

Handout 3.3D: Guidelines for Teaching Letter-Sound Correspondences

Because our goal is to teach all students to read connected text as quickly and accurately as possible, it is helpful to remember the following guidelines in designing letter-sound correspondence instruction, especially for struggling readers:

- **Letter-sound correspondences are often introduced in a sequence based on their frequency of use in text and spelling. Frequently used letters and sounds are taught before infrequently used sounds and letters.**

Examples:

- The letter *m* is more frequently used than the letter *x*.
- Present the “hard” /k/ sound for the letter *c* as in *can* before the “soft” /s/ sound for *c* as in *cent*.
- The /g/ sound for the letter *g*, as in *girl*, is presented before the /j/ sound for *g*, as in *gym*.

If students demonstrate difficulty during guided practice, provide immediate clarification by modeling correct responses and having students give the answer on their own. Then repeat several of the previous tasks and the one that caused confusion.

For example, when you ask for the sound of the letter *a* in *cat*, a student responds /i/. You would model the correct response by saying /aaa/ and then check the student’s understanding by asking for the student to give the sound for the letter *a* in *cat*.

- **There is not an established order of introduction for letter-sound correspondences, so it varies across beginning reading programs.**
- **Begin with letter-sound correspondences that can be combined to make words that students can read and understand.**

This helps students generalize that letters and their common sounds can be combined to make many words. For example, with the knowledge of the letters *m*, *s*, *t*, and *a* and their common sounds, students can read words such as *at*, *am*, *as*, *mat*, *sat*, and *Sam*.

It is important to introduce some vowels early so that words can be made and read.

- **Letter sounds with similar auditory features can be separated and introduced at different times.**
- Examples of similar auditory letter sounds include /m/ and /n/ and /e /and /i/.
- **Continuous sounds are usually introduced before stop (or clipped) sounds.**

Continuous vowel or consonant sounds can be prolonged or stretched out when they are pronounced and are easier to say without distortion. Voiced stop sounds are not as easy to pronounce in isolation without a vowel sound. The vowel sound should be “clipped” to make it as brief as possible.

For example, *b* should be pronounced /b/ instead of /buh/ and *g* should be pronounced as /g/ instead of /guh/.

Teaching voiced and unvoiced sounds can help some students who are having difficulty distinguishing the sounds of English. Students can distinguish the sounds through feeling the vibrations of voiced sounds by touching their voice box with their fingertips or by covering both their ears and listening as they say the sounds.

Small mirrors are also helpful for students who are having trouble distinguishing sounds. Students can watch the position of their mouths, tongues, and teeth as they form the sounds. Be sure to model the correct formation for the letters.

It is **not** necessary to teach all of the continuous sounds before introducing stop sounds.

- **Introduce only a few letter-sound correspondences at a time and provide many opportunities for practice.**

The number of letter-sound correspondences introduced will vary, depending on students’ knowledge and skills. You may need to reduce the rate of introduction of new sounds for students who are experiencing difficulties.

Using multisensory techniques, such as sky-writing, helps some students remember letters and their sounds.

- **When students can reliably identify the sound of a letter, it is helpful to provide opportunities for these students to practice discriminating the new sound from other known letter-sound correspondences.**

For example, present the newly introduced sound for *t* with other known letter-sound correspondences in this way: *s, t, m, t, p, t, s*. Ask students to identify the letter sounds. This task provides built-in review for previously learned letter sounds to help students remember them.