

Decoding Skills Cue Cards and User Guide

Strategies and Tips to
Build Stronger Readers





Contents

User Guide.....	1
Compound Words.....	4
Consonant Blends.....	5
Consonants With Multiple Sounds.....	6
Consonant-Vowel-Consonant (CVC) Words.....	7
Consonant-Vowel-Consonant-e (CVCe) Words.....	8
Contractions.....	9
Digraphs and Trigraphs.....	10
Prefixes.....	11
Prefix Charts.....	12
R-Controlled Vowels.....	13
Rhyming Words.....	14
Suffixes.....	15
Suffix Charts.....	16
Syllables.....	17
Vowel Teams and Diphthongs.....	18
Word Families.....	19
Glossary.....	20

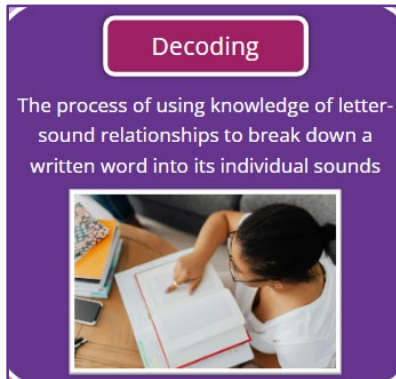




Decoding Skills Cue Cards User Guide

This set of decoding skills cue cards was developed for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) programs, but any out-of-school time program can use them. The cue cards can be especially helpful for out-of-school time (OST) **staff members**, volunteer **tutors**, and **homework helpers** who don't have formal training in teaching literacy.

Three Things to Know About Decoding



- **Definition:** Decoding is the process of using knowledge of letter-sound relationships (phonics) to break down a written word into its individual sounds.
- **Importance:** It's a foundational literacy skill that helps students read new words independently instead of relying on memorization or guessing.
- **Skill building:** Although schools teach decoding skills in grades K-3, many students in grades 4 and up still need support to strengthen those skills. You can help!

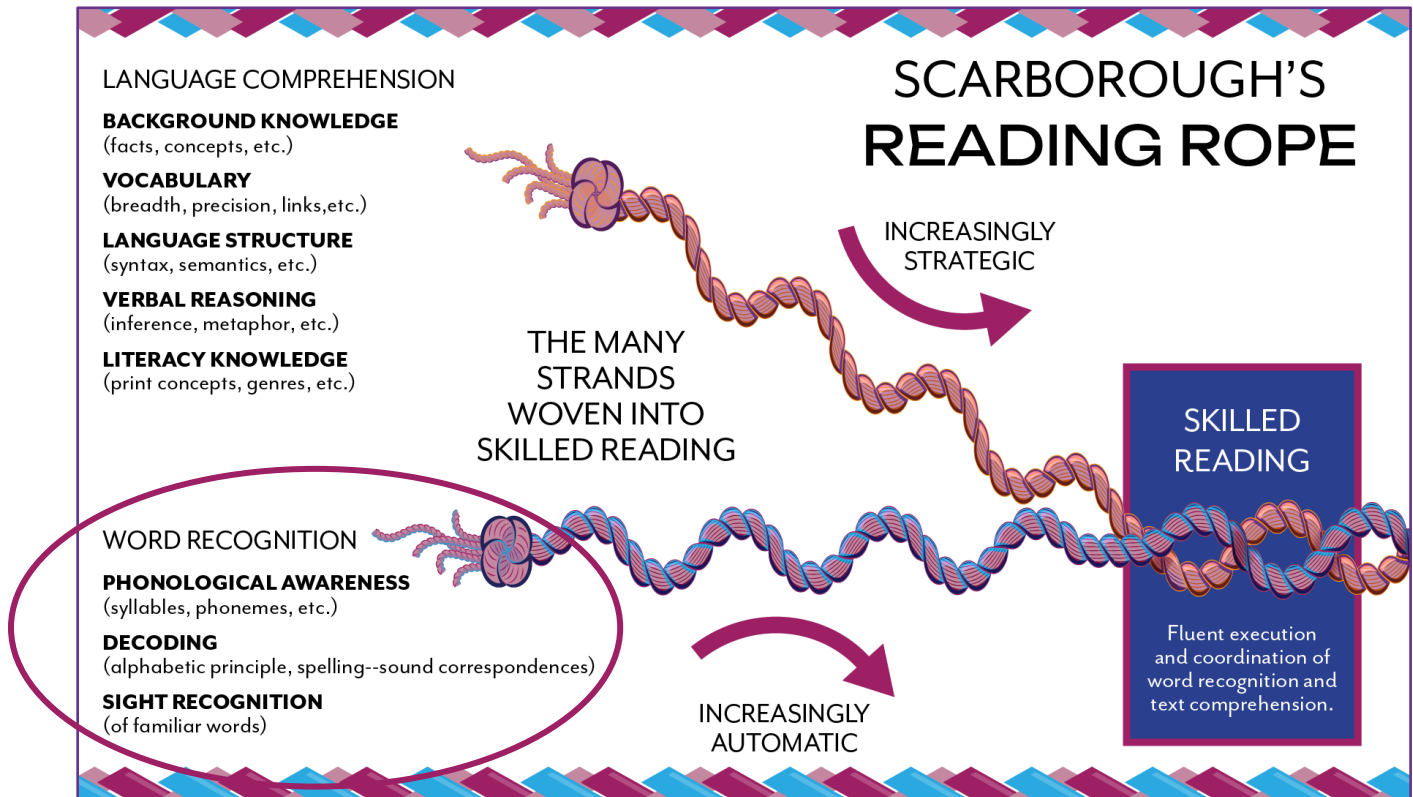
The Cue Cards Address Key Decoding Skills

- **14 skills:** The cue cards cover the decoding skills named on the puzzle pieces you see here.
- **16 cue cards:** The set includes two "bonus" cue cards with common prefixes and suffixes and their meanings. These are handy reference tools to share with students!
- **Teaching strategies, tutor tips, and fun facts:** Each card provides practical ideas and information you can use *today*.
- **Glossary:** If you hear a term related to decoding and you're not sure what it means, check the glossary at the end of this guide.



