

# How Words Work: Morphological Strategies

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Understanding the morphological nature of words and using morphological strategies for reading and spelling is a very efficient way of building excellent literacy skills. Dyslexic students and literacy strugglers often don't get to look at, or understand, words in this way because they are too busy struggling with basic skills.

Working on the morphological structure of words is useful in many ways:

- It gives insight into word meanings and history which some students find helpful and interesting.
- It improves vocabulary knowledge.
- It often grabs the attention of the struggler who has given up on ever becoming a better speller.
- It is a fresh and different approach for students for whom the phonological route has been unsuccessful; an antidote to 'phonics fatigue'.

I have used the approach outlined here with individual students aged 9 years and over, with adults in groups of ten, and most successfully with two groups of six boys aged between 10 and 15 at a specialist EBD unit.

I devised the programme myself and named it 'How Words Work'. It incorporates all the principles of specialist literacy teaching that work so well for dyslexic students and others who struggle with literacy. The principles are:

- It is *structured* building hierarchically from common, well-known and easily grasped information to more difficult concepts.
- It is *cumulative* in that what has been learnt re-appears and is used in many different ways; previously learnt information is kept under continuous review.
- It is *multisensory* using movement and manipulation, cursive writing, verbalisation, reading and spelling in a linked way.
- The teaching is by *directed discovery*. Students are led to the information they need by carefully structured stimuli; they discover and so own the new knowledge.
- It offers back-up *memory support* using concrete reminders of concepts learnt.

I describe here some starter sessions for group work and then show some examples of materials from later sessions.

## Early Stages of the Programme

In the very first session I have found it useful to take a simple, easily understood base word and show students

how the meaning changes depending on who is doing the action, at what time etc., by asking some leading questions eg 'I might help you with your work now, what would we say if it happened yesterday?' (answer 'helped') and so on, writing the words one at a time in a list on the board.

Fig.1

List of words provided by students and written on board by teacher, one by one, in response to leading questions

help  
helps  
helping  
helped  
helpful  
unhelpful  
helpless  
helper

It is important that students watch the word string develop in this way rather than be presented with the finished list – the latter would hold far less meaning.

I ask what is the commonality in all the words (help) and whether it is always spelled in the same way (yes).

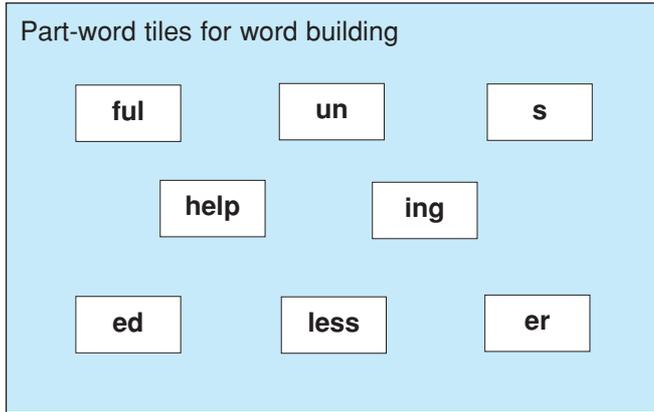
Together we then examine 'bits that fix on to the front of the base word' eg *un-* and see how many words we can think of that begin with *un-*. We can then attempt to discover how *un-* changes the meaning of words.

We carry on examining other 'bits' in the same way, e.g. *-ing, -ful* etc. At this early stage I deliberately use the terminology 'bits that fix on to the front of the base word' and 'bits that fix on to the back of the base word' as I don't want to scare them away with terms that sound difficult to remember and understand. Correct terminology will come later.

At the end of the session I draw attention back to the help list and ask the students how many 'bits' were used to form all the words in the list. It is a revelation to many that the answer is just 8 'bits'.

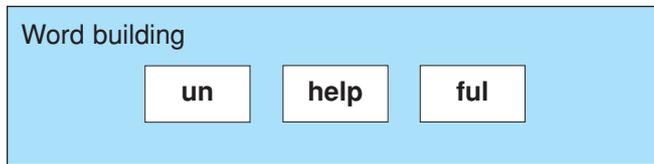
In the next teaching session I give students a little bag containing those 8 bits on small cards and ask them to spread them out on the table.

