

## The Three Sounds of Suffix *-ed*

by Michael Hunter, Linda Farrell, and Tina Osenga  
Founding Partners, Readsters

**waited**      **grabbed**      **jumped**

Each of these three words ends with the suffix *-ed*. All three appear to the eye as two syllable words. Your ears, however, tell you that only *waited* has two spoken syllables.

No wonder our students think English spelling is crazy!

In *waited* the letter **e** spells the schwa vowel sound (/ə/). But in *grabbed* and *jumped* the letter **e** is not spelling a sound at all. In these words the suffix *-ed* only adds a consonant sound (/d/ and /t/ respectively), not a syllable.

### So, what are we to tell our students about the suffix *-ed*?

Students need to understand that the suffix *-ed* is added to a base word to indicate past tense. The suffix *-ed* is an example of spelling that indicates meaning, but does not fully represent pronunciation.

When reading a word with suffix *-ed*, our students also need to know that:

- The suffix *-ed* is pronounced /əd/ when added to base words that end with the letters **t** or **d**.
- In all other words, the suffix will be pronounced as a single consonant sound, either /d/ or /t/. (Students do not need to worry about whether the sound is /d/ or /t/, for reasons explained later in this article.)

When students are spelling words, they need to remember that for a past tense verb the sounds /d/, /t/, or the syllable /əd/ at the end are spelled with the letters **ed**.

*Simple enough, but why does the suffix *-ed* spell three sounds?*

For one thing, in English we sometimes spell by meaning rather than by sound. The suffix *-ed* serves to change verbs from present tense to past tense. The consistent spelling of the suffix *-ed* tells our eyes and brains that these are all past tense words, even if our ears hear three different endings.

For most words with the suffix *-ed*, the suffix is articulated by adding the sound /d/ or /t/, as opposed to adding a syllable. Although, this suffix most likely was originally pronounced as a complete syllable, over the years, the pronunciation changed because the past tense could be indicated effectively with just one sound for most words. Therefore, pronunciation of the suffix *-ed* as a complete syllable has largely faded from past tense.

For just a small set of verbs, though, the pronunciation didn't change. The suffix *-ed* continues to be pronounced as the syllable /əd/. Think of *waited*, *mended*, *delighted*, and *sounded*. These past-tense words have a second syllable because it is difficult, and would be unnatural, to double-voice the final consonant sounds as /d/ /d/ or /t/ /t/. (Try it with *waited* or *mended*.) The letter *e* is voiced as a schwa between the two consonant sounds, adding a syllable to the pronunciation.

With the letter *d* in the spelling of the suffix *-ed*, the sound /d/ is not unexpected. But why in some words is /t/ the sound that is added to the base word? This has to do with the fact that some consonant sounds require the vocal chords for articulation and some do not.

Sounds that do not require activation of the vocal chords (e.g. /t/, /p/, /f/, /sh/, /s/) are known as unvoiced. Sounds that require activation of the vocal chords (e.g. /d/, /b/, /g/, /m/, /l/) are known as voiced sounds. All vowels are voiced sounds. The sounds /d/ and /t/ are a voiced/unvoiced pair, meaning that the only difference in their articulation is whether the vocal chords are activated. All other parts of the articulation for these two sounds are the same. (A listing of the voiced and unvoiced consonant sounds is at the end of this article.)

Shifting quickly from an unvoiced to a voiced sound requires more effort than moving from an unvoiced sound to an unvoiced sound. Think of the word *jumped*. It is more difficult than to pronounce the suffix *-ed* as the voiced sound /d/ in *jumped* than to pronounce the suffix as /d/'s unvoiced partner /t/. The suffix *-ed* is naturally pronounced by most people as the unvoiced /t/ for a base word that ends with any unvoiced consonant sound. For base words that end with a voiced sound, including all vowel sounds, the suffix *-ed* will naturally be pronounced with the voiced sound /d/.

As interesting as we may find all this, our students simply need to recognize that they add a spoken syllable for suffix *-ed* only when the base word ends in the letters *t* or *d*. At all other times they add only one sound. It is not necessary for students to differentiate between the sounds /d/ and /t/ because this can be difficult for the phonemically challenged. Most readers will naturally add /d/ or /t/ as appropriate.

