

# Stairway to Reading

This is a one-on-one remedial reading program for students of any age who have already received some reading instruction but who are struggling with reading. It was not originally designed for beginning readers, although it can be used for this purpose with the minor adaptations noted at the bottom of this page\*. The following items are required in addition to the material downloaded from the Internet.

- Pencils and erasers
- A lined notebook
- A small (approximately 11" by 13") dry-erase board, markers, and brush
- Ordinary paper OR Bristol board and a glue stick OR card stock (8 ½" by 11" 110-lb. paper)

*Stairway to Reading* consists of nine files. Only four of the files — this introduction, the 40 lessons, the flashcards, and the reading material — are essential to the program. The Bingo games and the Crazy Letters cards are there to provide extra practice if desired. There is also a handy checklist, an informative appendix, and motivational progress graphs.

A commitment of approximately one hour a day is recommended, but even 15 minutes of instruction a day can make a big difference. It is impossible to estimate how long it will be necessary to continue, as the speed of progress depends on the nature of the student's problems, the amount of time you spend working on reading, and how far behind he or she is. The shortest possible time to complete the program is about six weeks, while the longest possible time is a year or more. All students learn to read in the end, however.

The program begins with a diagnostic test which will take about 5 or 10 minutes to administer. The student's results on the test will indicate where to start *Stairway to Reading*.

## **THE DIAGNOSTIC TEST**

Seat the student across the table from you in a quiet area. Explain that you will be helping him or her to become a better reader and that first you need to find out how much he or she knows already. Explain that the test gets harder as it goes on and will eventually become too difficult for him or her.

Remove the student's copy of the diagnostic test and the teacher's copy of the diagnostic test (next two pages). Give the student's copy to him or her; you will be using the teacher's copy to note his or her responses. The teacher's copy has a rhyming word after each nonsense word so that you can be sure of the correct pronunciation.

In Part 1 of the diagnostic test, you are interested in assessing how good the student is at reading unknown words. Ask the student to read each nonsense word, explaining that they are not real words. Stop Part 1 as soon as he or she makes a mistake. Circle the error.

In Part 2, you are interested in assessing the student's reading level. The six reading passages correspond to grades 1 to 6. Ask the student to read each passage aloud, beginning with the first one. Stop Part 2 when he or she has misread two words in the same passage. Circle all errors.

Please note that no teaching or coaching should be offered during the diagnostic test, as this is merely an information-gathering session. It is important, however, to be very encouraging. Be sure to praise the student and act impressed by how much he or she knows already.

This is the end of today's session. The student can be dismissed at this point.

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### \* Adaptations for beginning readers

- Elimination of the diagnostic test, as these students automatically start at Lesson 1
- One-letter-a-day presentation in lessons 1, 3, and 5, with much guidance and practice of letter formation
- A slower pace, shorter and more playful sessions
- Elimination of the "challenge" sections

# Diagnostic Test

## Student's Copy

**Part 1**

- |    |       |      |      |       |       |
|----|-------|------|------|-------|-------|
| 1. | mit   | sog  | bic  | rab   | hap   |
| 2. | dun   | luk  | jaf  |       |       |
| 3. | wez   | quax | yev  |       |       |
| 4. | veft  | unt  | filt | dron  | kazz  |
| 5. | gote  | hibe | bule | quape | jede  |
| 6. | shoop | hage | phoy | cert  | thawk |

**Part 2**

<p>1 "What is that?" said Lucy, as she came out on the steps. "Oh, it is a little boat! What a pretty one it is!" "I will give it to you when it is finished," said John, kindly. "Would you like to have it?" "Yes, very much, thank you, John. Has grandma seen it?"</p>	<p>4 In several parts of the world there are to be found large herds of wild horses. In South America the immense plains are inhabited by them, and it is said that ten thousand are sometimes found in a single herd. These herds are always preceded by a leader, who directs their motions.</p>
<p>2 Herbert worked away until he had made the beam and the post. Then he made a hole in the middle of the block, and put the post in. Next, he put the beam into a little groove at the top of the post, so that it would balance nicely.</p>	<p>5 The bear, a ten-foot mass in tolerable proportion, seemed to be regularly beset by a pack of hungry little swells. First, one would take him on the haunch, then whip back into the sea over his tail and between his legs. Presently a bolder swell would rise and pitch into his back.</p>
<p>3 "Don't you hate splitting wood?" asked Charlie, as he sat down on a log to hinder Rob for a while. "No, I rather like it. When I get hold of a tough old fellow, I say, 'See here, now, you think you're the stronger, and are going to beat me.'"</p>	<p>6 It is a spacious and timbered room, with one large bull's eye window — an overgrown lens. The thing is sort of a Cyclops. There are ropes, and chains, and a windlass. There is a bell by which the engineer of the first engine can signal the plowman, and a cord whereby the plowman can talk back.</p>

