



Numbers and Letters, Stand Still! is an excerpt from *What About Me? Strategies for Teaching Misunderstood Learners* by Christopher Lee and Rosemary Jackson.  
© 2001 by Christopher Lee and Rosemary Jackson.

All rights reserved. No part of this material from *What About Me?* may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

## Two

---

### *Numbers and Letters, Stand Still!*

#### **Up and Over**

*Up and Over  
And in-between,  
The Letters,  
Words,  
Paragraphs  
Wash Over Me.  
Like a thunderstorm  
In Georgia on a summer afternoon Full  
of Sound  
and  
Fury  
I am drenched  
and overwhelmed  
I search the puddles  
(now muddy)  
I sift and sort  
and wash clean the concepts.  
I then send these thoughts  
to You.  
I struggle to be understood  
by you  
Do you understand?  
I am now Clear as Mud.*

—Carolyn Phillips

*What About Me?*

There is a specific feeling I have about letters, words, and numbers. Perhaps the description that best fits my feelings would be “chaotic emptiness.” The chaotic part is that the symbols swirl around in my head, never sticking in one place long enough for my mind to lock onto them; the emptiness part is that they have no meaning or soul. For years I was fascinated about why my mother would stay up late at night and read, not to mention her ability to get lost within her books. It seemed to me that everywhere I turned, people were entranced with the written word—a government conspiracy, I was sure. The bus stations, airports, supermarkets, libraries, streets . . . everywhere I looked was the written word. It just didn’t make sense to me why—or better yet, how—anyone could fall in love with written language. I hated it! It invaded my life in every area and caused me to develop an intense dislike of school from the beginning. My strongest feelings of chaotic emptiness are attached to years of homework rituals.

---

I rub my eyes as I flip open my fifth grade social studies book. I hate this book! It looks and feels like a tree sandwich, sliced thick on the outside and extra thin on the inside. I have many times felt sorry for the trees that were sacrificed for all the social studies books that have been wasted on me, always shadowing me. I can’t seem to lose this sandwich. It’s in my locker, on my back, at my desk . . . and here at the dining room table. What a terrible thing to do to a tree! Trees are meant for climbing to the sky, building forts, carving initials, swinging through the air, and, most importantly, hiding from parents. I guess I don’t get it. Why would anyone want to slice and dice a perfectly good tree for a book? I’m sure this is the same book that I had last year, and even the year before. It’s got to be a trick—a con game. The pile of letters inside the cover has not changed. The only difference year after year is the shiny new cover that displays the “picture of the year,” a picture that lets me know that this book is a social studies book rather than one of its counterparts—history, math, English—or one of those other heavy sandwiches that follow me year after year.

*Numbers and Letters, Stand Still!*

A familiar presence enters the room, hovering, speaking not a word. Our eyes meet . . . a nightly ritual: mom and son, battling it out over homework. However my mom and I have an understanding. By this time in my school career, we have fought every fight and tested each other's limits; she has become a master at finding my hiding places, even the ones in the trees. I glance at the top of the page. Placing my palm on the page, I rub it hard. Up and down, up and down. I imagine how cool it would be to be able to read with the palm of my hand . . . to have all of those menacing letters absorb into my bloodstream to be carried to my brain for dissection and understanding. If only this were a real possibility rather than a fantasy. Instead, I must use my eyeballs to read this text. I must have the weakest eyeballs on this planet! They tire easily and leave me stranded, most often at the beginning of the page. My eyeballs are unlike my legs. You see, I'm the fastest guy in the fifth grade. I can run and run without ever getting tired. I am a champion runner, but a loser when it comes to reading. My legs understand what needs to be done in order to win a race. But my eyeballs get lost trying to perceive the random shotgun blast of letters, numbers, and symbols that come at me off the page.

Closing my eyes to rest, I reopen them to search for the one thing in books that makes sense to me: pictures. Where are they? This page has none. What will I do? Pictures are my guides, leading me through a fantasy world that the letters and words lock me out of. Taking a moment, I flip through the next few pages, hoping to suck out the meaning of this chapter. Pictures of Indians and Pilgrims are scattered across the pages. I look closely at them all, assessing each one, hoping that they will show me the story that is apparently spelled out in ink. But it's another lost cause, another race my eyeballs will lose.