### **Are there exceptions to the pronunciation rule?**

A very few base words do not follow the pronunciation rule when suffix *-ed* is added. These are all adjectives, and they include the words *crooked*, *aged*, *blessed*, *dogged*, *wretched*, and *learned*. Notice, however, that the words *aged*, *blessed*, *dogged*, and *learned* do follow the pronunciation rule when used as verbs. (*Wretched* is not used as a verb.) The correct pronunciation for these words might be taught to older students as part of a vocabulary lesson, or when encountered while reading. Since these exceptions are few, it is not necessary to teach them during phonics lessons.

### So how do you incorporate this information into teaching?

The articulation and spelling of suffix *-ed* can be taught during core instruction in first grade, or in any grade where the students don't pronounce or spell words with suffix *-ed* correctly.

For practical purposes, to teach suffix *-ed*, have your students sort a list of words with the suffix *-ed* according to whether a syllable or a sound is added. Then, point out that all the base words with the added syllable /əd/ end in the letters **d** or **t**, and that all the other base words end in letters that are not **d** or **t**. A sample word sort is:

<u>Adds a Sound</u>	<u>Adds a Syllable</u>
jumped	landed
trimmed	rented
quizzed	tested
judged	added
chilled	petted
chopped	lasted
sipped	ended
wished	trotted
thanked	melted
picked	sanded
huffed	skidded
budged	grunted
stunned	wilted
banged	trusted
stacked	thudded

Some students speak a dialect in which, most of the time, they do not articulate any sound at all for the suffix *-ed* when they speak. In these dialects, the base word serves as both the past and present tense in oral speech. In this situation, teach the students how the suffix *-ed* is pronounced in Standard English. After demonstrating and teaching the pronunciation rule, have students sort the words based on the last letter in the base word. Use the sort to teach students how to pronounce words with full articulation to indicate the past tense. First teach them to add only one sound for the suffix *-ed*, because that is the most common pronunciation. Next teach them to add a syllable when base word ends in the letters **d** or **t**. After teaching this, remind students of the rule during oral reading and require them to correctly pronounce the words.

After all this your students may still think English spelling is crazy, but at least they will be able to handle reading and spelling words with the suffix *-ed*.

**List of Voiced and Unvoiced Consonant Phonemes**

**Pairs** - The articulation of the sounds in each pair differs only by whether the vocal chords are activated or not. The mouth position and airflow are the same for the two sounds in each pair.

<b>Voiced</b>			<b>Unvoiced</b>		
/d/	faded	/f/ /ā/ /d/ /əd/	/t/	dated	/d/ /ā/ /t/ /əd/
/b/	sobbed	/s/ /ō/ /b/ /d/	/p/	popped	/p/ /ō/ /p/ /t/
/g/	jogged	/j/ /ō/ /g/ /d/	/k/	biked	/b/ /ī/ /k/ /t/
/v/	waved	/w/ /ā/ /v/ /d/	/f/	puffed	/p/ /ū/ /f/ /t/
/j/	judged	/j/ /ū/ /j/ /d/	/ch/	watched	/w/ /ō/ /ch/ /t/
/z/	fizzed	/f/ /ī/ /z/ /d/	/s/	messed	/m/ /ě/ /s/ /t/
/zh/	garaged	/g/ /ə/ /r/ /ō/ /zh/ /d/	/sh/	wished	/w/ /ī/ /sh/ /t/
/th/	bathed	/b/ /ā/ /th/ /d/	/th/	birthed	/b/ /er/ /th/ /t/

**Non-pairs** - These sounds do not have a partner. The mouth position and airflow are unique to each sound.

<b>Voiced</b>		
/m/	hummed	/h/ /ū/ /m/ /d/
/n/	tanned	/t/ /ă/ /n/ /d/
/ng/	banged	/b/ /ă/ /ng/ /d/
/l/	sailed	/s/ /ā/ /l/ /d/
/r/	does not occur at the end of words	
/w/	does not occur at the end of words	
/y/	does not occur at the end of words	

<b>Unvoiced</b>		
/h/	does not occur at the end of words	