# Diagnostic Test

## Teacher's Copy

**Part 1**

- |                        |                        |                       |                        |                        |
|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. <b>mit</b> (bit)    | 2. <b>sog</b> (log)    | 3. <b>bic</b> (lick)  | 4. <b>rab</b> (lab)    | 5. <b>hap</b> (rap)    |
| 2. <b>dun</b> (fun)    | 3. <b>luk</b> (tuck)   | 4. <b>jaf</b> (staff) |                        |                        |
| 3. <b>wez</b> (says)   | 4. <b>quax</b> (fax)   | 5. <b>yev</b> (Bev)   |                        |                        |
| 4. <b>veft</b> (left)  | 5. <b>unt</b> (punt)   | 6. <b>filt</b> (jilt) | 1. <b>dron</b> (fawn)  | 2. <b>kazz</b> (jazz)  |
| 5. <b>gote</b> (boat)  | 6. <b>hibe</b> (bribe) | 1. <b>bule</b> (Yule) | 2. <b>quape</b> (tape) | 3. <b>jede</b> (reed)  |
| 6. <b>shoop</b> (loop) | 1. <b>hage</b> (page)  | 2. <b>phoy</b> (foy)  | 3. <b>cert</b> (surt)  | 4. <b>thawk</b> (lock) |

**Part 2**

<p>1 "What is that?" said Lucy, as she came out on the steps. "Oh, it is a little boat! What a pretty one it is!" "I will give it to you when it is finished," said John, kindly. "Would you like to have it?" "Yes, very much, thank you, John. Has grandma seen it?"</p>	<p>4 In several parts of the world there are to be found large herds of wild horses. In South America the immense plains are inhabited by them, and it is said that ten thousand are sometimes found in a single herd. These herds are always preceded by a leader, who directs their motions.</p>
<p>2 Herbert worked away until he had made the beam and the post. Then he made a hole in the middle of the block, and put the post in. Next, he put the beam into a little groove at the top of the post, so that it would balance nicely.</p>	<p>5 The bear, a ten-foot mass in tolerable proportion, seemed to be regularly beset by a pack of hungry little swells. First, one would take him on the haunch, then whip back into the sea over his tail and between his legs. Presently a bolder swell would rise and pitch into his back.</p>
<p>3 "Don't you hate splitting wood?" asked Charlie, as he sat down on a log to hinder Rob for a while. "No, I rather like it. When I get hold of a tough old fellow, I say, 'See here, now, you think you're the stronger, and are going to beat me.'"</p>	<p>6 It is a spacious and timbered room, with one large bull's eye window — an overgrown lens. The thing is sort of a Cyclops. There are ropes, and chains, and a windlass. There is a bell by which the engineer of the first engine can signal the plowman, and a cord whereby the plowman can talk back.</p>

**Student's Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 2 Highest level read with fewer than 2 errors** \_\_\_\_\_

## **PLACEMENT**

The numbers in each of the six reading passages correspond to the expected mid-year reading level for that grade. The student's approximate reading level is one grade *below* the level at which he made two mistakes.

## **DIAGNOSIS**

- If the student made a mistake in first line of Part 1 of the test, start at Lesson 1.
- If the student made a mistake in second line of Part 1 of the test, start at Lesson 3.
- If the student made a mistake in third line of Part 1 of the test, start at Lesson 5.
- If the student made a mistake in fourth line of Part 1 of the test, start at Lesson 7.
- If the student made a mistake in fifth line of Part 1 of the test, start at Lesson 11.
- If the student made a mistake in sixth line of Part 1 of the test, start at Lesson 12.
- If the student got all of the Part 1 words right but made two mistakes in the same Part 2 reading passage, start at Lesson 13.
- If the student was able to complete Part 2 of the test without making two mistakes in the same reading passage, he is reading at a grade 6 level or better and this program is not designed for him.

