

How to Cure Dyslexia

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Recently we received a letter from England written by an intelligent, accomplished and motivated adult who has a “reading problem.” He had been taught to read by look-say and exhibits the usual symptoms of dyslexia, and he wanted to know how to cure his disability. Since there are many adults in America struggling with this same problem, we thought it would make an excellent subject for a newsletter. So here is the gentleman’s letter, with its original spelling errors, followed by our cure:

Dear Mr. Blumenfeld,

I have just received the information package you sent me. I saw your advertisement in the “New Dimensions” magazine and thought it might be of interest but having little relevance to English/German education methods. Upon receiving and wading through the mass of articles etc., I read the education letter dated Jan. 1988 regarding dyxlexia. It was extreemly interesting, logical and above all explained the whole problem. It gave me important clues as to my own disabilities with reading and writing. I do’nt remember which method of reading I was taught; and to this day I still have problems with reading or should I say misreading and especially spelling. I intend to purchase your books for my children, when I get around to having some and perhaps for me to learn what I did’nt whilst at school. If you have any information or advice that could help me I should be very grateful, my problems are as follows.

READING:

- I can read well enough, but I have to concentrate.
- For some reason I miss words or don’t see them.
- I have a fear of reading aloud in public even with family or a child.
- I miss-read or insert the odd word, but I manage to stay within the context of the message.
- I have a little difficulty in pronouncing new words, I seem to make them fit what I think they should be or I look at a word to quickly and ad-lib, Eg. Alpha-Phonics at fist was Alphonics.

WRITING:

- Bad handwriting although it is getting better, I don’t have patience for it.
- Punctuation and especially spelling are substandard, but with rereading and the use of a dictionary I can eliminate most mistakes.
- Sometimes I totally forget how to spell a simple every-day word.
- I have difficulties with the ‘i’ and ‘e’ relationship and the rules regarding word end changes.

To read this letter it might seem as if I have quite a problem but I don’t, I speak very well (posh some might say); with a little effort, concentration and the aid of a dictionary I can write quite constructive letters, although the hand-written variaty have to be rewritten a few times. Thank God for the invention of this Word Processor. But essentially reading and writing should not take so much thought, it should pass almost effortlessly from eyes to mouth and from mind to pen. I should be grateful for any assistance with this particular journey that I’m on and thank you for your help this far.

Yours Sincerely

R. W.

Motivation is Key to Success

It's unusual for a dyslexic to be able to see his own problem as clearly as this individual does. Many dyslexics are so crushed, so embarrassed by their disability, which, they fear, is the result of a defective brain, that their sole way of dealing with the problem is to hide it.

The letter writer, on the other hand, realizes that his reading and writing problems are not due to a lack of innate ability or intelligence but are due to the teaching methods used in his primary education.

In my own experience as a tutor and in teaching disabled sight-readers to become proficient phonetic readers, I have found personal motivation to be the key to success.

Those who resist the teaching or have a hostile, angry attitude growing out of past failure and frustration are the most difficult to retrain. It is hard to blame them for this negative attitude since the damage that was done to them in primary school causes them continued pain and humiliation every day of their lives.

The letter writer, on the other hand, has confidence in his basic intelligence. He simply wants to know how to cure his acquired disability. Obviously, he has the will to do what needs to be done. And so, I recommend the following:

1. First he must realize that the cure to dyslexia lies in becoming a phonetic reader. That is, he must retrain himself so that instead of looking at our written language as a series of still pictures to be interpreted by spoken language, he will see the written word as a direct, accurate transcription of the spoken word. The sight reader associates the printed word with an idea or picture, as if it were a Chinese ideograph. A sight reader may see the word "father" and say "dad," or see the word "horse" and say "pony." He or she does not hear the written word because the association is between the printed word and an idea rather than the printed word and the actual speech sounds the letters represent.

Mastering the Alphabet

Alphabetic writing is a sound-symbol system in which the basic association is between letters and sounds. When properly taught, the pupil is drilled in the letter sounds so that an automatic association between letters and sounds is developed. This then permits the pupil to sound out the words he or she is reading. The reason why phonetic readers read with ease and enjoyment is because once they've developed this automatic association between letters and sounds, the reading process becomes as effortless as speaking or listening.

The letter writer instinctively understands this when he writes: "reading and writing should not take so much thought, it should pass almost effortlessly from eyes to mouth and from mind to pen." But his look say training has placed an association stumbling block in his path, and this blockage can only be removed by retraining.