Intuitively, Mom sits down beside me. Without any questions, she begins to read aloud to me, somehow able to make sense of all those ink blobs in front of us. Nine-thirty comes. As I crawl into bed, I take a deep breath and fall into my own pity pit, which is close to overflowing. I am stupid, stupid, stupid! Staring out my window, I lock my eyes on the moon, wishing that my teachers could make those letters and numbers stand still. If they were really good teachers, they would be able to fix my brain.

*What About Me?*

As an adult thinking back to the time in my life when I was a little kid struggling to understand why I could not read, I realize how naïve my beliefs were about myself as well as about my teachers. I was a ten-year-old boy blaming myself and my teachers for my lack of ability to recognize words and comprehend their meaning. I needed the letters and words to stand still on the page. The letters held no meaning for me because I could not attach sounds to most of them. The words undulated on the page like amoebae. Sentences represented a marathon during which I had to constantly stop and start at each individual letter, getting more confused and anxious the farther I read.

I don't remember ever being officially labeled as an "anxious" child. You know, the type of child who tapped his pencil constantly on the desk or broke into hives when a stranger would enter the room. However, as I have grown older I have reexamined the amount of stress and anxiety that I was dealing with as a child growing up with a hidden disability. Everyone has experienced anxiety-causing situations. As a student athlete, I was always under pressure to beat the guy next to me or to make a specific cut-off time. This pressure at times caused me to be anxious. However, in looking back to my childhood, I now know that same feeling I felt on the starting block was with me every day in the classroom. My controlled anxiety was deep within me and never left. It ran as an undercurrent all the time. It traveled with me wherever I went. I obviously had control of my anxiety, but what I realize now is that it fed off me for years without my dealing with it. Reading was one of the major players in my anxiety. Like plaque eating away at teeth and gums, anxiety slowly ate away at what little self-confidence I had at the time. Even though my anxiety did not show on the outside, it would flare up when I was presented with any sort of reading material: books, menus, cards, tests, signs, magazines, comic books, or whatever. The anxiety came from a feeling of failure for not being able to read or comprehend what was placed before me. As my eyes would scan the secret code, letter by letter, I would strain to decipher things. Depending on the day and my state of

mind, my reading ability would fluctuate. In fact, it was a mystery to my teachers why I was able to read relatively well one day and not at all the next. I felt that I read better when I was in a good state of mind. This would happen on a few occasions when the forces of the planets were properly aligned, my friends weren't teasing me, my mom wasn't mad with me and I had placed well in a swimming competition. On those days, I was able to figure out (decode) more words than usual, which led to comprehending my reading material a little better.

### *Decoding*

A learning disability that specifically affects reading and spelling is often referred to as *dyslexia*, a term with which I am all too familiar. Teachers cannot help me or other students with dyslexia break the reading code by using the same techniques they use with other students because we don't perceive the same code as everyone else. Phonics rules and word-attack skills are based on the premise that sounds consistently go with certain letters and that letters are placed in words in certain patterns. I perceive letters, words, and symbols differently than everyone else. My brain is a factory that produces its own secret codes. This factory in my head processes the written word in a chaotic fashion, working in a manner that does not correspond to other student factories. At times I feel that the employees running my factory are from a variety of different countries, each trying to help me perceive the written word in his or her own language.

I have spent many hours trying to understand my reading process. I know that the first stumbling block I encounter is my lack of ability to connect sounds and symbols. This is not caused by poor auditory or visual acuity; my eyesight is fine and my hearing is strong. However, somewhere in my brain I am not able to make the link between certain letters and their sounds. For instance, I confuse four out of the five vowels, meaning that when I see an O, I might say the sound for I or E. Quite often

*What About Me?*

when I see a U, I say the sound for O. The sounds and symbols for E, I, O, and U are interchangeable in my mind. They always have been and probably always will be. At any point in time, my brain may confuse letter sounds and symbols; however, one letter I can always count on misperceiving is R, which my brain does not seem to process at all. This is evident in my speech; any word with an “r” comes out somewhat distorted so that a boy from the South often sounds as if he has a Northern drawl.

