CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FUNDAMENTALS

Teaching Decoding, Vocabulary Development, and Fluency

Once you've mastered the skills in Chapter Ten and have your students reading more frequently and with greater leverage, mastering the methods of champion teachers in three core elements of literacy instruction—decoding, vocabulary, and fluency—can increase the quality and productivity of your students' reading, making them more attentive, more expressive readers and building a foundation that will increase the comprehension they take from their reading, no matter what subject you teach.

DECODING

Decoding is the process of deciphering written text to identify the spoken words it represents. Although decoding might appear at first to be a mundane, lower-order skill, its mastery is a prerequisite to all reading comprehension and thus to most learning. It's the foundation. Incomplete mastery of decoding can persist well beyond the elementary grades and detract from the success of even apparently advanced students. If a third-grade student labors over just two or three of the words in a sentence, concentrating his energy on piecing together each letter's contribution, he will likely have little memory left over to absorb the meaning of the sentence or even to remember the beginning by the time he reaches the end. If a middle school student in history class reads a passage about the causes of the Civil War but leaves the s off the verbs, the syntax of the sentence
will erode. The student may remember pieces of the main point but will fail to develop a cohesive understanding. If a high school student allocates much of her mental energy to sounding out new terms in a passage about representative government—*filibuster, cloture,* and *perquisite*—she may fail to attend to much else or even imprint the words’ meanings. If she gets the names or words wrong or breezes over them with only the roughest approximations, she may fail to recognize them in future discussion, conversation, or reading.

Given the bedrock importance of decoding at every level, teachers should strive to correct decoding errors whenever possible, no matter what subject or grade level they teach. Since these errors often indicate a broader lack of knowledge or skills, reinforcing general rules and ensuring that students practice decoding are the antidotes. However, many teachers who correct decoding errors fail to do either of these, opting instead to correct the error and ask the student to make an “echo correction”—that is, to repeat the correct word without decoding it. There are times when an echo correction is necessary, but it only gets the student through the word in the immediate situation. It doesn’t increase the likelihood of success the next time the student encounters the word.

So what sorts of actions are better than an echo correction? If a student can’t read *might,* the best way to correct such a decoding error may be to improve her knowledge of the rules. After all, she’s likely to struggle with *sight* and *tight* as well. Rather than saying, “That word is *might,*” the teacher might say, “-i-g-h-t says ‘ite.’ Now try that word again.” This has two benefits: it requires the student to incorporate the new information and then decode the original word successfully, and it reinforces a rule she can use on other high-frequency words. The next time the teacher corrects, he or she might say, “-i-g-h-t says . . . ?” and ask the student to recall and then apply the rule. In most cases, asking students to self-correct by applying a rule or new information—“That vowel is a long *a.* Now try that word again,” is another typical example—is powerful because it addresses the cause, not just the symptom, and thus contributes to a long-term solution.

Even so, exceptions are the rule in English—arguably one of our language’s most distinguishing characteristics. Many words are simply impossible or unrewarding to decode. In fact, sight words are often learned by rote specifically because rules do not apply to them. Where the ideal of self-correcting isn’t possible, the key is to recognize such cases quickly so as not to waste time and create confusion.
Transaction Costs and Decoding

A transaction cost is the amount of resources it takes to execute an exchange—be it economic, verbal, or something else. Think again of the ten dollar "savings" on the TV in the example in Chapter Ten. Transaction costs are most important in those interactions that happen frequently since frequency multiplies the importance of efficiency. This makes managing transaction costs especially relevant to addressing decoding errors.

Decoding errors are common and usually of short duration—a student reads "hope" as "hop" and the whole sequence, whether it gets corrected or not, lasts just a second or two. Correcting decoding errors consistently is important in helping your students build strong reading habits and reducing the transaction cost of your corrections is arguably the most important factor in your success—not just in improving students' decoding skills but in ensuring a successful lesson overall. Except in cases where your lesson objective focuses on decoding skills, you should strive for the lowest possible transaction cost in making corrections. This requires rigorous economy of language. Consider these two corrections of a student's decoding error:

Teacher 1: You said in-SPEAK-tion. Can you go back to the beginning of the sentence and read that word again?

