

What Teachers Need to Know About Phonics

The phonemes of English

and some common ways of representing them

Consonant phonemes with consistent spellings

/b/	bat, rabbit
/d/	dog, daddy
/g/	girl, giggle
/h/	hot
/l/	log, lolly
/m/	mat, summer
/n/	nut, dinner
/p/	pig, supper
/r/	rat, carry
/t/	top, patter
/y/	yellow
/th/	this (voiced) thing (unvoiced)

Consonant phonemes with alternative spellings

/k/	cat, king, back, school, queen (also the /k/ sound in box)
/s/	sun, press, circle
/f/	fun, photo
/j/	jam, ginger, bridge
/w/	worm, queen
/z/	zoo, pins, xylophone
/v/	van (one exception: of)
/sh/	sheep, station, chef
/ch/	chin, itch
/ng/	sing, pink
/zh/	measure, azure

'Short' and 'long' vowel phonemes

/a/	bag
/e/	bet, bread, said
/i/	big, cylinder
/o/	top, was
/u/	bun, love
/ae/	day, pain, gate, great
/ee/	feet, seat, Pete, me
/ie/	tie, tight, fly, time
/oa/	boat, grow, bone, toe, go
/ue/	blue, moon, grew, flute, you

Other vowel phonemes

/oo/	good, put, could, wolf
/ur/	church, bird, herb, earth, word
/ar/	start, father
/or/	corn, door, shore, roar, your
/aw/	paw, taut, tall, talk, taught
/ow/	clown, shout
/oy/	boy, oil
/ear/	near, deer, here
/air/	chair, share, there
'schwa'	(see opposite) farmer, doctor, grammar, metre, colour, America ...

The NLS suggests teachers introduce one way of writing each phoneme (i.e. the first spelling pattern given in each list of examples). Later, other main spelling patterns can be introduced, widening the spelling choices.

The ‘reading wars’ of the last century involved more skirmishes about phonics than anything else. The subject seems to attract extremists and obsessives – teachers should be cautious about whom and what they believe on the subject. However, two facts seem clear:

- ‘phonemic awareness’ (the insight that you can split up a word like *dog* into individual speech sounds and blend it together again) and a working knowledge of the ‘alphabet code’ by which we represent speech sounds seem critical to success in both reading and writing;
- given that the English language is about 80% phonetically regular, all teachers should have a working knowledge of phonics for the teaching of spelling.

Useful technical vocabulary

phoneme	individual speech sound
CVC word	consonant-vowel-consonant word, e.g. <i>dog</i> CVC words are the simplest type of words to decode or encode.
segmenting and blending	taking a word apart into its individual phonemes (e.g. /c/ /a//t/) and putting it back together (‘cat’). A child’s ability to do this seems to be fundamental to the development of literacy skills.
consonant cluster	two or more consonant phonemes, e.g. <i>twig</i> (CCVC), <i>lunch</i> (CVCC), <i>splash</i> (CCVC). In the past such letter-groups were often called ‘blends’. However, the NLS changed the terminology because ‘blending’ is now used in another important context (see above).
digraph	two letters standing for one phoneme, e.g. <i>sh</i> , <i>ay</i>
trigraph	three letters standing for one phoneme, e.g. <i>igh</i> , <i>ear</i>
onset and rime	in a single syllable word, the onset is the part of the word that comes before the vowel (cat ; grand , strong); the rime is the vowel and the rest of the word (cat ; grand ; strong). Once a child is able to blend and segment words easily, it is helpful to look at words in terms of larger units – first, onset and rime; later, syllables.
split digraph	a long vowel phoneme involving final silent e , e.g. <i>gate</i> , <i>Pete</i> , <i>time</i> , <i>bone</i> , <i>flute</i> . In the past this was often called ‘magic e’ – NLS introduced this terminology because the vowel sound is represented by a digraph (as in <i>tie</i>) which has been split up by another letter (as in <i>time</i>).
schwa	an indeterminate grunting sound. The schwa is the most common vowel sound in the English language, and uncertainty about how to represent it is behind many common spelling errors, e.g. <i>seperate</i> (separate), <i>definatly</i> (definitely).
morpheme	a unit of meaning, often related to grammatical function (e.g. <i>-ed</i> , <i>-tion</i> , <i>-ly</i>). Morphemes are important elements in reading and spelling, and often they are not phonetically consistent, e.g. <i>-ed</i> represents a different sound in <i>jumped</i> , <i>listened</i> , <i>wanted</i> .