

Easing the Frustration for Beginning Readers:

This book was born out of my son's frustration. He is the type of student who hates not knowing what he is doing. Those pesky b's and d's kept switching around on him, and there were too many letter sounds to keep straight. Frustration at the unknown would assail him within the first few minutes of each lesson, and he would shut down. We tried tactile learning, memory tricks, and lots of review – but nothing gave his brain a handle to grasp hold of when the letters began flipping! Our solution came with my invention of picture letters.

Picture letters put the clues right into the letter for the young readers to consult – taking away the frustration of not remembering the sounds for each letter. We began using this to teach a visual association of pictures with letters. The words I use are:

a-a-apple	g-g-goat	m-m-monkey	s-s-soldier	y-y-yolk
b-b-butterfly	h-h-horse	n-n-nest	t-t-tiger	z-z-zebra
c-c-cat	i-i-igloo	o-o-ostrich	u-u-umbrella	Th-th-thumb
d-d-dog	j-j-jellybean	p-p-panda	v-v-violin	Sh-sh-shark
e-e-elephant	k-k-kite	q-q-quilt	w-w-waterfall	Ch-ch-chick
f-f-fish	l-l-lion	r-r-road	x-x-ax	Wh-wh-wheel

Following shortly on the heels of my picture letter idea, I began to personalize the rules of phonics into stories about the letters (particularly the vowels) – stories of how they behaved and interacted with one another. It was modeled on how our family works together – each having our own individual jobs, but being always willing to help one another do special jobs (often sacrificing our own time and energies to make the other successful). Stories are much easier to remember than facts, and giving the letters personality traits makes them real characters in the minds of my children. I pepper their reading with stories a little bit at a time – giving time for each one to become familiar before adding another one. What follows on the next pages are my favorite stories from the book I'm writing.

Special Note: Little boys, in particular, need learning to be full of action. Try turning your reading into a “minefield”, where your boy never knows what the next word he reads might tell you to do to him! “mug” = playfully grab and wiggle his mug (face), “muss” = mess up his hair, “tug” = tug on his earlobe, etc! They absolutely love this hint of danger, and it is also a wonderful way to teach vocabulary.

The Earliest Stories to Tell:

- 1. Each letter has been given a very special job to do – and that is to make one particular sound.** This is hard for adults, as we are used to using multiple sounds for our vowels. Yet it makes it much more feasible for beginners to only consider one sound per letter. Resist the temptation to read “ma...” as “maw”. This is “ma” as in “map”.
- 2. A letter only gets to be a capital if it is doing something important. Starting a name is important, as is getting to be the first letter in a sentence** (being the “sentence leader” is a very important job).
- 3. Two letters with the same sound always cooperate to say their sound together.** mutt = m-u-t, not m-u-t-t; fuss = f-u-s, not f-u-s-s. Have some fun demonstrating how silly the word would sound if those double-letters refused to work together!
- 4. In our language, certain letters are called vowels: A, E, I, O, and U. These letters are the most useful and hardworking of all our letters. They have their main job, but they are often called on to work in teams to say different things – and they can say their names when they are by themselves.** (examples: a, I) **A vowel always gets to say its name when it is alone.**
- 5. All of the other letters are called consonants. They are much more rigid in their jobs – and rarely do they ever get to say anything else. Sometimes, a few lucky consonants get to work together to create a new sound that neither could make on their own** (th, sh, wh, ch are the most common).

Note to parents: Sight words occur so often in our language, that they are well worth learning to recognize early. Plus, some of these sight words don't follow the rules! If a letter isn't saying its sound, it just has to be learned.

Pesky Sight words that have to be learned: to, the

Faithful sight words that say what they should: has, in, on, an, is, it, at, from, with,
or, off, see, said

Good Things to Know:

- 1. A period closes the door after all the letters of the sentence have gone inside.**
- 2. A question mark also closes the door – but points out that more information is needed** (namely, an answer to the question).
- 3. When one vowel helps another to say its name, it stays silent.** I like to draw arrows from the letter whose is helping to the one that gets to say its name.