Teacher 2: In-SPEAK-tion?

The difference between these corrections may seem trivial but is in fact huge. Time how long it takes you to say each of these statements aloud. The time it takes to say the first phrase—the transaction cost—is at least five times greater than the transaction cost of the second. Every extra word the first teacher says takes time and disrupts the flow of student concentration on the story. Thus, every extra word potentially disrupts comprehension. If you used the second phrase to correct, you could make three or four interventions in the time you could make just one with the first phrase. While you should correct consistently to help students decode effectively, doing so quickly and seamlessly is the only way to make correction viable. Like the second teacher, you should strive to make a habit of using the simplest and quickest intervention. If you are consistent in the manner that you do so, your students will get in the habit of self-correcting quickly and efficiently.

Two of the most efficient correction methods in terms of transaction cost are "punch the error" (quickly repeating the misread word back to the student while inflecting your voice to make it a question) and "mark the spot" (rereading the
three or four words prior to the word on which the student made the error, and inflecting your voice to show that the student should continue the reading from the point where you stop.

An echo correction makes for a very low transaction cost, but as I have noted, it does not ask the student to decode. Echo corrections may be worthwhile when you're reading an especially important section of a text and can't afford even a minimal distraction. Otherwise, these corrections are best for sight words that defy the rules and logic of decoding.

**Address Decoding Errors Even When Students “Know” the Rule**

A certain proportion of reading errors are due to carelessness, haste, or sloppy reading habits. For example, some students habitually leave the s or other ending sounds off words, even though they know they are supposed to read them. These errors remain important to correct nonetheless. They still interfere with comprehension and, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the student who does not read words correctly has little advantage over the student who cannot read them correctly. This is yet another argument for lowering your transaction cost: in many cases, the key part is not so much the added information as the reminder to go back and reread more carefully, an important habit to build.

**Techniques for Addressing Decoding Errors**

Observing champion reading teachers in action has allowed me to develop what I hope is a clear and actionable list of the specific methods they use most often in correcting decoding errors. These methods allow you to correct errors consistently, with a minimal transaction cost, and in a manner that causes students to self-correct. Because these approaches are all relatively straightforward, you should be able to do them reliably and consistently with just a little bit of practice.

In many cases, the examples of various correction techniques provided in this section are wordier (they have a higher transaction cost) than they would be in actual classroom use. I've done this to make them clearer, but teachers should always strive to streamline. In the two examples, in Punch the Error, which follows, I encourage dropping the phrases, “Can you get the last part?” and “Try it again,” as soon as students come to understand that those parts of the directions are implicit.
Punch the Error

- Repeat the word a student misread back to him or her, replicating and putting emphasis on the part where the error occurred. *Examples:* “Is that word in-SPEEK-tion??” “CARE-pet??”

- After a student makes a decoding error, repeat or describe the part of the word he or she read correctly. *Examples:* “You got the first two sounds.” “Express is right. Can you get the last part?”

- Sometimes students get the right sounds in the wrong order. Punch this error by identifying the correct order of sounds. *Example:* “The i comes before the r. Try it again.”

Mark the Spot

- Reread the three or four words immediately prior to the word on which the student was unable to decode, inflecting your voice (usually by extending the last syllable or two of the last word) to show that the student should pick up there. *Example:* When the student reads, “He ran though the door,” the teacher corrects with, “He ran . . .”

Name the Sound

- Name the sound a letter should make, and ask students to repeat and apply it.
  - Identify the sound a vowel is making, especially whether it is making a long or short sound, and ask students to apply it. *Examples:* “[That’s a] long a.” “Long vowels say their name.” “Read that again: a long a.”
  - Identify the sound a consonant is making, especially whether a C, G, or S is making a hard or soft sound, and ask the student to apply it. *Examples:* “[That’s a] soft c.” “Hard c like cat/soft c like city.” “Hard g like golf/soft g like gym.”