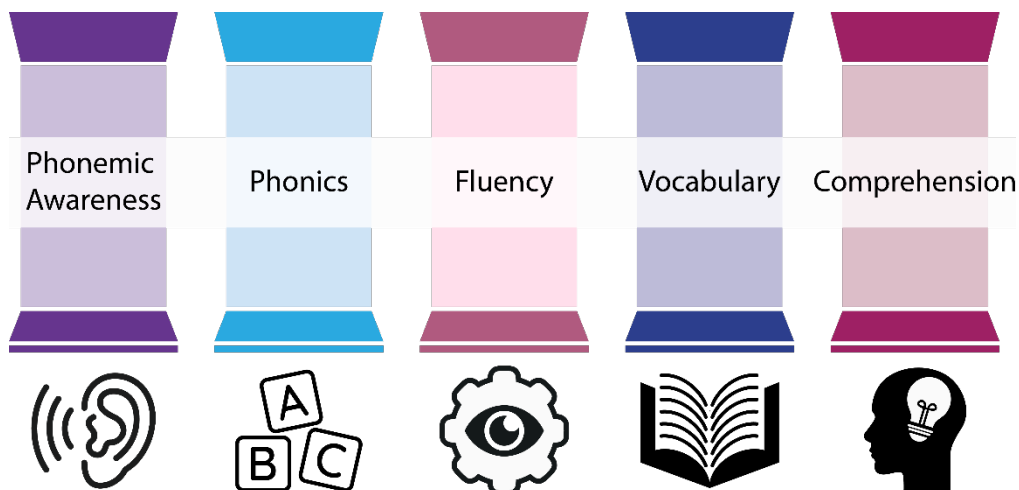
Decoding Is Essential for Skilled Reading

This graphic shows a well-known model that illustrates how skilled reading develops through the integration of multiple strands of knowledge and skills. The circled area shows decoding as one of those strands.



Decoding Skills Are Part of the Five Pillars of Reading

The graphic below shows what are commonly known as the five pillars of reading. The second pillar is phonics. Phonics is the system for teaching the relationship between letters and sounds. Decoding is the application of that knowledge to sound out and read unfamiliar words.



Explore These Literacy Resources and Learning Opportunities From the 21st CCLC NTAC!

Visit 21stcclcntac.org to access additional resources and learning opportunities especially for 21st CCLC professionals like you. For example:

In the “Our Resources” Section of the Website

- [Literacy Toolkit](#) — This toolkit consists of 23 tools and a user guide to help you infuse literacy into out-of-school time activities.

In the Professional Learning Portal

To access the [Professional Learning Portal](#), registration is required, but everything in the portal is free!

Once you register, sign into the Learning Management System, where you’ll find:

- **Supporting Literacy in Out-of-School Time** — This course includes modules to help you support student literacy and infuse engaging literacy activities into your program. You can earn a certificate of completion in an hour or less for each module you complete.
 - Module 101 — **Literacy in Out-of-School Time** — introduces essential literacy concepts (such as the four building blocks of literacy and the five pillars of reading) and ways to support literacy development in OST.
 - Module 102 — **Foundational Literacy Skills: Decoding and Spelling** — provides ideas for strengthening decoding skills among students of all ages to help them become better readers and spellers.
 - Additional modules will be added in the coming months!

Connect With Peers in the Knowledge Network

- [Literacy Group](#) — Visit and follow this online community of practice to learn about new resources and connect with 21st CCLC professionals from across the nation.

Stay Informed

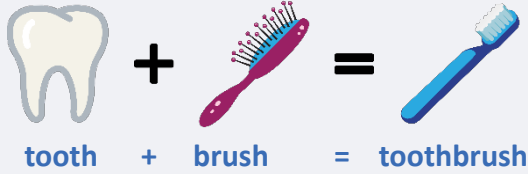
- Sign up for the [21st CCLC NTAC Listserv](#) to get news about new modules, resources, webinars, and more.
- [Follow us on LinkedIn.](#)

This resource was developed in 2026 by the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the Federal government. This resource is in the public domain and is available at 21stcclcntac.org. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

Compound Words

A compound word is a word that:

Combines two or more words to create a new word



Can be broken apart into two words



The Three Types of Compound Words

Closed	Open	Hyphenated
No space between the words; also called solid compounds	Open space between the words but considered one word because the unit creates a new meaning	Two or more words joined by a hyphen to create a new meaning
butterfly	high school	hand-me-down
arrowhead	living room	self-serve
popcorn	ice cream	mother-in-law
snowball	graphic organizer	merry-go-round

Deciding Which Type of Compound Word to Use

Why are some compounds closed but others are open?

- Sometimes it depends on which dictionary or guidelines the writer used. For example, most newspapers use the Associated Press Stylebook as their guide. **Fun fact:** Even dictionaries don't always agree!
- Usage can change over time. At times multiple versions of a compound may be in use, as was the case for a time with *baseball*, *base ball*, and *base-ball*. Now we just use the closed compound: *baseball*.

Tutor Tip

To develop a better sense of which type of compound to use (and when), suggest that students:

- Create a wall chart of compound words they come across.
- Track compound words in a notebook.

Compound Word Notebook

Example

- know-how (as a noun)
- strong-arm (as a verb)
- backyard
- flashlight
- report card
- video game



When are compounds hyphenated?

- In compound numbers like *twenty-one* and *ninety-nine*
- If they're hyphenated in the dictionary
- To make the meaning clear: *A little used chair* is both small and not new. *A little-used chair* is one that isn't used very often.

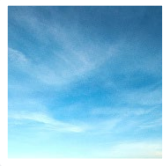
Mystery Solved!

Have you ever seen a two-word phrase hyphenated in one sentence but not in the next? Sometimes, hyphenation depends on the sentence structure, not a spelling rule. For example, a compound word is hyphenated before the word it describes (as in *a well-done plan*), but usually not after (as in *the plan was well done*). Now you know!

Consonant Blends

A **consonant** is any letter of the alphabet other than *a, e, i, o,* and *u* that represents a basic speech sound.

The consonant *y* can function as a vowel when it's not at the beginning of a word or syllable: *gym, shyly, sky.*



Consonants can be combined with vowels to form **syllables**.

Examples of syllables:

tor•na•do
clo•ver



They can be combined with other consonants to form **digraphs** and **consonant blends**.

Examples of digraphs:

phone
bang
know

Examples of consonant blends:

prone
band
snow



Consonant Blends

A consonant blend is formed by two or three consonants next to each other within a syllable, with each consonant retaining its individual sound.

Beginning and Middle Consonant Blends	bl, cl, fl, gl, pl, sl br, cr, dr, fr, gr, pr, tr, shr, thr sw, tw sc, sk, sm, sn, sp, st scr, spl, str	Beginning <i>flag</i> <i>brought</i> <i>twig</i> <i>speck</i> <i>strum</i>	Middle <i>inflate</i> <i>embrace</i> <i>between</i> <i>crisper</i> <i>instruct</i>	Tutor Tip Circle consonant blends or highlight them with a colored marker as you say the word. Challenge students to do the same. Make a game of it! Small world
	Ending Consonant Blends	lb, ld, lf, lk, lm, ln, lp, lt mp nd, nk, nt rst sk, sp, st	Ending <i>bulb</i> <i>damp</i> <i>hand</i> <i>worst</i> <i>clasp</i>	

Two Consonants Together Aren't Always Blended!	Each of these words looks like it has a consonant blend but doesn't!		
	The <i>sk</i> in bas•ket•ball	The <i>tw</i> in net•work	The <i>rt</i> in nur•ture
	Because these are multisyllable words and the syllables are divided between the consonants, the consonants are voiced separately and therefore are not blended.		