## **NOTES**

The next five pages contain notes that will help your teaching. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact the author of *Stairway to Reading*, Malkin Dare, [mdare@sympatico.ca](mailto:mdare@sympatico.ca). Malkin loves to help kids become better readers.

## GENERAL NOTES

### THE PROBLEM

Written language is just a system for writing down sounds. All words are composed of one or more sounds, and most languages have developed a more or less logical system for representing each sound by one or more letters. Unfortunately, English spelling is not as regular as that of most languages. Ontario English (which is the dialect *Stairway to Reading* is based on<sup>\*</sup>) has 45 sounds but only 26 letters in its alphabet, meaning that some sounds have to be represented by combinations of letters. One sound, the sound /oo/ (as in *moon*), can be represented in at least 12 different ways (for example, *stew, soon, glue, judo, soup, do, lose, tune, shoe, fruit, neutral, and through*). Many letters can represent several different sounds (for example, the letter ‘y’ in *yes, key, happy, boy, gym, sky, type, day, and they*). As a result of this complexity, many students need to be taught very, very carefully.

The most important principle in fixing reading problems is to find the place on the learning ladder where the student first missed a rung, go back to that place, and teach the missing skills in a logical order. *Stairway to Reading* is structured as a series of steps. Once you have started the program, do not proceed to the next step until the current one has been mastered. Daily sessions of about an hour are best. Progress is usually slow at first but often speeds up gradually.

There are some students who find learning to read hard. This has little or nothing to do with their intelligence; rather, there seems to be a slight glitch in their brains. (Your student may or may not belong to this group, as some students’ reading problems are due solely to faulty instruction at school.) Because *Stairway to Reading* caters to hard-to-teach students, it contains many more opportunities for practice and repetition than the average student will need.

However, there will be a few students who need even more practice and repetition than *Stairway to Reading* offers. Their teachers are encouraged to create supplementary examples and exercises, by for example adapting the games and progress charts in the supplementary files. Suggestions and help are available from the author, Malkin Dare, [mdare@sympatico.ca](mailto:mdare@sympatico.ca). Even really-hard-to-teach students can become competent readers, indistinguishable from students who learned to read more easily, provided they receive careful instruction and lots of practice.

### PREPARING FOR THE FIRST LESSON

Do not begin the first teaching session until you have analyzed the student’s results on the diagnostic test and read ahead in the lessons. You will need to do some advance preparation, such as purchasing supplies and preparing flashcards. You should also walk yourself through the first few lessons to familiarize yourself with the routine. In general, the more you prepare for each session, the more successful it will be.

In the Flashcards file, you will find three different categories of flashcards. On Page 1 is the **Flashcard Letters** category: the 26 letters of the alphabet plus seven duplicates. On Pages 2-4 is the **Simple Code** category: 26 flashcards, one for each letter of the alphabet. On Pages 5 to 16 is the **Advanced Code** category: flashcards for the most common multiple-letter ways of representing sounds, organized by sounds.

The students who made a mistake IN THE FIRST THREE lines of Part 1 of the diagnostic test will need all three sets of flashcards. The students whose first mistake was ON LINE FOUR will need only the Flashcard Letters and the Advanced Code flashcards. The students whose first mistake was AFTER LINE FOUR will need only the Advanced Code flashcards. The flashcards can be printed onto ordinary paper and cut out; however, they will be quite flimsy. If you want stronger flashcards, you can glue them onto Bristol board (a glue stick works well), or print or photocopy them directly onto card stock.

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<sup>\*</sup> There can be enormous variations in pronunciations – for example, the sound /air/ in Lesson 26 is represented quite differently in England. Teachers thus need to modify the program as appropriate.

## **GENERAL NOTES (Cont.)**

### ***PREPARING FOR THE FIRST LESSON (Cont.)***

To prepare for the first teaching session, assemble the lessons and the student's reading material, a dry-erase board and markers, pencils and erasers, a lined notebook, and the flashcards. Seat the student across the table from you and explain that you will be working together for about an hour every day to help him or her become a better reader. Some students have to be bribed at first but, as soon as they realize that they are really going to learn to read, they are often very happy to co-operate.