- Name the sound a group of letters is making, and ask students to repeat and apply. *Examples:* “-TCH says ‘chuh’ ” [with the instruction to try again understood]. “-EA says ‘ay.’ ”

- If there’s a clear and identifiable rule, remind students of it, and ask them to apply it. *Examples:* “E at the end makes the vowel says its name.” “Silent E makes that a long a.”
• Here are the most common rules that every teacher should be prepared to reinforce:

• **Long vowels:** In a long vowel sound, a letter says its name (e.g., the \(a\) in cape). With the exception of times when they’re followed by the letter \(r\), long vowel sounds are very consistent. You should be able to prompt students with: “Long \(e\)” and have them self-correct.

• **Short vowels:** In a short vowel sound, a letter says something, well, shorter than its long form (e.g., the \(a\) in cap). With the exception of times when they’re followed by the letter \(r\), short vowel sounds are consistent (almost as consistent as long vowels). You should be able to prompt students with: “Short \(e\)” and have them self-correct.

• **Silent \(e\) (makes the vowel say its name):** When a word’s pattern is vowel-consonant-\(e\), the \(e\) is almost always silent and the preceding vowel is long (says its name). You should be able to prompt students “Silent \(e\)” (or “Tricky \(e\)”) and have them self-correct.

• **Bossy \(r\) (makes her first car turn):** Vowels followed by \(r\) usually make their own sound—distinct from the long or short sound and often similar to other “\(r\)-controlled” vowel sounds. The sounds in first and turn are the same; the \(a\) in car isn’t short or long! You should be able to prompt students to remember “bossy \(r\)” and have them self-correct.

• **Soft/hard C:** Hard \(c\) says car. Soft \(c\) says cent. You should be able to prompt students “Soft \(c\)” (or “Hard \(c\)”) and have them self-correct.

• **Soft/hard G:** Hard \(g\) says gas. Soft \(g\) says gentleman. You should be able to prompt students “Soft \(g\)” (or “Hard \(g\)”) and have them self-correct.

• **-tion says shun:** You should be able to prompt students “-tion says shun” and have them self-correct.

• **-ight says ite:** You should be able to prompt students “-ight says ite” and have them self-correct.

• **-igh says I:** You should be able to prompt students “-igh says I” and have them self-correct.

• **Slyly:** When a word ends in \(-y\), it most often makes an \(i\) sound if the word is one syllable and an \(e\) sound if it has multiple syllables. Think dry and democracy or sly and slyly. Because it contains both, use slyly as your cue. You should be able to prompt students slyly and have them self-correct.
• Give the student a more familiar example of a troubling letter sequence from which to model. *Example:* For a student struggling to read the word *would:* “You know *could,* so this must be...?”

**Chunk It**

• Help students chunk difficult words by recognizing familiar patterns and words-within-words. *Examples:* If a student struggles to read the word *hopeless:* “Do you see a part of that you already know?” “The first four letters are a word you know.” “Cover the ‘-less,’ and read what you have.”

• Affirm and reiterate what the student got right, focusing him on the problem chunk. *Example:* “You got *hope,* but the second part isn’t ‘-ing.’”

• Ask students to read a confusing word without a suffix or prefix first. *Example:* “‘Re’- is a prefix. Try reading the word without it. Cover up the *r* and the *e.* Now what do you have?”

**Speed the Exceptions**

• When a word does not conform to standard rules, identify the correct pronunciation quickly and directly. *Example:* “That word is written ‘bury’ but pronounced ‘berry.’ We’ll just have to remember it.” “That word is *through.*”

• If a student should know a word’s distinctive pronunciation (it is a sight word or has recently been discussed), quickly identify it as an exception. *Example:* “That’s one of our sight words.” “That word doesn’t follow the rules, but we studied it yesterday.”

• If there’s a specific rule the word breaks, identify that rule if you can to make the reasoning clear. *Example:* “We’d expect the *e* to make that *I* say ‘g-IVE’ [as in *hive*] but this word is an exception.”

It’s also important to use quick and simple positive reinforcement when students read a word correctly not only because it encourages them but it also lets them know explicitly that they got it right. Since correction of mispronunciation and misreading is inconsistent at best in their lives, they may not know when they’ve gotten a word correct. As students continue reading, say “yup,” “perfect,” “you got it,” “nice,” and so on. You can also increase efficiency by reducing the amount of time students spend pausing and wondering whether they’ve gotten a tough word correct. Obviously you want this method to speed, not slow, your
reading. You can minimize your transaction costs by making the phrases you use to reinforce both quick and consistent (too much variation draws too much attention to your words).

