



Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner answers a question about wild guesses and decoding.

Chris Turner, our learning difficulties consultant, has many years experience helping struggling students to master new skills. Call the Council to have Chris answer your question about learning problems.

*My student makes a lot of wild guesses after seeing the first letter of the word. Often the word she guesses doesn't make any sense in the passage she is reading. For example, she might read **family** when the word is **fireplace**. What can I do to help her read more accurately?*

—At a Loss

Many poor readers have developed this habit. Essentially, it is a coping strategy in response to frustration -- they are just trying to get through the passage as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, it really gets in the way of fluent, meaningful reading. There are usually two different things going on. First, the student does not know HOW to decode the word systematically. Second, your student may not expect the words she reads to make sense. You will need to help your student work on both areas.

In my last column, I talked about the basic principles for developing comprehension — learning to read for meaning:

- 1) Work on interesting material that is at the right level.
- 2) Spend lots of time on pre-reading to set the stage and introduce unfamiliar words.
- 3) Help your student to use comprehension strategies as she reads.
- 4) Spend time after reading to consolidate understanding and provide additional practice on difficult words.

This month, I will discuss some decoding basics. Just guessing from the first letter of a word is like trying to recognize people by looking only at their shoes. You might be able to tell a few friends that way, but it won't help you much with strangers. Teach your student a variety of strategies to use.

First, keep it simple. Teach decoding separately from comprehension. This is very important. Working on one thing at a time reduces students' frustration level and increases their success.

Second, use good systematic material. Many students need lots and lots of practice with learning the relationship between sounds and words. You will probably need to choose some supplementary phonics material to help your student get the practice they need. The Focus on Phonics series is excellent. So is the Lexia Phonics software. Start at the beginning and work your way through the material systematically.

Third, help your student understand the basic principles of decoding. Many students feel frustrated because they have never really understood how decoding works, that

- 1) Sounds are represented by groups of letters in a systematic way.
- 2) Most words in English follow regular patterns which can be learned.
- 3) Words have parts and can be broken into smaller units.

When you are working on decoding and reading together, encourage your student to take it slowly and aim for total accuracy. (Later you can work on speed, fluency and comprehension.) Students need to look at the word as a whole and at the parts. One useful technique is to cover up a difficult word with your thumb. Uncover the word one syllable at a time and decode each small part. Help your student to recognize the root word in the middle of longer words. This technique helps make decoding process more manageable.

Keep positive. With practice, decoding **will** become easier.

Be patient. It will probably take a lot of practice.