The more letters are put together, the more difficult they are to read. People have tried to teach me the rules of phonics, along with vowels and blends and digraphs, and I can be successful at times in applying those rules and reproducing sound combinations. However, when I try to apply what I have learned to attack a word, I am usually unsuccessful, because the individual vowel sounds and combinations change their sounds and forms when they all get together, in most cases making it a guessing game. It’s like a crowded party where all the sounds and faces run together. For example, the word *church* should be easy to sound out according to the sounds and rules of phonics. However, the middle two letters—*ur*—elude me because of my brain’s inability to maintain the connection between the U and its sound, the R and its sound, and the entirely new sound created by the U and R together. It’s much like walking along the shore and looking back to discover that your footprints are vanishing before your eyes. The part of my brain that recognizes groups of letters or words decodes the letters much like the game, “Musical Chairs.” The letters seem to fall into the chairs in a different order every time I look at them. For example, it is often difficult for me to recognize my own name. Sometimes the *s* and the *i* switch places, so that my name comes out as *Chrsitopher*. At other times when I read my name, certain letters are missing, especially ones in the middle, so that my name might read as *Chrtopher* or *Christher* or *Chrtpher*. Christmas is a terribly confusing time of year for me because the word *Christmas* is so similar to *Christopher*. When I was younger, I found it almost impossible to distinguish between

the two. Looking around and seeing my name everywhere, I knew Christmas had to be a very special holiday.

The second part of reading, after one learns to decode the sounds and symbols, is attaching meaning to those words, or comprehension. As one might imagine, it is difficult to comprehend the meaning of words when you can't decode the words themselves. I have been told that one of the keys to comprehension is the ability to predict what is going to happen. Teachers ask questions to help students figure out what they are about to read. The ability to predict appears to be one of my strengths. If I can decode just a few words in a sentence, I can make an educated prediction about what the sentence means. Then I can add the key words from all the sentences together with my intuition and prediction skills to make a pretty good guess about the meaning of a paragraph.

If I could go back and talk to my teachers, I would tell them that making me read aloud did not help my reading ability at all. Having me read aloud focused only on my decoding abilities, which were essentially nonexistent. When allowed to read silently, I developed my own survival skills. In fifth grade, I was a gambler in training. I gambled on the combination of a few key words to give meaning to an entire paragraph, and I counted on luck to help me know when to answer questions in class or keep quiet. I was able to gather some important facts, which I use every day of my life; however, there are big chunks of information that are missing. I know this now because when I go to retrieve information I was supposed to have learned—from history, science, math, and so on—the information is not there. Key words sometimes float to the surface; however, I never seem to be able to recall “the big picture.”

Using the Table of Contents at the beginning of a book is a way to get “the big picture,” and I regularly use that strategy now. However, when I was in school, I never understood the true intention of what the Table of Contents was supposed to do. I made no linkage from the Table of Contents to the rest of the book. To take this a step further, I also didn't understand

*What About Me?*

why the chapters were in the order they were. Every book was a maze of words. I never saw a beginning or ending or understood where I was going in the big scheme of things. It would have been nice to have had an aerial view of the maze I was in. Then the path would have been clearer. Teachers should not assume that what is obvious to them and most other students is obvious to the student with learning disabilities. I did not truly get the importance of the Table of Contents until it was described to me as a kitchen table with dinner courses laid out in a sequential manner. As a child, I must have taken the word *table* literally, not understanding the difference between a table of items and a table at which you eat. I believe I got confused at an early age about why the word *table* was being used in this context. Because I did not understand the difference, I rarely used the Table of Contents in any setting. I now understand that there is a certain order in which the information needs to be presented to me. I understand this because I can visualize the content as the different entrees on a table. Chapter One is the appetizer. Chapter Two is the salad. This is only one example of many concepts I have misunderstood through the years. To this day, I have great difficulty recognizing that words can look the same and sound the same but have two completely different meanings.