Removing the Blockage

The simplest and easiest way to do this is to get copies of *Alpha-Phonics* and *How to Tutor* and to teach oneself our English alphabetic system. Can one do it without a tutor? Yes. Anyone, who wants to, can learn how our 26 letters stand for 44 irreducible speech sounds, just as anyone wanting to learn to read Russian would have to learn to recognize the 32 letters of the Russian alphabet and the sounds they stand for. The process is the same, except that if you didn't speak Russian someone who did would have to articulate the sounds for you. Or, if you were shown their equivalents in the English alphabetic system, you would be quite able to articulate the sounds yourself. However, since the letter writer is an intelligent speaker of English, he should have no trouble articulating the isolated sounds our letters stand for.

In both *Alpha-Phonics* and *How to Tutor*, our English alphabetic system is taught in a logical, systematic way, so that by the time the learner reaches the end of the course, he or she knows the spelling forms of all of our speech sounds and should be able to read anything in English with accuracy.

While both books teach the same things, they are different in format. In *How to Tutor* the lessons are printed in regular book-size type with the instructions appearing on the same page as the lesson. While the book was made to be used by a tutor to teach another to read, it is particularly ideal for an adult teaching himself. *Alpha-Phonics*, on the other hand, is a larger sized book devised specifically for direct tutoring of others. The lessons have large sized letters, and the instructions are in back of the book for use by the tutor. *Alpha-Phonics* is ideal for a tutor or parent teaching someone else — child or adult — to read.

The English Alphabet

The reason why the English alphabetic system must be taught in a logical, systematic way is because we have only 26 letters to represent the 44 sounds in the language. This anomaly, or mismatch, is due to the fact that the Roman conquerors of Britain imposed their Latin alphabet on the local inhabitants, who, it must be admitted, did a rather ingenious job of adapting it to their own language. Indeed, they did such a good job that writers, using the system, have managed to produce some of the world's greatest literature, including the King James Version of the Bible, the plays of Shakespeare, the poems of Milton, etc. In other words, the English alphabetic system has served the writers of English very well indeed.

26 Letters for 44 Sounds

However, when you use 26 letters to stand for 44 sounds, you will have to make some rather interesting and novel accommodations. Some of the letters will have to stand for more than one sound, and some of the sounds will have to be represented by more than one letter. For example, the “th” sound is represented by t-h; the “sh” sound is represented by s-h; and the “ch” sound is represented by c-h. The letter *a* stands for at least four sounds: long *a*, as in *apron* and *April*; short *a*, as in *cat* or *bat*; the “ah” sound as in *car* and *father*; and the “aw” sound as in *all* and *call*. How does one know which

sound to make when the letter *a* appears? By having learned the appropriate sounds in their spelling families. And that is the way the sounds are taught in *Alpha-Phonics* and *How to Tutor*. In both books the sequence of lessons takes into account all of the special aspects and eccentricities of our alphabetic system. The short *a* is taught first in conjunction with the consonants. Then the rest of the short vowels are taught in conjunction with the already learned consonants. Next, the final and initial consonant blends are taught, and finally the long vowels are taught in their great variety of spelling forms. Lessons on the other vowel sounds and spellings are interspersed in the final third of the program.

Actually, there are about 20 vowel sounds in English, but we use only six letters to represent them. That's one of the reasons why English spelling requires a little effort to master. Another is that English pronunciation has changed over the centuries but the spellings have not. Also, English has incorporated words from Latin, Greek, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, etc., all of which has complicated our spelling. Attempts have been made to simplify English spelling, but with very limited success.

This should not disturb us, for our spelling, or orthography, is a remarkable repository of information about the history and origins of our language.

Applying Phonetic Knowledge

2. Once the learner has completed learning the English alphabetic system, he or she must learn how to apply this newly acquired knowledge to his or her reading. The letter writer is aware that he misreads, inserts "the odd word," misses words or doesn't see them. He also has difficulty in pronouncing new words and he mutilates words by reading too quickly. In short, he makes all of the errors that look-say readers typically make.

Now comes the more difficult part: transforming or changing a sight reader into a phonetic reader. That can only be done by having the pupil read aloud, interrupting him whenever he makes an error, no matter how small, and by teaching him to apply his phonetic knowledge.

My own experience as a tutor has taught me that look-say reading habits do not automatically disappear after a pupil has learned the alphabetic system. It requires conscious effort on the part of the pupil to overcome these bad habits. And that is why it is very important to make the pupil aware of his misreadings.