**Fig.2**



I say words and they make them by pushing cards together.

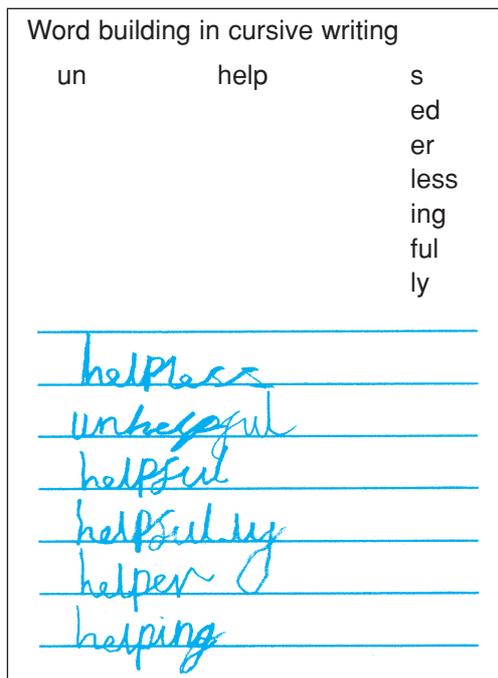
**Fig.3**



The students are pleased to be making words that they might not recognise in print and cannot spell – yet.

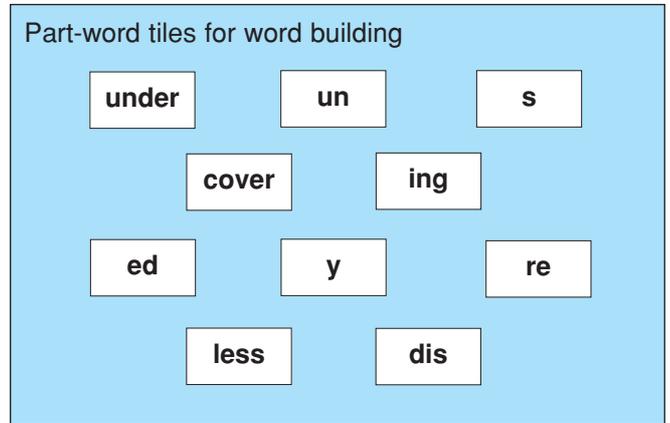
To add to the multisensory nature of this work students are now asked to write the list of words in a supported way – the essential ‘bits’ are provided, they have to identify and write.

**Fig.4**



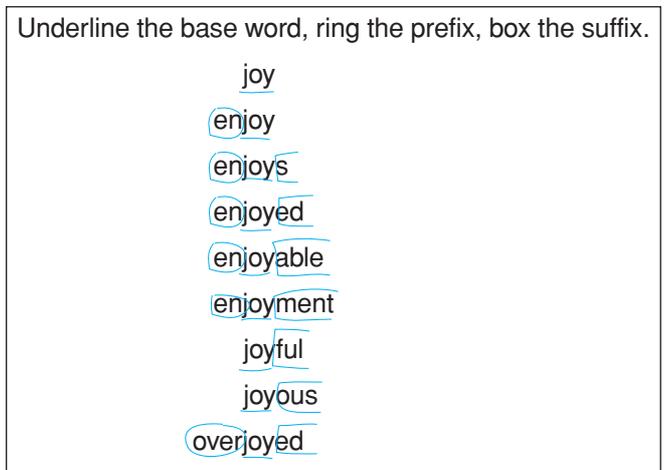
In following sessions other base words and affixes are examined in a similar way. Sometimes the student sees the new base word and affixes in individual units as described above and is asked to construct words.

**Fig.5**



Sometimes the complete words are presented and the student is asked to deconstruct them by cutting, drawing lines in the correct places, or using a simple coding system: underline the base word, ring the prefix and box the suffix.

**Fig.6**



When the time seems right I start to substitute the word ‘bit’ for the correct terms ‘prefix’ and ‘suffix’. I don’t expect the students to remember the terms but with frequent usage they tend to begin to appear in the students’ spoken responses. Thus we have assimilated some difficult labels quite effortlessly.

Base words and affixes that have been studied in these sessions can be used for comprehension and cloze work similar to the example shown.