I wish my teachers could have spent a day in my head. Teachers have such a love of books that I think they might overuse the written word as a teaching tool. I have trouble remembering any teacher who deviated from the textbook when teaching. I was *afraid* of that book. I needed to be introduced to that book. We needed to shake hands. One of the largest mistakes most of my teachers made was to *assume* that I was on the same page in the book as everyone else. I am not talking about the actual page number, but “place,” in the sense that I was going into the lesson with the same knowledge base as everyone else in the class. It would have been helpful if my teachers had started their lessons in a manner so creative that it would have intrigued all the students, while at the same time

establishing a foundation for students like me. For example, in dealing with history, instead of a teacher having students start by opening the history book to a certain page to begin a lesson, it would have been helpful for my teachers to introduce the chapter in a creative manner that reviewed the time period and laid the foundation for what was to come. One of the most effective ways I got information into my brain with any given subject was to have a good introduction to the material before jumping into it. Just as a runner needs to warm up before starting a run, a student with learning disabilities also needs a warm-up time to prepare for the journey ahead. When developing individual lesson plans, I think it would be helpful for teachers to begin with an “attention-getter” that is designed to draw students’ attention to the lesson, to establish the relevance of the lesson to their lives, and to lay the foundation for the information to come.

It wasn’t until my public speech class in college that I understood the important contributions that Dr. Martin Luther King made to our history. The class was studying his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. I realized quickly that my classmates had much more of a foundation on this important figure than I did. I felt alone in the class. I was frustrated with why I did not know more about Dr. King. How did I miss this important lesson, which I now know is a vital part of history and is addressed throughout the education curriculum? My college professor, as most teachers would, assumed that all of us in the class were “on the same page.” He had no idea that after class, I had to go back and fill in the holes in my Swiss cheese brain before I could start the class assignment. While everyone else was able to immediately begin to analyze the speech, I had to go back and figure out who Martin Luther King was. It amazes me, and saddens me for personal reasons, as to why I got so little out of my academic years while my friends and colleagues were enriched with so much. Sometimes I long to have those years back, and I find myself in the evening staring at the moon wishing that my brain was not made of Swiss cheese.

## *Comprehension*

I wish my teachers had focused on helping me with comprehension instead of decoding. I always felt like I never got past first base in reading. There I stood, watching the game go on around me. Year after year, the books would fly by me. I would see these books as they slid past first base, but I was never able to grab on to them and follow them around the bases. At first base, I could hold the book and look at the pictures and guess what the book was about. At second base, it was my responsibility to make sense of (decode) the squiggles on the pages and try to turn them into words. If I accomplished that successfully, I could then go to third base, where I would get an understanding of what I was reading. The goal of any baseball player (reader) is to make it all the way around the bases to reach home plate—to “own” the book.

I could never get past first base. Because of the way my brain processes information, I could not make sense of the squiggles. This put a barrier between me and third base. I now know that I can get to Base Three, where comprehension takes place, without ever having to touch Base Two. I can take a short cut. If I can run from Base One to Base Three, I have a second chance of catching the book before it passes me by. My goal in the Game of Reading is to *comprehend* what is in front of me, no matter what method I have to use.

For years, my teachers worked hard on teaching me how to decode. I learned from them that reading was figuring out the words. It wasn't until my English 102 class during my sophomore year in college that I reached third base and started to understand what reading was all about. The teacher's name was Amelia Davis-Horne, and she was effective because she made the words come alive. She gave life to the pages in front of me. In that class, it didn't matter that the words did not stand still. What mattered was that, for the first time, the words made sense. Although there were pages of reading requirements, the class was never about reading; it was about

meaning—transporting ourselves from the classroom right into the story.

