

Phonics Guide

Phonics is a method of teaching people to read by matching sounds with letters or groups of letters. In this guide, we've grouped related terms together.



Phoneme: the smallest unit of sound that you can hear within a word; the word phoneme refers to the sound, **not** the letter(s) which represent the sound in writing. For example, in the word *gate*, there are three phonemes (g-long ay-t); in *school* there are four (s-c-long ooh-l). There are 44 phonemes in English, which can be split into two groups:

24 consonant phonemes: for example, 'b' (*bang*, *bubble*), 'm' (*monkey*, *hammer*), 'ch' (*chat*, *match*), 'ng' (*bang*). You can see in the examples that the sounds (the phonemes) can be written in different ways (different graphemes).

20 vowel phonemes: there needs to be at least one vowel sound in every word. There are short vowel sounds (*apple*, *egg*, *bread*, *kit*, *gym*, *octopus*, *wash*, *umbrella*, *won*), long vowel sounds (such as in *rain*, *tray*, *tree*, *me*, *light*, *kite*) and other vowel sounds (such as *book*, *could*, *fork*, *board*, *chair*). As before, the sounds can be written in different ways (different graphemes).

Top tip! When you talk about sounds to your child, use the phonemes (the letter sounds). The reason for this is that sounding out words is practically impossible if you use the letter names: *cat* doesn't sound like 'see-ay-tee'.

Top tip! When saying the sounds of **b, d, g, j** and **w** and other letters, you might notice the 'uh' sound which follows each ('buh', 'duh'...). It's hard to say the sound without it but do try to emphasise the main letter sound and avoid saying the 'uh' too much. In some letters, avoid the 'uh' completely (say 'mmm' rather than 'muh' and 'sss', not 'suh'). This is to avoid your child spelling a word like *cat* and wanting to add the 'uh' sound (c-u-a-t).

Grapheme: a grapheme is a 'symbol' of a phoneme – it's a letter or group of letters representing a sound and we use the letter names for this.

A one letter grapheme is the 'c' in *cat* where the hard 'c' sound is represented by the letter 'c'; a two letter grapheme is in *leaf* where the long 'ee' sound is represented by the letters 'ea'; a four letter grapheme is contained in *through* where the letters 'ough' make the long 'oo' sound.

To complicate matters even more, some sounds (phonemes) can be spelled with different graphemes (spellings). For example, the hard 'c' sound can be spelled with 'c', 'k' or 'ck' graphemes (as in 'car', 'kite' and 'lock'); the long 'ee' sound can be spelled with lots of different graphemes, such as 'ee' (*Leeds*), 'ea' (*beat*), 'ie' (*chief*), 'ei' (*ceiling*), 'e-e' (*theme*).

Digraph: is a two letter grapheme, such as 'ch', 'sh', 'oa' (two letters making one sound).

Split digraph: the 'e' at the end of words works with another letter to make a sound. Think about the difference between *hop* and *hope* – both have three sounds (phonemes), but the split digraph in *hope* creates and 'long o' sound.

Trigraph: a three letter grapheme, where three letters represent one phoneme, as in *ear*, *air*, *high*, *pear* (three letters making one sound, even in a word like *pear* where the 'r' is not really said).

Top tip! When you talk about sounds to your child, use the phonemes (the letter sounds). Soon, though, it's a good idea to distinguish this from the letter name; the hard sound 'c' can be made using a 'c' (a 'see') as in *cat*, a 'k' (a 'kay') as in *kit*, or a 'ck' (a 'see-kay').

Blending: the merging together of the separate sounds in a word. The separate sounds (phonemes) are spoken in order, all through the word, and are then merged together into the whole word - this is a vital skill for **reading**. For example, the three phonemes ch-a-t are blended to make *chat*, whilst th-r-ee blend to make *three*.

Decode: to read words.

Segmenting: breaking words down into phonemes to spell (so, the opposite process to blending). The whole word is spoken aloud and then broken up into its sounds (phonemes) in order, all through the word - this is a vital skill for **spelling**. For example, hearing that *leads* can be segmented into l-ea-d-s, with the 'long e' sound but also possibly represented by 'ee' (*Leeds*) and other possibilities (see the graphemes, above).

Encode: to spell words.

CVC: a word containing the sequence 'consonant, vowel, consonant'. For example, *cat* and even *chat* because the 'ch' grapheme works together to make a single sound (phoneme) – you wouldn't say c-h-a-t).

Tricky words: words like *they* and *said* which can't be sounded out easily.