Consonant Blends and Digraphs: What's the Difference?

 Consonant blends: Consonants keep their individual sounds.	 Digraphs: Consonants work together to create a single sound.
---	---

Consonants With Multiple Sounds

A **consonant** is any letter of the alphabet except *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* that represents a basic speech sound. The consonant *y* can act like a vowel, as in *why*.

Sounds for *p*, *b*, and *m* are made with lips together, as in *baby*. Sounds for *f* and *v* are made with the top teeth touching the bottom lip, as in *cave*.



A **consonant** can be combined with a vowel to form a syllable.

Examples

ti·ger

vol·ca·no



Pronunciation of Consonants Can Be Voiced or Unvoiced

Voiced: b, d, g, j, l, m, n, r, v, w, y, z

Unvoiced: f, h, k, p, q, s, t, x

Try This: Lightly touch your throat while making a consonant sound. If you feel vibration, the consonant is voiced. (All vowel sounds are voiced.) Unvoiced consonants will not make the throat vibrate.



Another way to understand consonants is to look into a mirror and see where your tongue, teeth, and lips are when they make each sound. This will help you recognize the physical feeling of making each sound.

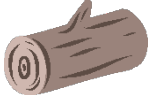
*Teaching voiced and unvoiced consonants and practicing them in pairs can help improve pronunciation and articulation, particularly for English learners.

Consonants Can Make Different Sounds in Different Words

c			g				<p>Tutor Tip</p> <p>Use rhymes to remember how spelling affects sound.</p> <p><i>For hard vs. soft c sound:</i></p> <p>C is mostly hard before <i>a</i>, <i>o</i>, and <i>u</i>. With other vowels, a soft <i>c</i> will do.</p> <p><i>For hard vs. soft g sound:</i></p> <p>G is often hard before <i>a</i>, <i>o</i>, and <i>u</i>. With other vowels, a soft <i>g</i> will usually do — But you'll know this isn't always true if you get a gift given to you!</p>
hard /k/	soft /s/		hard /g/	soft /j/			
record	cinder		gate	gelatin			
cat	icy		magnet	rage			
s			t				
/s/	/z/	/sh/	/t/	/ch/	/sh/	/d/	
safe	rose	sure	tap	nature	action	butter	
hiss	is	sugar	potato	picture	fiction	city	
x			y				
/ks/	/gs/	/z/	/y/	long i	long e	short i	
fix	exam	xylophone	yellow	sky	funny	gym	
mixture	exact	Xavier	you	multiply	easy	myth	

Consonant-Vowel-Consonant (CVC) Words

CVC Words Have a Vowel Between Two Consonants

				
jam	net	dig	log	tub

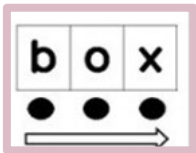
Vowels in CVC words make a “short” sound, like the /a/ in *jam*.

Fun Fact

Dictionaries and pronunciation guides sometimes indicate a short vowel sound by putting a curved line (called a breve) above the letter — ä, ě, ĭ, ŏ, ŭ.

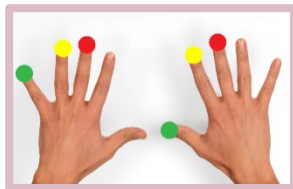
Decoding takes practice! Using physical actions and visuals can help make otherwise repetitive activities fresh and engaging. A certain visual might be just what someone needs to make the lesson “click” — so mix it up!

Physical and Visual Strategies for Sounding Out CVC Words



Word Tapping

Touch each dot with your index finger as you sound out the word (/b/ /o/ /x/). Then slide your finger along the arrow as you say the sounds together (*box*).



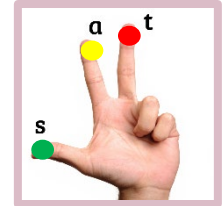
Finger Tapping

If using your left hand, tap the beginning sound with your pinkie finger, middle sound with ring finger, and ending sound with middle finger. If using your right hand, tap thumb, pointer finger, and middle finger as you say each sound.



Arm Tapping

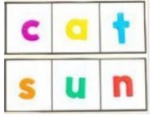

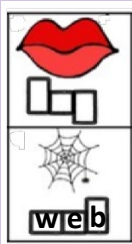
Right-handed? Tap down your left arm as you sound out the word (/b/ /a/ /t/), then sweep from shoulder to wrist as you say the word (*bat*). Left-handed? Tap from right wrist to shoulder as you sound out the word, then sweep up your arm as you say the word.



Finger Stretching

Make a fist. Extend the thumb for the beginning sound, pointer finger for the middle sound, and middle finger for the ending sound. Make a fist again and say the word. Using the left hand, the palm faces you; using the right hand, palm faces away.

Tutor Tip: Make sure students work left to right to reinforce the direction of reading.

Letter Tiles	Stoplight Letter Tiles	Word Boxes
 <p>After hearing a word, students repeat it and then slide the letters making the beginning, middle, and ending sounds into each box as they sound out the word: /c/ /a/ /t/ and /s/ /u/ /n/. They say the word again when all letters are in place.</p>	<p>Used the same way as the letter tile activity, the colored boxes help students associate green with “go” for beginning sounds, yellow with “caution” (vowels are tricky), and red with “stop” (for ending sounds).</p> 	<p>Given the picture, students say the word and then sound it out as they write the beginning, middle, and ending sounds into the corresponding boxes. The shape of the boxes helps them visualize the letters and correlate sounds.</p> 

Consonant-Vowel-Consonant-e (CVCe) Words

CVCe is a common spelling pattern.



rake



lime



rope

The Silent e Rule



Silent e



Magic e



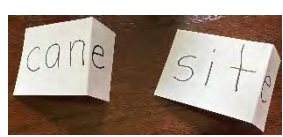
Super e

- ✓ The silent e rule states that e at the end of a syllable makes the vowel before it a long vowel, or makes it “say its name,” meaning it’s pronounced the same as when you say the letter name.
- ✓ This is the most common job of the silent e.

Tutor Tip

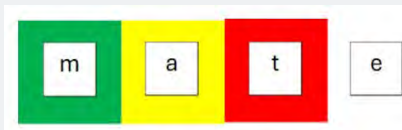
Check with school-day staff to see what they call the letter e in CVCe words. Then use the same term, whether it’s silent e, magic e, or super e.

Activity Idea #1



Use index cards to help transition from short-vowel consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words to long-vowel words ending in e. Write the word across the card. Then fold the final ¼ of the card under to see the change from a CVC word to a CVCe word.

Activity Idea #2



Use the image of a stoplight and letter tiles to practice the pronunciation shift from CVC words to CVCe words. Form words by placing a beginning consonant on green, a middle vowel on yellow, and an ending consonant on red. Add and remove an e to see how it changes the word and its pronunciation. Placing the e after the red “stoplight” offers a reminder that the e is silent.