Note that the sentences can be read to the student by a teacher, assistant or peer. The student is not at any time expected to spell these words unaided. They can feel secure that all that they need is provided.

**Fig.7**

Example of cloze sheet

**cover**

<b>re</b>	<b>s</b>
<b>un</b>	<b>ed</b>
<b>dis</b>	<b>ing</b>
<b>under</b>	<b>able</b>
	<b>y</b>

The detective works ..... at a nightclub in Dover.  
 Scientists are always trying to ..... new ways to cure diseases.  
 Insurance will not be paid if the jewels are .....  
 The table ..... is waterproof.  
 Food left ..... attracts flies.  
 The heart attack victim made a good .....  
 We are ..... lots of things about Mars from the probe.  
 The Russian submarine is not ..... from the sea bed.  
 An amazing ..... led to the cure for cancer.

Over time we make a collection of base words and affixes studied so that they are not lost from the students' minds. Three wall charts for the classroom might be made adding new base words and affixes as we study them (Fig. 8,) or individual note books are made.

In this way it becomes apparent to students that the same affixes are used over and over again in many long, multi-syllable words. They are also led to recognise that the spelling of most affixes is stable; one piece of information can help with many, many other words. Slowly the world of words which has given them so much trouble becomes more orderly and less chaotic.

Examples of useful materials for the early stages (Figs 8 & 9).

**Fig.8**

Charts of word families studied for classroom wall

<b>PREFIXES</b>	<b>BASEWORDS</b>	<b>SUFFIXES</b>
un in en re pre dis	help cover press light joy	s ed ing ful less ment y

➔      ➔      ➔

Examples of useful materials for the early stages of the programme

**Fig.9**

Words printed on small cards for students to cut

hope	less	un	like	ly
------	------	----	------	----

DOMINOES

press	ing	dress	es	cross
-------	-----	-------	----	-------

PAIRS

thank	wish
-------	------

ful      ing

**More advanced work**

Once the students are confident working with base words and affixes we move on to some less transparent base units or 'word roots'. The same procedure is used as in the initial session: I write a word root on the board and invite the students to suggest other words containing that word root and watch the word string develop.

I explain the change in terminology – parts of words which appear in many longer words and carry meaning, but are not always words when they stand alone are referred to as word roots, rather than base words which are meaningful by themselves.

**Fig.10**

Word root and affixes	interrupt interruption disrupt disruptive corrupt corruptible erupt erupted erupting rupture abrupt abruptly
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When a few word roots have been studied it is useful to link in with history work in school and add an etymological perspective to some of our most difficult and seemingly obscure words.

Over the next five or six sessions we look at a map of the British Isles and talk about the original inhabitants and the various invading groups who settled and contributed to our language mix. For simplicity's sake I

tend to stick to Celts, Romans (Latin and Greek), Anglo Saxons, Vikings and Normans but mention other influences if and when they occur.

The students are given a chart to fill in as the weeks pass; a similar master chart is placed on the classroom wall.

**Fig.11**

Why is English a difficult language to learn?

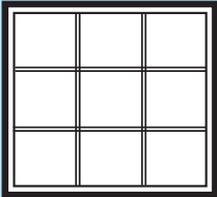


Tribes/Invaders	Languages

For each group of invaders we look at typical words and learn how to find origins of words in a dictionary.

**Fig.12**

window



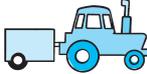
(ME f ON *vindauga* (vin WIND + *auga* EYE)  
i.e. window is a middle English word from Old Norse  
*vindauga* meaning wind eye  
*Concise English Dictionary: 6th Edition*

Subsequently when we study word families we make an aide-memoir, either a complete word list and pictorial reminder, or just a clue word and picture, to remind us of the origin and meaning of the word group (Figs. 13, 13a, 13b).