That English 102 class was the start of the development of my own comprehension action plan. Ms. Davis-Horne taught me the basics. She made first base a great place to be. Her introductions to the stories brought instant interest, even to subjects that had previously held little interest for me. The story could be about bird watching—when I was nineteen, I could not imagine anything more boring—and she would be able to make it interesting. This teacher would be able to transport me into the mind of a bird watcher. She did this by setting the stage. She used whatever props she needed in order to entice us. If that meant bringing in a bird, she brought in a bird. She was a master at developing scenery. Her podium became a stage that would change story by story. She used videos when we were to read anything about historic events. Intertwined throughout the stories, she would often play music. The music was never really connected to the plot of the stories but was used to create a mood. If it was a sad story, we might hear some mournful music from Chopin, while Beethoven played for us to drive home a powerful point. Role playing was another one of her favorite teaching strategies. She turned students into actors who would become characters in a scene. Even the most complex material would come clear to me. For the first time, I was able to talk intelligently about these stories. Because she immersed my mind totally in the story, I wanted to get involved—which is the key to teaching children to read.

If teachers focus on comprehension, students are going to *want* to read. To develop my own reading comprehension action plan, I have analyzed what helps me comprehend best. I have also traveled across the country and listened to children who are like me. There are basic things that I hear that work for other students struggling to understand the written word, and from those children as well as from adults like me who still struggle to read, I would like to pass along the following suggestions to teachers.

*What About Me?*

### **Don't Assume the Obvious**

Children are always asking questions: What are we having for dinner? When are we going to Six Flags? How many days till Christmas? Having answers to these questions is essential for children to organize their day-to-day lives and helps them to anticipate and prepare for what is to come. Children naturally want to know what to expect. Use this same philosophy to start off every lesson. For instance, start by going to the Table of Contents and training your students to do this. This will help orient the students to where they are in the book, remind them of what they have already studied, and show them where they are going. Most students with learning disabilities have the ability to understand the structure of their day. They should be able to comprehend the gist of what they are studying, even if they can't comprehend the words in every passage. Don't assume that what is obvious to you and most other students is also obvious to the student with learning disabilities. The Table of Contents is, in fact, made up of words!

### **Alive and Kicking: Make New Vocabulary Words Come Alive**

Always introduce new vocabulary words in an interesting manner, and then directly link them to where they are placed in the book. It is important to remember that *you* are responsible for making the words come alive. Don't assume that your students will automatically recognize the word when they meet it in the passage. Help them out by giving them colored transparent tape to lay over the new words in their books or some other medium that will help pull out the words from the passage. This will help make the connection and give life to the passage.

### **Picture Reading**

It would have been helpful for me to have a visual outline of the stories and books that teachers wanted me to read as a child. One of the most effective ways for me to comprehend "the big

picture” of anything I read is to use a graphic organizer. Although I have difficulty decoding symbols, my brain recognizes visual diagrams and pictures with ease. These pictures are processed as a unified whole, a complete thought, whereas letters, words, and numbers are fragmented into puzzle pieces in my brain. For example, when I see a picture of a cake, it stays with me. I recognize it immediately and attach meaning to it. When I see the word *cake*—c/a/k/e—I often fail to recognize it, because the letters are like pieces of a recipe that have been torn apart and thrown at me. They offer little meaning, and they are clouded with negative feelings. Graphic organizers use pictures and diagrams to illustrate concepts and organize text into a sequence that is easy for me to store and retrieve.

I started using graphic organizers when I was in college, although I had no idea that was what they were called. I was allowed to substitute a series of selected courses in place of my foreign language requirements. Ironically, the selected courses were all literature courses offered by the English department. (A lot of good that did! The printed word, even written in English, is, at times, foreign to me.) Having taken a total of six literature courses, it was as if I had minored in a foreign language. However, it was through these courses that I perfected my use of graphic organizers to comprehend large amounts of complex reading material. In one year, I had to read the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and Dante’s *The Inferno*. It was the first time I had truly “tasted” literature and was exposed to the feeling of what knowledge was all about. I finally understood why my mother stayed up night after night reading book after book. Through these adventures, a new world opened. Even though I rarely spoke in class discussions of these assignments, my mind was bursting with activity. I started visualizing myself on the journeys taken by the heroes of these stories. With Rosemary Jackson, I developed my own reading style. At first nothing would stick, whether I had Rosemary read the stories aloud to me or whether I was listening to them on tape or attempting to read them myself. It took

