

# Multisensory Activities to Teach Reading Skills

Minnesota Literacy Council – Summer Reads 2015



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## **A little bit about my experience and me**

This summer I worked as a Summer Reads AmeriCorps VISTA. My site was at Lake Harriet Lower School, through the Minneapolis Public Schools Summer School program. I tutored students grades K-3 in multiple classrooms four days a week. Many of the students were English Language Learners, mainly Hispanic and Somali. I have worked in the Minneapolis school district for the past seven years as an educator of children with special needs. I am currently in school at Augsburg College pursuing my teaching license in special education.

I have had the privilege of working with some amazing teachers who understand that not all children learn the same. Children with special needs are not the only ones to benefit from multisensory teaching techniques. Many special education teachers do use these techniques because their students learn a little differently. They need to develop more brain pathways to learning. They need more repetition. They may learn at a different pace. I have learned by watching these amazing teachers, teaching children with special needs just takes a little more patience and a lot of creativity.

## **Why I became interested in multisensory learning**

Most teaching curriculums only cater to the auditory-visual learner. However, for some students, it is not natural for them to learn this way. They need to move more or learn through tactile projects. These same students that struggle so much to read, write, learn and understand, have so many gifts they don't see. They don't see how gifted an artist they are or how well they comprehend oral language. They don't see how well they dance or how intricately they build towers out of blocks.

In my special education classroom, I work with students of all levels of functioning. What they all have in common though is that they all are unique learners. Many of my students are tactile learners. Many have sensory integration disorders. Many have hearing and vision impairments, as well as cognitive impairments. Multi-sensory learning interests me because without it, many of the students I work with are always at a disadvantage because they learn differently. But they do learn.

My past experience in the education field led me to pursue further research in the area of multisensory teaching instruction this summer. I wanted focus my time with the students I tutored on multisensory learning. One, to see how effective it was for teaching reading to young elementary students, especially in terms of sight word recognition. Secondly, because I knew I could have a lot of fun with my students doing it.

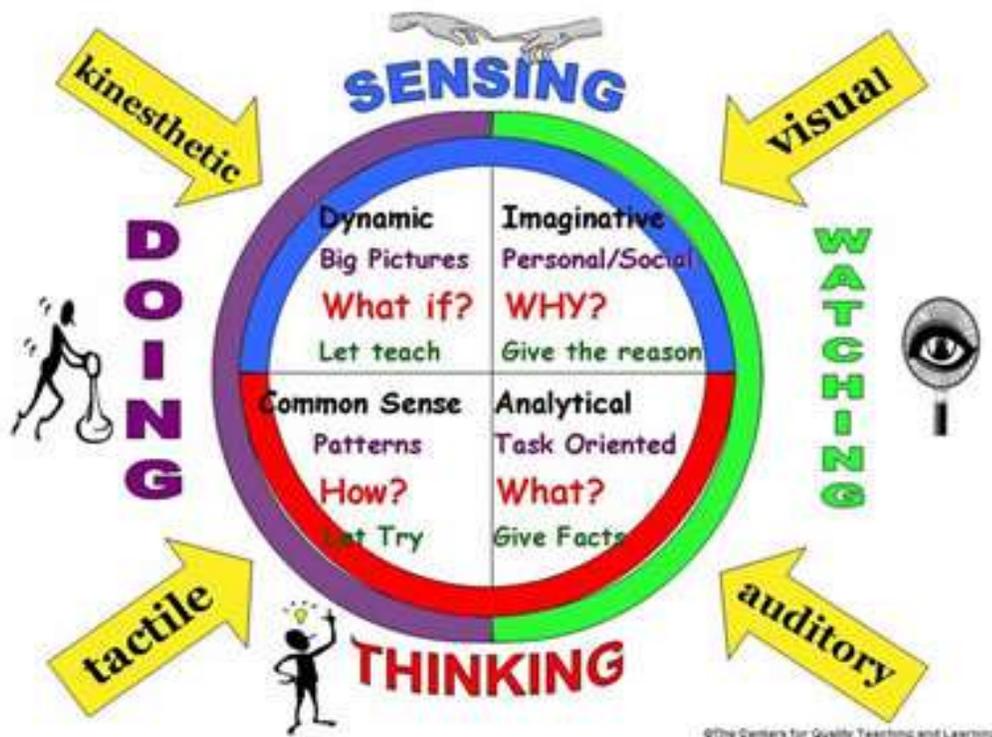
Over the summer, I have worked with children of all ages, ethnicities and skill levels. My focus with my students has been on using multi-sensory techniques to teach reading skills and sight word recognition. Although most of these techniques are geared towards tactile/kinesthetic and auditory visual

