



# Help Your Students Become Word Detectives



By Wiley Blevins

The first words early readers encounter are generally simple, one-syllable words such as *cat*, *play*, and *mom*. Most children learn these words with relative ease through direct, explicit phonics instruction and lots of reading practice. However, many readers begin experiencing difficulties when they encounter larger words with many syllables, such as *identify*, *constitution*, and *remarkable*. Especially in the after school environment where instruction can be tailored to each child's needs, there's a lot you can do to help the kids in your program tackle these bigger, harder words—and essentially motivate them to become “word detectives.”

When listening to your student read, follow these five simple steps:

1. **Look for word parts at the beginning of the word (prefixes).** Many words, such as *replay* and *unhappy*, contain common word parts called prefixes. A prefix appears at the beginning of a word and changes the meaning of the word. For example, the prefix *dis* means “not” or “the opposite of,” as in *dislike*—to not like. The most common prefixes are *un* as in *unhappy*, *re* as in *reheat*, *in* as in *inappropriate*, and *dis* as in *disappear*.
2. **Look for word parts at the end of the word (suffixes).** Similarly, many words contain common suffixes, which appear at the end of a word. The most common suffixes are *s* as in *bugs*, *ed* as in *started*, and *ing* as in *running*. Others include *ly*, *ness*, *ty*, *ment*, *er*, *or*, *ful*, *less*, and *est*.
3. **In the base word, look for familiar spelling patterns.** Think about the six syllable-spelling patterns in English. After you remove the prefix and suffix from a word (if the word contains these parts), what is left is called the base word. Often this will be a simple one- or two-syllable word such as *play* in the word *playing* or *event* in the word *uneventful*. Children can use their basic phonics skills to sound out the one-syllable base words and their knowledge of English syllables to sound out words with more than one syllable. There are six common spelling patterns in English.

- **Closed:** These syllables end in a consonant. The vowel sound is generally short: rabbit, napkin.
- **Open:** These syllables end in a vowel. The vowel sound is generally long: tiger, pilot.
- **Consonant + le:** Usually when le appears at the end of a word and is preceded by a consonant, the consonant + le form the final syllable: table, little.
- **Vowel team:** Many vowel sounds are spelled with vowels pairs such as ai, ay, ea, ee, oa, ow, oo, oi, oy, ou, ie, and ei. The vowel teams appear in the same syllable: explain, notebook.
- **R-controlled:** When a vowel is followed by r, the letter r affects the sound of the vowel. The vowel and the r appear in the same syllable: turtle, market.
- **Final e:** These syllables generally represent long-vowel sounds: compete, decide.

**4. Sound out and blend together the word parts.** Once your student has found all the big chunks in a long word, it's time to put them together to read the word. That is, instead of sounding out the ten separate sounds in the word *uneventful*, he or she only has to put together the three big pieces in the word – *un*, *event*, and *ful*. This technique makes it much easier to read the word.

**5. Say the word parts fast.** Sometimes when a reader sounds out a longer word, the actual word sounds slightly different from the way he or she sounded it out. That is because most multi-syllable words have unaccented syllables. An unaccented syllable has the "uh" vowel sound, as in the first syllable of the word about or the second one in disappear. If your student has heard the word he or she is sounding out, then he or she will be able to recognize it quickly based on the approximate pronunciation.

Once your reader has identified the word, ask him or her to reread the sentence containing the word. Ask, "Does the word make sense in the sentence?" This will help confirm that he or she sounded out the word correctly. If it doesn't sound right, have him or her adjust pronunciation as needed.

Over time, your students will get used to looking for these word parts and become quite adept at tackling bigger, harder words. Periodically stopping and helping them through a new word using these five steps can help them become master word detectives and successful readers!