



How to Cure Dyslexia: Part 3

In my last column I stressed the need for the adult, self-teaching reader to be able to break up multisyllabic words into their syllables, so that the reader could see the phonetic structure of the word. The sight reader tries to find little words that he can recognize in multisyllabic words, which might give him a hint of what the word says. He is looking for a small, recognizable picture in the big word. But because that method is so inefficient, the reader is more likely to misread the word.



A syllable, by the way, is a unit of speech with one vowel sound. It can have no consonants or several consonants attached, but it can have only one vowel sound. For example, all the following are one-syllable words: a, at, meet, prom, prompt, thrust, scrunch. Two-syllable words can be as simple as: ago, omen, or amen, or as complex in spelling as: promptness, earthquake, spendthrift, or knowledge. Dictionaries will show you how to divide a multisyllabic word into its syllabic components or pronunciation units.

Spotting One's Own Errors

The biggest problem sight readers have is in not knowing when they've made an error in reading. However, the easiest and probably most obvious way for sight readers to know they've made an error is when they can't understand what they've just read. If the sentence doesn't make sense, it's because the reader has misread it. The reader must then reread the sentence to find the error. It is not uncommon for sight readers to make the same error in rereading. Therefore, the reading must be slow and word-for-word. If you are tutoring such a sight reader you must have patience and let the reader take as much time as necessary to discover his own errors.

Obviously, this can be a laborious process. However, if the learner chooses to read stories or articles that are interesting and worth reading, then the retraining can be more of a pleasure than a pain. I have found the *Reader's Digest* to be an excellent source of interesting articles on a wide variety of subjects. The articles can be read in one learning session and are written in good basic English. Also, chapters from books of high interest to the learner are recommended. The subject matter may indeed be so engaging and compelling that the learner will be strongly motivated to read the entire work, regardless of its difficulty.

While learning to read phonetically, the student might as well be learning something else at the same time. That's why the choice of reading materials is important. We read for knowledge and enjoyment. Most schools, however, force children to read materials that provide neither knowledge nor enjoyment. That is why so many children get the idea that reading is boring and irrelevant.

Improving One's Writing

The writer of the letter who wanted to know how to cure his dyslexia also wanted to know how to improve his writing. His bad handwriting can be improved with some patience and effort. First, he should learn to write in clear cursive script. This can be done by writing each of the cursive letters in



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their proper forms. He must then practice connecting the letters correctly and legibly when writing words. All of this should be done slowly, using good models. Speed will increase with proficiency. But proficiency should always come first. The writing section in my book *How to Tutor* provides cursive writing instruction with good models.

Also, the writing stylus should be held lightly between the thumb and the fourth finger, also known as the forefinger or index finger, and rest on the longer third finger. In this way, the learner uses a minimum of the hand's muscles and can write extensively without tiring. These days, teachers in primary schools make no effort to teach their pupils how to hold the pen or pencil correctly. That is why so many students wind up using their fists as the means of holding a pen.

The first duty of a teacher should be to prevent a student from developing a bad habit. But today's primary teachers don't seem to know what a bad habit is. The second duty of the teacher is not to teach anything that later has to be unlearned. But they do that every day when they teach children to read by the sight or whole-word method. Note how difficult it is to unlearn the sight method of reading in order to become a competent phonetic reader.

As the self-learner learns to read phonetically, this new phonetic knowledge should also improve his spelling. Punctuation is first learned by simply reading and copying good texts and understanding why the punctuation marks are where they are. (The more complex rules of punctuation, such as how commas are used to set off nonrestrictive clauses and when to place punctuation inside quotation marks and when to place them outside, can be learned from a good English grammar or style book.) In the past the *New Yorker* magazine was meticulous in its writers' use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Read some of the articles in their old issues to see what good correct writing looks like.

The purpose of punctuation, of course, is to make the text easier to read and understand and reduce ambiguities. It provides the written word with the graphic equivalent of inflection and rhythm. Quotation marks and apostrophes clarify meaning and separate what someone actually said from what others say he said. Commas, colons, semi-colons, and dashes help the writer organize his thoughts on paper.

In a way, writing should be as easy as reading phonetically. However, painstaking writers will often write and rewrite until they are satisfied that they have expressed exactly the ideas they wish to convey to the reader, so that the latter will understand what the author wants him to know. To be understood is always the goal of the good writer. Rewriting, revising, and editing are functions of the thinking process. In speech, we often find the right word eluding us. In writing, we can take the time to find the right word. Good writing, in fact, is little else than refined or thoughtful speech.

The letter-writer, whom we introduced in Part 1, also had difficulty with some of our spelling rules. Many of today's primary teachers no longer believe that spelling is all that important, especially if they are teaching children to read by the sight method. They've even created a classroom exercise known as "creative spelling," in which children are encouraged to write words in any way they want. They are actually encouraging the child to develop bad spelling habits.

But if spelling is not all that important, why was Dan Quayle's political career ruined because he added an e to the spelling of the word "potato"? While the added e is an acceptable variant spelling of potato, the former Vice President became the butt of late-night TV comedians and is remembered to this day for this slight spelling mishap. So if you think that spelling is not important, just remember Dan Quayle.

Spelling rules are writing conventions which must be learned by study and practice and, above all, by



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writing. The more one writes, the better one learns the rules, not as rules but as conventions which favor consistency, common sense, and logical practice. A writer who constantly makes spelling mistakes has simply not stopped long enough to study the words he keeps misspelling. Professional writers rely on their editors to catch their spelling mistakes. But the average writer must rely on his own devices.

A good way to learn to spell correctly is to make a list of the words one is in the habit of misspelling and juxtapose the correct spellings next to them. Instantly seeing the wrong way and the right way to spell a word should help the writer remember the right way. The self-learner should also refer the words back to their spelling families in *Alpha-Phonics* so that he can learn their spelling patterns. As the sight reader becomes a phonetic reader, his spelling will improve.

Mastering the System

Actually, learning to read phonetically is merely mastering the mechanics of our English alphabetic writing system — a system so versatile and ingenious in its design that writers such as William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, John Milton, Charles Dickens, and a host of other great writers and poets have managed to produce the world's greatest literature, which can be enjoyed by all of the future generations. The written language is the repository of the world's knowledge and wisdom, and a phonetic reader has it all at his fingertips. The most effective form of censorship is illiteracy, which is what the sight method of reading instruction leads to.

After one has learned to read phonetically, then one can learn about the English language and how to use it. That's when we get into grammar, structure, vocabulary, syntax, word origins, writing styles, and more. And that, in itself, often becomes a pleasurable lifelong pursuit. At this point you might want to invest in a great dictionary. The writer Ilan Stavans writes of his passion for dictionaries in his book *Dictionary Days*. He bought a two-volume OED (*Oxford English Dictionary*) to satisfy his passion. It is the Rolls Royce of dictionaries. You may not want to go that far. But a good dictionary should always be a part of your personal property.

Because the use of language is what makes human beings distinctly human, it should command an interest above all else in your education. Language is the tool of thought, spiritual vision, and invention, and before one can make maximum use of that tool, one must master the basic mechanical skills of reading and writing. How long will it take for the letter-writer to become a proficient phonetic reader? It all depends on how much time and effort he puts into the task and how badly he wants to get rid of his disability. As stated earlier, motivation is the key to success. It is the driving force that enables people to overcome insurmountable obstacles.

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