

ExWyZee Remedial Reading

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ExWyZee Remedial Reading Sep-Com Monograph

DECODING WORDS BY SEPA-RA-TION ON THE COM-PU-TER

To Treat the Deficit in Transition From Letter-By-Letter
Sounding-out of Multi-Syllable Words to Decoding-By-Parts*

(While this paper might be of interest to professionals, it is written for parents.)

A Remedial Reading Constant: One of the constants in reading-impaired students is a deficit in making the transition from letter-by-letter sounding-out of multi-syllable words to decoding-by-parts. *Without exception*, students evaluated for work in the ExWyZee program, and found to be in need of remedial reading instruction, suffered a deficit in that transition. It's one of the most serious and most pervasive problems for problem readers, and it gets worse with every month that it goes untreated.

How would you say *docosahexaenoic* acid, if you are trying to tell your druggist on the phone that you want a supplement containing it. You might pronounce it as do-co-sa-hex-ae-no-ic, or doco-sahex-ae-no-ic, and she will understand. But she's likely to roll her eyes if you try to say it letter-by-letter. (See fish oil bottle.)

As you know, basic primary phonics instruction has the student learn to read words letter-by-letter, to say (or think) single-letter-sounds and to blend those sounds together to identify words. So, *sand* is read by blending four letter-sounds, ss-aa-nn-d, and *mast* is as mm-aa-ss-t.

Then, to become a fluent reader, a transition must take place – transition from sounding out words letter-by-letter to decoding by parts. The reader must learn to say (and to think) the sounds of parts, and to blend those word-part sounds. The fluent reader will not decode the word *faster* as six units of sound, but as two sound units: *fas-ter* or as *fast-er*, or maybe as *fa-ster*.

As the transition takes place, the reader sees the three-letter combination, *ter*, standing for one sound. It can be called up in reading terminal, sister, mister, yesterday, and the nonsense-word septerdon.

At first these new sound-units will be mostly single syllables. But as fluency increases, longer combinations will be instantly recognized as sound units. The reader might decode *Antarctica* as Ant-arctic-a, or Ant-arc-tica, or Antarc-tica, and decode *computer* as com-puter or compu-ter.

For most of us, the Transition takes place spontaneously, without concentrated instruction to promote it. But something like 20% of us do not make adequate transition to sub-conscious separation of multi-syllable words into word-part sound units. And that population occupies many seats in our special-ed rooms.

*Morphological processing.

An under-diagnosed deficit. My experience with students and my observations of remedial reading instruction in schools indicate that The Transition deficit is grievously under-diagnosed and under-treated.

For one thing, The Transition deficit is somewhat obscured by what I prefer to call a Context-Screen. Consider Jimmy, fourth grade, who, on Monday, could not read these four words in an assessment list: seventh, attend, invited, and november. (With November intentionally not capitalized.)

But on Tuesday he successfully read this passage in an oral reading session:

“Billy was born October seventh. His mom held a birthday party for him and invited all the kids in his class to attend.”

The Context Screen hid the fact that he could not read those four words in a list of *unrelated* words.

And, for another thing, my observations of school practices has well-meaning tutors directing students, actually coaching students, to sound-it-out-sound-it-out, when they should be coaching them to separate-separate. The SepCom section of the ExWyZee Remedial Reading program is designed to teach them to separate-separate-separate.

The SepCom procedure was developed in working with students who are reasonably proficient at reading word parts that make up multi-syllable words (words such as microscope, migrated, catapult, and ambulance) but who are not proficient at reading the words composed of those parts. That is, the phonics ability of these students enables them to read the following word parts, when they are presented in a list of word parts.

pult	scope	ted	bu
cata	mi	mi	lance
	cro	gra	am

But they are weak on reading words composed of those parts. They can read cata and pult, but don't recognize the word catapult. They can read bu, am and lance, but can't read ambulance.