Contractions

Contractions are:

- Shortened versions of frequently used words or phrases
- Created by removing at least one letter and replacing it with an apostrophe
- Used to make writing or speech more concise, informal, and conversational
- Usually formed from two-word phrases but can also come from longer phrases (e.g., *o'clock* from "of the clock") or from a single word (e.g., *ma'am* from "madam")

Contraction challenges:

- They may be new to English learners.
- They add complexity when learning grammar.
- Readers must learn two pronunciations for what's essentially the same phrase.
- Not all words with apostrophes are contractions. Some show possession (e.g., the *dog's* bone).
- Some represent more than one thing (e.g., *he's* can mean "he has" or "he is").
- Some don't follow the rules (e.g., *won't* changes vowels in addition to losing letters).

Contractions Anchor Chart

am		are		had	
I am	I'm	they are	they're	he had	he'd
		we are	we're	I had	I'd
		you are	you're	she had	she'd
				they had	they'd
				we had	we'd
				you had	you'd
has		have		is	
he has	he's	I have	I've	he is	he's
she has	she's	they	they've	it is	it's
who has	who's	have	we've	she is	she's
		we have	you've	that is	that's
		you have		there is	there's
				what is	what's
				where is	where's
				who is	who's
not		will		would	
can not	can't	he will	he'll	he would	he'd
could not	couldn't	I will	I'll	I would	I'd
did not	didn't	she will	she'll	she would	she'd
do not	don't	they will	they'll	they would	they'd
has not	hasn't	we will	we'll	we would	we'd
have not	haven't	you will	you'll	you would	you'd
is not	isn't				
should not	shouldn't				
was not	wasn't				
would not	wouldn't				
will not*	won't*				



Tutor Tip

Display a contractions anchor chart in your program's homework time area as a quick reference. Or give students a copy to keep in their word-study notebook.

Tutor Tip*

The contraction for "will not" is *won't*, not *willn't*. This contraction changes spelling rather than just replacing letters with an apostrophe. Be sure to point this out!

Digraphs and Trigraphs

What are digraphs?	What are trigraphs?	Why learn about them?
<p>Two letters in a row that work together to make one sound</p> <p>Usually, both letters are consonants.</p> <p>What about <i>qu</i>, like in <i>quilt</i> and <i>liquid</i>? It's a consonant-vowel digraph.</p>	<p>Three letters in a row that work together to make one sound</p> <p>Is the <i>sch</i> in <i>school</i> and <i>schedule</i> a trigraph? No, because the three letters combine to make two sounds, /s/ and /k/.</p>	<p>It's a superpower!</p> <p>Knowing about digraphs and trigraphs helps you read fluently and independently.</p> 
<p>Examples:</p> <p>ch, gh, ph, sh, wh (<i>h</i> changes the sound of the letter before it)</p> <p>ng (the two sounds combine)</p> <p>ck, gn, kn, mb, wr (one letter's quiet)</p>	<p>Examples:</p> <p>igh, tch</p> <p>Tutor Tip: The trigraph <i>tch</i> is most often found at the end of words, and <i>igh</i> frequently functions as a vowel.</p>	<p>But watch out!</p> <p>If you try to sound out words that have digraphs by sounding out individual letters, you'll struggle to read them correctly.</p> 

Tutor Tip: Words like *November* or *lumber* may look like they have a digraph, but the *m* and *b* are pronounced separately because they're in different syllables.

Digraphs May Occur at the Beginning, Middle, or End of a Word

ch	gh*	ph	sh	wh	qu
beginning, middle, or end of word	beginning, middle or end of word	beginning, middle, or end of word	beginning, middle, or end of word	beginning or middle of word	beginning or middle of word
cheese	ghost	photo	shine	whale	quilt
bleachers	laughter	elephant	cushion	overwhelm	liquid
lunch	cough	graph	wish	—	—
ng	ck	gn	kn	mb	wr
middle or end of word	middle or end of word	beginning, middle, or end of word	beginning or middle of word	middle or end of word	beginning or middle of word
—	—	gnaw	knowledge	—	wrist
finger	rocket	assignment	doorknob	plumber	shipwreck
ring	duck	reign	—	lamb	—

***Fun Fact:** The *gh* digraph makes two different sounds — /g/ as in *ghost* or /f/ as in *cough* — or the *gh* can be silent, as in *though*.

th x 2

The *th* Digraph Makes Two Different Sounds

Voiced	Unvoiced
Voiced <i>th</i> is pronounced with vocal cord vibration. A <i>th</i> before a silent <i>e</i> is voiced (<i>breathe</i>).	Unvoiced <i>th</i> is pronounced without vocal cord vibration.
<i>this</i>	<i>thumb</i>
<i>feather</i>	<i>panther</i>
<i>smooth</i>	<i>math</i>
Put your hand on your throat. If you feel a vibration as you say the <i>th</i>, that means it's voiced.	

Prefixes

A prefix is:

A letter or meaningful group of letters (morpheme) added to the beginning of a word to create a new meaning

Learning about prefixes helps you:

- Decode unfamiliar words
- Separate words into parts to construct meaning

Famous “A”

The letter *a* (as a prefix) is famous for its ability to change a root or base word to mean its opposite. For example:

- atypical = not typical

As a prefix, *a* can also have other meanings:

- ashore = at or on the shore
- aloud = in a loud manner

subtext

sub = under

text = written or printed words creating meaning

subtext = an underlying meaning

Busy “Be”

Be (as a prefix) can convey a wide range of meanings:

- About (*bespeak*)
- Around (*besiege*)
- Thoroughly or completely (*bewilder*)
- To make, cause, or seem (*befriend, belittle*)
- To provide with (*bedeck*)

As a prefix, *be* often turns nouns and adjectives into verbs, as in *bewitch* or *befoul*. In these cases, *be* usually means “to make, cause, or seem.”

Stick to It!

When prefixes are added to a root or base word, the spelling of each part stays the same. To add a prefix:

Stick with the original base or root word and *stick* the prefix on the front.

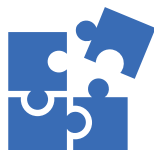
Examples:

mis + read = misread

hemi + sphere = hemisphere

pre + teen = preteen

Puzzle It Out With Prefixes



With prefixes, you can solve words like puzzles — either by taking words apart or by putting new pieces together. Try it!

- Combine a prefix with a root or base word to create a new word: *dis* + *agree* = *disagree*
- Break apart words with prefixes to better understand the word’s meaning: *disagree* = *dis* + *agree*

Prefixes and Hyphens

Most words with prefixes aren’t hyphenated unless a hyphen is needed for clarity (*re-cover* means “to cover again” but *recover* means “get better”) or before a capital letter (*anti-American*). Not sure? Check a dictionary.

Tutor Tip

Use flash cards and build-a-word games to practice reading prefixes in isolation and then adding them to words.

Did You Know?

Many prefixes come from early Latin or Greek.