learning, I have included other senses, such as taste, smell and proprioception. These techniques not only benefit students with special needs. They are for all students.

~Becca Hoisington, Summer Reads VISTA member 2015

## What is multisensory learning?

- ❖ It involves the use of our senses. It focuses primarily on using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile elements.
- ❖ It is taught incorporating all senses into the learning process to activate different parts of the brain simultaneously, enhancing memory and the learning of written language.
- ❖ It helps learners discover what learning style fits them best.
- ❖ It provides more ways for understanding new information, more ways to remember it and more ways to recall it later.



## Who benefits from multisensory learning?

### ❖ Everyone

- We learn with our whole body. We have a multisensory brain.
- We all have different learning styles.

### ❖ People with learning disabilities

Students with dyslexia have trouble with language skills involving speech sound (phonological) and print (orthographic) processing and in building pathways that connect speech with print.



### ❖ People with sensory integration challenges

Children with sensory integration challenges sense information normally but have difficulty perceiving and processing that information because it is analyzed in their brains in a different way.

### ❖ Young children

In order for a child to be able to sit still, pay attention, and visually remember the shapes of letters and numbers, the child first needs to have developed his or her proprioceptive system, a sense of the body in space. (kinesthetic, proprioception).

## How effective are multisensory techniques for teaching reading strategies?

❖ **Past research:** Here are two very successful approaches to multisensory strategies that have been around for decades. Please check out these websites for further details.

➤ Orton Gilliam Based Approach-A multisensory reading instruction approach geared for students with disabilities.  
<https://www.orton-gillingham.com/>

➤ Montessori Education-A successful child-centered education program used in early childhood, private and public schools.  
<http://amshq.org/Montessori-Education/Introduction-to-Montessori>

### ❖ **My experience with Summer Reads**

This summer I was able to see improvements in both sight word recognition and reading fluency in the majority of students. This was a combination on the part of the teachers, myself and of course the students' hard work. This is not a formal study. I saw changes in pre- and posttest scores in the areas of sight word recognition and fluency. I don't know if these students were able to retain the information or what other factors influenced their learning.

Three 1<sup>st</sup> grade girls, all English language learners, I worked with all had beginning sight word scores in the lows 30s out of 71 sight words. When I retested them, one student scored 68 and the other two scored in the seventies. We would work in a very concrete manner on a difficult sight word that stumped them all. For example, the word "write" came up a number of

times. We built it in playdough. We painted it. We chanted it. We traced it. We wrote it. We recited it. When they were all retested on that word they said it very proudly. I saw that look on their faces many times and on many of the other students' faces. They were recalling something. They had formed mental pictures of some sort that helped them recall those words that they were accessing at those moments. What was also encouraging to me was that they were transferring these sight words to their reading. They were also showing general improvement in their vocabulary and reading scores in their summer school classes.

Many of the students said coming to their tutoring sessions was their favorite part of summer school. Although these students were learning many basic reading skills, they were having fun doing it. As an educator and future licensed teacher, I could not ask for a better outcome than that.

