

CALL THE STRUGGLING READER HELPLINE!

Two top literacy experts are on call to answer your toughest questions. **By Nell K. Duke & Michael Pressley**

It's May and fourth-grader Jimmy still doesn't quite recognize where sentences begin or end. And Maria (who wants to read the same books her friends are reading) is still struggling mightily to decode three-syllable words. You know what it's like. As a teacher, sometimes you try every intervention strategy you can think of, and still you feel you are not getting through. That's when it really helps to have someone to call. We asked two literacy researchers, Michael Pressley and Nell K. Duke, of Michigan State University, to share some of the questions they are often asked by teachers and to offer their insights. (Do you have a struggling reader question? E-mail it to us at instructor@scholastic.com!)

A few of my students do well sounding out simple words like "hot" or "cup," but struggle with even slightly more difficult words. How can I help them move forward?

It appears that these students are adept at handling words in which there is a nice one-to-one match between the letters and sounds—with each letter in the word standing for one, predictable sound. That is good news in many



ways—it means they are grasping the alphabetic principle, know many sound-letter correspondences, and can blend sounds together to make a word. Of course, as we all know, in English there is often not a clean one-to-one match between a letter and a sound. We have lots of situations in which combinations of letters stand for a sound, such as the two letters *sh*- in “ship,” or the three letters *-dge* in “fudge.” Your students are now finding that letter-by-letter sounding out does not work for most words.

Instead, students need to look for patterns of letters in words. Often this is aided by decoding through analogy. For example, if they know “could,” they can use that to help them decode the word “would.” At the Benchmark School in Media, Pennsylvania, a highly successful school for children with reading difficulties, they teach children a set of key words that represent all of the most common letter patterns in English. For more, see www.benchmarkschool.org.

We spend so much time on testing, we can't get through our reading curriculum! Any suggestions?

Making the best use of the instructional time you do have is always a challenge, but never more so than when kids are losing time to testing. Here are a few things to consider. First, work with your students on increasing their time on task. Research shows that teachers most effective at building students' literacy have more than 90% of the students on task more than 90% of the time.

Secondly, try to find ways to address your content areas and literacy goals simultaneously. For example, with Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction, or CORI, an hour of the literacy block is replaced with instruction that focuses on learning science through literacy and hands-on experiences. Students in CORI classrooms actually end up with better literacy achievement than those in classrooms that kept that hour focused exclusively on literacy. >>

expert advice

I'm in a Writers' Workshop rut. I need new ideas!

Try involving students with new genres they haven't been using for writing. Perhaps your students would be inspired by a project to make brochures or advertisements for a local science museum or other attraction. It's helpful to be on the lookout for what students are thinking about. One teacher we know noticed children complaining about the lack of toppings for their burgers at lunch and had them write a letter to the administration expressing their concern. Another teacher observed a lot of interest in paper-folding during indoor recess, and engaged children in writing how-to texts for one another about different origami.

With all of these and nearly any writing project, a real purpose and an audience for the writing are key. Make sure students know they are going to actually display the brochures and advertisements, send the letters, or give one another the how-to texts. This should not only spice up the writing workshop, but also foster children's writing development. (Visit www.msularc.org to read about sample projects like these.)

Last year, I had the opportunity to move up a grade with my students. I knew they would lose ground over the summer, but I was surprised how much they regressed. Is there any way to avoid this?

Summer loss is unfortunately pretty common. Looking across a number of studies, one group of researchers calculated that summer vacation results in about one month of loss in achievement. As you probably observed, some students "lose" more than others, with students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds most vulnerable on average. And some academic areas show more loss than others, with math and spelling especially susceptible.

Short of changing the school calendar, the most direct way to address summer loss is to create opportunities for students to continue developing their knowledge and skills over the summer.

Finding a reading focus, and materials, for each individual student's interests and situation may be the best thing you can do to prevent a summer slide. For your class, you can provide lists of fun books to read and suggested summer activities—from an old toy sale (great for math computation) to writing fan letters (a chance for spelling practice). You might even arrange for groups of students to talk about their reading over the summer in person, or via e-mail and text messaging.

I think my students will keep up with their reading over the summer, but I'm not sure about writing. What can I do?

You're right to be concerned. Students do spend less time writing than reading in the summer months. One way to encourage writing over the summer is to establish pen-pal relationships. You might buddy up students who aren't likely to see one another over the summer but who would like to stay in touch. Or connect students with penpals elsewhere in the country, or the world (start by visiting www.epals.com). And, if you are up to the challenge, you might encourage students to write to you over the summer. Providing students with stationery and stamps, if your budget allows it, is likely to help.

In addition to letter-writing, you might encourage students to keep a journal. Promise those students who stick with journal-writing all summer the chance to have a lunch with you in the fall to share (if they feel comfortable) a favorite or funny journal entry.

Perhaps your school could publish a "Summer Stories" book in the fall with a piece of fiction from each student who chose to participate.

And take heart that even if your students do no writing, just reading can help them to become better writers. □

NELL DUKE IS ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR AND MICHAEL PRESSLEY IS DIRECTOR OF THE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT RESEARCH CENTER (LARC) AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY. SEND YOUR LITERACY QUESTIONS TO US AT INSTRUCTOR@SCHOLASTIC.COM. FOR REFERENCES TO RESEARCH ARTICLES RELATED TO THIS ADVICE, PLEASE SEE WWW.MSULARC.ORG.