

What is blending?

Blending is the process of combining letter sounds to read a word. It is that simple, but it is also an important and somewhat elusive process. The definitions below help to explain what exactly blending is:

- Blending is “teaching students how to read a word systematically from left to right by combining each successive letter or combination of letters into one sound.” — “Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade. Educator’s Practice Guide” NCEE, 2019
- Blending is “the main strategy for teaching students how to sound out words and must be frequently modeled and applied. It is simply the stringing together of letter sounds to read a word. It is the focus of early phonics instruction, but still plays a role when transitioning children from reading monosyllabic words to reading multisyllabic words.” — Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction,” ILA, Literacy Leadership Brief, 2019

Why is teaching blending important?

It is important to teach blending because combining letter sounds to form words is not an intuitive skill that children can be expected to pick up without direct instruction. To learn blending, children need frequent modeling, explanation, and practice blending words in isolation, and in the context of sentences and continuous text. Early reading teachers who frequently model, explain, and practice blending in these diverse formats have been shown to achieve greater student gains than teachers who do not pay as careful attention to blending in this range of contexts (Blevins, 2017).

How is blending taught?

There are two kinds of blending: final blending, sometimes referred to as “sounding out,” and successive blending, sometimes referred to as cumulative blending and chunking. Both kinds of blending are commonly taught and regarded as useful by researchers and educators.

Final Blending

Other Names	Sounding Out
<p>How To</p>	<p>With final blending you say each letter sound in a word discreetly, and then blend them together. For instance, say each letter sound in the word <i>sat</i> /s/-/a/-/t/—and then blend those sounds together to say <i>sat</i>.</p> <p>“Teach students to ‘sound out smoothly,’ elongating and connecting the sounds as much as possible (e.g., /mmmaaannn/ rather than /m.../a.../n/). This will help students remember and combine the sounds to arrive at the correct word (Foorman, 2016).”</p>
<p>Example</p>	<p>T: How does this word begin?</p> <p>S: /c/</p> <p>T: What is the next sound?</p> <p>S: /a/</p> <p>T: Then what sound comes next?</p> <p>S: /t/</p> <p>T: What happens when you combine them?</p> <p>S: /c/-/a/-/t/</p> <p>T: What is the word</p> <p>S: cat!</p> <p>Adapted from: Foorman, Barbara, et al. “Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade. Educator’s Practice Guide. NCEE 2016–4008.” What Works Clearinghouse (2016).</p>
<p>Ways to Teach and Practice</p>	<p>Tapping: Final blending is often taught and practiced by having children “tap” each letter sound between their thumb and each finger, before sliding their thumb across their fingers for the final blending of each of the sounds into a word.</p> <p>Elkonin Boxes: Each letter in a word is written in a box. Children sequentially push or pull a counter into each box as they say the letter sound, then they run their index finger under all of the boxes, blending together the individual sounds they have just articulated for each letter.</p>
<p>Pros and Cons</p>	<p>Final blending is often used to initially teach blending because the pronunciation of each letter sound discreetly prior to combining it with subsequent letter sounds makes the essential logic and processes of blending very clear.</p> <p>While it is often an efficient way to introduce blending, final blending is not the most efficient way to continue instruction on blending. As children get better at blending cumulatively, successive blending may be more efficient for them (2017).</p>

