

Foundational Strategy Lessons: Determining Whether A Syllable Is Open Or Closed

In this series of lessons, suggestions are made for thoroughly developing a key syllabication skill: Determining whether a syllable is open or closed. Memorable practice and application activities include contrasting words such as *super* and *supper* and *diner* and *dinner* and reading about three intriguing animals whose names contain double open syllables: dodo, emu, rhino. Students build background knowledge as they apply a key foundational skill.

See *Foundational Literacy Booster: 50 Lessons for Reading Multisyllabic Words*

Common Core Standards

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.1.3.d](#)

Use knowledge that every syllable must have a vowel sound to determine the number of syllables in a printed word.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.1.3.e](#)

Decode two-syllable words following basic patterns by breaking the words into syllables

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.2.3.c](#)

Decode regularly spelled two-syllable words with long vowels.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.3.3.c](#)

Decode multisyllable words.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.1.4.c](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.3.4.c](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.2.4.c](#), [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.4.4.c](#)

Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.

Strategy Lesson: Determining Whether A Syllable Is Open Or Closed

As they progress through the grades, most students eventually learn phonics and become adept at deciphering single-syllable words. However, a significant number of students have difficulty applying their knowledge of phonics to multisyllabic words. Difficulty decoding polysyllabic words is a stumbling block for many youngsters. As Hiebert and Bravo (2014) comment, “We are confident that the single most lacking area at the present time in beginning reading instruction in the U.S. is the failure to guide students in strategies for dealing with the many multisyllabic words in their texts” (p. 14).

The ultimate purpose of instruction in syllabic analysis is to develop students’ ability to decode words that are unfamiliar in print. Along with presenting patterns of multisyllabic words, it is also important to develop students’ ability to use strategies to decode multisyllabic words. A key strategy is determining whether a

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syllable is open or closed. Pronounce the following word pairs: *fiber, fibber; coma, comma*. Chances are you had no difficulty assigning a long vowel sound to *fiber* and *coma* and a short-vowel sound to *fibber* and *comma*. Vowels occurring at the end of a word or syllable are often long and those followed by a consonant are often short. A single consonant occurring between two vowels usually goes to the right, which makes the first syllable long (*fi-ber, co-ma*). Conversely, two consonants occurring between two vowels often split, one going to the left and one to right, which makes the first syllable closed (*fib-ber, com-ma*). Adept readers automatically recognize this pattern in known words and use it to read unfamiliar words.

Objective

Students will use word structure to determine whether a syllable is open or closed and has a long-vowel or short-vowel pronunciation.

Introduction

Discuss with students the importance of the ability to read multisyllabic words. Explain that you will be showing them a strategy that will help them. To introduce or review the concept of open and closed syllables, write the following words on the board or display them with a white board or other digital device.

diner	dinner
super	supper
tiny	tinny
robot	robber
baby	babble

Read the words with students. Underline the syllables as you do so. Contrast the vowel sound heard in the first syllable of each word pair. “What vowel sound do you hear in the first syllable of *diner*? Is that a long or a short sound? What vowel sound do you hear in the first syllable of *dinner*? Is that a long or a short sound? What is the difference between the two words?” Point out that there is one consonant between the two vowels in *diner* but two consonants between the two vowels in *dinner*. Also point out that the first syllable in *diner* ends with a vowel and is known as an open syllable, but the first syllable in *dinner* ends with a consonant and is known as a closed syllable. Discuss the remaining word pairs in the same way.

After all the vowel pairs have been discussed, lead students to see that when there is one vowel between two consonants, the vowel often goes to the right and so the first syllable ends with a vowel and is an open syllable and has a long sound. However, when there are two consonants between vowels, the consonants split, one going to the right and one going to the left, and the first syllable is closed so that the vowel has a short sound.

Guided Practice

To provide practice with the concept of open and closed syllables, read the following word pairs with students. Underline the syllables. Note that the words in the first column have open syllables whereas those in the second column have closed syllables.

raven	rattle
crater	cracker
paper	panda
flavor	flatter
cedar	cellar
pilot	pillow
rider	riddle
hotel	hotter
rodent	rotten
human	humming

Independent Practice

To provide independent practice with the concept of open and closed syllables, have students complete and discuss Exercise A Choosing the Correct Word on p. 7.

Application

Ask students if they can think of three animals whose names contain two open long-vowel syllables (dodo, emu, hippo). Write the names that students suggest and discuss whether the names do contain two open syllable long vowels. Have students read brief articles about the three animals and complete the cloze (multiple choice) items that follow in Exercise B Reading Articles on p. 7.

