

# Guide: Most Common Decoding Problems in Struggling Readers

## 1. Letter-Sound Correspondence Issues

- **Problem:** The student doesn't reliably connect letters to sounds (e.g., confusing "b" and "d" or "f" and "v").
- **Signs:** Reads "bat" as "dat" or "van" as "fan."
- **Strategies:**
  - Explicitly teach one letter-sound at a time
  - Use sand tracing, sky writing, or magnetic letters
  - Practice with minimal pairs ("bat" vs. "dat")

## 2. Difficulty Blending Sounds

- **Problem:** The student can identify letters and sounds individually but struggles to blend them into words.
- **Signs:** Can say "c" /k/, "a" /æ/, "t" /t/ separately but can't read "cat."
- **Strategies:**
  - Use a blending board or Elkonin boxes
  - Sound-by-sound blending aloud with teacher modeling
  - Gradually increase word length

## 3. Segmenting Words into Sounds

- **Problem:** Student struggles to break words into individual sounds for spelling or decoding unfamiliar words.

- **Signs:** Can't spell "stop" even when it's said slowly; guesses words based on first letter.
- **Strategies:**
  - Use tapping or clapping to segment each sound
  - Teach how to identify onset and rime
  - Practice with phoneme manipulation activities

#### 4. Confusing Similar Letters or Sounds

- **Problem:** Student confuses letters that look or sound similar.
- **Signs:** Reads "pat" as "tap" or "on" as "no."
- **Strategies:**
  - Multi-sensory differentiation (writing in sand, forming letters with clay)
  - Letter sorting games ("b" vs. "d")
  - Frequent repetition with feedback

#### 5. Silent Letters

- **Problem:** Student reads or pronounces letters that are silent.
- **Signs:** Reads "knight" as /k-n-i-g-h-t/
- **Strategies:**
  - Explicitly highlight silent letters in words
  - Use word families and patterns
  - Practice with word sorting

#### 6. Irregular Words (Sight Words)

- **Problem:** Student can't read words that don't follow standard phonetic rules.

- **Signs:** Struggles with “said,” “was,” “some”
- **Strategies:**
  - Teach in small sets with visual, auditory, and kinesthetic cues
  - Use flashcards and multisensory memory strategies
  - Integrate in decodable text for repeated exposure

## 7. Vowel Confusion

- **Problem:** Student misreads long vs. short vowels or vowel teams.
- **Signs:** Reads “cap” as “cape” or “team” as “tam”
- **Strategies:**
  - Explicit vowel pattern instruction (CVC, CVVC, etc.)
  - Highlight vowel sounds using colors or markers
  - Practice with word sorts and blending exercises

## 8. Multi-Syllable Words

- **Problem:** Student struggles with decoding words with two or more syllables.
- **Signs:** Reads “fantastic” as “fan-tas-tic” incorrectly, or guesses the word
- **Strategies:**
  - Teach syllable types (closed, open, silent-e, vowel team, r-controlled, consonant-le)
  - Mark syllables with hand signals or colors
  - Chunk longer words into manageable parts

## 9. Consonant Blends and Digraphs

- **Problem:** Difficulty reading blends (bl, st, tr) or digraphs (sh, ch, th).
- **Signs:** Reads “ship” as “sip” or “tree” as “tee”
- **Strategies:**
  - Introduce blends and digraphs gradually
  - Use manipulatives (tiles, counters) for each sound
  - Reinforce with blending and segmenting practice

## 10. R-Controlled Vowels

- **Problem:** Struggles with vowels followed by “r” (ar, er, ir, or, ur).
- **Signs:** Reads “car” as /ca/ or “bird” as /bid/
- **Strategies:**
  - Teach r-controlled vowels explicitly
  - Highlight the r-influenced vowel in color or underline
  - Practice with decodable texts that isolate patterns

## 11. Silent and Schwa Vowels

- **Problem:** Difficulty with unstressed vowels (schwa /ə/) in multisyllabic words.
- **Signs:** Reads “banana” as /ba-na-na/ incorrectly stressed
- **Strategies:**
  - Teach the schwa sound explicitly
  - Clap or tap for syllable stress
  - Practice reading multisyllabic decodable texts

## 12. Letter Reversals and Directionality

- **Problem:** Confusing b/d/p/q or reading right-to-left
- **Signs:** “b” becomes “d,” “was” becomes “saw”
- **Strategies:**
  - Multi-sensory memory (air writing, tactile letters)
  - Visual cues and frequent repetition
  - Emphasize orientation in teaching letters

### 13. Decoding Unknown Words

- **Problem:** Student guesses unfamiliar words instead of decoding them.
- **Signs:** Reads “lamp” as “light”
- **Strategies:**
  - Slow, systematic phonics approach
  - Teach strategies: chunking, onset-rime, syllables
  - Reinforce with repeated practice in decodable text

### 14. Vowel-Consonant Patterns

- **Problem:** Difficulty recognizing patterns like CVC, CVCe, CVVC, CCVC
- **Signs:** Reads “make” as “mack” or “boat” as “bot”
- **Strategies:**
  - Explicitly teach patterns with visual supports
  - Practice reading and writing decodable words in each pattern
  - Use multisensory tracing and blending

### 15. Word Endings and Inflections

- **Problem:** Struggles with -ed, -ing, -s, -es
- **Signs:** Reads “jumped” as “jump” or “dogs” as “dog”
- **Strategies:**
  - Teach endings as separate syllables or sounds
  - Practice with decodable sentences highlighting endings
  - Incorporate in writing activities

## 16. Sight Word Overload

- **Problem:** Student relies on memory for too many irregular words without rules
- **Signs:** Can read some sight words but forgets them in context
- **Strategies:**
  - Teach in small, structured sets
  - Pair with phonics patterns when possible
  - Multisensory review daily

## 17. Fluency Breakdown

- **Problem:** Decoding is slow or laborious, making comprehension hard
- **Signs:** Reads word by word, loses track of meaning
- **Strategies:**
  - Practice repeated reading of decodable passages
  - Track words with fingers or pointers
  - Focus on automaticity for high-frequency patterns

## 18. Letter Clusters in Unfamiliar Words

- **Problem:** Struggles with unusual consonant clusters (spl-, scr-, str-)
- **Signs:** Reads “street” as “sreet” or “split” as “spit”
- **Strategies:**
  - Break clusters into smaller segments
  - Use blending boards or tiles to model sounds
  - Practice decoding similar clusters across words