

## Series: Powerful Best Reading Practices for Struggling Readers

### Part 7: The Reading Gamble: Improving the Odds for Struggling Readers

by Marie Carbo, EdD

Unfortunately, for many struggling readers, as their grade level increases, their reading difficulties worsen. They feel embarrassed and stupid—some act out; others withdraw. Their teachers often feel sad, inadequate and tired of dealing with the anger of some of these students.

#### Overcoming Four Causes of Reading Failure

Let's improve the odds for struggling readers by identifying four key reasons for reading failure, as well as strategies that can quickly help these students learn to read with increased ease and enjoyment.

**Cause #1: Students with Poor to Fair Visual Abilities.** These youngsters have difficulty remembering what they see. They may confuse the order of letters (reading "spot" for "stop") and/or have difficulty discriminating between/among letters and words that look alike (perceiving "m" for "n." or "fill" for "full"). See Figure 2.

#### Effective Strategies:

a) Try using colored overlays. Begin by identifying the overlay color that enables a particular student to see letters and words more clearly. Then allow the student to place an overlay of that color over a page

of print when he or she is reading (Visit [www.dyslexiacure.com](http://www.dyslexiacure.com)).

b) Use clear print and dark markers on whiteboards.

c) Outline the shape of words for greater visual impact (see Figure 3).

**Cause #2. Students with Poor to Fair Auditory Abilities.** These students may have difficulty remembering what they hear. They confuse words that sound alike (such as "leaf" and "leave" or "cot" and "cat"), and/or have difficulty discriminating between/among letters that sound similar (such as "sh" and "ch" or "a" and "o"). Often, learning vowel sounds is particularly difficult for them (see Figure 4).

#### Effective Strategies:

a) Use "talking stories" to help these students build a strong sight vocabulary. With talking stories, the person recording the story uses a slightly slow pace and reads just a page or two on each CD track. Students listen a few times to a story track while following along in the story, and then read that small portion of the story aloud (see Figure 5).

b) If the student is strongly visual, practice words on flash cards.

c) Reduce or eliminate the teaching of phonics until the student is able to read fluently, with good comprehension. Introduce phonics gradually and make sure that the student understands the phonics being taught.

**Cause #3. Students with Limited English Ability.** These students may be newly arrived in the United States, and/or little English is spoken in their family or neighborhood.

#### Effective Strategies:

a) Pair a student with limited English with an English-speaking

Figure 1

#### IDENTIFYING MODALITY STRENGTHS



##### Auditory Learners

- Detect differences in sounds among letters and words
- Recall what they hear
- Learn by listening and speaking



##### Visual Learners

- Detect visual differences among letters and words
- Recall what they see
- Learn by observing



##### Tactile Learners

- Detect differences in shapes and textures that they touch
- Recall what they touch
- Learn by writing, tracing, playing games



##### Kinesthetic Learners

- Detect differences in experiences
- Recall body movements, experiences, feelings
- Learn by performing and by most kinds of physical activity

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student and encourage simple conversations.

b) Read simple stories to these youngsters in English.

c) Use "talking stories," as described above. Students with

limited English benefit from listening four to five times to a small part of a "talking story" (as little as ¼ to ½ page), and then reading that part of the story aloud. The repetition of a small amount

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**Figure 2**

### IDENTIFYING VISUAL STRENGTHS

6-8 = Excellent    4-5 = Good    1-3 = Poor to Fair

#### *The student can:*

- \_\_\_ 1. follow simple instructions that are written and/or drawn.
- \_\_\_ 2. concentrate on a visual activity for 15 to 30 minutes.
- \_\_\_ 3. work on a visual task without looking away or rubbing his/her eyes.
- \_\_\_ 4. recall words after seeing them a few times.
- \_\_\_ 5. read words without confusing the order of the letters (e.g., reading "spot" for "stop").
- \_\_\_ 6. discriminate between/among letters or words that look alike (e.g., "m" and "n" or "fill" and "full").
- \_\_\_ 7. discriminate between/among letters and/or words that are mirror images (e.g., "b" and "d" or "saw" and "was").
- \_\_\_ 8. spell words easily that do not have a direct sound-symbol correspondence and must be recalled visually (e.g., "straight," "glue," "knuckle").

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**Figure 3**



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## Reading Gamble

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of a story helps to improve the student's confidence, reading ability and mastery of English.

**Cause #4. Students Who Dislike Reading and Seldom Read.** Many struggling readers have never been able to read with ease and enjoy the story that they are reading. But struggling readers improve rapidly and enjoy reading when they are given high-interest (and even fun)

“talking stories.” After repeated work with these specially recorded stories, the brain automatically begins to decipher more new words, and students are able to read increasingly difficult material in short periods of time (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Carbo, 2013; 2014). As a result, the youngsters feel smart, and their behavior improves rapidly as they see their reading level rise quickly.

## Improving the Odds for Struggling Readers

By understanding the underlying cause(s) of reading problems, and applying strategies that enable students to learn to read with ease and comfort, we create repeated successes for struggling readers. And when we make this process easy, enjoyable, and fail-safe, we enable struggling readers to be successful and place them on the road to becoming lifelong readers.

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## Figure 4

### IDENTIFYING AUDITORY STRENGTHS

6-8 = Excellent    4-5 = Good    1-3 = Poor to Fair

#### The student can:

- \_\_\_ 1. follow brief verbal instructions.
- \_\_\_ 2. repeat simple sentences of eight to 12 words.
- \_\_\_ 3. pay attention to a story or lecture for 15 to 30 minutes.
- \_\_\_ 4. identify and recall the sounds of individual letters.
- \_\_\_ 5. discriminate between/among words that sound alike (e.g., “leaf” and “leave” or “cot” and “cat”).
- \_\_\_ 6. discriminate between/among letters that sound alike (e.g., “sh” and “ch” or “a” and “o”).
- \_\_\_ 7. blend letters quickly to form words.
- \_\_\_ 8. sound out words and still retain the storyline.

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## Figure 5 How to Record “Talking Stories”

- Use high-interest stories that are above the student's independent reading level.
- Record at a slow pace with good expression.
- Record about 2-4 minutes of text per track.

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### Author

Dr. Marie Carbo is Founder and Executive Director of the National Reading Styles Institute (NRSI). Learn more at [www.nrsi.com](http://www.nrsi.com).