# Learning Types and Activities

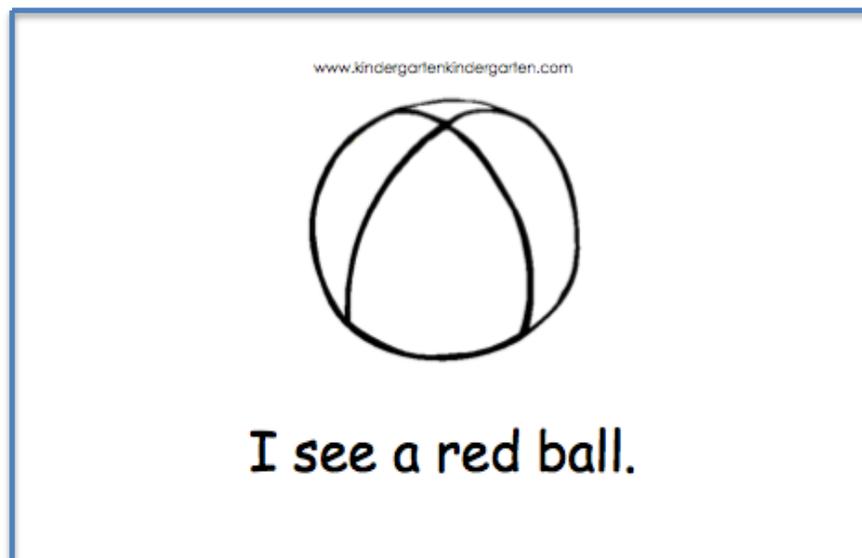
**Visual-spatial**-A visual learner learns best by using their eyes to see information. They learn by seeing words in printed form or by using graphics and pictures, observing real life, and other visual aid.

## Activities focused on visual learning

**Printable books:** Students read short books emphasizing sight words, word families, and short/long vowels. Students underlined with marker the focus words such as all the short “a” words, etc. For more great book ideas and these printable books checkout:

<http://www.kindergartenkindergarten.com/books/>.

I like printable books because students can color, draw, write and underline in them. Reading becomes more of an active activity for the students.



Here is an example of a printed book I used with a student. This student had never read a book before. He knew these three sight words. I had him tell me which color was red and underline the word red. He knew what a ball was by the picture. He could read the whole book. Each page had different colors. He colored it and read it to his teacher. He was so proud of himself for reading his first book. It is a simple concept.

I gave another student a book called, "I Am an Artist". He loved to draw. He could illustrate part of the book as he read it.

### **Hidden sight word coloring/sight word**

**mosaic:** This is similar to color by number. Students begin to visualize the sight word with the color. Printable sight word coloring sheets can be found on [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). A sight word mosaic is an abstract design that is colored by sight word. Students make squiggles, lines and shapes. Sight words are written in between the shapes. I found this much more fun. Students can design their own mosaic and you can target more sight words. I found this and similar ideas at [www.thisreadingmama.com](http://www.thisreadingmama.com). This activity helps students connect the word with the colors visually. It is also a very tactile focused activity.

**Flashcards with identifying pictures:** Children learn with repetition. Flashcards provide repetition. That being said, flashcards don't have to be boring. I played several games with sight word flashcards this summer with my students they loved. Including BANG.

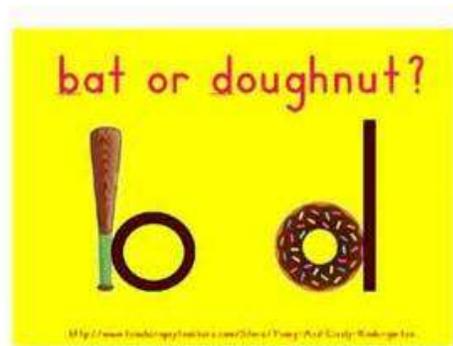
Here is a link to that game:

[www.canteach.ca/elementary/beginning11.html](http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/beginning11.html)

If children cannot create or form mental pictures while reading, they are forced to memorize the words they see. (visual). Flashcards with pictures associated with letters provide a visual cue.