Latin		Greek	
ab-	away from	chrono-	time
circum-	around	poly-	many
intra-	within	therm-	heat

re-

dis-

tele-

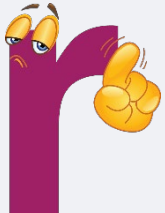
Prefix Charts

Common Prefixes					
Prefix	Meaning	Example	Prefix	Meaning	Example
a-	not	atypical	ir-	not	irrevocable
ab-	away	abdicate	mis-	wrong	misunderstanding
ad-	to	advertisement	mono-	one	monolith
ante-	before	anteroom	multi-	many	multimedia
anti-	against	antibiotic	non-	not	noncompliance
auto-	self	automobile	omni-	all	omnipresent
bi-	two	bicycle	over-	too much	overjoyed
com-	with	combine	post-	after	postscript
con-	with	confluence	pre-	before	preview
de-	reverse	defrost	pro-	forward	proclaim
dis-	not	dishonest	re-	again	redo
dys-	abnormal	dystopian	retro-	backward	retrograde
en-	cover	envelope	semi-	half	semifinal
equi-	equal	equilibrium	sub-	under	submarine
ex-	from	exhale	super-	over	superstar
extra-	above	extracurricular	sym-	together	symbiotic
homo-	same	homogeneous	syn-	together	synthesize
hyper-	over	Hyperventilate	trans-	across	transport
il-	not	illiterate	tri-	three	triangle
im-	not	immeasurable	un-	not	unhappy
in-	not	incredible	uni-	one	universe

<p>Tutor Tip Support students' understanding of math and science by reviewing prefixes common to those subjects.</p>	Common Math Prefixes				Common Science Prefixes			
	Prefix	Meaning	Prefix	Meaning	Prefix	Meaning	Prefix	Meaning
	bi-	two	octa-	eight	archaeo-	ancient	homo-	same
	cent-	hundred	penta-	five	arthro-	joint	hyper-	above
	dec-	ten	poly-	many	astro-	stars	hypo-	less
	hemi-	half	quad-	four	bio-	life	hydro-	water
	hepta-	seven	semi-	half	chloro-	green	macro-	large
	hex-	six	tetra-	four	dys-	abnormal	micro-	small
	kilo-	thousand	tri-	three	epi-	on, upon	proto-	first
milli-	thousandth	uni-	one	geo-	Earth	xeno-	foreign	
mono-	one			hetero-	different			

R-Controlled Vowels

An **r-controlled vowel** is a vowel immediately followed by an *r*. The presence of the *r* prevents the vowel from making its typical sound.



The *r* in these words is sometimes called a “Bossy *r*.”

Examples:





third **fur** **germ**

An *r* Directly After a Vowel Affects the Vowel Sound

-ar	-er, -ir, -ur	-or	Vowel Teams
The vowel sound for this spelling is pronounced like a pirate’s “argh.” Sometimes it’s pronounced like -er, usually in the second syllable of a word.	All three of these spellings make the same sound. The -er spelling occurs most frequently.	The vowel sound for this spelling is usually close to the long <i>o</i> sound. It occasionally makes the -er sound when following a <i>w</i> or in the second syllable of a word.	The presence of <i>r</i> also affects the sound of vowel teams like <i>ea</i> and <i>ou</i> .
Examples: car, smart (like -argh) pillar, sugar (like -er)	Examples: her, fern, teacher bird, stir hurt, purse	Examples: horn, fort (like -or) word, worm (like -er) author, sailor (like -er)	Examples: heart (like -ar) learn (like -er) pour (like -or)

Tutor Tip: Show a word pair in which the only difference is the presence or absence of an *r* after the vowel. For examples, see below. Say both words and notice how the vowel sound changes.



cat



cart



bun



burn



spot



sport

Learning About R-Controlled Vowels Can Make You a Stronger Reader!

It helps you:

- Recognize and decode words with r-controlled vowels.
- Sound out words correctly.
- Pronounce words correctly.
- Read more fluently.

Rhyming Words

Rhyming words:

- Have the same vowel sound and the same ending sound
- Are based on sound, not on spelling

Tutor Tip

Some students understand the explanation of rhyming words better if you describe them as words where *only* the beginning sound is different.

Rhyming Words With Different Spelling Patterns



grow

no

sew

buy

high

sky

buzz

does

was

Because rhyming words are based on sounds rather than spelling, reading rhyming words with different spelling patterns can be tricky for new or struggling readers.

Word Family Rhyming Words



dump knee hall better

jump see stall letter

Here are some common word families:

-at -ap -ag -an -op -on -ot -ock
 -et -en -ed -ell -it -in -ig -ing
 -un -ug -ut

Word family rhyming words are the easiest ones to recognize in print because each word in the same family has the same middle and ending letters and sound. The only difference is the letter (or letters) for the beginning sound.

“Eye Rhymes”

These words look like they should rhyme — but they don’t. They trick your eyes! English has many borrowed words and old spellings. That’s why some words are spelled the same way but pronounced differently. Try reading the word aloud if you’re not sure. The ear can help you catch tricky differences.



bough

though

laughter

daughter

grow

now

move

love

come

home

Suffixes

A suffix is:

A letter or meaningful group of letters (morpheme) added to the end of a word to create a new meaning

Learning about suffixes helps you:

- Decode unfamiliar words
- Separate words into parts to construct meaning



Try This!

The next time you read something, see how many of the four most common suffixes (-s, -es, -ed, and -ing) you can find in a paragraph. Also, listen for suffixes the next time you watch a video or hear someone talk.

careless

Concern, attention

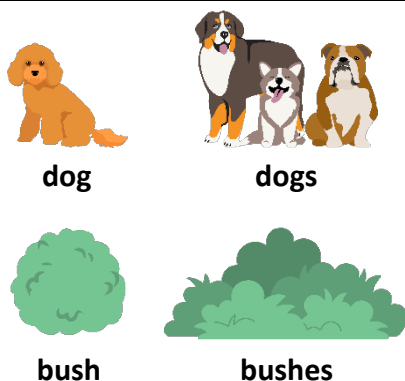
without

Lack of care, concern, or attention

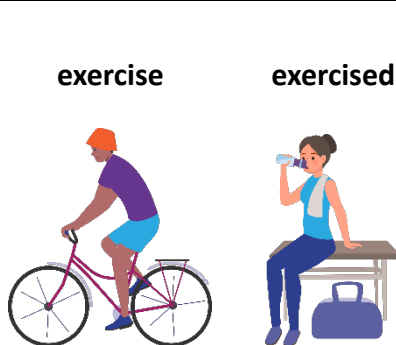
Things to Know About Suffixes

Common Suffixes — and How They Affect Meaning

-s and -es create a plural



-ed creates past tense



-ing creates present tense



Adding a Vowel Suffix

If the root or base word ...