Linking sounds and letters

The 44 phonemes in the English language

Regular alphabet letters and sounds are in green.
Advanced letter patterns and sounds are in blue.

vowels			
There needs to be at least one of these vowel sounds in every word (one per syllable).			
phoneme (sound)	examples	grapheme (written pattern)	
short vowel sounds			
/ a /	<u>a</u> pple	<u>a</u>	
/ e /	<u>e</u> lephant, br <u>ea</u> d	<u>e</u>	ea
/ i /	igloo, gym	<u>i</u>	y
/ o /	<u>o</u> ctopus, w <u>a</u> sh	<u>o</u>	a
/ u /	<u>u</u> mbrella, w <u>o</u> n	<u>u</u>	o
long vowel sounds			
/ ae /	rain, tr <u>a</u> y	ai, ay, a-e, a	
/ ee /	tr <u>ee</u> , m <u>e</u>	ee, ea, ie, y, e, ey	
/ ie /	l <u>igh</u> t, k <u>i</u> te	igh, i-e, y, i, ie	
/ oa /	bo <u>a</u> t, bo <u>o</u>	oa, ow, o, o-e	
/ ue /	t <u>u</u> be, em <u>u</u>	u-e, ew, ue, u	
/ oo /	mo <u>o</u> n, scre <u>o</u>	oo, ue, ou, ew, u-e	
other vowel sounds			
‘oo’	bo <u>o</u> k, cou <u>o</u> d	oo, u, ou	
/ ou /	hou <u>o</u> se, cow	ou, ow	
/ oi /	co <u>o</u> in, bo <u>o</u> y	oi, oy	
‘r’ controlled vowels			
/ ar /	star <u>a</u> , gla <u>a</u> s	ar, a	
/ or /	for <u>o</u> k, boar <u>o</u> d	or, aw, a, au, ore, oar, oor	
/ er /	her <u>e</u> b, nur <u>e</u> se	er, ir, us, ear, or	
/ air /	ch <u>a</u> ir, p <u>a</u> ir	air, ear, are	
/ ear /	spe <u>a</u> r, de <u>e</u> r	ear, eer, ere	
There’s also an unstressed vowel close to /u/ (the ‘uh’ sound), as in ‘teacher’, ‘picture’. It’s also in ‘the’ – that’s the reason our younger children would learn this as a ‘tricky word’.			

consonants			
Consonants give a sort of 'structure' to the vowel sounds. Try to avoid saying / u / (the 'uh' sound) as much as you can.			
phoneme (sound)	examples	graphemes (written pattern)	
/ b /	<u>b</u> and, bu <u>bb</u> les	<u>b</u>	bb
/ c /	<u>c</u> ar, du <u>ck</u>	<u>c</u>	k, ck, q, ch
/ d /	<u>d</u> igger, pu <u>dd</u> le	<u>d</u>	dd
/ f /	<u>f</u> ish, giraffe	<u>f</u>	ff, ph, gh
/ g /	guitar, gogg <u>l</u> es	<u>g</u>	gg
/ h /	<u>h</u> elicopter	<u>h</u>	
/ j /	jellyfish, frid <u>g</u> e	<u>j</u>	g, dge, ge
/ l /	lea <u>l</u> f, be <u>l</u> l	<u>l</u>	ll, le
/ m /	<u>m</u> op, ham <u>mm</u> er	<u>m</u>	mm, mb
/ n /	<u>n</u> ail, <u>kn</u> ot	<u>n</u>	nn, kn
/ p /	<u>p</u> ump, pup <u>pp</u> ets	<u>p</u>	pp
/ r /	<u>r</u> ain, <u>wr</u> ite	<u>r</u>	rr, wr
/ s /	<u>s</u> un, mou <u>ss</u> e	<u>s</u>	ss, ce, se, c, sc
/ t /	<u>t</u> urtle, litt <u>tt</u> e	<u>t</u>	tt
/ v /	<u>v</u> olcano, hal <u>ve</u>	<u>v</u>	ve
/ w /	<u>w</u> atch, que <u>en</u>	<u>w</u>	wh, u
/ x /	fo <u>x</u>	<u>x</u>	
/ y /	yo-yo	<u>y</u>	
/ z /	<u>z</u> ip, plea <u>se</u>	<u>z</u>	zz, ze, s, se
/ sh /	<u>sh</u> oes, televi <u>si</u> on	sh, ch, si, ti	
/ ch /	chil <u>ch</u> dren, st <u>ch</u> itch	ch, tch	
/ th /	<u>th</u> e, mo <u>th</u> er	(One has a softer sound.) th	
/ th /	<u>th</u> ing	th	
/ ng /	sin <u>g</u> , an <u>g</u> le	ng, n	