Successive Blending

Other Names	Cumulative Blending, Chunking
<p>How To</p>	<p>With successive blending, you cumulatively blend or “chunk” letter sounds sequentially, blending them progressively as you come to them to build a word as you go. For instance, you say the first two letter sounds in a word and immediately blend those sounds together. Then you say the third letter sound in a word, and immediately blend that sound with the first two blended sounds. Then say the fourth letter sound, etc., as you move through the word linking each new sound to the chunk that preceded it. Many directions for working with successive blending stress the importance of always starting by combining the first two letter sounds in the word (Beck, 2013).</p>
<p>Example</p>	<p>T: How does this word begin? S: /c/ That is the next sound? S: /a/ T: What sound do you get when you put together those sounds? S: /ca/ T: Then what sound comes next? S: /t/ T: What happens when you add /ca/ and /t/? S: cat!</p> <p>Adapted from: Foorman, Barbara, et al. “Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade. Educator’s Practice Guide. NCEE 2016–4008.” What Works Clearinghouse (2016).</p> <p>A more advanced version of the successive blending modeled above would entail the teacher putting their finger under the beginning of the word and slowly running their finger under the word, “stringing” together each sound without pause as the sounds melt into each other (/caat/) (Blevins, 2017).</p>
<p>Ways to Practice</p>	<p>Pocket charts with moveable cards and/or magnetic letters are often used to teach successive blending, as letters can be moved from right to left as they are connected on to the previous chunk: i.e., <i>c-a-t</i> becomes <i>ca-t</i> and then <i>cat</i>.</p>
<p>Pros and Cons</p>	<p>Successive blending may be easier than final blending for children who have problems remembering letter sounds, since they do not have to hold a long string of meaningless phonemes in their head for a long time as they would have to do with final blending, but rather blend the phonemes as soon as they say them, and connect them to preceding phonemes (Beck, 2013).</p> <p>While successive blending may be trickier to learn than final blending initially, it is more efficient to use than final blending once children understand the general concept of blending (Blevins, 2017).</p>

What is a high-impact instructional practice for teaching blending?

The practice of selecting words to blend from the books children will be reading in small group instruction can become a high-impact practice if done well and frequently, preferably daily. To do this, you can list the words on a small dry-erase board and have children blend them before reading the book. This will allow for practice blending, and also front-load words needed for reading the book. These lists of words to blend should be differentiated to meet the group's needs, contain minimal contrasts to maximize opportunities for analyzing words (hat, hate, tap, tape, cap, cape), and contain some sentences to work on blending in running text. These words can also be related to vocabulary instruction, particularly for English language learners.

What are some things to keep in mind when planning blending instruction?

- Start teaching blending with short CVC words that are familiar to children, remembering to model and give feedback as children begin to blend independently. Then move to longer words as children progress.
- Make sure children have time to blend words in connected text—books, stories, and sentences—as well as in isolation. Proportionally, the time spent blending words in isolation should be smaller than the time spent blending words in connected text, since blending words in connected text is the ultimate goal and is more cognitively challenging than blending words in isolation. However, overlooking spending some daily, focused time blending words in isolation is also a mistake, since many children who do not get this practice fail to learn how to blend effectively. Practices such as selecting words from a connected text to blend in isolation and then to blend again in the text itself are ideal because they address both instructional needs simultaneously in a meaningful way.
- Don't over-instruct or over-model blending. For example, if children in a group were taking turns blending a list of words from the book they were about to read, model how to blend one or two of the words and then let the children figure out how to blend the rest, only helping them when needed, assuming you have picked words they are capable of blending. Likewise, once children understand how to blend both monosyllabic and multisyllabic words well, do not go on teaching and modeling it, as it is a skill that becomes internalized for most people once they know how to do it for both monosyllabic and multisyllabic words (Beck, 2013).
- Differentiate blending instruction to meet the needs of different learners, as some children can blend very easily and other children struggle with it. To meet end-of-the-year word reading and phonics benchmarks, some children may need more thoughtful, focused blending instruction than others.
- Without losing sight of phonics scope and sequences, connect blending instruction to class topics and texts whenever possible by choosing words to blend that are related to what children are learning about or are in the books they are reading, as well as the phonics patterns they are learning. This will make blending more meaningful and memorable, and also provide opportunities to link it to vocabulary instruction.

Works Cited

Beck, Isabel L., and Mark E. Beck. *Making Sense of Phonics: The Hows and Whys*. Guilford Publications, 2013.

Blevins, Wiley. *A Fresh Look at Phonics, Grades K–2: Common Causes of Failure and 7 Ingredients for Success*. Thousand Oaks, Corwin Press, 2016.

Blevins, Wiley, et al. "Literacy Leadership Brief: Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction." International Literacy Association, 2019.

Foorman, Barbara, et al. "Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade. Educator's Practice Guide. NCEE 2016–4008." *What Works Clearinghouse* (2016).

Note: *The resources provided are for informational purposes only. All resources must meet the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) accessibility guidelines. Currently, the Department aims to conform to Level AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1). However, the Department does not guarantee that linked external sites conform to Level AA of the WCAG 2.1. Neither the Department of Education nor its officers, employees or agents specifically endorse, recommend or favor these resources or the organizations that created them. Please note that the Department of Education has not reviewed or approved the materials related to the programs.*