### *What About Me?*

another step to achieve comprehension and retention. It all started with a doodle that Rosemary drew in an effort to explain a piece of the story to me. However, it ended with the pencil in my hand, diagramming the story in pictures as she read to me. One of my better doodles was Odysseus's confrontation with the Cyclops, which I'm sure haunted Rosemary's nightmares that evening. I spared no red ink on the gory details and passed the discussion test a few weeks later with red ink in hand. The graphic organizer was a perfect fit for me. It allowed me a way of getting the information out of the book and into my mind.

I think there are two types of students who might use graphic organizers for reading. Some students will pick up the technique naturally, while other students may need to be taken through the steps of how to use this technique effectively. Teachers can use graphic organizers with the entire class by diagramming the reading material with words and pictures while simultaneously talking through the process.

There are books available with preconceived graphic organizers especially designed for specific types of reading material, such as biographies, sequential events, comparison and contrast, and so forth. There is also software available that allows you to create your own computer-generated organizer. For some students, this process comes naturally, and the best thing is to give these students a pad of paper and turn them loose to create their own organizers. Some helpful tips for using graphic organizers to help improve reading comprehension in students with learning disabilities include the following:

- Show examples of the various looks an organizer can have so students will understand that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to complete them.
- Make sure your students are on the right track as they progress through the reading material. Don't allow them to complete the organizer incorrectly; communicate with them throughout the process.

- Let your students be natural with the designs they come up with: boxes, circles, pictures—they should be encouraged to use whatever works.
- Be particularly careful with timelines and other sequenced information; check often to be sure that students correctly sequence a series of events. It should not matter whether the sequence goes from top to bottom, bottom to top, right to left, left to right, or even diagonally across the page as long as the events are placed in the correct sequence from the starting point.
- Have students try out different mediums for creating their graphic organizers, such as lined paper, blank paper, colored paper, manipulative objects, colored pencils, crayons, markers, computers, and so on. Often, the farther away one gets from traditional paper and pencil, the more memorable and meaningful the final product will be.

### **Primal Teaching: Tap into Your Students' Emotions**

One reading comprehension strategy that has always worked for me is my teachers' abilities to tap into my emotions. This strategy is easier said than done. As a student, I always carried around deep frustration, anxiety, and anger. The most effective teachers were the ones who were able to use my emotions to tie me into the context of whatever we were reading. There are several core characteristics that many students with learning disabilities share: a basic lack of self-worth, the feeling that everyone is watching you, and a feeling that you're going to get caught at "faking it." Teachers can draw on these emotions to make their students feel passionate about reading. Books that I remember from my high school years are books that made an emotional impact on me. For some reason, my connection with the book overrode my disability. A good example of this is from high school, when I sat through the class-reading of a difficult book: *A Tale of Two Cities*. I was able to relate personally to the

*What About Me?*

characters in the book, particularly Madam DeFarge. At that time in my life, I was very angry and really involved in manipulating myself through the education system. I identified with the character of Madam DeFarge because she was strong and was not going to let anyone beat her. I know that my English teacher at that time had no idea that she had tapped into a unique strategy that worked for me, but, to this day, the few books I do remember are the ones that I am in some way emotionally connected to. Most of my areas of difficulty are tied to the part of my brain that's in charge of language; therefore, comprehension strategies that work the best come when that part of my brain is bypassed and the most primal part, the emotional part, is stimulated.

