

Using Decodable Books

By Pamela Brookes, author of DOG ON A LOG[®] Books

Edited by Nancy Mather PhD

Decodable books, also called “sound-out books,” are written to teach and reinforce phonics rules. They generally include a few sight words that help the story make sense. Sight words are common words that must be memorized because they cannot be sounded out. This could either be because they do not follow phonics rules (of, the) or because the phonics in the words have not been taught yet (and, like, he, for.) This last group will be decodable eventually, but only once the student has been explicitly taught more phonics rules.

1. Make sure your student knows the essential, foundational skills of phonological awareness. This means they can play with the sounds in the words they hear. They can rhyme, separate words into syllables, and they can blend and separate the sounds in words with three sounds, such as “cat.”
2. Choose a systematic series of decodable books that align with the phonics progression (Scope and Sequence) that you will be using with your students. Or, choose a systematic, cumulative series of decodable books and plan to teach your students using the series’ outlined phonics sequence.
3. If you are just introducing letters for the very first time, teach a small number of letters. Six is a good number, such as the letters *a, s, m, f, t, n*. Once they’ve learned each letter’s name, its keyword, and the sound it makes, teach them how to blend the sounds of the letters into words. (Some decodable books will start with a list of words. You can use those books or give your students handouts with words.) Keep the pictures of the keyword images/letters on the wall or in a binder for their use. If a student forgets the sound of a letter(s,) have them look at the keyword picture as a reminder.
4. Teach them one or two sight words. Have them read a sentence or two on a handout or a decodable book. (With just six letters, you may not find a book that has a decodable story AND sentences.) Now, introduce them to their first story in a decodable book. Make sure that it uses just the letters and sight words you’ve explicitly taught.
5. Teach you students another group of letters and have them practice as above. Repeat the process of instruction, practice, mastery.
6. Once they’ve mastered reading books with just the 5 short vowel sounds and 21 primary consonant sounds in “vc” and “cvc” words, begin teaching them the next phonics rule in your sequence. Provide them decodable handouts and/or a decodable book with just the letters and phonics they’ve been explicitly taught.
7. Add in another phonics rule and let them read decodable content. Continue the process of explicit instruction, practice, decodable books for more practice, mastery, and new concepts.
8. In general, it is best NOT to focus on comprehension with decodable books as, for many students, it is too hard to practice decoding AND comprehend what they are reading. The purpose of decodable books is to practice and build phonics skills. Early comprehension skills are best taught with read alouds.
9. Once phonics skills are mastered, students are ready to move into more “authentic text.” Some students will be ready by the middle of first grade, whereas others could take until third grade (or longer for students with dyslexia.)
10. If students are having difficulty mastering phonological awareness and systematic phonics, they may have a reading disability such as dyslexia. They should be referred to a trained specialist for assessment and possible further individualized instruction using an explicit, systematic phonics program.

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