

Phonics: In Practice

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Phonics instruction teaches common letter-sound relationships, including sounds for common letter patterns, so that readers can apply them in decoding unfamiliar words.

The purpose of phonics instruction

Only a small percentage of English words have irregular spellings and letter-sound relationships. This means that nearly all English words can be read by applying knowledge of letter-sound relationships and blending sounds together to form a whole word.

Being able to decode words effortlessly (convert spelling into speech sounds) means children are able to focus their attention on comprehending what they read.

Beginning phonics lessons

Regardless of grade, start phonics lessons with consonant letter sounds that are easy to pronounce and less often confused with similar letter sounds. This enables students to master one letter sound before having to learn a similar letter sound. For example, students may confuse the letter sounds for *t* and *d*. Since the letter *t* is more common, instruction should introduce *t* many lessons before introducing *d*.

Learning sounds for letters is basically rote learning, and for rote learning, the use of memory cues can be very helpful. For instance, for short *a*, children can learn that the letter *a* looks like an apple with a broken stem, and short *a* represents /a/ as in *apple*. Multi-sensory activities, such as repeatedly tracing the vowel letter and saying its sound, are often useful as well.

Start explicit phonics instruction with short vowel words because these vowels have one predictable spelling (with few exceptions) and are the most commonly occurring vowel sounds in English. Because the short vowel sounds are highly confusable, they should be taught individually, not all at the same time.

Phonics Terms

- **Phoneme**
The smallest unit of sound in our spoken language. Pronouncing the word *cat* involves blending three phonemes: /k/ /æ/ /t/.
- **Grapheme**
A written letter or a group of letters representing one speech sound.
Examples: *b, sh, ch, igh, eigh*.
- **Onset**
An initial consonant or consonant cluster. In the word *name*, *n* is the onset; in the word *blue*, *bl* is the onset.
- **Rime**
The vowel or vowel and consonant(s) that follow the onset. In the word *name*, *ame* is the rime.
- **Digraph**
Two letters that represent one speech sound (diphthong). Examples: *sh, ch, th, ph*.
- **Vowel digraph**
Two letters that together make one vowel sound. Examples: *ai, oo, ow*.
- **Schwa**
The vowel sound sometimes heard in an unstressed syllable and that most often sounds like /uh/ or the short /u/ sound. Example: the "a" in *again* or *balloon*. All English vowels have a schwa sound.
- **Morpheme**
The smallest meaningful units of language. The word *cat* is a morpheme. Not all morphemes stand alone as words; some are attached to words, usually as affixes. These are called bound morphemes. Examples include: *non-, -est, -ing, -er, -ion*.

Kindergarten phonics lessons

Phonics lessons in kindergarten focus on students becoming automatic at letter naming, single-grapheme letter sounds, and reading single-syllable words with short vowel spellings. Instruction may include common digraphs (*ch, sh, th, wh, and ck*). For some kindergarten students, articulating some consonant sounds may be difficult, but this does not prevent them from reading and comprehending words with those sounds.

To learn more about when kids learn different consonant sounds, see this [Speech-Sound Development chart](#).

First grade phonics lessons

In first grade, phonics lessons start with the most common single-letter graphemes and digraphs (*ch, sh, th, wh, and ck*). Continue to practice words with short vowels and teach trigraphs (*tch, dge*). When students are proficient with earlier skills, teach consonant blends (such as *tr, cl, and sp*).

Ensure students understand the difference between blends, digraphs, and trigraphs: that each letter in a blend retains its own sound, while the letters in digraphs and trigraphs represent one sound.

In first grade, we may also include two-syllable words with short vowel sounds (e.g., *cat·fish, pic·nic, kit·chen*). Inflectional endings such as *ing, er, and s* would also be included. When students have mastered short vowel spelling patterns, introduce *r*-controlled (e.g., *er, ur, or, ar*), long vowel (e.g., *oa, ee, ai*), and other vowel sound spellings (e.g., *oi, aw, oo, ou, ow*).

Teaching of common syllable types is also very useful for first-graders. By the end of first grade, typical readers should be able to decode a wide range of phonetically regular one-syllable words with all of these letter patterns and syllable types, including one-syllable words with common inflectional endings (e.g., *sliding, barked, sooner, floated*).