Most look-say readers are not aware of the errors they make because they were taught that accuracy is not important and they were encouraged by their teachers to guess and "take risks." Today's teachers, in particular, do not even bother to correct sloppy reading, let alone sloppy spelling. But pupils know the difference between what is correct and what is not. And that is why they don't want to read aloud in class, for fear of appearing stupid. Accuracy may not matter to the teacher, but it does matter to the pupil who is terrified at the thought of making a fool of himself in public.

The Importance of Accuracy

The letter writer knows the feeling all too well. He writes: “I have a fear of reading aloud in public even with family or a child.” Why? Because he knows that accuracy is not only important but is also a reflection of his competence and intelligence. In other words, he desperately wants to be accurate but is prevented from being so by the way he was taught to read. In short, he was crippled by the teaching methods used in his primary school.

And the crippling goes on. In the United States today children are taught to read by the much-touted “whole language” method, which is just another form of look-say. The Washington Post of 11/29/86 reported, “The most controversial aspect of whole language is the de-emphasis on accuracy.” The article quoted Julia Palmer, president of the American Reading Council, as saying, “Accuracy is not the name of the game.” What, then, is the name of the game? Sloppy reading! How can we help the letter writer become an accurate, confident reader? It is unlikely he will be able to find a suitable tutor who will listen to him read aloud and correct him when he makes mistakes and show him how to use his phonetic knowledge in deciphering the new words he will encounter. It would be ideal if he could find such a tutor. But, if not, there is a way he can do it himself.

Self-Teaching

If the letter writer will read aloud into a tape recorder, and then play back the tape while following the text, he may be able to see and hear his own errors, and mark them on the text. Then he ought to reread the text, again into the tape recorder, to see if he can correct himself. Over a period of time, by becoming aware of his errors, the letter writer should be able to achieve the accuracy he wants.

He must also keep a vocabulary notebook, that is, write down in a notebook all of the new words he encounters, breaking them up into syllables and learning to pronounce them correctly. Over a period of a year he will accumulate thousands of new words, and he should make it a habit of frequently reading down this vocabulary list in order to become more familiar with the words and develop quick recognition.

Being able to see the syllabic structure of a multisyllabic word is the key to becoming a phonetic reader. That is why it is important to break up each new multisyllabic word into its syllables. He must continue to learn to read all new words in this way—that is, see words in their phonetic structure and associate the syllables with their sounds.

Incidentally, a syllable is a unit of speech with one vowel sound. It can have none or many consonant letters attached, but it can only have one vowel component. For example, all of the following are one-syllable words, *a*, *at*, *meet*, *-prom*, *prompt*, *thrust*, *scrunch*. Two-syllable words can be as simple as *a-go*, and *a-men* or as complex in spelling as *prompt-ness*, *earth-quake*, or *spend-thrift*. Dictionaries show how to divide multisyllabic words into their syllable components or pronunciation units.

Spotting One's Own Errors

The biggest problem sight readers have is, knowing when they've made an error in reading. However, the easiest, and probably most obvious way for sight-readers to know they've made an error is when they can't understand what they've just read. If the sentence doesn't make sense, then chances are that a reading error was made. The reader then must reread the sentence to find the error. It is not unusual for sight readers to make the same error in rereading. Therefore, the rereading must be slow and word-for-word.

Obviously, this can be a laborious process. However, if the learner chooses reading materials that are interesting and worth reading, then the retraining can be more of a pleasure than a pain. I have found the *Reader's Digest* to be an excellent source of interesting articles on a wide variety of subjects. Also, chapters from books of high interest to the learner are recommended. The subject matter may indeed be so engaging that the learner will be strongly motivated to read the entire work, regardless of its difficulty.

The Right Reading Materials

While learning to read phonetically, the student might as well be learning something else at the same time. That's, why the choice of reading materials is important. We read for knowledge and enjoyment. Most schools, however, force children to read materials that provide neither knowledge nor enjoyment. And that is why so many children get the notion in school that reading is boring and irrelevant.

Improving One's Writing

3. The letter writer also wants to improve his writing. His bad handwriting can be improved with some patience and effort. First, he should learn to write the cursive letters in their proper forms and then learn how to connect them correctly and legibly. This should be done slowly, using good models. (The writing section in *How to Tutor* provides such models.) Speed will increase with proficiency. But proficiency should always come first.

As the letter writer learns to read phonetically, this should also improve his spelling. Punctuation is learned by simply reading and copying good texts and understanding why the punctuation marks are where they are. The purpose of punctuation, of course, is to make the text easier to read and understand and reduce ambiguities. It provides the text with the graphic equivalent of inflection and rhythm. Quotation marks and apostrophes clarify meaning. Commas, colons, semicolons and dashes help organize thoughts on paper.