**Fig.13**

tractor  
retract  
distract  
contract  
extract  
subtract  
subtraction  
distraction  
attract  
attractive  
traction  
tractable

**tract**  
draw or pull

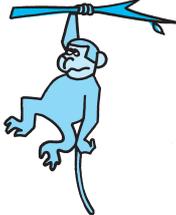


**tractor** *that which draws or pulls*

**Fig.13a**

Memory aid: Word group and pictorial reminder

**pend**  
hang

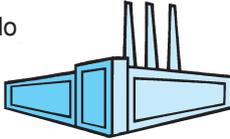


**suspended** hanging under

**Fig.13b**

Memory aid: Clue words and pictures

**fac**  
make or do

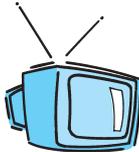


**factory** place where things are made

The closer the words are to the students' everyday life, the more meaningful they will be (Fig. 14).

**Fig.14**

**vis**  
see



**television** far off seeing

**mob**  
move

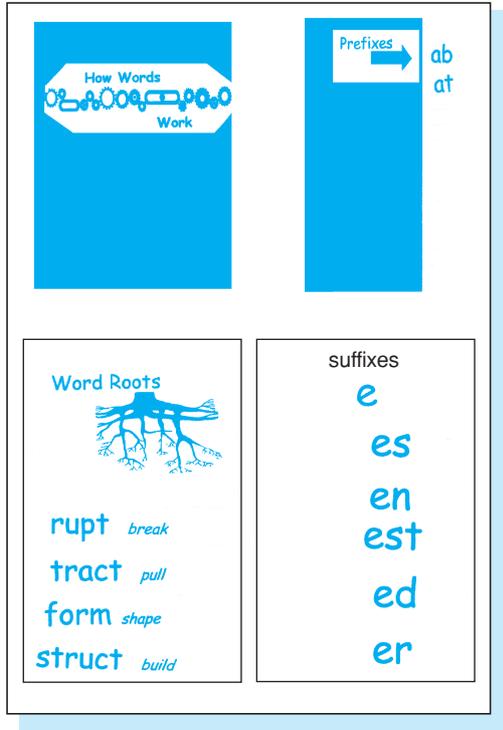


**mobile phone** moving sound

Examples of games and activities used to extend this work (Figs. 15, 16, 17).

As before, a wall chart or individual student note book will be used to collect word roots and affixes learnt (Fig. 15).

**Fig.15**



**Fig.16**

Cut up words and stick in correct place on the table		
prefix	root	suffix
	vest	
	vest	s
	vest	
in	vest	ment
in	vent	
in	vent	or
in	vent	ed
in	vent	ion
in	vent	ing
pre	vent	

Morphological strategies for reading and spelling are mature strategies used by the truly and fully literate adult. Most adults know these things implicitly and are rarely called upon to make their implicit knowledge

explicit. With dyslexic students, as with everything else, we need to help them to analyse and understand the morphological nature of words scientifically and explicitly because like many other things they do not pick them up from experience; when in doubt they will often revert to less mature and less helpful phonic strategies.

**Fig.17**

Word chain/dominoes prefixes and suffixes					
*	in	tend	con	tract	de
port	re	mind	de	tect	in
fect	re	fresh	mis	spell	*

*	sort	ing	port	able	stretch
ed	thick	est	light	en	fresh
er	hope	less	fall	en	quiet
ness	match	es	*		

**Fig.18**

Write the morphemes in the correct place on the table		
prefix	root	suffix
re	ing	e
ive	ject	ile
in	ed	ion
sub	or	pro
con	s	

Now write 15 words

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Imagine trying to use a phonic strategy to read or spell 'interrupted': 'i..n..t..e..r.....' The sound:symbol code will not prove useful and the memory load is great even for those without dyslexic or literacy problems. For spelling, perpetual worries like, 'Do I need one r or two?' are answered by knowing that the prefix ends with r and the word root begins with r. This knowledge nullifies the question and brings some confidence and certainty to

the hitherto slippery world of words.

Don't be put off from using this approach by feeling that you do not know or understand enough about morphology or etymology yourself. View it and explain it as a voyage of discovery which you and your students make together. Begin to keep a set of index cards or computer files yourself and you will be surprised at how engrossing and addictive it becomes.

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**Fig.19**

Split the words	re fresh
	un born
	spending
	lightest
	depressing
	hopeless
	unhappy
	refillable
Write the word sums	
friendly =	..... + .....
misspelling =	..... +..... +.....
quietly =	..... +.....
reminded =	..... +.....
loveable =	..... +.....
freshness =	..... +.....

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