlled and the second syllable type is closed. Table 2 shows the most common syllable types, along with examples. Teachers must also

remind students that when dividing words with consonant blends or consonant digraphs, they must keep them together and not separate them into different syllables.

Table 2

Syllable Division Patterns

vc cv*	v cv	vc v	v v	vcccv
jumbo	Polish	polish	poet	district
problem	bogus	cabin	diet	complex
pilgrim	raven	comic	oasis	orphan
cascade	humid	lemon	museum	dolphin
garnet	pilot	denim	duet	constant
trombone	hotel	radish	neon	explain
rabbit	omit	seven	fluid	farther
reptile	oval	blemish	riot	monster
harpoon	baby	finish	video	pilgrim
orbit	music	wagon	violin	complain

*The vc|cvc|cv pattern is an extension of the vc|cv pattern. Examples are *palmetto, Atlantic, fantastic, compensate, and insistent*.

Conclusion

Being a fluent reader means reading smoothly, accurately, and quickly to gain meaning from a text (Shaywitz, 2003). Students who are struggling to read may need direct teaching of word attack strategies. One way to help students become independent readers is to teach syllable types and syllable division patterns (Carreker, 2005; Shaywitz, 2003). When given these techniques and skills, students can tackle longer or more intimidating words. Word attack strategies may give students a

feeling of confidence to break words apart, determine the vowel sounds, blend syllables back together, and read the word. Teaching students techniques to determine the meaning of unknown words will help build their confidence and make them more self-reliant, which in turn promotes improved reading comprehension. Determining syllable types and syllable division patterns for multisyllabic words are strategies that teachers can incorporate into any existing curriculum. By doing so, students are more likely to become independent readers and learn to love reading (Neuhaus, 2016b).

References

Carreker, S. (2005). Teaching reading: Accurate decoding and fluency. In J. R. Birsh (Ed.), *Multisensory teaching of basic language skills* (pp. 213-255). Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

- Knight-McKenna, M. (2008). Syllable types: A strategy for reading multisyllabic words. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 40*(3), 18-24.
- Light, J., & McNaughton, D. (2012). Literacy instruction for individuals with autism, cerebral palsy, down syndrome and other disabilities. Retrieved from <http://aacliteracy.psu.edu/index.php/page/show/id/9/index.html>
- Moats, L., & Sedita, J. (2006). *LETRS: Language essentials for teachers of reading and spelling*. Boston, MA: Sopris West.
- National Reading Panel. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel-Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
- Neuhaus Education Center. (2016a). *Glossary*. Retrieved from <https://www.neuhaus.org/educators/glossary>
- Neuhaus Education Center. (2016b). *Our research*. Retrieved from <https://www.neuhaus.org/reading-challenges/our-research>
- Shaywitz, S. E. (2003). *Overcoming dyslexia*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Texas Education Agency. (2018). *What research tells us about reading comprehension and reading instruction*. Retrieved from <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/what-research-tells-us-about-reading-comprehension-and-comprehension-instruction>
- Torgesen, J. (2009). *Preventing early reading failure and its devastating downward spiral*. Retrieved from <http://bharathiyartamilpalli.org/training/images/downwardspiral.pdf>