In a sense, writing should be as easy as reading phonetically. However, painstaking writers will often write and rewrite until they are satisfied that they have expressed exactly the ideas they want to put forth. Rewriting, revising and editing are parts of the process of thinking. In speech, we often find the right word eluding us. In writing, we can take the time to find the right word. Good writing, in fact, is little else than refined speech or thoughtful speech.

Spelling Rules

The letter writer also has difficulty with some of our spelling rules. Spelling rules are writing conventions that must be learned by study and practice. The more one writes, the better one learns the rules, not as rules but as conventions that favor consistency, common sense, and logical practice. A writer who constantly makes spelling mistakes has simply not stopped long enough to study the words he keeps misspelling. What he should do is make a list of the words he most often misspells and juxtapose the correct spellings next to them. He should refer the words back to their spelling families so that he can learn their spelling patterns. As the sight reader becomes a phonetic reader, his spelling will improve.

Mastering the System

Actually, learning to read phonetically is merely mastering the mechanics of our alphabetic writing system. After that, one is learning about the English language and how to use it. That's when we get into grammar, structure, vocabulary, syntax, word origins, etc. And that, in itself, often becomes a pleasurable lifelong pursuit.

Because the use of language is so distinctly a human trait, it commands an interest equal to any other in life. Language is the tool of thought, and before one can make maximum use of that tool, one must master the basic mechanical skills of reading and writing.

How long will it take for the letter writer to become a proficient phonetic reader? It all depends on how much time and effort he puts into the task and how badly he wants to get rid of his disability. As stated earlier, motivation is the key to success. It is the driving force that enables people to overcome insurmountable obstacles.

We wish the letter writer great success in his quest for self-improvement and literary excellence.

Notes by Donald L Potter: Internet Publisher

June 6, 2005, Odessa, TX

Dr. Blumenfeld sent me this article with express permission to publish it on my website and with the earnest desire that it would receive wide spread distribution among parents and educators. There is a great deal of interest in the subject of dyslexia today. Dr. Blumenfeld demonstrated in exquisite detail in his 1973 book *The New Illiterates* how that dyslexia was the logical and necessary outcome of whole-word instruction. This Newsletter presents “The Cure.”

Dr. Blumenfeld’s *Alpha-Phonics* and *How to Tutor* are available on my web site: www.donpotter.net.

This article was taken from *The Blumenfeld Education Letter*, Vol. V, No 8. (Letter # 48), December 1990. Editor: Samuel L. Blumenfeld.

The Masthead reads:

“My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge.” Hosea 4:6

The **purpose** of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them.

Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways:

academically,

spiritually,

morally,

and

physically

– and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks.

“Without vision, the people perish”

Donald L. Potter, June 6, 2005, Odessa, TX.

Further Observations from Donald Potter

July 17, 2010

Five years have passed since I published this fine article by Samuel L. Blumenfeld. I retired from public education about the time I published this essay. Shortly after retiring from public school teaching, I got a call from the Odessa Christian School here in Odessa, TX, asking me to consider teaching fourth-grade. After teaching fourth-grade for a year, my principal asked me to teach Spanish and remedial reading. I am certified in elementary bilingual, ESL, regular elementary, and secondary Spanish. It seems like a great opportunity to use my skills to teach a lot of kids Spanish and to help student with reading problems.

Notice that Mr. Blumenfeld explains, “The letter writer, on the other hand, realizes that **his reading and writing problems** are not due to a lack of innate ability or intelligence but **are due to the teaching methods used in his primary education.**” It appears that not many educators realize that the phonics-first method of teaching beginning reading and the sight-word method are **mutually exclusive**. Any instruction in sight-words presented **before** phonics will to some degree create a **blockage** against viewing words phonetically. Much so-called dyslexia is of this type. The main characteristic of dyslexia is simple guessing at words from word shape (bad, dad, dab, did, bib, bob; horse, house; lion, loin, etc.), from context (syntactic and semantic), from pictures, from rudimentary phonic (vowel and consonant substitution: b_t = *bat/bit/bet* or _at – *bat/hat/sat/mat*, etc.). The frustration created by trying to read this way leads to a form of artificially induced neurosis that is often diagnosed as dyslexia, ADD, ADHD, and etc. Reducing the frustration by teaching the students to read phonetically not infrequently reduces or in many cases cures the problem. Rudolf Flesch called this remediation with phonics, “detoxification.”

Mr. Blumenfeld’s phonics program is currently available in its most recent revision (1997/2005) from The Chalcedon Foundation.

<http://chalcedon.edu/store/Books/alpha-phonics-a-primer-for-beginning-readers/>