Often we see alphabet flashcards with pictures that start with the letter, “F or fox”. Any flashcards are helpful with pictures. However, when a letter can become a picture, students remember it better. For example, the letter “S” can easily become a picture of a snake. One student I tutored with dyslexia had difficulty distinguishing “b” and “d”.

I used illustration of a “bat and ball” shaped “b” and a “drum and drumstick” or “donut” shaped “d” as one method to help him visualize the difference. I also had him work through a short story with many “b” and “d” words. In one color I had him underline “b”s and in another “d”s. I had him compare the illustrations to the letters he underlined. “B” and “d” reversal is common not only in dyslexia. It is common in all young children.



Here is a cute example of a picture of the letter “y”

## **Other visual letter recognition strategies:**

- ❖ Letter sorts: Have students sort letters by categories. This can be done on paper or with manipulatives (letters with tails vs. no tails, circles vs. no circles, dots vs. no dots.
- ❖ Have students watch what they look like when saying letters in the mirror. What letters make an “O” shape of their mouths? What do their tongues do when then make a “sh” or a “th” sound? This makes them laugh. Especially if you do it with them.

**Auditory Learners-** An auditory learner is someone who learns best by listening and talking. They learn reading by listening to someone present information orally and by being allowed to discuss and ask questions.

### **Activities focused on auditory learning**

**Rhyming/making up words with word families:** Using a white board or a word building kit students take a word family sound such as “at” and make a list of real and silly words. (cat, bat, dat, jat) Students like to make silly words and they still learn the same concepts.

**Read Alouds:** “Literacy does not depend upon reading text in books. This point just can't be emphasized enough with dyslexic learners, so here it is again: Literacy does not depend upon reading text in books.”

[www.dyslexia-reading-well.com/multisensory-learning](http://www.dyslexia-reading-well.com/multisensory-learning)

I had a student with learning disabilities. I would read chapter books to him everyday. We talked about books. He listened and comprehended very well. He was nine and at a kindergarten reading level. For many students, read alouds are a great way to teach comprehension and even vocabulary. Especially, for students who do not read written word well. As a tutor, I read to all age students. I found it just as important to read to older children. Many older kids love to have chapter books read to them.

**Phonemic awareness:** Phonemic awareness is verbal and auditory, not written, and prepares children for reading print. Segmenting and blending sounds to make words can be played around with in many ways. I had students bounce or throw a ball for each letter sound, jump or clap. They liked the ball best.

I had students make exaggerated sounds to blend sounds together or for letter sounds. The sillier the sounds, the better. Stretchy bands can be used as a manipulative tool to stretch out sounds and then blend them together. When the student pulls the band back in, the sounds are said more quickly and clearly make a word. Several more good examples of ways to work with phonetics can be found at [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com) under the category “phonemic awareness activities”.

**Chanting:** A teacher I worked with in the past always chanted a word several times after a student learned it. Every time I worked on a word with a student I would say, “What was that word again?” about three times and my students would say it a little louder every time. It always seemed to reinforce the new words just a little bit more.

**Tactile Learners:** Tactile learners learn best through their sense of touch, such as using their hands and fingers. They learn best by writing, drawing, and using hands-on manipulatives.

## Activities focused on Tactile Learning

**Playdough:** Students create sight words or letters with play dough. For younger students I recommend a play dough mat with letters already outlined. I used our most difficult sight words and wrote them on a white board. Students had to make the word with playdough and guess the word. This would work well with word families or blending letters as you can manipulate and change one letter. You can also physically manipulate play dough to “squish sounds together, separate them or take away a silent letter.