... ends in two consonants,
just add the suffix.

catch + es = catches
malt + ed = malted

... ends in a consonant-vowel-consonant,
double the final consonant.

get + ing = getting
con + ed = conned

... ends in a silent e,
drop the e.

smile + ed = smiled
late + er = later
tune + ing = tuning

Adding a Consonant Suffix

Add the suffix to the root without changing either one.

apartment
flavorful

Adding a Suffix to a -y Word

Change the y to an i unless the suffix begins with i.

hurry + ed = hurried
silly + ness = silliness
party + ing = partying

Did You Know?

If the root can stand on its own and still have meaning, it's called a *base word* (like *act* in *actor*).

Did You Notice?

A *vowel suffix* starts with a vowel. A *consonant suffix* starts with a consonant.

Tutor Tip

Try suffix bingo (e.g., have students match suffixes to words on a bingo card) or root-suffix matching to reinforce understanding.

Suffix Charts

These handy charts show the most common suffixes and what they mean.

Noun Suffixes					
Suffix	Meaning	Example	Suffix	Meaning	Example
-age	action, state	marriage	-ity	state or condition	curiosity
-al	condition	denial	-ment	the action of	retirement
-ance	action, state	acceptance	-ness	state of or quality	darkness
-ation	action	immigration	-or	a person doing	investigator
-eer	engaged in	volunteer	-ship	a position held	membership
-ence	action, state	existence	-sion	state or being	confusion
-er	doing	teacher	-th	state or quality	warmth
-ery	a trade	bakery	-tion	resulting state	celebration
-es	more than one	bushes	-s	more than one	trains
-hood	state or quality	adulthood	-ty	condition	loyalty
-ing	action, process	feeding	-ure	action or state	pressure
-ist	engaged in	violinist			

Verb Suffixes					
Suffix	Meaning	Example	Suffix	Meaning	Example
-ate	to make	motivate	-fy	to make, produce	satisfy
-ed	verb past tense	climbed	-ify	to make, produce	intensify
-en	become	soften	-ing	present tense	baking

Adjective Suffixes					
Suffix	Meaning	Example	Suffix	Meaning	Example
-er	comparison, more	faster	-ive	quality of	expensive
-est	comparison, most	nastiest	-less	without	useless
-ful	full of	skillful	-like	similar to	childlike
-ic	relating to	heroic	-ly	characteristics of	fatherly
-ical	the nature of	logical	-ous	having qualities of	poisonous
-ious	having qualities of	mysterious	-y	characterized by	fruity
-ish	the nature of	sluggish			

Adverb Suffix		
Suffix	Meaning	Example
-ly	in a specified manner	clearly, hourly

Syllables

Syllables:

- Are units of sound
- Come together to form words
- Can have more than one *letter* but not more than one *sound*
- Include at least one *vowel*, with only one *vowel sound* per syllable

Knowing about syllables helps you:

- Chunk sounds together
- Read fluently and accurately
- Pronounce and spell words

Tutor Tip: Use visual aids, syllable charts, and word cards. Highlight syllables in different colors.

Single-Syllable Words



cat



tree



house

Multisyllabic Words



air•plane



sub•ma•rine



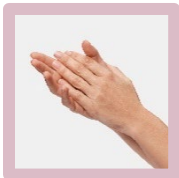
ther•mom•e•ter

Six Syllable Types

Type	Description	Example
Closed	Ends in a consonant and has a short vowel sound	bas•ket
Open	Ends in a vowel and has a long vowel sound	to•ma•to
Vowel + consonant + e	Has a long vowel and ends in a silent e	cup•cake
Vowel team	Is spelled with two vowels next to each other	tea•cup
R-controlled	Has a vowel followed by an <i>r</i> , which distorts (bullies) the vowel sound	bur•ger
Consonant + le	Has a consonant followed by <i>le</i>	ta•ble

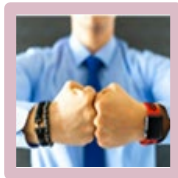
To identify syllables in a word:

Clap It



Clap the number of syllables

Pound It



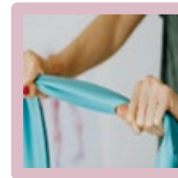
Pound fists together for each syllable

Chin Drop



Count each time chin hits hand while saying word

Stretch It



Stretch a band for each syllable

Cheer It



Raise one arm at a time for each syllable

Vowel Teams and Diphthongs

Vowel Team



These vowel teams make a long vowel sound.

Watch out! Vowel teams can be tricky.

- Two or more vowels can work together to make one vowel sound.
- Two vowels working as a team are often called a **vowel pair** or **vowel digraph**.
- The team often makes the sound of the first vowel.
- A vowel team sometimes contains a *w* or *y* functioning as a vowel.
- It's one of the most common formations of vowel sounds.
- Vowel teams might challenge struggling readers.

Long a

ai – raid
ea – break
ay – way
ey – hey
ei – eight

Long i

ie – pie

Long o

oe – toe
oa – oatmeal

Long e

ea – seat
ee – peel
ey – valley
ie – cookie

Long u

ue – due
eu – feud
ew – mew

ea
We expect a long *e* (*eat*) but sometimes get a long *a* (*steak*).

ie
We expect a long *i* (*pie*) but sometimes get a long *e* (*cookie*).

oe
We expect a long *o* (*toe*) but sometimes get a long *oo* (*shoe*).

ow
Context is *how* you *know* if it's *bow* or *bow*.



These vowels team up to create a new sound:

short oo	long oo	ew as long oo	ew as long u	au	aw
book lookout cook stood foot wood	bamboo soon food taboo pool zoo	brew jewel cashew news dewy stew	curfew mew few nephew pew	author pauper fault sauce haul vault	awful law crawl straw hawk thaw

Diphthongs: A Special Type of Vowel Team

The vowel sounds glide from one to the other in the same syllable.

oi	oy	ou	ow
avoid boisterous choice moist toil voice	boy destroy employ joyful loyal oyster	cloud ground house pounce scrounge spouse	brown cow flower growl powder trowel

Tutor Tip

When reviewing vowel teams, share nonexamples, too, like the ones below. Each of these words looks like it has a vowel team but doesn't. That's because the vowels are in separate syllables!

cha•os flu•id li•on po•et re•invent ru•in

Word Families

There are **two kinds of word families** — **rhyming** and **morphological**. It’s helpful to know about these families if you’re learning to read or learning a new language.

Morphology is the study of how words are formed. The root *morph*, from Greek, means “shape or form.” The ending, *-ology*, means a field of study. In literacy, morphology explores the structure of words, including prefixes, suffixes, and roots, to understand how they change meaning.