Even students who have fairly good command of reading the smallest word-parts that carry meaning (morphological awareness) presented in isolation, do not have the *basic skill* -- the subconscious *habit* -- of mentally separating multi-part words into readable parts. Even when directed to separate words on paper or on the computer, we might see them separate microscope as micr-os-cope, and ambulance as amb-ula-nce.

When we see a student who is as far along as grade three, even late grade two, who attempts to read sandbox as ss-aa-nn-d-ba-ox, it's time, probably past time, for focused exercises to facilitate the transition to word-part decoding. SepCom is designed to provide that focused instruction.

SepCom in brief (Details): The SepCom (Separation on Computer) word-decoding procedure requires the student, working with a tutor,

(a) To make trial-separations of words on the computer screen. A student might separate microscope as mic-ro-scope, or mi-croscope, or as micro-scope.

(b) Then to say the sounds of the parts in the separation, to see if that separation identifies the word. A correct separation is any separation that leads the student to identify a word. There's no such thing as a wrong separation. If it works for the student, it's a good separation.

About learning things: Learning is easier if you can see the results of your efforts. If you can see evidence of what you've done, your teacher can point to it and tell you what is wrong with it. And your teacher can point to it, and tell you what is right with it. Being partly right is more satisfying than being flat-out wrong. The tap-dance teacher has an advantage over the voice teacher. The dance teacher and student can hear the dancer's moves, and can see them on tape or in a mirror. They have visual and audio feedback. The voice teacher and student have only sound. You can't see a High-C.

So what's that got to do with decoding words? We can't teach reading without hearing students read aloud, assessing their progress, and coaching them then and there on how to turn letter-sounds into words and thoughts. But for students who don't learn to read on schedule, and who need remedial work on decoding words, we have three problems that are hard to deal with if oral reading and coaching is the *only* method we use.

Problem 1: The student is doing something that is more like singing than tap dancing. When she makes an incorrect try at saying a word, there is no visible trail, no record of that try. In coaching her we can repeat what she said, but we can't point to it. Each try at sounding a word is just that – sound – audio feedback only. Even when we say the sound back to her, she might not recognize it as the sound she made only seconds ago.

Problem 2: Failure to make the transition from letter-by-letter reading of words to word-part reading can be difficult to remedy, sometimes difficult to detect, when all we have is audio feedback.

Problem 3: A student reading orally, coached by a tutor, can obey phonics rules, do a lot that is correct, but get no credit for it. Consider a student who pronounces fantastic as fant-as-tic, and does not recognize the word. She correctly performed two-thirds of a difficult procedure.

Step 1: She mentally separated the word into letter-blends.

Step 2: She voiced phonetically-correct sounds for those parts.

Step 3: But she didn't recognize the written word, even though, just this morning, she might have told a friend about a fantastic concert she attended on Saturday. So she gets no credit, no praise, and no satisfaction from doing the first two essential steps in the decoding. That's frustrating. It's defeating.

So why SepCom? SepCom gives us a way to deal with those three problems – by making word separation more like tap dancing than singing. In SepCom decoding practice we can see the process, as well as hear it. We can see a student's trial separations on the computer screen.

Mechanics of the SepCom procedure: SepCom trains the student to identify, to decode, a word by making trial separations of the word into blend-parts on the computer, and to experiment with different sounds of the parts to get an overall blending of sound that identifies the word.

See the SepCom Exercises below. The words have been entered by a teacher or from a file of words for the ExWyZee program. Notice this is a list of *soundable* words. Words such as night, tongue, soldier, solder, not soundable by the rules of phonics, are not on this list. The list should be a mix of words we would expect to be in a student's vocabulary (ambulance) and words the student might not be familiar with (ambulatory). Our goal is train students to pronounce unfamiliar words, as well as familiar ones. (Code EV = Expected in Vocabulary.)

