

## Morphological Awareness



### The Power of Morphology

*By 10 years of age, knowledge about the structure of words is a better predictor of decoding ability than is phonological awareness (Mann & Singson, 2003).*

Morphological awareness is the recognition, understanding, and use of word parts that carry significance. For example, root words, prefixes, suffixes, and grammatical inflections (e.g., -s or -es for plurals) are all morphemes which can be added or taken away from a word to alter its meaning.

Morphology is one of the often-overlooked building blocks for reading fluency, reading comprehension, and spelling. Research is now demonstrating the importance of strong morphological teaching as early as first and second grade (Apel & Lauraence, 2011), where traditionally it has been the focus in middle and high school years. In addition, there is evidence that students learn orthography (phonics), phonology, and morphology in concert rather than in stages, when learning how to read and write. Students with strong morphological skills possess a distinct advantage over students who use a "whole word approach" to decode words. With strong morphological skills, students can approach a novel multisyllabic word and break it into parts in order to predict the meaning. This skill helps in all areas of literacy: decoding, spelling, comprehension, and oral language. Many times struggling readers are unable to identify a word they encounter in the text, even though they know it in

their oral language. As a result, their expressive vocabulary remains quite limited compared with proficient readers who incorporate novel vocabulary from their reading into their oral language. Strong readers accomplish this because they recognize the word, infer its meaning, and are able to pronounce it. They efficiently map the vocabulary from their reading with previously known oral vocabulary as well.

As previously mentioned, children seem to simultaneously learn and integrate their phonological, orthographic, and morphological knowledge as they learn to read and write. Early learners may not always do so efficiently or completely, but they do show evidence of emerging awareness. Therefore, instruction and intervention might also be most efficient when these skills are explicitly taught in parallel. There are many ways in which this can be done. Several types of activities will be outlined with specific examples following in the appendix:

- Word sorts with self-discovery to aid in recognition of word families based on morphology or orthography.
- Explicit instruction of syllable types to recognize orthographical patterns.
- Scaffolding to turn patterns into "rules" about meaning and spelling.
- Word manipulation through blending and segmenting morphemes to further solidify patterns. Flashcards, syllabication, Word analysis while reading, letter tiles, etc.
- Practicing both decoding and encoding activities in tandem is like strengthening both tricep and bicep muscles to maximize the outcome. They are held in tension and the knowledge of one supports the other.

In sum, morphological awareness is an integral part of reading instruction and is especially so for struggling readers. Explicit instruction that integrates morphological awareness with orthographical knowledge (e.g., phonics), and phonological awareness provides the greatest impact. Students who learn how to attach meaning to parts of words will be empowered to be better readers and spellers. Success starts here!

## Appendix: specific activities

**Find the Roots:** Teach the concept of root words to your students. You might say, "A root word is the 'main' word in a longer word." Give examples and then have your students practice identifying the root words.

Ask your students to highlight the root words in following complex words.

1. mouthy
2. hopeful

3. sleepless
4. carefully
5. childish
6. workable
7. sawed
8. trembling
9. growing
10. unhelpful

**Fix the Affixes:** Explicitly teach students that affixes are extra parts that are "fixed on" to the root word. The affixes at the beginning of words are called "prefixes" because "pre-" means before, and a "suffix" comes at the end of a root word.

Ask your students to "fix" the broken root words with the correct "affix."

- Love            -ful
- Treat           -ly
- Grate           -less
- Mood           -able
- Do               -ing
- Sad              -tion
- Pink             -y
- Tempt          -ish
- Move            -ed
- Aggravate      -ment

**Word Sort:** Ask students to sort the following words according to their affixes. Then they should guess the meaning of the affix based on their prior knowledge and the patterns they see.

- Forgetful
- Management
- Disappear
- Neglectful
- Distrust
- Government
- Rightful
- Disown
- Shipment
- Careful
- Disengage
- Beautiful
- Disability
- Statement
- Temperament

**Building Blocks:** Make flash cards and ask your students to make as many real words as they can with these cards. Make sure that the cards contain several root words and multiple affixes.

A starter set of morphemes might include:

- En-             -ous
- Courage       -ing
- -Ment          Dear
- Trust           Fold

- -Y Humble

**Syllabifying the "Big Words":** Ask your students to preview the next chapter of their textbooks and write down 10 "Big Words." Next, have them highlight the root words that they recognize and take off any affixes that they see. Next they should break up the remaining parts of the word into syllables. Encourage them to infer the meaning of the word based on these word parts. Ask them how they would pronounce the word. A couple of examples follow:

*Metamorphosis:*

- Root: Morph (change)
- Affix: meta (whole/big picture)
- Possible meaning: change of the whole thing
- Possible pronunciation: meta/morph/a/sis

*Oxygenate:*

- Root: Oxygen (an element on the periodic table)
- Affix: -ate (to fill)
- Possible meaning: to fill with oxygen
- Possible pronunciation: ox/y/gen/ate

## Research

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There have been many studies done on morphological instruction and its effects on literacy abilities. Joanne Carlisle published a research article in 2010 compiling the results of various morphological instructional studies whose results overwhelmingly show improvements in literacy abilities of the participants. Carlisle suggests that these studies' results support the teaching of morphological awareness in order to improve students' reading abilities. Read her article "Effects of Instruction in Morphological Awareness on Literacy Achievement" to learn more about the connection between morphological instruction and increased literacy. You can read more [here](#).

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