



Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner continues her discussion about guessing and decoding.

Chris Turner, our learning difficulties consultant, helps tutors with struggling students to master new skills. Call us with your questions.

When my student reads, she sometimes substitutes other words for what is on the page. For example, she might say **street** instead of **avenue**. She usually gets the meaning right, but the word wrong. What should I say to her? Should I just ignore it? —*Uncertain*

This kind of substitution error is very common with new readers, especially those with visual processing difficulties. Accuracy and fluency in reading are your goals. You and your student need to discuss and agree on how you will make corrections to help her achieve that goal. My student and I have found the following technique helpful.

As she reads I listen for two types of errors: those that interfere with the meaning of the passage and those that will not affect her ability to understand what she is reading. If she makes the first kind of mistake—for example if she says *imagination* for *immigration*— I stop her at the end of the sentence and tell her to go back to the word. I pre-teach key vocabulary before we read each passage, so this kind of error is rare.

If she makes the kind of mistake you mention—right meaning, wrong word—then I mark the word with a dot above it and let her continue to the end of the passage. Then I take her back to the words she missed. Usually students are aware that they are guessing, and that's fine when they are trying to read for meaning. However, it is very important that they go back afterwards and work on the word they couldn't read. That is how they will build their reading vocabulary and become fluent, accurate readers.

Help her to use her word attack strategies (phonics, word families, word parts) to decode the word. Go over the meaning of the word. How is an *avenue* different from a *street*? A *home* from a *house*? Reinforce the new word by having her write it on an index card and add it to her word bank or spelling dictionary.

It is very important that students learn not to feel stressed by this correcting process. They need to be aware that going back over the words they missed is a natural way of learning new words. Striving for accuracy and making necessary corrections increases fluency. Ignoring errors does not lead to learning.

Just as your student is learning from these errors, so are you. Paying attention to the mistakes your student makes can help you to develop additional exercises to help your student learn other similar words. Putting a dot on missed words can be very reinforcing for students because it shows them how many words they got right. Also, it helps you keep track of the number of errors a student is making. If a student is misreading more than 20% of the words in a passage, the material is too difficult and your student needs to be working with easier material. It is counterproductive to work on material that is too hard.