Note: Students must learn to play with words until they make sense.

- “Said” isn’t actually pronounced with a long “a”, but it’s close enough that they can find the familiar pronunciation with a bit of sound-play.
 - “Want” isn’t using the short “a” sound, but it is close enough to the true sound for students to get there. It’s better to teach them flexibility than confuse them with too many exceptions.
 - In words such as “won”, I sometimes stretch the actual pronunciation a bit. By my accent, “won” should reflect the “uh” of the “u”, rather than the “ah” of the “o”. However, “wahn” is close enough to “wuhn” for your student to make the leap – and we want to encourage that kind of flexibility! When your students are sounding out words in ‘regular’ books, I want them to confidently play around with sounds when they encounter a word that isn’t following the rules – and that can’t be taught in a sterile, precise environment!
- 4. Q is a very timid letter. It only has the courage to make words if its best friend, U, comes along.**
 - 5. C and K are best friends. Whenever “c” finds himself at the end of a word, he invites “k” to join him to say their sound together!**
 - 6. The letter “X” only makes its true sound in the middle or end of words** – and hardly any words start with “x”.
 - 7. In 2-3 letter words, there aren’t many letters to share the work. That’s why a vowel at the end has to work hard to say its name without any help from other letters.** (so, go, he, she, me, be)
 - 8. One of my favorite blending sounds to demonstrate is “oo”!** Encircle your eyes as though your hands were binoculars. Spot your child, and say “OO!” (as in food) - a very impressed, pleased noise. Later,

when they discover that “ou” can also make the same sound, show that the binoculars work even if one of the lenses is broken (shaping your right hand as the “o”, and the left hand as the “u”).

9. E is a very helpful letter. When it appears at the end of a short word, it helps the vowel inside to say its name!

10. While “E” is a very helpful letter, it can only reach its helping arms so far. It can reach around one consonant, but not two. That’s why double letters become single when “e” needs to help the center vowel. (fill, file; mill, mile; back, bake; tack, take)

Examples of vowels helping each other:

The second “e” helps the first to say its name. (bee, beet, week).

The “a” helps “e” to say its name. (eat, read, each)

The “i” helps “a” to say its name. (rain, faith, paid)

The “y” helps “a” to say its name. (tray, bay, play)

The “a” helps “o” to say its name. (boat, loan, goat)

The “e” helps “o” to say its name. (toe, woe, Joe)

The letter “U” has two different ways of saying his name. When he is feeling formal, he says “you”. When he is feeling casual, he shortens it to just his nickname - “ou”. Play around with the formal name “you” until you can hear the shorter name “oo” within it. Liken this to a child going by their formal name versus their nickname. When reading, encourage your child to try both the full name “you” and the nickname “oo” in their word, and choosing the one that sound correct. (cute vs duke, true, spruce)

Vowels Can Be TOO Helpful:

Vowels like to help each other – and are always reaching out to see if there is someone to help! Knowing this, we sometimes have to keep vowels far enough apart that they can't help each other – or else they will change the word on us!

Keep your student thinking about the need to double consonants at the end of words when we don't want vowels to work together on their sounds.

1. **We especially have to watch the vowels when we add endings to words, like “-ing”, “ed”, or “er”.** (“clap” + “ing” = “clapping”, not “claping”) The “i” can reach around one letter to help “a” say its name (which completely messes up some words), but it can't reach around two letters! (“spot” + “ed” = “spotted”, not “spoted”), (“win” + “er” = “winner”, not “winer”)
2. **Words that have 2 consonants at the end don't have to worry about the “ing” vowel reaching around to help their vowel to say its name!** (jump, jumping; rock, rocker; puff, puffed)
3. **If the word already ends in a vowel, we don't want to double up on vowels when we tack on a new ending.** Doubled vowels will play with each other and forget their original job! (“joke” + “er” = “joker”, not “jokeer”) (“pale” + “ed” = “paled”, not “paleed”) (“make” + “ing” = “making”, not “makeing”)

As you know, parents, our language is a conglomeration of many languages. When your student encounters a word that just doesn't follow the rules they have learned, you can easily impart a tolerance for exceptions by explaining that it is a borrowed word – not from our language, and therefore doesn't follow our rules. My favorite examples are “pizza”, “rodeo”, and “eight”.