Rhyming Word Families	Examples			
<p>Words that have the same:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vowel and vowel sound Ending letter and ending sound <p>But different:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beginning letters/sounds <p>Words can rhyme without being in the same word family. For example, <i>true</i> rhymes with <i>you</i> but their vowels and ending letters differ.</p>	<p>-um</p> <p>bum gum hum rum sum yum drum strum</p>	<p>-eck</p> <p>deck neck peck check speck</p>	<p>-ight</p> <p>fight light might night right sight tight bright</p>	<p>-all</p> <p>ball call fall hall tall wall small stall</p>
Why learn about rhyming word families?	Tutor Tip			
<p>It helps you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize spelling patterns Become familiar with common sound combinations Chunk groups of sounds to learn for increased fluency <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Listen for rhymes in your favorite song!</p> </div>	<p>To help students visualize these word families and reinforce that only the beginning sound is different, write the words in a vertical list. Then use a different color to highlight or underline each beginning sound. Instead of sounding out the entire word, such as /b/ /e/ /n/, encourage students to chunk the word family part so it sounds more like /b/ /en/.</p>			<p>-en</p> <p>Ben den men pen ten when</p>

Morphological Word Families	Examples		
<p>Words that have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The same root Added prefixes, suffixes, or both Related meanings 	<p>Help</p> <p>helper helped helpful helpfulness unhelpful</p>	<p>Act</p> <p>actor action acting react reaction</p>	<p>Form</p> <p>formed forming reform conform formulate</p>
Why learn about morphological word families?	Tutor Tip		
<p>It helps you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> See patterns in multisyllabic words Link words and word meanings to each other Read, write, and spell with increased fluency 	<p>In a notebook, students can collect roots, members of the word family that includes that root, and definitions to serve as a ready reference when reading and writing. Each root (such as <i>help</i> or <i>act</i>) should have its own page.</p>		



Glossary

What to do: Use this glossary as a quick reference for terms related to decoding and spelling.

Why it matters: Knowing these terms can help you communicate with school-day staff and literacy specialists about students' literacy needs.

Alphabetic principle: The concept that letters are used to represent individual sounds (phonemes) in the spoken word, critical for learning to read and spell

Affix: A prefix (e.g., *un* and *dis*) or suffix (*ness* and *ly*), added to the beginning or end of a word to change its meaning and create a new word

Auditory processing disorder: A condition that affects how the brain processes and understands sound, often causing difficulties with hearing-related tasks such as oral comprehension and following directions

Antonym: A word that means the opposite of another word (e.g., *hot* and *cold* are antonyms)

Automaticity: The ability to read quickly and accurately without conscious effort

Background knowledge: Preexisting knowledge of facts and ideas necessary for understanding new information and making meaningful connections

Base word: The part of a word that carries its main meaning and can stand on its own. Prefixes and suffixes can be added to create new words with related meanings (e.g., *act* is the base word in *actor* and *acting*)

Blend: Two or three graphemes, each one representing a phoneme (e.g., the *s-c-r* in *scrape*); these are two or three adjacent consonants before or after a vowel in a syllable

Book walk: A literacy activity done prior to reading a new or unfamiliar text, in which the facilitator and students examine the covers, headings, and illustrations of the text to build anticipation and familiarize students with its context, vocabulary, genre, and other notable aspects

Breve: A curved line placed above a vowel to indicate a short vowel sound (e.g., *ă, ě, ĭ, ǒ, ů*)

Building blocks of literacy: Reading, writing, speaking, and listening

Chunking: A learning strategy that breaks complex tasks or information into small, manageable parts; also, a decoding strategy in

Don't See What You're Looking For?

This glossary defines many terms that are in the cue cards, but it's not comprehensive. The following glossaries are available online:

[The Florida Center for Reading Research's Glossary of Reading Terms](#)

[The Iowa Reading Research Center's Reading Glossary](#)

[The International Literacy Association's Literacy Glossary](#)

[Reading Rockets' Glossary](#)



which the reader breaks words into manageable chunks rather than sounding out each letter (e.g., *ch-air* for *chair*)

Closed syllable: A unit of sound that ends in one or more consonants and usually contains a short vowel sound (e.g., *hat*, *rab•bit*). *Closed syllables are like rooms with the door shut. The consonant at the end “closes” the vowel in.*

Compound word: A word that combines two or more words to create a new word. Some compound words are open (*ice cream*), some are closed (*mailbox*), and some are hyphenated (*deep-fry*).

Conjunction: A word that links sentences, clauses, phrases, or other words. Some common conjunctions are *and*, *but*, *or*, and *because*. *Conjunctions are like bridges. They link parts of a sentence so thoughts can travel smoothly from one side to the other.*

Consonant: A letter that’s not a vowel, representing a basic speech sound in which the breath is at least partly blocked by the tongue, teeth, or lips. *Consonants are like speed bumps for your breath. Your mouth has to slow it down or stop it to make the sound.*

Consonant blend: Two or three consecutive consonants within a syllable that retain their individual sounds (e.g., *scream*, *clip*, *grasp*)

Consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) word: A three-letter word that begins and ends with a consonant; the vowel is almost always short (e.g., *dog*, *van*)

Consonant-vowel-consonant-e (CVCe) syllable: A unit of speech that has a long vowel and ends in an *e* (e.g., the second syllable in *cup•cake*)

Consonant-vowel-consonant-e (CVCe) word: A four-letter word that has a long vowel and ends in an *e* (e.g., *cave*, *home*, *fine*)

Contraction: A word created by combining two words into a shortened form, with an apostrophe denoting a letter or letters that have been removed (e.g., *isn’t*, *we’re*)

Decoding: The process of using knowledge of letters and sounds to read a word by separating it into individual sounds and blending them together, how readers translate written words into spoken language

Diagnostic Decoding Survey: A short test (also known as a *diagnostic phonics survey*) that helps teachers know what reading skills to focus on by showing how well students can sound out words

Digraph: Two consecutive letters within a word that work together to make one sound. There are consonant digraphs (e.g., *ck* in *duck* and *sh* in *short*) and vowel digraphs (e.g., *ea* in *seat* and *oa* in *boat*).

Diphthong: A type of vowel team in which the first vowel sound in a syllable glides to the next vowel sound, making a new blended sound (e.g., *oi* in *coin* and *ou* in *bout*)

Dolch sight words list: Developed by Dr. Edward William Dolch, a list of 220 service words and 95 sight words that account for about 80 percent of the words in children’s literature and 50 percent of the words in writing intended for adults — organized by reading level, from pre-primer to third grade. **Note:** Although this list is still in use, it was compiled in 1936 and is considered to be an inaccurate reflection of today’s texts.



Dyslexia: A specific learning disability that is neurological in origin and characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities

Echo reading: A learning strategy in which a fluent reader reads a short passage and then the student “echoes” the reader by re-reading the passage

Encoding: The process of translating a spoken word into its written form by breaking the word into its individual sounds (phonemes) and then matching those sounds to the corresponding letters (graphemes). Encoding is often called the “flip side” of decoding, and it’s an essential spelling skill.