**Cueing Systems**

Good readers often begin to read a word incorrectly but arrive at the right pronunciation by using knowledge of letters and sounds, grammar and syntax, and context to develop plausible options. Experts call these *cueing systems* because they are three separate ways students infer information about words.

Experienced teachers and reading specialists should carefully encourage students to use and develop these cueing systems to address decoding errors:

**Letter and Sound Cueing**

*Text reads:* “The dog growls.”

*Student reads:* “The dog barks.”

*Teacher says:* “If it was *bark*, there would be a *b* at the beginning. [pointing to the letter *g*] Is this a *b*?”

**Grammar and Syntax Cueing**

*Text reads:* “The boys wore their coats.”

*Student reads:* “The boys wore their coat.”

*Teacher says:* “The boys all shared one coat? Is that correct?”

Although using students’ knowledge of grammar and syntax can be useful, teachers should avoid instructing students to use what “sounds right” since what sounds right to readers who have not internalized standard rules of grammar is unreliable at best.

**Meaning and Context Cueing**

*Text reads:* “Clowns wear makeup and fake noses.”

*Student reads:* “Clowns wear makeup and face noses.”

*Teacher says:* “Does it makes sense that they would wear face noses?”

Poor readers often rely excessively on meaning and context cueing systems. Be careful not to encourage them to rely exclusively on techniques that do not reinforce actual letter and sound decoding.
VOCABULARY

Students need a rich vocabulary to understand what they read, and the importance of word knowledge is redoubled by the fact that, as E. D. Hirsch, whose books on cultural literacy led to the founding of the Core Knowledge program, points out its effect compounds over time. Whether a student learns the word taiga as she’s reading a passage about subarctic climates may depend in part on whether she knows what tundra means. In his book The Knowledge Deficit, Hirsch describes this as a Matthew effect. Simply put with vocabulary, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The term was first coined by sociologist Robert K. Merton in 1968 and takes its name from a line in the biblical Gospel of Matthew:

For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

Students who know more words learn more words. In fact, research suggests that a ten-thousand-word vocabulary gap exists between students of privilege and students from less advantaged backgrounds by the time they reach tenth grade. This disparity in and of itself may account for a significant part of the learning gap.

But while teaching vocabulary is critically important, all types of teaching vocabulary are not equal. Good vocabulary instruction starts with a student-friendly definition that’s simple and clear. While some teachers believe that arriving at the definition is the goal of vocabulary work, champion teachers start there and spend their time having students practice using words widely and richly after they know the basic meaning. They recognize that knowing a definition is a long way from being able to use a word effectively in writing or thought. They recognize that it is more powerful to ask students, “How would you use it?” When would you use it?” or “How is it different from [a similar word]?” than to guess, “What do you think that might mean?” In fact, a correct guess may be a dangerous false positive, suggesting that a student knows what a word means, when in reality, she understands it only at the most basic, and therefore insufficient, level.

Many teachers also use a synonym model in teaching vocabulary: defining a word by finding a viable synonym. This technique has critical flaws, however (Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan). Even if two words overlap significantly in their meaning, they are not the same, and it is the difference between the two that matters. Consider mimic and imitate, two words that might be taught as synonyms. Mimicry usually implies mocking, often for humorous effect, while
imitation can be neutral or negative. However, even when negative, it implies something cheap and not the derisive sense that mimic carries. This difference accounts for a disproportionately large share of the meaning either word contributes to a written passage. A scene in which Billy mimics his teacher makes for a very different story than does one in which he imitates her. A student who sees these words as interchangeable misses that critical difference not just in the words but in the passage as well. Teaching deep word knowledge means helping students understand how a word is similar to and different from similar words, and it unlocks shades of meaning in the author’s word choice. That is, focusing on difference prepares students to use vocabulary functionally and increase their reading comprehension.

