

Guidelines for Using Manipulative Letters

Word work using manipulative letters is a powerful tool for helping struggling students develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle. Just as we use manipulative objects in mathematics instruction to make abstract concepts more concrete, manipulative letters can make abstract concepts, such as sound segmentation and blending, more concrete.



Word work should begin with familiar words. Once students learn a new word well, their familiarity with the word can serve as a starting point for learning new words and for reinforcing letter-sound knowledge. Use manipulative letters to demonstrate how the letters come together to form the word and then to show the similarities and differences between the familiar word and other words.

- Use lowercase letters of just one color.
- Select target words from text.
- Guide students in blending and segmenting sounds in words.
- Conduct word work at the onset-rime level (e.g., changing hat to sat to mat to rat to bat) and phoneme level (e.g., changing hat to hit to hip to sip to tip to top).
- Help students to encode (spell) and decode (read) new words.

Encoding words:

- Change *sat* to *hat*.
- What would you have to do to change *fat* into *fast*?

Decoding words:

- Change the *s* in *sat* to an *h*. What word do you have?
- If I put an *s* right here in *fat*, what word does that make?

- Use both real words and nonsense words.
- Expand children's knowledge by helping them form "challenge" words.

Each session should include opportunities for students to decode (read) and encode (spell) words at both the onset-rime and phoneme levels.

Word Work with Manipulative Letters: Progression of Practice

When planning word work it is important to select words and letter patterns that provide some level of challenge to students while still allowing them to experience success and build fluency.

Below is an example of levels of word work from basic to more advanced. This is not an exhaustive list and may or may not directly align with individual student needs or your school's scope and sequence. Students' prior decoding knowledge should always be considered first when planning.

CVC words (consonant-vowel-consonant)

1. changing only the initial sound
 - a. pat > mat > hat
2. changing only the middle **or** final sound
 - a. pat > pad > pap (changing the final sound only)
 - b. pit > pot > pat (changing the middle sound only)
3. changing the initial **and** final sound
 - a. pat > mat > mad
4. changing the initial, middle, **and** final sound
 - a. pat > mat > mad > mid

Blends and digraphs

1. adding initial blends and digraphs
 - a. plot > slot > slit
2. adding final blends and digraphs
 - a. cast > mast > mask
3. adding initial **and** final blends and digraphs
 - a. clap > clasp > grasp

R-controlled vowels

- ar
- or
- er, ir, ur

VC-e pattern:

- a_e, e_e, i_e, o_e, u_e







Vowel patterns

- ai, ay, ee, ea, ow (show), ie, y as a vowel (cry, baby), oo (book or hoot)

Diphthongs

- oi, oy, aw, au, ow (how), ou (house)

Word Work with Manipulative Letters

Less challenging		More challenging
building words using a few letters		building words using the full alphabet
consistently using the same letters across multiple sessions to build words		building words using a new combination of letters every session
consistently changing the same aspect of the word (i.e. only changing the initial sound)		changing a different aspect of the word every time (i.e. changing the initial, then final, then medial sound)
using a 1:1 correspondence when changing sounds (i.e. replacing one sound with one new sound)		making a change by adding or deleting sounds, changing the total number of sounds in the word
changing one sound at a time (e.g. bat > pat)		changing multiple sounds at one time (e.g. bat > splat)

Word Work Sample Script

Area of focus: sh digraph and short vowel sounds

Anchor word from text: wish

1. Look at this word from the book. This is the word 'wish'. Make the word 'wish' with your letters.
2. Change wish to fish. What letter do you need? [encoding]
3. Change the f to d. What word is this? [decoding]
4. Change dish to dash. What letter do you need? [encoding]
5. Change the d to m. What word is this? [decoding]
6. Let's make a silly nonsense word. Can you change mash to mish? What letter do you need? [encoding]
7. Now take away the sh and make it a d. What word is this? [decoding] Mid is a real word that means middle.
8. Change mid to mad. What letter do you need? [encoding]
9. Change the m to g. What word is this? Gad is a nonsense word. [decoding]
10. Put an l between the g and a. What word is this? [decoding]
11. Change glad to lad. What do you need to do (take away the g)? [encoding] Lad is another way to say boy.
12. Change the a to i. What word is this? [decoding]