

## Readsters Responds

by Linda Farrell, Tina Osenga, and Michael Hunter  
Founding Partners, Readsters

*Question: I enjoyed your sessions for beginning and struggling readers on decodable readers and teaching high frequency words. I have a question about a fourth grade student who can read high frequency words (there, may, you, never, etc.), just can't spell them. His writing is almost completely phonetic, spelling incorrectly almost all words. Do you have any suggestions for teaching students to spell words correctly that they already know how to read? Thanks for your time.*

*Submitted by D. Van Prooyen, Interventionist,  
Lansing Christian School, Lansing, IL*

A student who can decode well, but spells completely phonetically, is unusual. The problem generally is orthographic in nature, one of not being able to recall spelling patterns. (An aside: In my experience, these students also often have poor handwriting, but I've never read a study connecting the two weaknesses.)

The solution is to teach these students the spelling patterns. This takes explicit instruction and a lot of time. The Lindamood-Bell program, *Seeing Stars*, can help students with this issue. Or, you can embark on explicitly teaching regular and irregular spellings to him.

I will share with you a method we use to help students with this problem. The premise is that we identify the parts of the words that are difficult to remember for spelling (schwa vowel, irregular, or unexpected spellings), and put our instructional focus on those parts of the words. A warning - this can require extensive practice for students with poor orthographic memory.

An example of a regular spelling that might be difficult is the 'silent e' pattern. For the 'silent e' vowel spelling, we present the student with 15 "word pairs" such as *mad - made* and *glob - globe*. The student uses a technique called "touch & say" to read each word. He touches each grapheme and says its sound, then reads the word. For example: *math* would be /m/ - touching under **m**, /ă/ - touching under **a**, /th/ - touching under **th**, then 'math' - tracing left to right under the word. When the word has only one vowel letter, the student touches that letter with one finger and reads its short sound. For words with the 'silent e' spelling, he touches the vowel letter and the **e** with two fingers (on the same hand) at the same time and reads the long vowel sound. Before spelling the words, the student determines whether the vowel sound is long or short, shows how many letters will spell the vowel sound - by drawing a line or dot for each, then spells the word on the line or above the dot. He then respells the word without the lines or dots.

For words that are irregularly spelled, the student identifies the letters that are regularly spelled and are not difficult (usually the consonants). We point out the letters that he will have to "learn by heart" (Heart Letters) and have him mark them in some way, such as drawing a heart

over the letters. He tells you what the Heart Letters are, air-writes the word, names the Heart Letters, and then spells the word and underlines the heart letters. An example might be that the student spells the word *should* without the letters **o** and **l** (shud). Show the student the words *should*, *would*, and *could* because they have the same irregular spelling. Point out that he is hearing all the sounds and is only missing the letters **o** and **l**. Explain that the letters **oul** are the Heart Letters. Have the student write each word on a card and underline the Heart Letters. He can air-write the three words, and then can write them and underline the Heart Letters. (See “A New Model for Teaching High Frequency Words” in this newsletter.)

Be sure to dictate sentences containing the words the student is learning to spell so he develops automaticity of the spellings during writing.

This can be a slow process because each difficult spelling pattern needs to be worked on individually until mastered. The good news is that at some point, with this intensive instruction, a number of students we work with start seeing patterns on their own. Their spelling improves remarkably after that.