### ***B/D CONFUSION***

Some students' may confuse the letters 'b' and 'd'. This is very common and does not indicate neurological problems. Many of these students form both letters by either drawing a vertical line or then trying to decide which side of that line to put the circle on or by drawing a circle and then trying to decide which side of the circle to put the line on. Either way, valuable brain power is squandered on thinking about letter formation and the student continues to confuse 'b' and 'd'. As a general rule, all letters should be formed from left to right (and from top to bottom). Therefore, the letter 'b' should be started by drawing a line from the top line to the bottom line and then forming a clockwise circle, while the letter 'd' should begin with a counter-clockwise circle, followed by a down-stroke. Most students' problems can be solved by extensive practice with one or other (but not both) of the letters. Choose either 'b' or 'd', and give the student considerable practice forming that letter correctly, saying the sound as he does so, in a variety of media — for example, on the dry-erase board, in rice, on sandpaper, with his arm in the air, in the bathtub, and so on. Spend only about a minute at any one time on such activities, several times a day. The other letter should be ignored until the first letter has been mastered. Once the student has spent several days on this, the confusion should be much diminished. A similar process can be followed for the few students who also confuse 'p' and 'q'.

### ***ALPHABETIC SYMBOLS***

There are two different symbols for the first letter of the alphabet ('A' and 'a'). Several other letters, such as 'g', 'q', 'I', and 'J', can vary as well. Students need to be able to recognize all these forms of the letters of the alphabet.

### ***IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK***

Immediate feedback is the most powerful teaching tool there is. When students give correct responses, they should receive positive feedback. When students make mistakes, they should be corrected in a matter-of-fact manner and in as few words as possible, with just one very succinct reason why they are wrong. The student should then be led to the correct response.

### ***THE SESSIONS***

Make the teaching sessions short and snappy, provide lots of praise and encouragement always end on a positive note with something the student can do well, and give him or her a treat at the end of the session. Never spend more than five or ten minutes on any activity.

### ***FORGETTING***

New learning is easily erased, and it is normal for a student to have completely forgotten something he or she seemed to know the day before. Simply teach and practise the concept over and over until it has been "over-learned" — that is, learned so thoroughly that it requires no active attention or conscious thought.

## **GENERAL NOTES (cont.)**

### **COMPREHENSION**

Lack of comprehension is not usually a problem, except when the student is overwhelmed by the amount of attention he or she must devote to decoding. If this happens, students benefit from repeated reading of the non-comprehended passage until they can decode the words so easily that they have enough mental space left over to pay attention to meaning. If comprehension is still a problem, make a practice of asking frequent questions about what the student is reading, perhaps asking him or her to predict what will happen next or asking him what he or she would do if he or she were in that situation.

### **GUESSING**

Most students are accustomed to guessing when they encounter an unknown word, but this practice should be vigorously discouraged. *Stairway to Reading* has been structured in such a way that every unknown word can be sounded out using the phonics skills the student has already learned. When a student has trouble decoding an unknown word, provide prompts (such as supplying the sound that is causing the trouble) and, if the student is still unable to read the word, simply supply the word.

### **CONTINUITY**

Frequent, short sessions are more effective than irregular, long sessions. Even short breaks in reading instruction will result in much erosion of progress. The best results will be achieved by at least a little instruction every day, no exceptions. If this is not possible for some reason, perhaps during a vacation or illness, when lessons resume it may be necessary to do a quick review of prior lessons.

### **ENRICHMENT**

As students progress and they begin to read more complicated material, their ability to decode gradually becomes less important while their general knowledge and vocabulary gradually become more important. In preparation for more advanced reading, you should be exposing your student to many different kinds of experiences (going to museums, playing baseball, walking in the woods, visiting a farm, travelling to other places, etc.) and talking about everything afterwards using precise terms to describe what you saw and did. Another excellent way to build vocabulary and general knowledge is for students to hear interesting stories containing words and information they are unlikely to encounter otherwise. A good starting point might be the stories in the following collections edited by Jim Trelease: *Hey! Listen to This: Stories to Read Aloud* (ages 5-9); and *Read All About It!* (preteens and teens). You might also consult the children's librarian at your local public library.

### **FLUENCY**

Learning is not a yes/no process but rather takes place in stages. At first, the teacher's goal for students is that they understand the new concept and are able to apply it. But the new learning must be practised over and over — to the point where the student can practically do it in his or her sleep — in order for it to be truly mastered. In reading, it is necessary for the student to be able to recognize familiar words and apply phonics skills to unknown words almost effortlessly. The teacher should not proceed to the next lesson until this kind of fluency has been achieved.