Teaching Students to Apply the Closed/Open Syllable Generalization Flexibly

The closed syllable generalization works well in instances where two consonants

occur between two vowels, but not quite as well for the open syllable generalization in which one consonant occurs between two vowels. The consonant goes to the left almost as many times as it goes to the right: *haz/ard*, *ped/al*, *tim/id*, *top/ic*, *pun/ish*. Because of the many exceptions, students are instructed to try a long-vowel pronunciation first and then a short vowel if the long-vowel pronunciation doesn't result in a real word. Or, to explain it another way, students initially move the consonant to the right and if that doesn't result in a word, they move the consonant to the left.

Objective

Students will use word structure and context to determine whether a syllable is open or closed and has a long-vowel or short-vowel pronunciation.

Introduction

To introduce or review the concept of exceptions, display and read the following sentences and ask students to tell what is wrong with the way that you are reading them. (Read the boldfaced words as though the first syllable is long.)

The pioneers built log **cabins** (KAY-binz).

The pioneers went west in covered **wagons** (WAY-gunz).

The pioneers had to cross wide **rivers** (RIGH-verz)

Lead students to see that although there is only one consonant between the vowels in the boldfaced words, the vowel is short. The vowel goes to the left instead of the right and so the syllable is a closed one.

Guided Practice

Read the following exception words with students. Underline the syllables so that they can see that the first syllable is closed and so has a short vowel.

hazard

dragon

pedal

travel

magic

clever

timid

comet

widow

punish

Explain that there are many words in which the consonant between two syllables goes to the left and so makes a short sound rather than going to the right so that the first syllable has a long sound. You might use *robot* (regular open), *robber* (regular closed), and *robin* (exception closed) as an example of an open, closed, and exception example. Tell students that because there are many exceptions so that when they come to a word that has one consonant between two syllables, they should try the long sound first and, if that doesn't work out, they should try the short sound. In Exercise C: Sorting Open and Closed Syllable Words on p. 10, have students sort the words into three columns: Regular Closed Syllable (*robber*), Regular Open Syllable (*robot*), Exception Closed Syllable (*robin*). Do the first two words with students.

Using Context

Using the following sentences, demonstrate how context can help determine whether a word has closed or open syllables as in the following sentences. Model how you use context as you go about determining whether a syllable has a long or short vowel.

A **cavity** is a bit of decay in a tooth.

A **comet** shot across the sky.

The **baby** was **babbling**.

Guided Practice

Read sentences containing open- and closed-syllable words with students.

Emphasize the use of context.

1. A **cavy** is a small furry mammal.
2. A **comet** shot across the sky.
3. It was a hot, **humid** day.
4. The **humerus** is known as the “funny bone.”
5. A pit **viper** is poisonous.
6. Crows are **clever** birds.
7. Spider silk has **super** strength.
8. The wall was built of **solid** steel.
9. We laughed at the **humorous** joke.
10. The large rock in the road was a **hazard** to traffic.

Providing Steps of a Strategy for Determining Whether a Syllable is Open or Closed

As a summary, discuss and list the steps for determining whether a syllable is

open or closed. The first step is to locate the vowels. In the beginning stages, students might mark the vowels by underlining them. Students then count the letters between the vowels. If there is just one consonant, that goes to the right and the first syllable is open and has a long-vowel sound. If there are two consonant letters, they are split, with one going to the left and one going to the right. The first syllable is closed and has a short-vowel sound. You might post the following steps.

Strategy: Reading Open and Closed Syllables

1. Find the vowels.
2. Count the letters between the vowels.
3. If there are two letters, split them. One goes to the left. The other one goes to the right. This makes a closed syllable so the vowel is usually short. Example: *rob-ber*
4. If there is one consonant between two vowels, the consonant usually goes to the right. This makes an open syllable so the vowel is usually long. Example: *ro-bot*
5. If this doesn't make a word that you know or a real word, try moving the consonant to the left. This will make it a closed syllable so that the vowel is usually short. Example: *rob-in*

Note: Letters in a digraph stay together. They are not split. Examples: *pan-ther*, *broth-er*

When first learning to identify open and closed syllables, students physically mark the vowels. However, as they become familiar with the strategy, they can mentally mark the syllables. Provide opportunities for students to practice using the strategy. When students encounter multisyllabic words, prompt the use of the strategy. If they misapply the strategy—for instance, reading a closed syllable as though it were an open one—prompt the correct application of the strategy: “What are the vowels? How many consonants are there between the vowels? Is the first syllable open or closed? Does it have a long or short sound? Is the word a real one? Is the syllable an exception?”

Assessment

Note how well students are able to apply skills and strategies. For instance, after students have been taught exceptions to open and closed syllables, note whether they are able to apply this knowledge when they encounter a word such as *lizard* or *logic*. When a struggling reader I was working with read *logic* as /loh-jik/, but then immediately reread it as /loj-ik/, I could see that instruction in the use of the Determining Whether Syllables

Are Open or Closed Strategy had paid off, and, more importantly, that the student was reading for meaning.