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SepCom Practice

SepCom Exercises

Line	Date	Words	Separations	Said It	Decoded	Knows Meaning
10-10-2010		microscope	mi-cro-scope		A	A
10-10-2010		migrated	mig-rat-ted			
10-10-2010		migrated	mi-grat-ed			
10-10-2010		migrated	mi-gra-ted		A	A
10-10-2010		october	october	A		A
10-10-2010		pentagon	pentagon	A		A
10-10-2010		radical	rad-ic-al			
10-10-2010		radical	radi-cal		A	
10-10-2010		victor	vic-tor		A	A

EXIT
Save Progress
Rejoin Letters
Copy Row

Sort By:
Date
Word
Random
To teacher's page:

- Line 1: Could not read *microscope*. Separated and decoded it.
- Line 2: Could not read *migrated*. Separated & said parts, didn't recognize word.
- Line 3: Directed to click Copy Row button, and make a different separation of *Migrated*. Said parts but still not recognize the word.
- Line 4: Directed to click Copy Row, and make third separation of migrated, said the parts and recognized the word.
- Line 5: Recognized october, said it, and knows meaning. (Word is intentionally not capitalized.)
- Line 6: Read the word pentagon without separation. Didn't know meaning.
- Line 7: Could not read *radical*. Separated & correctly read it.
- Line 8: Could not read *victor*. Separated and correctly read it. Knows meaning.

As you read on, refer to the exercises above. The student is directed to read a word in the list. If he reads it correctly, he gets to type the letter-A in the *Said-it* blank for that word. If he knows the meaning of the word, he types a letter in the *Knows-Meaning* blank.

However, knowing the meaning is not relevant to the goal of these exercises – to teach decoding-by-parts. The ability to read and to say the word "mastodon" satisfies our goal, even if he doesn't know what a mastodon is. If he is unable to say the word, you direct him to the second column, and separate the word into two or more parts.

Example

1. Student places the cursor to the left of the word, like this: /microscope.
2. Uses the arrow key to scroll the cursor to the right until it passes over some letters that make a word-like blend of letter-sounds. Student might place the cursor like this for this first separation: mi/croscope,
3. Uses the dash key to make that separation: mi-croscope.
4. Scrolls some more to the right until another word-like part is selected, mi-cros/cope, and make a separation there with a dash. Seldom is a word separated into more than three parts.
5. When the student has finished making separations, her trial separation might be: mi-cros-cope.
6. Now we direct her to say the parts in the separation. She might say the parts with a pause between each part, and not recognize the word. So we direct her to say the parts fast. Faster! Faster!! In many cases saying the parts fast will reveal the word. (We are assuming here that she knows what a microscope is.)

But, if she says the parts as "my cross cope," and doesn't recognize the word, even when saying the parts fast, we tell her to make a different separation. We do not coach her to identify the word with that first separation. Keep in mind that we are teaching experimentation with word separations. If, on the second trial-separation, she makes it mi-cro-scope, or micro-scope, chances are she will recognize the word when saying the parts. (But maybe not. See Joey's Dyslexic Locked Word Vault in the [About Dyslexia](#) monograph, Link #2.)

When a student makes a separation into soundable parts, but is unable to identify the word, she should be praised for a logical separation, even though that separation is not working for her. That positive feedback is essential to building confidence in the SepCom procedure.

If our student makes the separation, micr-osc-ope, we would tell her to say each of those parts, which should make it clear that she has not separated the word into soundable parts (blends) that would sound like words to a Russian kid who is studying English. "Soundable blend" is not easy to define. We have to do it as the student does the SepCom exercises, by pointing out, for instance, that when you try to say the word-part "micr" it sounds like a dog growling.

Very often a student will make a workable separation of a word, but use the wrong sound for a vowel, or use hard-G, as in golf, when it should be soft-G as in magic. In those cases we coach him on experimenting with different sounds for those letters.