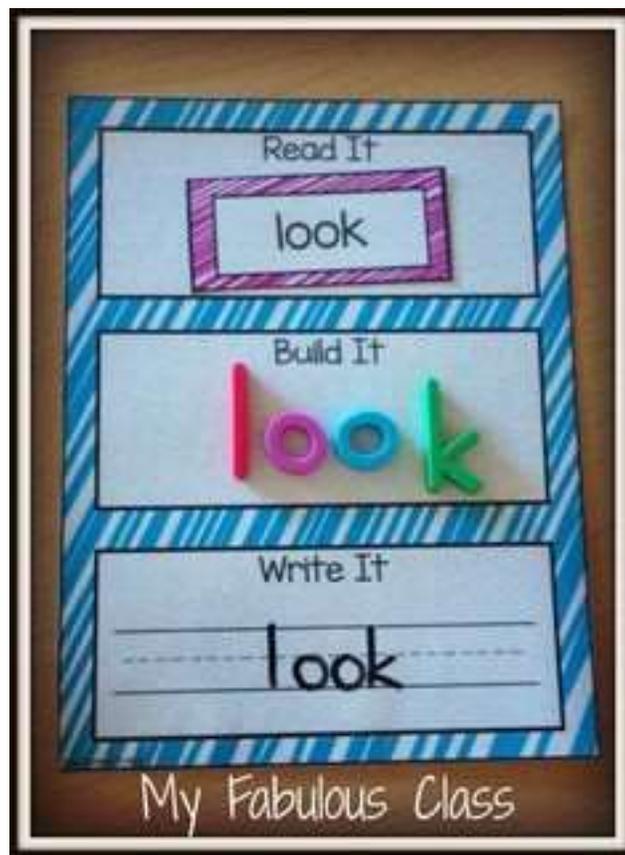
One example of how playdough can be manipulated to help students understand difficult concepts is with silent letters. When I was working with students this summer on sight words involving a silent “W” I had students create a word with a silent “W” (write) and squished up to “W” to illustrate that we don’t sound that out.



**Word building kits:** This can either be with magnetic letters or scrabble pieces. The kids liked the colorful letters. I also had a container you can find at Target with three compartments in one section, two in another and a middle section. When using the word building kit for compound words and simple three letter blends I used the compartments. The students loved the word building kit.



**Read it, Write it, Build it:** I used this technique with a student with a learning disability in particular. However, it can be used with anyone. It is a good multisensory technique. It is exactly as it says. Works well with sight words.



**Using Wikki Sticks to build words/letters:** Similar concept as play dough.

**Sandpaper letters:** These are tracing letters made of sandpaper. Students use their finger to trace the letters. The students retain a tactile memory of the feel of the letters. This

is a well-established Montessori technique. Here is a template to create your own. [www.montessorimom.com/sandpaper-letters](http://www.montessorimom.com/sandpaper-letters)

## Writing letters and sight words in the:

- ❖ Sand
- ❖ Shaving cream
- ❖ Air (learning disability teaching technique)
- ❖ Salt



Here is an example of a sand writing activity. You can also put colorful designs underneath or use colorful sand.

**Hidden sight word painting:** Prior to meeting with students write sight words in white crayon on white paper. Students paint over words with watercolor. As they paint the sight words appear. When I did this with students, they had a contest to see who could paint over all the sight words and read them all first.

**Kinesthetic learners:** Kinesthetic learners learn best through movement of their large or gross motor muscles. They take in information best while moving and doing, being involved in projects, role playing, learning while standing up and engaging in real life activities.

## **Activities involving Kinesthetic Learning**

**Sight word jump:** Write sight words on post it notes and put them up high on the wall. Students jump for the word when it is called out. Students jump for the word when it is called out. Check out [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com) for more “jumping” ideas.

**Race Car blending:** Phonemic awareness activity using a toy car to drive across the letters written spaced across a racetrack to make a word. Students sound out the letters as they drive across it. When students drive slowly they sound out the letters very slowly and segment them. When they zoom by they say the word clearly, loudly and quickly. My students liked this activity. They liked to play with the speed of the letter sounds with the speed of the car. Here is a template available through [www.teacherspayteachers.com](http://www.teacherspayteachers.com). It would be easy to create your own though.

