

Unlocking New Words

Your child is cruising through a book when she suddenly comes to an unfamiliar word. It's like an obstacle in the road, causing her to slow down or stop. Use the ideas in this guide to give her a plan of attack for reading and understanding new words and getting back on track.



Sound it out

Suggest that your youngster start by saying each syllable of a word separately. Then, have him blend the sounds together by saying the word aloud slowly. This might help him realize that he knows it after all. (“Dis-in-fec-tant. Oh, *disinfectant*, like a cleaner!”)

Use a similar word

Does the unfamiliar word remind your child of a word she knows? If she reads, “The doctor told Maya to *elevate* her broken foot,” she might notice that *elevate* sounds similar to *elevator*. Because elevators go up and down, she might realize that *elevate* means “to raise.”

Think about the topic

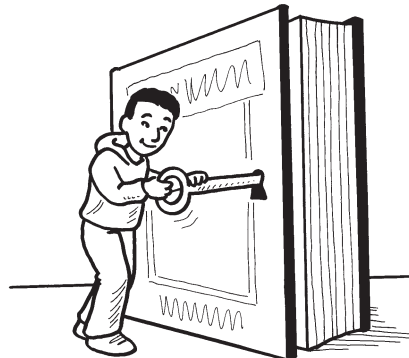
Your youngster’s knowledge of a subject can help him unlock mystery words. For example, if he’s reading about the solar system and gets stuck on a word

that begins with *a*, he might think of *a* words that have something to do with outer space (*astronaut*, *astronomy*, *asteroid*). Would one of them make sense in the sentence?

Find a definition

Instead of stopping when she sees a tricky word, encourage your child to read on and come back to it. Sometimes the author will state the definition directly, especially in a textbook or other nonfiction book. *Example*: “A tree’s *circumference* can help scientists determine its age. They measure the distance around the trunk. For some trees, 1 inch equals 1 year.” (*Circumference* means “distance around.”)

continued



Taking words apart

Prefixes, suffixes, and roots can all provide clues to a word’s meaning. Suggest that your child try these steps to break words into parts and discover their meanings.

1. When your youngster comes to a tricky word that has a prefix, have her write the word on paper and cover the prefix with a sticky note. (Common prefixes include *ir-*, *im-*, *il-*, *in-*, *re-*, *un-*, and *dis-*.) Then, she can write the meaning of the prefix on the note. For

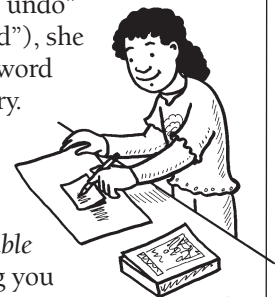
irreversible, she would cover up *ir* and write *not* on the sticky note.

2. If the word has a suffix, have your child cover it up, too. (Frequently used suffixes are *-ing*, *-es*, *-able*, *-ed*, *-ly*, and *-ful*.) For example, she could cover up *ible* in *irreversible* and write *able to* on the sticky note. *Note*: Some words, like *carefully*, have more than one suffix.

3. Once your child has covered the prefix and suffix, only the root (*reverse*)

will be visible. (*Note*: The last letter might be cut off.) If she doesn’t know the definition (“to undo” or “to go backward”), she can look the root word up in the dictionary.

4. Finally, your youngster can put all three parts together. (*Irreversible* means “something you are not able to undo.”)





Try context clues

Your youngster can use clues in the sentence to figure out what a word means. Have him read the sentence, leaving out the unknown word. If he's stuck on *vicinity*, he would read, "Since Charlie lived in the ____ of the mall, we agreed to pick him up on our way." Next, have him try a word that would make sense in the blank: "Since Charlie lived in the *area* of the mall, we agreed to pick him up on our way." (*Vicinity* means "area.")

Search for other uses

Sometimes your child can skip ahead in a paragraph or chapter to see if the word appears again. For instance, the meaning of *migration* isn't clear from a sentence like, "Students tracked the butterflies' *migration*." But the next time the word is used, she might be able to figure it out: "The butterflies will fly thousands of miles during their *migration* from Canada to Mexico." (*Migration* means "journey.")

Go beyond words

Textbooks and novels sometimes include maps, drawings, charts, or photographs that can help your youngster sort out the meaning of a new word. If he gets stuck, suggest that he look through the page for clues to the word. For instance, he might wonder what a mine shaft is. He can use a diagram of a mine to learn that the shaft is a tunnel that miners travel through.

Look it up

Suppose that your child tries several strategies and still can't understand a section because she doesn't know a word. Have her look it up in a dictionary and reread the passage with understanding. If she can make sense of the section without knowing the word's meaning, she might put a sticky note on the word and look it up when she finishes reading. That way, she won't get frustrated by having to stop and start.



Vocabulary games

The more words your youngster recognizes at a glance, the fewer road-blocks he'll encounter when he reads. Try these activities to encourage him to learn new words.

Synonyms

Choose a word, such as *hungry*, and take turns saying synonyms for it (*starving*, *famished*, *ravenous*). Continue until no one can think of a new synonym. Then, check a thesaurus to see if you missed any before picking a new word to try.

Beginnings and endings

Call out any two letters (*j* and *t*). Ask your child to make a list of words that

begin with the first letter and end with the second. *Examples: jet, judgment, jolt, jubilant.* When he runs out of ideas, he can look in a dictionary for more.

Definitions

Open the dictionary to a random page and choose a word you think your

youngster won't know (*revive*). If he can tell you the definition (bring back to life), he gets to try to stump you. If he doesn't know what the word means, use the dictionary entry to give him clues until he guesses ("Revive includes the root word *vive*, which means *to live*").

Headlines

Have your child look through the newspaper for a word with five or more letters (*bicycle*). Encourage him to write his own headline in which each word starts with a letter, in order, from the chosen word ("Baby Iguanas Can Yodel, Cries Leading Expert").