Here are two cases of students whose Response To Intervention (RTI) in the ExWyZee program, quite clearly and early-on, indicated that their reading problems were not due to dyslexia. It's sometimes said that a student slipped through the cracks. These students were far enough along to suggest that they were slipping through a canyon.

Case 1, retained in grade 4: She separated the word migrated as mig-rat-ed, a logical separation. Could be the name of a rat poison. But when she pronounced the parts she said "mig (as in big) -- rat (the rodent) -- ed." So she didn't identify the word. I told her to try long-i, as in mice, and she immediately said the word accurately. When I asked her what it means, she said it's what bears do in winter. When I told her that was close, she said, "Oh, it's when birds fly South."

Case 2, grade 5: The word apologize was separated as apo-log-ize, a logical, phonetic separation. And his saying of each part was phonetically accurate:

He pronounced the parts,
apo -- as if somebody is acting like an ape,
log -- as in a tree,
ize -- with long-i.

I praised the separation, but said that it isn't working for him. I told him to make a different trial separation. He then separated it as apol-o-gize, and almost immediately said, "Oh, it's apologize." This is a case where a student might not recognize the word because of using the hard-g (as in glass). In that case, we would direct him to use soft-g, as in George.

Beware: Beware of something we often see in education -- the teaching of a method for performing some skill -- getting the student to where he can perform the method during lessons on it -- then assuming he will use that method later in situations where the method should be applied. (A common failing in math.)

SepCom trains the student to experiment with separating a word into soundable parts to find a separation which identifies the word. However, a student can become good at separating words on the computer, when directed to do it, but not be conditioned to use the method mentally and automatically when reading a history lesson or an English assignment.

Our goal is to produce a student who will instinctively and subconsciously experiment with separations, when coming on a word he doesn't recognize at first, without thinking about separation lessons he had on the computer.

So teach imagination lessons: After the student has become fairly good at the SepCom procedure, put him in the program, as you have been doing, and direct him to imagine, to pretend, that he is separating the words on the computer. When pretending doesn't work for a certain word, have him separate it on the computer.

How can we tell when a student has achieved the habit of experimenting with word separations? We can't tell for sure, but the best indicator is that she has become as good, or almost as good, at pretending to separate words on the computer as she is at actually doing it on the computer.

What words to include in the SepCom drills? While the main goal of SepCom is to train the student to decode words that he doesn't recognize at a glance, we should not pass up the opportunity to develop vocabulary.

Don't limit the word lists to words with which you would expect the student to be familiar. Correctly pronouncing the *probably-unfamiliar* word, ambulatory, is a better indicator of decoding skill than identifying the *probably-familiar* word, ambulance. And, for whatever method we teach for decoding of words, we should, at the same time, be developing vocabulary.

Here are words we would not expect many elementary students to know, but which are examples of probably-unfamiliar words which provide needed decoding practice, and, at the same time, help to build a richer vocabulary: protagonist - somnambulist – horticulture - fortitude - sensationalism - husbandry - strata - mitigating - unmitigated - solace – constabulary - stagnation - fulminate - oxidation - ratification - artisan - wanton - factorial - undulate - vector - cubit - taciturn - tantamount - eclectic - expectorate – oncologist - bicameral - unicameral - sextant - didactic.

Yes, those are third and fourth grade words if our objective is to teach decoding of the written English language. Consider this contradiction. I've met reading teachers (one a reading consultant) who tell me words in the above list are not 3rd grade words, but who agree that having students read nonsense words (septodoma, fishlation, unmitofa) is a good technique for teaching decoding. The 30 words in the above list are nonsense words to most mid-el students. Use them. And, after a student has decoded one of them, tell him what it means. Build vocabulary

Here are some SepCom word subsets:

1. Personalized set of words from a master list: When the ExWyZee program is loaded onto a parent's computer, a SepCom file containing several hundred words is entered also. The parent has two options for SepCom drills for a given student.