**Sight word towers:** Write sight words on red solo cups. Ask students to read the words on the cup. If they read it correctly they can add it to their tower. If they miss the word, they have to put the cup to the side. This was a favorite of students. After they built their towers, they liked to run a car into them and watch them crash down.



**Letter sound blending puzzles:** These are three letter word segmented puzzles students put together. Each piece was a separate letter sound. When put together, it made the word and corresponding picture. I found these at Target for \$3.00 in the dollar section. You can also make your own. I found this free download

[www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Puzzles-1173760](http://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Puzzles-1173760)

Here is another idea I found. You can laminate and add magnets to the back of the puzzle pieces. Mix up all the puzzle pieces on a magnet board, have the students put them all together and read the words.

<http://moffattgirls.blogspot.com/2014/01/ready2read-level-1-unit-1again.html>

**Activities involving taste and smell:** Most multisensory activities do not involve these senses. However, all senses activate different memories and create more opportunities for learning.

### **Taste**

- ❖ Using alphabet cheese it's to spell words in place of letters in word building kit. If students read the words correctly they can eat the word.
- ❖ Find foods that start with particular letters of the alphabet you're working. For example: p is for pineapple, pumpkins, pepperoni pizza, or pancakes

### **Smell**

- ❖ Writing letters with a mixer of glue and dry jello mix.

- ❖ Find smells that start with particular letters of the alphabet

## **Activities involving proprioception**

Proprioception is about knowing where your body is in space and knowing how to get around your environment safely. The proprioceptive system is developed and strengthened in children by having them do large and small physical movements, especially movements where they experience pressure, using their fingers, hands, arms, trunks, legs, and feet. Any activity that helps children move in this way is incorporating this sense.

Children with learning disabilities often struggle with this. Proprioception has to do with spatial orientation. Some children have difficulties imprinting and remembering the correct spatial orientations of letters and numbers. The letters b, d, p, and g are especially difficult. When we are allowing young students to move, fidget, even fall off their chairs sometimes, we are allowing them to become more aware of their own bodies. During the time I worked with my students, I allowed some wiggling as long as we did not lose focus. If we could not find our focus, it usually meant we needed to move on to another activity. It didn't mean we needed to stop working. It did mean the student needed to move.

## Conclusion

I wanted to conclude with a few final thoughts on my experiences this summer and on this project in particular. First of all, although these activities have been separated into learning style/senses categories, they are not meant to be looked at separately. Some students respond better to kinesthetic approaches to learning. That doesn't mean I didn't use visual and auditory approaches as well. Many of the activities I have in certain categories, for example "Read it, Build it, Write it", can actually be put into all categories. We might have learning styles that work better for us than others. That doesn't change the fact that we have multisensory brains.

Secondly, what I learned from my experience this summer is to pay attention to what a student is telling you, verbally and nonverbally. I started to recognize when an activity I did was not working. It didn't mean it was a bad activity. It might not have been right for the student or it might not have been the right time.

Third, as an educator and a future teacher, I know how many ideas are floating out there. I took several ideas from past teachers, blogs, Pinterest, and teaching websites. I modified them. I tried them out. I tweaked them based on how the students responded. Teaching children is like becoming a writer. You have to produce several rough drafts before you get good. Teachers become good teachers by trying, failing and trying something else.

## Helpful Websites

- [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)
- [www.heidisongs.blogspot.com](http://www.heidisongs.blogspot.com)
- [www.education.com](http://www.education.com)
- [www.teachhub.com](http://www.teachhub.com)
- [www.notimeforflashcards.com](http://www.notimeforflashcards.com)
- [www.thisreadingmama.com](http://www.thisreadingmama.com)
- [www.teacherspayteachers.com](http://www.teacherspayteachers.com)

## Pictures Cited (in order)

[www.pixbay.com](http://www.pixbay.com)

[www.larcschool.com](http://www.larcschool.com)

[www.ontheroadtobecomingascholar.blogspot.com](http://www.ontheroadtobecomingascholar.blogspot.com)

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