

The Story Behind Smart Start Word Analysis Exercises

"Dad?"

"Yes?" he answered picking up the receiver.

"Have a moment?"

"Always."

His reassuring tone was filled with warmth.

"Teaching is not what I expected. I've always looked forward to school, because I had a teacher. Now, I am the teacher."

He chuckled and said, "You have a classroom of teachers!"

"What do you mean?"

"Pay attention to your students and they will teach you what you need to know."

* * *

Four years later, I was facing an issue common to grade one teachers—how to get six year olds to identify the differences between short and long vowels. The children were teaching me just how hard it was. Two weeks of daily group practice decoding short vowel words, long vowel words with silent e and long vowel words with two vowels together resulted in the children correctly verbalizing the concepts. However, when it came to applying the concepts independently things fell apart. My classroom of young readers clearly needed a different strategy.

How could I give them enough individual practice without overwhelming them?



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Eventually, I started thinking about how we practiced math facts through daily drills. Was it possible to make exercises for sorting short and long vowels? If so, how could I make the children interested in the exercises?

Then I remembered a book from my own childhood about creating and deciphering secret codes. It was a lot of fun making invisible ink messages with lemon juice!

Combining these two thoughts gave me an idea! The children could pretend to be code breakers deciphering the code for short and long vowel words. I got out my word list book The Reading Yellow Pages and created my first language arts word analysis exercise. The first drill had three steps.

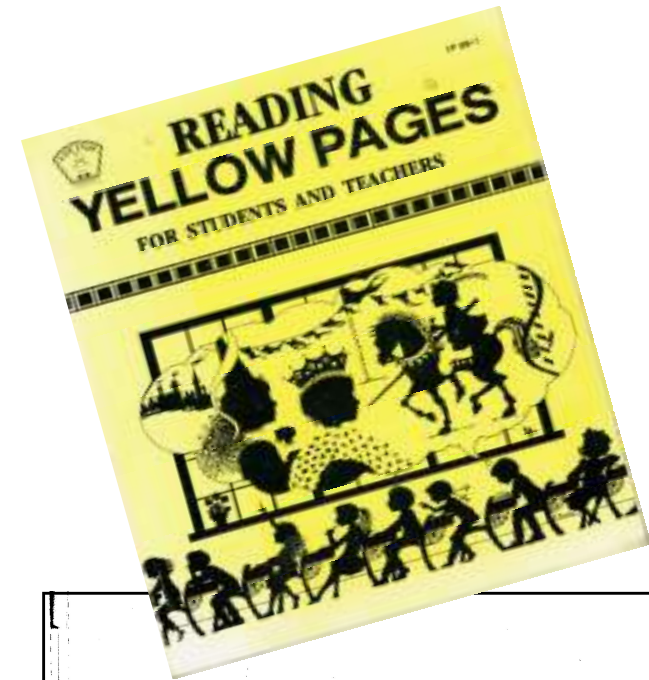


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1. Sort the words according to short and long vowels using letters to identify them:

R = regular vowel word (short vowel)

B = bumper word (long vowel with silent e words)

M = mouse words (long vowels with two vowels together)

2. Mark the vowels in each word.

*short vowels:

bat

*long vowels with silent e:

bake

*long vowels with 2 vowels together: seal

3. Decode the word.

The children found dipping a q-tip in lemon juice to write an invisible message exciting! Heating the paper over a light bulb revealed the message as the lemon juice turned colour. This was a fun way to connect code breaking with word analysis exercises. Children who are learning to read are, in a sense, code breakers.

The first exercise I made had thirty words. We reviewed how to break the code for the three different types of words and the children were excited to try. What happened next, was a real surprise. It took the class more than half an hour to name, mark and read the words! I could hardly believe how difficult it was for most of them. We did the same exercise using different words four days in a row and then I made another important discovery. Some children were naming and marking the words, but didn't bother to sound them out—this resulted in the child being able to correctly sort the words, but still unable to read them! After this discovery, each child was instructed to take his work to the carpet and wait for another child to come. The two children became partners and took turns reading their words aloud.

Three weeks later the outcome was amazing. The children could quickly assess the strategies and apply them to decoding. By this time, the majority of students could complete the thirty words in less than five minutes—with another couple minutes tacked on to read them aloud to a partner. Afterwards, most of them easily applied these coding principles to their independent reading. The fluency gained in the children was astounding!

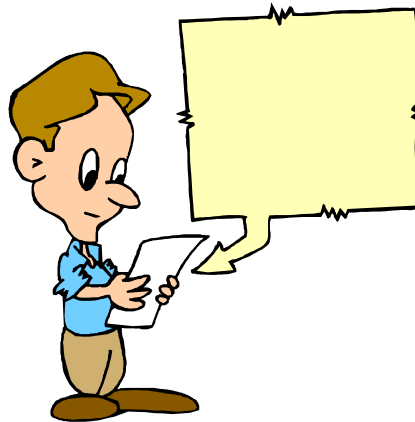


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1. blast _____
2. teen _____
3. sails _____
4. strap _____
5. bake _____
6. goat _____
7. mole _____
8. read _____
9. stack _____
10. file _____

• Word Analysis Exercise

- **R = regular** (short vowel)
- **B = bumper** (long vowel/silent e)
- **M = mouse** (two vowels together)
- Make sure that after marking all words as shown that students go back and sound out each word with a partner.



- Without this blending practice, students will learn to analyze words without applying the skill to orally decoding words correctly.

1. blast ^u__R__
2. tēen __M__
3. s^ails __M__
4. strap __R__
5. b^akē __B__
6. g^oat __M__
7. m^olē __B__
8. rēad __M__
9. s^utack __R__
10. fⁱlē __B__