Option one for SepCom drills is to put a student to work on that master list, simply skipping words when coming to ones not appropriate for that student. Option two is to select *Assign Words To Student* from the SepCom menu, then, by clicking on words, create a subset of words for a given student. More words from the list can be assigned to that student later.

2. Compound words set: (eg: sunset, anyway, baseball, football, sometimes) This set is used to start students who have the most trouble learning to decode by separation, to help them gain confidence that they can make the transition to word-part decoding. This list was first used with a second-grader who was a master at passive-resistance. He had perfected that defense. (See Conning Connor in the appendix.)

3. The digraph set: This set, with digraphs (th, sh, ch, ph) is to cope with a student who separates those two-letter combinations in regular SepCom drills. eg: father = fat-her, farther = fart-her, fishing = fis-hing.

4. The prefix set: This set is aimed at the student who needs focused work on prefixes. eg: antifreeze, bicycle, pentagon, octagon, hexagon, nonsense.

5. Dumb-Endings set:

Note: I find that these ExWyZee dumb-endings drills are sometimes tion-ed (shunned) because they are difficult. Yes. They are. But they focus atten-shun on one of the most seri-us problems faced by impaired readers.

So whether this impediment to reading is dealt with by taking dumb-spelled words apart on the computer and mentally reassembling them in a somewhat phonics-based way (as in the SepCom drills), or such words are taught as sight-word patterns to be memorized, they must not be ignored. They're not going away in your student's lifetime.

Kids respond well to our telling them that many English words are spelled with dumb-endings (sight, fight, conscience, through, tough, tongue). The ExWyZee Dumb-Endings set can be loaded on the computer, and that set maintained separately from the master SepCom set.

At the top of that list some dumb word-parts are presented, along with their sounds: When the student comes to a word in the list that she can't read (eg: malicious), she is directed to:

(1) Find the dumb-part of the word at the top of the list (cious), (2) Separate the smart-part from the dumb-part on the computer (mali-cious).

(2) Recite the dumb-part (speak it).

(3) Blend the two sounds (mali-shuss) to decode the word.

6. Matched pairs

This list is used diagnostically, especially with ones I have reason to believe might not be seriously reading-impaired. I have the student read a few probably-familiar words (ambulance, agriculture, violation, photograph), then read similar but maybe-not-familiar words (ambulatory, agronomist, volition, photogenic). When we see a student who misreads second words of the pairs, it suggests that SepCom work might be indicated, especially if that student has difficulty making a good separation to decode the unfamiliar words.

APPENDIX

(A) In my first session with a student: While I will ask the student to read isolated words aloud, I won't ask him to read text aloud until I have done extensive diagnostic work with him. For one thing, it's a lousy way to begin with a student who sits in class praying the teacher doesn't call on him to read. For another thing, if he's reading-impaired, I-know-that-I-will-hear-the-one-word-at-a-time-cadence as he struggles with each word in the selection. And further, how slowly and laboriously he reads tells me nothing about what to do with him.

(B) Breaking the Sounding-out Habit: This, *Breaking the Sounding-out Habit*, might lead you to the wrong conclusion, that I would support what is sometimes called a look-say, or the whole-language approach, as opposed to a phonics approach to the teaching of reading. That's not the case.

What I'm addressing here is the condition that is so prevalent in the reading impaired population -- the deficit in making the transition from letter-by-letter sounding-out to word-part decoding. By the time a reading-impaired student is in mid-elementary, if he has not made the transition from letter-by-letter sounding out to word-part-decoding, we are faced with the difficult problem of breaking a habit that grew out of a good habit.

Here is what can happen in severe cases. At this writing we have a severely dyslexic, functionally illiterate, *but very bright*, sixth-grade student in the ExWyZee Remedial Reading Program. When we started him in the program, he habitually attacked even four-letter words by sounding-out.