Evidence-based literacy practices: Instructional strategies and practices supported by research-based evidence of their effectiveness in improving literacy-related outcomes in real-world settings

Expression: The feelings, changes in pace, changes in tone, and emphasis that a reader uses

Fluency: The ability to read a text accurately, smoothly, and with expression

Foundational literacy skills: Skills that help learners read, write, and understand language (e.g., phonics, phonemic awareness, decoding, reading fluency, and vocabulary). *Foundational literacy skills are like the roots of a tree. Strong roots help everything above grow and thrive.*

Fry sight words list: A list of the 1,000 most common words — ordered by frequency — in reading materials for grades 3-9, originally published in 1957 by Dr. Edward Fry and updated in 1980

Grapheme: A unit of written language that represents a phoneme; a letter or group of letters that correspond to sounds (e.g., *b, th, igh, eigh*)

High-frequency word: A word that is often seen in print. Some follow predictable spelling patterns (e.g., *and, like*), whereas others don’t follow regular patterns and need to be memorized (e.g., *said, was*).

Inferences: Assumptions a reader makes based on evidence from the text and the reader’s own experience and background knowledge

Literacy: The ability to read, write, speak, and listen to make sense of the world and communicate effectively; sometimes used in terms to describe knowledge competence in specific areas, such as *financial literacy* and *digital literacy*

Long vowel: A vowel (*a, e, i, o, or u*) that is pronounced like its name (e.g., the vowel sounds in *name, feet, nice, note, and use*). *Long vowels are like singers. They hold their sound and say their name loud and clear.*

Low-frequency word: A word that doesn’t appear often in everyday print. Two types of low-frequency words are content words (e.g., *photosynthesis, referee, zeitgeist*) and academic words (e.g., *compare, summarize, interpret*).

Metacognition: The act of monitoring and assessing one’s own awareness and thought processes

Morpheme: The smallest unit of sound that has meaning. A morpheme can be a whole word (e.g., *book*) or part of a word (e.g., the prefix *un-* or the suffix *-ed*) that changes a word’s meaning or function.



Multisyllabic word: A word containing two or more syllables (e.g., *outlaw*, *elephant*, *mathematical*)

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): Established by Congress in 1969 and often called The Nation’s Report Card; the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what U.S. students know and can do in various subject levels at grades 4, 8, and/or 12, helping to measure and compare student learning across States and over time

Onset-rime: The natural division of a syllable into two parts; the onset is the first sound or letters before the vowel, and the rime includes the vowel and what follows (e.g., *pl-an*)

Open syllable: A unit of speech that ends in a long vowel sound (e.g., the syllables in *to•ma•to*)

Oral reading: Reading out loud

Phoneme: The smallest unit of sound in a word (e.g., each of the letters in *cat*)

Phonemic awareness: The ability to recognize and manipulate sounds

Phonics: A method of teaching student how to read by helping them connect written letters (graphemes) to the sounds they represent (phonemes). Phonics teaches readers how to decode words by applying letter-sound rules (e.g., knowing that *c* says /k/ in *cat* and *sh* says /sh/ in *ship*)

Phonological awareness: The ability to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of words and sentences (e.g., identifying the syllables in a word, identifying words that rhyme, and segmenting a sentence into words)

Prefix: A morpheme placed at the beginning of a root or base word to create a new word (e.g., *un* in *undone* and *dis* in *displace*)

R-controlled syllable: A unit of speech in which the vowel is followed by a “bossy” *r*, which distorts the vowel sound, as in both syllables of *bur•ger*

R-controlled vowel: A vowel that is immediately followed by an *r*, the presence of which prevents the vowel from making its typical sound (contrast, for example, the vowel sounds in *cat* and *car*)

Readers theater: A literacy activity in which students are assigned parts of a script to perform, usually without staging, background, or props, the main purpose being to improve reading fluency and expression

Reading comprehension: The ability to understand, interpret, and derive meaning from text

Rhyme: Correspondence between the ending sounds of words (e.g., *moon/swoon* and *sky/high*)

Root: A morpheme (the smallest unit of sound that has meaning) that carries a word’s basic meaning. Many roots come from Latin or Greek and can’t stand alone in English (e.g., *aud* is the root for *audio*, *audience*, and *audible*), though some can (e.g., *act* in *actor*, *action*, and *react*).

Scarborough’s Reading Rope: A model that shows various skills a reader needs to master to become proficient and how those skills work together to create proficiency

Short vowel: A vowel (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, or *u*) that is not pronounced like its name (e.g., the *a* in *nap*)

Sight word: A word that shows up often in print that readers need to recognize instantly for fluent reading. Sight words often don’t follow spelling rules and therefore cannot accurately be sounded out (e.g., *the*, *and*, *you*, *said*, *was*, *is*, *for*).



Silent e: The final *e* in CVCe words and syllables, the presence of which makes the previous vowel long (e.g., the *e* in *cake*, *line*, and *site*); sometimes called “magic *e*” or “super *e*”

Soft consonant: A consonant that speakers can pronounce without stopping their airflow (e.g., the *c* in *city*, as opposed to the *c* in *canvas*, and the *g* in *giant*, as opposed to the *g* in *go*)

Specific learning disorder: A neurodevelopmental disorder that is typically diagnosed in young school-age children, although it may not be recognized until adulthood, characterized by a persistent impairment in at least one of three major areas: reading, written expression, and math; sometimes referred to as simply *learning disorder* or as *learning disability*

Suffix: A morpheme added to the end of a root (e.g., *ion* in *diction*) or a base word (e.g., *est* in *cleanest*) to create a new word

Syllable: A unit of speech that contains one vowel sound (e.g., *sub•ma•rine* has three syllables)

Synonym: A word that means the same thing as another word (e.g., *little* and *small* are synonyms)

Syntax: The rules that decide how words should be arranged to form clear sentences. *Syntax is like the choreography of language. It tells each word where to stand and when to move so the sentence flows smoothly and makes sense.*

Trigraph: Three consecutive letters that work together to make one sound (e.g., *tch* in *watch*)

Vocabulary: The set of words a person knows. *The larger a person’s vocabulary, the more meaning they can derive from interactions with text and speech and the more precisely they can express themselves.*

Vowel team: A combination of two (called a digraph), three, or four letters that work together to make one vowel sound, almost always the sound of the first vowel (e.g., *ea* in *peach*, *ai* in *sail*, *oa* in *goat*, *igh* in *night*, *eigh* in *sleigh* or in *eight*)

Word family (morphological): A group of words that share a base word and related meanings (e.g., *played*, *playing*, and *playful* belong to the *play* word family)

Word family (rhyming): A group of words that have the same middle and ending letters and sounds but different beginning sounds (e.g., *cat*, *hat*, *bat*, and *sat* belong to the *-at* word family)

Writing Rope: A model that shows how different writing skills become intertwined as a writer becomes more proficient

This resource was developed in 2026 by the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), funded under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Department) and administered by Synergy Enterprises, Inc. under Cooperative Agreement No. 287E230009 with the Department’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the Department or the Federal government. This resource is in the public domain and is available at 21stcclcntac.org. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