Special Friendships:

There is a very special friendship between three letters: Y, I, and E. These three letters are as different as they can be. I and E are vowels – “i”, tall and skinny, while “e” is short and round. Then we have “y” – sometimes a consonant, sometimes a vowel – and so long-legged that she has to dangle her legs to sit down. Yet these three gentle ladies are faithful and true to each other. When “I” or “e” are too busy to end a word, “y” will step in and do it for them. When “y” is being a consonant, it says y-y-yolk. When it is filling in for its friends, it can be i-i-icicle or e-e-eagle. How do you know which sound to use? Try both and pick the best! (Over time you'll learn to know which is which.)

When “y” would have to sit next to “s” at the ending of a word (Y is scared of the snake-like s), then “i” and “e” rush in to take her place. Which of the vowels gets to say its name? Why, it's whichever one “y” was replacing! (fly – flies; try, tries vs. hurry-hurries).

We've taught that “C” says “c-c-cat” – and that is its job. It makes this loud, hard sound most of the time: cat, cot, cut, crab, club. However, **“C” has very good manners. When it is in front of one of the gentle ladies (“e”, “i”, or “y”), it drops its loud sound to speak softly.** It says “c-c-city” (cent, civil, cyan).

G is the same way. Most of the time, its sound is loud and hard (g-g-goat), but around the gentle ladies, it adjusts to say j-j-jellybean. (gentle, giant, gyro)

H is a great friend to have – he really helps to calm down sounds that can be too loud on their own. Consider the now familiar th, wh, ch, and sh. Now we find that “h” helps “p” as well → “ph”

Additional sound clusters:

Ar-ar-arch	Ur-ur-urn	Er-er-urn	Ir-ir-urn
Or-or-orange	Aw-aw-autumn	Au-au-autum	
Ou-ou-ouch!	Ow-ow-ow!!!	Oi-oi-oil	Oy-oy-oil
Al-al-altar	All-all-altar		

All of the time, when you see “all”, it will need a special sound all its own! There are also many, many times when just “al” gets the same sound (because there isn’t room in some words for two “ll”).

A wonderful thing to know about bigger words is that their syllables follow the same rules of pronunciation as small words. Your student has been seeing how 2-syllable words work, when we taught how -er and -ing are added to small words, as well as in some simple names, like “Dennis”. Now, it’s time to start teaching bigger words.

- Knowing that syllables will act the same as small words did, we can make reading much easier by teaching our students to instinctively see the smaller words (syllables), and learn how to take big words in “small bites”.
- Cover up the syllables in larger words to help your student see where they break – encouraging them to read them as though they were independent words. Constant exposure to where the syllables break will develop an inner sense of how to tackle (and to some extent, spell) words. If you are weak on this yourself, you can find how words break by looking in the dictionary.
- Remember that when a vowel ends a 2-3 letter word, it has to work harder to say its name by itself? That is true for syllables as well. (bu...gle, cra...dle, ma...ple) As you try to explain why a vowel is saying its name, don’t forget to check if there are multiple syllables – as that is very commonly the reason.
- In the word “opener”, “o” is all by himself in the first syllable. That’s why he has to say his name – just like “a” and “I” do when they are alone.