Independent Exercises

Exercise A Choosing the Correct Word

Underline the word that fits the sense of the sentence better.

1. Have you ever eaten at a (dinner, diner)?
2. You can eat breakfast, lunch, or (dinner, diner) there.
3. The prize for the (whiner, winner) was dinner at the diner.
4. People who complain are known as (whiners, winners).
5. Dinner at a diner is good for those who eat a lot of food and those who eat a (tiny, tinny) bit of food.

Exercise B Reading Articles

Read the article. Then tell about the article by underlining the correct words in the sentences that follow the article.

The Last of the Dodos

The story of dodos (DOH-dohz) does not have a happy ending. In fact, it has the saddest of endings. Dodos were big birds, but they had small wings. Dodos could not fly. And dodos were also slow runners. Even so, the dodos were safe on their island. But then ships came. The ships stopped at the dodos' island. Sailors from the ships planned to get food and water there. The sailors killed dodos and ate them.

Dodos were tender and so were good to eat for dinner or even for breakfast. Lots of ships stopped at the dodos' island. The sailors ate lots of dodos. The sailors also had pigs and cats. The pigs and cats ate the dodos' eggs. Then one day no one could find the dodos. There were no dodos on the island. There were no more dodos anywhere. Dodos were extinct (ek-STINGKT). It was a sad ending for a big bird.

1. Dodos were slow (rumors, runners).
2. Sailors (planned, planed) to get food and water on the dodos' island.
3. Sailors ate dodos for (diner, dinner).

4. The dodos had a sad (ending, enemy).
5. There are no more dodos. They are (extinct, expressed).

Read the article. Then tell about the article by underlining the correct words in the sentences that follow the article.

Second Biggest Bird

Everyone knows that the ostrich is the biggest bird. But which bird is number two? Can you guess? If you guessed the emu, you are correct. The emu, which lives in Australia (aw-STRAYL-uh), is the second tallest bird. It can grow to be over six feet tall and weigh more than one thousand pounds. Like the ostrich, the emu cannot fly. Its body is large, but its wings are small. Its wings are too small for flying. But emus are fast. Emus have long legs and can use those long legs to run at speeds of 30 miles an hour. Compare that with the running speed of a human. Humans can only run at an average speed of 15 miles an hour. Emus can run twice as fast as a man or a woman.

An emu knows how to protect itself from its enemies. Dingoes (DING-goz) leap at the head of the emu. Dingoes are wild dogs that live in Australia. But when a dingo attacks, the emu jumps high into the air so the dingo cannot reach its head. Then, as it comes down, the emu stomps on the dingo.

1. An emu can grow to be (over, oven) six feet tall.
2. An emu can run (fatter, faster) than you.
3. An emu can run twice as fast as a (human, hummer).
4. Wild dogs known as (diggers, dingoes) attack emus.
5. An emu (presses, protects) itself by leaping high into the air.

Read the article. Then tell about the article by underlining the correct words in the sentences that follow the article.

Second Biggest Land Animal

Elephants are the largest land mammal. But do you know which land mammal is the second largest? The second biggest land mammal is the rhino. Rhinos come in different sizes. The biggest rhino is the white rhino. It is over six feet tall at the shoulders and can weigh up to six thousand pounds. Even though they are the second largest land animal, rhinos are fast on their feet. If a rhino is chasing you, you better be in a car or truck or bus. A rhino can run at a speed of 40 miles an hour.

Rhinos have poor eyesight, but they have a sharp sense of smell and a keen sense of hearing. Rhinos can hear sounds that are so low that our ears can't hear them. A rhino's ears have the shape of cups so they are better able to take in sounds. A rhino can also turn its ears so they are better able to pick up sounds.

1. The elephant is the largest land (mammal, mammoth).
2. Rhinos are the second (biggest, bitterest) land animal.
3. A white rhino is (otter, over) six feet tall.
4. A rhino's sense of smell is (better, beside) than its eyesight.
5. A rhino can hear sounds that (humans, humors) can't hear.

Exercise C: Sorting Open and Closed Syllable Words

Read each of the following words: rumor, humor, babble, baby, navy, supper, super, hazard, hazel, hassle, cavy, cabin, edit, clever, final, finish, victim, limit, viper, solid, rubble, comet.

Put each word into one of three columns:

- Open Syllable Regular (robot) in which there is one consonant between two vowels and the consonant goes in the second syllable.
- Closed Syllable Regular (robber) in which there are two consonants between two vowels and one consonant goes to the left syllable, and the other goes to the syllable on the right.
- Closed Syllable (robin) in which there is one consonant between two vowels, but the consonant goes in the first syllable.

Open Syllable Regular (robot)	Closed Syllable Regular (robber)	Closed Syllable (robin)

Assessment and Review

Note students' ability to complete guided and independent practice activities.

Note, in particular, students ability to apply the strategy. Provide review lessons.