Although the skill of inferring vocabulary from context appears frequently on state assessments, teaching vocabulary primarily by context clues is also far less effective in the long run. Contexts can be vague, nondirective, or misdirective. Even if students learn to infer word meaning correctly much of the time, they are still essentially making guesses, and often erroneous ones at that. More significant, deep word knowledge, a better predictor of achievement than broad word knowledge, can rarely be grasped from context-based instruction. Strong vocabulary must be systematically and directly taught.

Finally, since good vocabulary instruction requires a significant investment of time, choices of which words to invest in are important. Some words are more worthy of investment than others. Generally teachers should invest time in teaching tier 2 words, which are relevant to student’s lives, likely to appear again, and respond well to instruction. Tier 1 words such as awesome and cafeteria are basic words that students at a given grade level should know. They appear frequently in oral rather than written language and are too common or easy to warrant significant investment of a teacher’s time. Tier 3 words such as microbe and piccolo have a low frequency of use, and they tend to be used in specific domains. They are less worthy of investment because they are least likely to appear again in other parts of a student’s life.

If there are too many tier 2 words to teach (there often are), invest in words that relate best to what you’re teaching (either the content of what you’re reading or other vocabulary words). If you’re reading a passage on the Civil War, hostility might be especially useful (and memorable). If you’re reading a novel about social class, the word dignified might be a strong choice. And teaching dignified might make a strong case for including words like haughty and aspire since they could be compared, contrasted, and used as a group, making the whole larger than sum of their parts.
Since the approach described here involves intentional teaching of vocabulary—that is, teaching words regularly, consistently, and often before (or even regardless of whether) they come up in an authentic text—it’s worth looking at a possible road map for introducing vocabulary words.

**Six Techniques to Reinforce Strong Vocabulary**

Observing champion reading teachers in action has allowed me to develop what I hope is a clear and actionable list of the specific methods they use to reinforce vocabulary, especially depth of word knowledge. These methods allow you to reinforce word knowledge, in a variety of settings. Because these approaches are all relatively straightforward, you should be able to do them reliably and consistently with just a little bit of practice.

1. **Multiple takes.** To enter a word into their functioning memory, students need to hear a word (and ideally its pronunciation) multiple times. Try to get them myriad quick exposures after introducing a word.

   - Have students practice using a word in different settings and situations and give an example of a time when they might use it.
     - “What animal would you most want for a companion?”
     - “What’s the most nutritious thing you’ve eaten today?”
     - “Can you think of a character in a movie or on TV who wears a disguise?”
     - “When would it be especially important to be precise?”
   - Circle back to words you previously taught—yesterday, last week, or last month.
     - “Who can recall a vocabulary word we’ve studied this month that means not having enough of something?”
   - Give students a sentence stem with a vocabulary word, and ask them to finish it.
     - “My mother stared at me with astonishment; she never imagined that...”
   - Have students practice saying words correctly.
     - “That word is pronounced ‘FLOO-Id.’ Everybody say that.”
     - “What vocabulary word did we have that can refer to a liquid?”
2. **Compare, combine, contrast.** Beware the “synonym model.” It’s the difference between similar words that creates meaning in a passage.

- Ask students to distinguish between or compare two different words; focus on nuances of meaning.
  
  “Can anyone describe how *indifferent* is different from *apathetic*?”

- Ask students to describe how and whether they could combine vocabulary words.
  
  “Could a tyrant ever be humble?”
  
  “What kind of disguise could be vibrant?”

- Ask students to apply and discuss a change (ideally to a similar word).
  
  “How would the meaning of what Mr. Beasley said change if he used the word *furious*?”
  
  “How would it make James different if he mimicked Sue instead of imitating her?”
  
  “What does *mimic* have in common with *spiteful*?”

3. **Upgrade.** Find opportunities to use richer and more specific words whenever possible.

- Ask students to use recently introduced words in class discussions.
  
  “We have a vocabulary word for weather that’s hot and damp. Can you use it?”
  
  “Who can summarize the first chapter using the word *desolate*?”

- Ask explicitly for a better word.
  
  “Can you use a better word than *big*?”
  
  “James is upset when he’s speaking. Let me hear me hear you describe how he talked with a better word than *said*.”