### **Books on Tape: Have Students Listen to Good Reading**

Students with dyslexia have difficulty decoding symbols, in part, because the symbols don't "stick" to the page. One of the most effective reading strategies I have ever used is one that combines visual and auditory input. Books on tape have given me a new perspective on life. Through the use of this medium I have been able to go places that I was not capable of going before. It started as a survival skill. Due to the large amount of required reading I had in college, I was unable to keep up with the work. Something had to be done, so we began to order my textbooks on tape. For the first time that I could remember, I actually began to keep up with and understand my reading assignments. From talking with teachers and students, I am aware that people know about books on tape but typically view them as an accommodation rather than a reading-improvement strategy, and thus, de-emphasize the use of taped texts. This assumption is a mistake. I strongly believe that books on tape should be implemented on a daily basis with students who have difficulty with reading for three major reasons: (1) The combination of audio and visual cues combines two modalities for better comprehension, (2) following the text while listen-

ing helps your eyes learn to track the words more smoothly, and (3) the process builds better word recognition.

Multisensory learning is one of the best techniques for working with students who have processing deficits. Using books on tape while following along in a text involves both sight and hearing. I often follow the line of words with my finger or a ruler, adding a third modality. Hearing, seeing, and touching the words at the same time immediately heightens the clarity. I can almost feel the different parts of my brain being stimulated. I began using books on tape with a clunky, bright yellow, four-track tape recorder especially designed for people who are blind or visually impaired, but I have now upgraded to a sporty Walkman model. This allows me to add a fourth modality—movement, which is how I've always learned best. By reading, listening, feeling, and moving, my brain decodes the words much more efficiently, which increases my comprehension tremendously.

To my surprise, another benefit that arose from using books on tape was the development of the muscles in my eyes. No longer do I read with the same stopping and starting motion that plagued me for years. From years of hearing and following smooth reading, my eyes now transition smoothly from letter to letter and word to word.

Finally, I now recognize more words when reading on my own. It is hard for me to quantify the number of words I now recognize compared to those I knew before I started using books on tape; however, my confidence about smaller words, such as *there*, *was*, *has*, and so forth, has increased. Seeing, hearing, and touching the words over and over has improved my ability to decode on my own.

I now use books on tape throughout every part of my life, whether in school, in work, or in the social realm. Without this tool, it would be very difficult for me to access the information from magazines and books that is available to everyone around me. I wish that books on tape had been available to me as a child. As an adult, it is an invaluable tool.

## **Colored Transparencies**

Another mechanism that I have found very effective for myself and others who have difficulty decoding letters, symbols, and words is the use of colored transparency sheets. The easiest way for me to explain why this technique works is that it helps pull the reading material out from the page, giving it a type of three-dimensional effect. The scientific explanation is that colors can sometimes slow the letters and words from reaching the brain just enough to give the dyslexic brain a little more time to process the information. I have found it very helpful to use colored transparency overlays when I am reading a book or any other document from which I need to draw important details. I have experimented with several types of colors and have found that blue, gray, yellow, and green are the most effective for me. I have found that the red is ineffective, and, in fact, tends to make decoding more difficult. When I use this technique, it really does feel like the information I am trying to decode is slowed down by the colors, allowing my brain to process the information more efficiently. Cutting the transparency sheet into a small rectangular marker and placing it on the page to use as a guide is also helpful. I have seen some students tape the strips onto hand-made cardboard rulers so that when the ruler is placed over the sentence to be read, the transparency highlights the words.

Colored transparencies do not work for everyone, and, depending on the reading disability, may or may not be effective. I would suggest trying several colors before choosing one. There are two good sources of transparencies. Office or school supply stores will usually carry the page-length transparency sheets. A second source is your local high school or community theater, which uses transparency strips, called gel paper, for stage lighting. In fact, drama departments will sometimes have sample books from which they order. These sample books contain over two hundred colors of ready-made strips that make wonderful markers.

### **Magnifying Aids**

Even though I have good eyesight, an effective way for my brain to get information from a page of squiggles is by using magnifying aids. There are several types of magnifying aids on the market. Most are developed for senior citizens or people with visual impairments. One of the most effective is the magnifying page, which is like a sheet of paper that is transparent to the eye and has the effect of a magnifying glass. Placing the magnifying sheet over a paragraph helps enlarge the print and makes it easier to read the text. If this strategy is helpful, there are other magnifying devices that use light and distance to help the reader. It is important to remember that learning disabilities are perceptual disabilities and not connected to physical problems with the eyes; however, some aides designed for individuals with visual impairments can be helpful in aiding the brain to perceive. Of course, enlarging print is a popular accommodation; however, a low-cost magnifying sheet is portable, unobtrusive, and available to almost any reading situation. To locate these magnifying aides, contact an independent-living vendor for a catalog (see the Appendix).