Be...cause	Big...ger	In...ner	Grace...ful
Rea...son	Stu...dent	Ex...po...sure	Flut...ter...ing
Sup...pose	Know...ing	Danc...ing	Feath...ers
o...pen...er	Cov...er	Grass...hopper	Fool...ish
Won...der...ful	In...de...pen...dent	Sleep...ikng	Win...ter

Advanced Detail Stories:

“K” comes before “i” and “e”. “C” comes before the other 3! Remember how “c” has wonderful manners – and never makes a loud sound in front of the gentle ladies (i,e,and y)? Well, “k” doesn’t! **If you need to spell “kite”, “kettle”, “kind”, or “ketchup”, you have to use “k”, because “c” would never do it!**

“S” and “T” often work as a team, and are very nice about letting “E” reach around them both to help another vowel. (haste, waste, taste)

There is a special relationship between “o” and “ld” – maybe it’s an old friendship? The “ld” help “o” to say its name! (old, gold, sold)

Remember how “ld” helps “o” to say its name? **Well, “ld” and “nd” have the same kind of friendship with “i”!** (mild, wild, kind, find)

Some words can be pronounced two different ways, according to the meaning you want to use! (wind)

Sometimes, vowels get unexpected help – and are able to say their names when you don’t expect it. If you run into a word that doesn’t sound right, it may be one of the exceptions – so try letting the vowel say its name. These times are few, though, and you will quickly learn to know them by sight. Here are three. (post, most, gross)

Another by-guess and by-golly pair of letters is “-ie”. These two letters take turns. Sometimes “i” helps “e”, and sometimes “e” helps “i”. How do you know which sound to use? Again, try both and pick the best! (pie, tie, pier, tier)

OW - **Here is a rare case of a consonant helping a vowel** to say its name. (low, grow, fellow)

Ew, ue **Here are two more pairs of letters that can say “oo!”** (crew, stew, dew, due, clue, blue)

Encourage your student to experiment with both –oo sounds. (oo-oo-food, oo-oo-book) If one sound doesn’t make a recognizable word, try the other. In the initial stages, this is the simplest way to learn the words, and the more they read a given word, the faster they will remember which sound it wants. (book, pool, moon, hood)

Normally, with “ea”, the “a” helps “e” to say its name. **In some cases, though, “a” is there as a quiet friend.**

To know which is which, try both methods and see which one makes sense. (read, sweat, tread)

In the word “dresses”, an extra “e” steps in to let the final “s” say its sound separately from the earlier “ss”.

There are times, particularly at the front of a word, when “a” borrows the sound of “u” (uh-uh-umbrella) away, alike, about

We have seen “er-er-urn” before – and it’s fun to notice that in these two words, they are friendly and **welcoming to a lonely letter “a”**. The “a” doesn’t have a job, but it is still welcome to join them as they do their “ur” job! (heard, earth)

In -dge words, “d” is often silent. (fudge, judge, badge)

Sometimes –or sounds more like –er. Try saying these words first as they are written. Depending on your region’s accent, you may find you prefer to a slightly different pronunciation (such as an –er sound)! Learning to play with the sounds of words you are reading is a good skill to master. (au...thor, can...dor, col...or)

Why does “lamb” have a silent “b” at the end? Because the little lamb was sleeping – otherwise it would be saying “baa, baa, baa!” **If you see “b” following the letter “m” at the end of a word, just know that it is a silent friend – there to keep “m” company.** (climb, numb, limb)

Similarly, “k” in front of “n” and “w” in front of “r” are also silent friends. (knot, knee, wrote, wrap). When your student encounters a words that has too many sounds, tell them to try all the sounds – and then listen for the familiar word within.

Over time, we have dropped some of our sounds in certain words – or have forgotten the original reason for the extra letters being there. This is an easy hurdle to get past. (castle, fasten, nestle; guest, guide, guard;honest, hour, rhino;half, calf, chalk)

When you see “tch”, the “t” is always silent. Try saying these words with the “t” making its usual sound, and then without the “t” sound. Perhaps at one time in our past, people did pronounce the “t” – but no longer.

The -gh s combination is usually silent, but not lazy! When it follows an “i”, it helps the “i” to say its name! (high, tight, bright, to...night)