When asked to read the word "bent" you would hear the following three-part verbalization "buh-ent-bent." And for the word "tan," he said "tuh-an-tan." Letter-by-letter sounding-out of unfamiliar words (or ones he was not sure of) was not merely habitual. It was a compulsive reaction.

This is a boy who has been in special-ed for at least five years. His teacher reported him to be reading on the primary level. He was in a remedial reading program where he was reading: Sam, the fat cat, has a nap on the mat. He was receiving no focused instruction in decoding-by-parts. He was reading:

Sam, when he should have been reading Samson,

fat, when he should have been reading Fatima,
cat, when he should have been reading catatonic
nap, when he should have been reading kidnap,
mat, when he should have been reading format.

We (his parents and I) put him to work on SepCom exercises, learning to separate and decode words from Africa to zebra. His personalized SepCom word list contains such beyond-primary words as alabaster, blister, mister, sister, fistula, and somnambulist. He is making progress, but prime time was lost in reading about fat cats.

(C) Conning Connor (Really, his name is Connor): The compound word list was first used with a second-grader who was master at passive-resistance. He had perfected that defense. When directed to read or to separate even simple words (donut, cartoon, carton, Friday) he would say "I don't know," or "I can't," and no amount of coaxing could get him to try. Push too hard, and he would just sit with his hands on his face, peeking through his fingers.

So I presented him with a set of compound words, and told him:

"I don't want you to read these words, and I don't want you to separate them as we have been doing. I want you to read just the first part of each one. Remember now, do not read these words."

The first word in the list was "anything". After a short hesitation, he responded with "any". I told him to check the said-it box for that word, (as if he had said the word). He looked at me for a while, I guess trying to decide if I was on the level, allowing him to take credit for the word even though he hadn't read it. Then he checked the box.

The second word was "something" and he responded by saying the whole word. I squeezed his shoulder and told him he was not obeying the rules, that he was not supposed to say the word, only the first part of it. He smiled, and we went on with the list. (With that smile, I had him.) He correctly said the first parts for most of the twenty words I had in that list. Again, he got credit in the said-it box for saying only the first parts of the words in the list.

After a couple of sessions at that con-game, I presented him with another compound-word list, and directed him:

"Don't read these words, read only the right ends of them."

Now he was basking in success, getting credit for reading only parts of words.

You might guess what phase-three was in conning Connor. I gave him compound words, directed him to say the first part of each, and then to immediately say the second part. By now Connor was on a roll. I could present him non-compound words, and he would do his best at separating them and saying the parts.

(D) Blend definitions: The word "blend" is used in this monograph as both a verb and a noun. Used as a verb, we can *blend* (put together) the sounds for the letters s, t, u, into the word-part "stu". We can *blend* (put together) the word parts stu, and dent, into the word "student".

Used as a noun, *blend* is a bit difficult to define in terms a child will understand. I tell them that a blend is a word-part that would sound like a word to a Russian kid who is starting to learn English. Zo sounds like a word, but zr and rz do not. Zog sounds like a word, but ozg does not. Arb sounds like a word, but abr does not. Mof and fom sound like words, but mfo does not. Rambu sounds like a word, but mbuar does not.

(E) Why not just teach separation by syllables? How would you grade these readers? Billy, who tackles docosahexaenoic acid mentally separating it into syllables, do-co-sa-exa-en-oic, would get an A from me, just for attempting it. Betty rates a plaque in the hallway for reading it as doco-sahex-aenoic. Babs gets a full-ride at Yale for reading that monstrosity as docosahex-aenoic. (Some dietitians recommend daily doses. You might be taking it. Check your Omega 3 Fish Oil label.)

The point is that, the fewer the parts, the longer the parts, in a reader's word separations, the more fluent the reader. Some reading programs in our schools provide workbook drills in separating words by syllables, but provide little or no routine work on experimenting with word-separations in reading familiar words and decoding unfamiliar ones. If you have a reading series at hand take a look.

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