4. **Stress the syntax.** Students often struggle to use new words in different settings. They know *inadvertent* but can’t turn it onto *inadvertently*. They say, “I am feeling inadvertent.”

- Ask students to identify or change a word’s part of speech.
  
  “What part of speech is *stride* here, Susan?”
  
  “Can you use *stride* as a noun instead?”
  
  “How would I make *inadvertent* an adverb?”
• Ask students to identify or change a word's tense.
  "Can you think of a sentence that uses cower in the past tense?"
  "Can you put that sentence in the third person?"

5. **Back to roots.** Stress the foundational knowledge of roots so students can apply their understanding to new words.

• Ask students to identify roots or affixes and describe how they relate to meaning.
  "Why is the root ped- in the word pedestrian?"
  "What might monolith and lithograph have to do with a stone?"

• Ask students to identify other words containing a root.
  "Telepathy is sending or reading thoughts and feelings from far away. What other tele- words have 'far away' in their meaning?"

6. **Picture this.** Create a multidimensional image of each new word by using pictures and actions.

• Help students visualize words by giving them a picture that exemplifies a word they've learned. Or have students draw their own picture of a word.

• Ask students to act out or personify a word.
  "Show me what you would look like if you were furious."
  "Who can swagger across the room?"

• Have students develop gestures to help them remember words. Give them the word, and ask for the gesture. Give them the gesture, and have them provide the word. **Example:** For the word idyllic, students skip once to signify skipping through the woods, an exaggeratedly idyllic way to spend an afternoon.

**Vocabulary Methods for Specialists**

Reading and language arts teachers take on the additional challenge of introducing vocabulary instruction more systematically into their classes. Teachers at one high-performing middle school use the following sequence to introduce vocabulary words. It applies many of the techniques above and requires ten to fifteen minutes at the outset of each class to teach one or two new words as follows:

1. **Provide the definition and part of speech of a new vocabulary word.**

2. **Provide a similar word, ideally one with which students are familiar, and explain how the vocabulary word is similar but different.** Have students suggest times when they might use the word in question and why.
3. Show students a picture that portrays the vocabulary word. Explain why the picture is a representation of the word.

4. Create a sentence, written by the class with your guidance, that reflects the word’s meaning in a complete thought.

5. List and discuss variations on the word, identifying their part of speech: “Apathetic can be a noun, apathy. Or I could make it an adverb by adding a suffix. What suffix would I add to make apathetic an adverb?”

6. Play vocabulary-reinforcing activities and games using multiple takes and compare, combine, contrast.

7. Write a sentence independently (usually as homework) using the word correctly and according to standards for quality vocabulary sentences.

**FLUENCY**

In the standard definition, *fluency* consists of automaticity (the ability to read at a rapid rate without error) and expression (the ability to group words together into phrases to reflect meaning, emphasize important words, and express tone and register). You could argue, however, that fluency consists of automaticity plus expression plus comprehension. That is, to read a text expressively, the reader has to comprehend it. What are the register, tone, and mood like? Which words deserve special emphasis? How does the punctuation shape the meaning? In short, fluency isn’t more than fast reading; it’s reading with the meaning made audible.

True expressive and fluent reading demonstrates comprehension—in some cases, more efficiently than talking about or describing that understanding. It embeds the understanding in the action of fluent reading. And while many teachers think of fluency as a skill that’s most relevant in the elementary grades, the opposite may be true. Developing students’ ability to comprehend the full amount of information carried within the text relies on an “expressive ear” that can extract meaning from subtext, tone, register, innuendo, and analogy. Mature books rely even more heavily for their meaning on the portion of the argument carried by these subtextual elements. Unlocking those forms of meaning must be continually practiced and modeled even, and especially, in the later years. The best way to truly understand Shakespeare, experts will tell you, is to read it aloud. And of course the other key to understanding Shakespeare—or any other text—is to be able to read it quickly and efficiently and with sufficient brain cells left over for thinking about things other than what the words were.
Four Techniques to Reinforce Strong Fluency

Observing champion reading teachers in action has allowed me to develop what I hope is a clear and actionable list of the specific methods they use most often to reinforce fluent and expressive reading. These methods allow you to reinforce both automaticity and comprehension in a way that most students will find enjoyable. Because these approaches are all relatively straightforward, you should be able to do them reliably and consistently with just a little bit of practice.