### **Highlighters and Highlighting Tape**

I use highlighters to help me decipher words that look similar and need emphasis. For instance, due to the way my brain processes symbols, I cannot distinguish between similar words. When reading a passage, I have trouble distinguishing between *has* and *was*, *been* and *done*, *there* and *they*, and numerous other pairs of words. Numbers are just as difficult. Nines and sixes, threes and eights, and twos and fives consistently elude me. Using colored highlighters or colored highlighter tape, I mark the similar words in different colors so that I know they are different words when I reach them. I use this strategy when I am reading something important, in which the details have to be clear.

In addition to highlighting similar words, I have at times made myself a definition chart to use while reading. For in-

### *What About Me?*

stance, when I took biology in college, many of the words started with the prefix *phy-* and looked similar. I had difficulty with not only decoding the words, but also remembering their meanings. Rosemary would often write the words and definitions at the top of the page and then select colors to highlight each one so that when I encountered that word in the passage, I could refer to the chart. Eventually, I would connect the color to the word and definition and use the chart less and less.

Although this is a great study technique, the public schools usually frown upon letting students highlight books or write in their margins. Students with learning disabilities may need to purchase their textbooks so they can use the strategies they need to use; however, the recent invention of highlighter tape is a removable alternative to permanent highlighter pens. Students can use the tape as study aids just as they would use highlighter pens. The tape is also handy for teachers who may want to preview chapters and highlight the important information before students take them home to read. This helps students learn how to use highlighters to pull out only the most important information.

### *Conclusion*

If I had only known as a child what I now know about reading, my life would have been a little easier. As an adult with a reading disability, I have learned how to use effective strategies and technology that I have discovered on my own. I now know the joy of literature. Whether I read a book or listen to it on tape, my life is enriched by the written word. I've also learned that there is no magic pill to correct my reading disability. It follows me around, never leaving my side, whether I am faced with reading a menu, a birthday card, or a road sign. To be effective, strategies must be able to follow me through these different environments. The most effective strategies are the ones that are portable and nonintrusive. It is my experience that when these strategies become a habit in my day-to-day life, I read

*Numbers and Letters, Stand Still!*

more effectively and efficiently. Reading becomes a habit rather than a struggle. I have made reading a part of my life. Just as I get up every morning to go to work, I also read the newspaper on the Internet with my screen reader.

The philosophy in most school systems is that children are failures if they cannot read on their expected grade levels. When this happens, teachers, parents, and students panic. At that point, they frequently pull back to what has worked for everyone else instead of thinking “outside the box” and experimenting with things that *might* work for that individual student. I have my own individualized reading plan. I know how I read best: I like to read standing up, not sitting down; the lights cannot be too bright or dim; absolutely no fluorescent lights are allowed; I use color whenever I can—black and white bores me; if the environment is too noisy, I use earplugs; if it’s too quiet, I make my own noise; sometimes I walk backwards when I read—for some reason, this relieves anxiety; I read best in the morning and worst at night; I always ask for help when I can—life is too short to be stuck on a word; my favorite strategy is to have someone read for me. About 30 percent of the time, I read off a computer, using screen-reading software; about 20 percent of the time, I listen to tapes; and the additional 50 percent of my reading is on my own, using a variety of self-selected strategies. This last 50 percent is the hardest and is not by choice.

As a child, I lay in bed and cried because I could not read like everyone else. As an adult, I no longer cry for myself but for all the other children who may never learn to love the written word as I have. To them, their books will always be tree sandwiches, and their hiding places will be harder to find.

So, I urge the teachers and parents who are reading this book not to let your children go to bed staring sadly at the moon because they can’t make the words stand still, when the important thing is to make the words come alive.