### **LABELS**

Labels such as “learning-disabled” or “ADHD” are not particularly useful or meaningful, as there is no known cause, treatment or cure. Not surprisingly, once students begin to receive proper teaching, behaviour problems often melt away.

## GENERAL NOTES (cont.)

### ACCURACY

Many students, especially the students who were able to read all of the nonsense words in Part 1 of the diagnostic test but not all of the reading passages in Part 2, have a bad habit of reading inaccurately. Often, they guess at words. These habits are very hard to break, but they must be broken — otherwise they will prevent the student from ever becoming a fluent reader. Explain to the student that his or her task is to read everything completely accurately. Right now, there is no need to read fluently, quickly, or with expression — these things will come later without being sought. For now, all that matters is accuracy. Every time the student makes a mistake, stop him or her and point out the error. It is helpful for some students to be forced to return to the beginning of the sentence in which they made the error (they hate this). Some students find it helpful to point to each word with their finger and/or use a ruler to keep their place. Some students are more motivated to read accurately if they can earn a few M&M's (or pennies or another small treat) per page, losing one reward for each mistake. Do not take away a reward if the student hesitates at an unknown word and says he or she can't read it. In fact, this is great progress! In the past, the student would probably have taken a wild guess. After he or she has spent a few seconds attempting to decode the unknown word, simply supply it and praise the student for not guessing. Recording the student's reading on a tape recorder is another good way to encourage accuracy. Because the effort to read accurately can overwhelm the student's ability to comprehend what he or she is reading, repeated readings of each story are usually extremely beneficial — for comprehension, word recognition, and fluency.

### PRONUNCIATION OF SOUNDS

It is common to embellish certain sounds. For example, the sound /k/ is often pronounced “kuh” (which is actually two sounds: /k/ and /ū/). Make sure that the student pronounces each sound crisply. It may help to listen to the sound when it is at the **end** of words — it is easy to hear how crisp /k/ should be when it is the last sound in the word *book* — or to pretend to stutter, as in *K-K-K-Katie*. Make sure that /r/ is pronounced neither as “er” nor as “ruh”.

### WEAK AREAS

There will be a few lucky students who sail through *Stairway to Reading* smoothly and quickly, but most students will find at least one aspect of reading extra difficult. For example, one student might have trouble hearing all the sounds in words. Another might have fine motor control problems and struggle to form letters. Other students might find it hard to remember the sound-letter correspondences and/or blend the sounds together to make words. Whatever the area(s) of difficulty, the solution is always the same — extra practice. The teacher should devise a variety of different activities to afford the necessary practice, never spending more than about five minutes per exercise. For ideas, contact Malkin Dare, [mdare@sympatico.ca](mailto:mdare@sympatico.ca).

### THE READING PROCESS

After a particular word has been correctly sounded out several times, the reader's brain automatically transfers it to another part of the brain whence it can be retrieved without sounding out. The goal of reading instruction is to build a huge word bank in the second part of the brain. The number of times that a word must be sounded out before it can be transferred varies considerably, but in most cases the range is from five to fifteen exposures. As students progress, the number of required exposures gradually lessens.

## **GENERAL NOTES (cont.)**

### ***KEEPING TRACK***

Many people find it helpful to make notes after each teaching session, since it's hard to remember exactly which exercises were done on a particular day and how they went. *Stairway to Reading* includes an optional checklist file which you are welcome to download.

### ***STAIRWAY TO READING FORMAT***

To indicate a letter, *Stairway to Reading* uses single quotation marks (for example, the letter 'a'). To indicate a sound, *Stairway to Reading* encloses the symbol for the sound in slashes (for example, the sound /oo/. To indicate a word, *Stairway to Reading* uses italics (for example, the word *big*).

### ***ZEROING IN ON PROBLEMS***

When a problem area is identified — let's say the student confuses 'ar' and 'ra' or the student can't grasp whether the letter 'c' represents the /k/ sound or the /s/ sound — zero in on the problem. It will probably not go away on its own, but it is fixable. Adopting a matter-of-fact manner, tell the student that you are going to work on it together (but no more than five minutes a day) until it is fixed. Very targeted practice will usually resolve the problem in short order.

### ***FOLLOW-THROUGH***

When the student has completed all 40 lessons, he should begin one or more of the workbooks recommended on Page 41. Typically, struggling readers are also behind in spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and composition. With patience and hard work, however, they can all eventually catch up.