- **Show some spunk.** Read aloud to your students regularly. When you do, model strong reading and expressive emphasis. This may involve some risk taking—if you’re not inclined to drama—but not only will you show them how to unlock the expressive parts of language, you’ll make it safe for them to take the risk of reading with spirit and vigor. This is equally important whether you are reading *War and Peace*, *Owl at Home*, “A Summary of the Oxygen Cycle,” or the directions to a word problem. In fact, students may be least familiar with how to extract meaning from the last two examples and thus may get the most out of hearing those read aloud.

A particularly important time to show some spunk is at the start of a longer section of oral reading or when starting up again after a break for discussion. Reading the first few sentences yourself models expressiveness, normalizing it and helping to sustain and engage interest in the text by getting it off to an exciting start. The verve and energy you bring to oral reading will be modeled in your students’ oral (and silent) reading.

Talking about modeling effective reading raises questions, however, about what to model and how. Here are two thoughts. The first is to group the words. Reading is like making music. The notes and rests have different lengths, both in how they are written and in the subtleties of how they are played. In the sentence, “Reading is like making music,” for example, the words *making* and *music* run together slightly more than the other words for most readers. Readers tend to group those words for emphasis and rhythm, and the sentence’s meaning shifts subtly as a result. As with music, some of the meaning is made visible by punctuation; other aspects are less obvious. When you read, help students recognize how the music in reading is played by grouping consciously. Seek to model stringing words together in fluid groups—the longer the better. For example, look for words in prepositional phrases to stick together, for a drop in the voice, and a slight acceleration for a parenthetical.

Another technique to follow in modeling oral reading is to identify especially important words in a passage and emphasize them. One benefit of this technique is
that when students implement it, they are required to engage their full intellectual faculties in deciding what words are in fact most important. Their choices present a fruitful topic for discussion and a valuable source of data about their reading. One Shakespearean expert I know proposed that the best way to read the Bard is to find and emphasize contrast words and emphasize the tension between them as you read. You can start students off more simply by having them look for transition words (*after*, *instead*, *suddenly*) and comparative and superlatives (*darker, faster, saddest, fullest*) to emphasize.

- **Ask for some drama.** Just as your reading expressively is good for students, so too is asking students to read expressively. It forces them to practice looking for the depth of meaning in words. To make oral reading more systematically expressive, try the following:

  - Identify (by telling students or helping them to infer it) the kind of expression your students should impart to the passage and ask them to apply it. “Wilbur is upset, Diamond. Can you read that sentence in a way that shows that?” You could also ask students to first infer Wilbur’s mood and then ask them to model: “How is Wilbur feeling right now? What emotion is he feeling? Good. Can you show me that?”

  - Call students’ attention to dialogue tags and their role as “stage directions.” “The passage says, ‘‘I don’t want any,’’ Mr. Malone said sharply.’ Read that again so his words are sharp.” You can make this technique even more effective by modeling the applicable tone when you read the dialogue tag and asking students to apply it to the sentence they are reading. In other words, in the example, you would say the word *sharply* in a sharp tone of voice that students could mimic and apply to the sentence.

  - Ask students to identify the two or three most important words in a sentence (or the two or three most important ideas in a passage) and place special emphasis on them.

  - Ask students to add to or extract something particular to or from the text by choosing a key descriptive word from the surrounding passage or even a vocabulary word and asking students to read the passage in a way that emphasized that word. For example, in a lesson at Excellence Charter School in Brooklyn, third-grade teacher Roberto de Leon responded to a student’s reading of a passage from *Phantom of the Opera* by saying, “Stop. Repeat that line, and read it as though he wanted to make her obey him.” *Obey* was one of the classes vocabulary words, and as he gave this instruction, de Leon
held up a note card with obey written on it. The student reread the passage focusing on incorporating the emphasis that de Leon suggested. In another example, a teacher asked her students to read aloud from a scene in C. S. Lewis’s *Prince Caspian*. After the first reading, she noted, “Look back a few sentences. It says the children are feeling gloomy as they sit and wait for the train. Can you read that again to show that the children are gloomy?” Obviously it can be especially rigorous when your line of questioning forces students to infer what tone or mood the words should carry from subtler clues. “Who can tell Danielle what kind of tone to use in reading these lines? Why do you say that?” You might even add, “Did everyone read it that way?” before asking Danielle to model the tone in her reading.

- Ask students to provide other possible interpretations of a line that a student read. De Leon is a master of this. “Oh, I love it!” he replied to a student’s expressive reading. “Who else wants to read that line expressively? Maybe in a slightly different way?”

**SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 23**

**FLUENCY**

In clip 23 on the DVD, Roberto de Leon of Excellence Charter School of Bedford Stuyvesant demonstrates exemplary teaching of fluency. He begins this inspirational clip by using the oral doze technique from Control the Game to test for leverage. He quickly finds he needs to restart to ensure that his students are not just listening but reading along with him (or a student reader). From here it’s all fluency.

De Leon demonstrates Show Some Spunk by modeling for his students the kind of expressive reading that embeds meaning and shows comprehension. Notice how effective his pass-off is to the student who reads with the mask. Roberto models the tone of the letter he asks the student to read with the first two words and then passes off to his student midsentence. The student can now practice applying the tone Roberto has set to his own reading simply by trying to continue it—something the student does extremely successfully. The student probably wouldn’t have taken the risk of reading so expressively if de Leon hadn’t done so himself first. Show
Some Spunk and Ask for Some Drama are permanently and inherently connected!

Finally, notice the way Roberto uses Lather, Rinse, Repeat so effectively, embedding it within lots of positive feedback but asking the student to reread with a new emphasis: embedding the application of the vocabulary word obey.

In this clip, de Leon is both developing his students' reading ear and teaching them to use their reading to demonstrate comprehension. This in turn will make his evaluation of their comprehension more efficient. He'll be able to hear it.

- **Check the mechanics.** Students may see punctuation but not grasp what it is telling them to do in terms of meaning or inflection. Make explicit reference to punctuation, and ask students to demonstrate their understanding of it in their oral reading. “There’s a period there. Did you stop?” “I want you to pause and breathe whenever you see a comma.” “Someone is talking there, right?” Emphasize the importance of syntax—the relationship of the pieces of a sentence and its effect on meaning, which is often lost on weak readers—and the idea that though sets the rest of the sentence in contrast to the initial phrase is a critical part of effective reading. Ask students to identify which words told them a sentence was a question or which words told them that the two men were not alike.

- **Lather, rinse, repeat.** Don’t just have students read frequently; have them reread frequently. Once students have made basic sense of the words in a sentence, ask them to go back and reread specifically for fluency. Here are three particular reasons for a reread:

  - To smooth out an original read that was wooden or required mechanical correction. “Okay, now that you’ve got the words, let’s go back and read it with energy. This is an exciting part of the book!”

  - To emphasize some aspect of meaning or incorporate feedback. “Okay, good. Now read that sentence [or passage] again, and try to show how scared they are.” “Can you go back and put special emphasis on the words that show the boys are scared?”

  - For fun or because the original read was especially good. “Oh that was great! Can you read it again so we can all hear how surly you made it sound?”
SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 24

FLUENCY

In clip 24 on the DVD, Hannah Lofthus of Leadership Prep Bedford Stuyvesant demonstrates exemplary teaching of fluency. In this clip you'll hear in her student readers the clear results of the consistent use of Ask for Some Drama, but the epiphany I take away from this clip is how powerful Lather, Rinse, Repeat can be when it's used to give positive in addition to constructive feedback. Lofthus asks her student to read the passage again because he showed "fantastic expression," both celebrating and analyzing a great student read with the rest of the class. The expressiveness the final reader brings to her reading as the clip closes just can't be a coincidence.

For fans of Strong Voice (technique 38 in Chapter Six) you'll also notice Lofthus using the self-interrupt method of ensuring that she doesn't talk over students. It might be interesting to compare and contrast it to Sultana Noormuhammad's self-interrupt in clip 17.