Teaching syllable types in first grade

Teaching children about syllable types is useful because vowel sounds in English vary, and knowledge about syllable types can help children determine the vowel sound of a one-syllable word. Later, once they have learned some rules for dividing long words, children can also apply their knowledge of syllable types to decode two-syllable and multisyllabic words.

Instruction in syllable types should focus on children’s abilities to classify words correctly (e.g., sort one-syllable words that are closed from one-syllable words that are not closed) rather than on children’s abilities to recite rules or definitions. However, it is very important for us to present clear, consistent definitions of the syllable types, in order to avoid inadvertently confusing instruction.

The six syllable types common in English are closed, silent *e*, open, vowel combination, vowel *r*, and consonant-*le*. The chart below lists these syllable types along with their typical vowel sounds, definitions, some examples, and some additional comments.

The specific order in which syllable types are taught can vary substantially, depending on the phonics program being used. However, the closed syllable type is usually taught first, because closed syllables are common in English, and it is virtually impossible to write even a very simple story for children that contains no closed syllables. Conversely, consonant-*le* syllables always occur as part of two-syllable (or longer) words, so that syllable type would often be taught last.

Syllable Type (Synonyms)	Vowel Sound	Definition	Examples	Comments
Closed	Short	Has only one vowel and ends in a consonant.	splash, lend, in, top, ask, thump, frog, mess	The main prerequisite when children learn the closed syllable type is that they first have to be able to classify letters as either vowels or consonants.
Silent <i>e</i> (magic <i>e</i>)	Long	Has a –VCE pattern (one vowel, followed by one consonant, followed by a silent <i>e</i> that ends the syllable)	plane, tide, use, chime, theme, ape, stroke, hope	Words like <i>noise, prince,</i> and <i>dance</i> are <u>not</u> silent <i>e</i> , even though they end in a silent <i>e</i> , because they do not have the -VCE pattern; <i>noise</i> has a –VVCE pattern and <i>prince</i> and <i>dance</i> have a - VCCE pattern.
Open	Long	Has only one vowel that is the last letter of the syllable.	he, she, we, no, go, flu, by, spy	This syllable type becomes especially useful as children progress to two-syllable words. For example, the <i>ti</i> in <i>title</i> , <i>lo</i> in <i>lotion</i> , and <i>ra</i> in <i>raven</i> are all open syllables.
Vowel combination (vowel team)	Varies depending on the specific vowel pattern; children must memorize sounds	Has a vowel pattern in it (e.g., <i>ay, ai, aw, all, ie, igh, ow, ee, ea</i>).	stay, plain, straw, fall, pie, piece, night, grow, cow	Vowel patterns do not always involve two vowels but can also consist of a vowel plus consonants, if this pattern has a consistent sound (e.g, <i>igh</i> almost always represents long /i/; <i>all</i> almost always represents /all/). Also, some vowel patterns can have more than one sound. For example, <i>ow</i> can represent long /o/ as in <i>grow</i> or /ow/ as in <i>cow</i> . For these patterns, children learn both sounds and, when decoding an

	for these individual vowel patterns.			unfamiliar word, they try both sounds to see which one makes a real word.
Vowel <i>r</i> (bossy <i>r</i> , <i>r</i> -controlled)	Varies depending on the specific vowel <i>r</i> unit; children must memorize sounds for these units (e.g., <i>ar</i> , <i>er</i> , <i>ir</i> , <i>or</i> , <i>ur</i>).	Has only one vowel followed immediately by an <i>r</i>	ark, charm, her, herd, stir, born, fork, urn	Does not include words in which the vowel <i>r</i> unit is followed by an <i>e</i> (e.g., <i>stare</i> , <i>cure</i> , <i>here</i>) or in which the <i>r</i> follows a vowel combination (e.g., <i>cheer</i> , <i>fair</i> , <i>board</i>). These words can usually be taught as silent <i>e</i> (in the first case) or vowel combination (in the second).
Consonant- <i>le</i>	Schwa	Has a -CLE pattern (one consonant, followed by an <i>l</i> , followed by a silent <i>e</i> which ends the syllable)	-dle as in <i>candle</i> , -fle as in <i>ruffle</i> , -ple as in <i>maple</i> , -gle as in <i>google</i> , -tle as in <i>title</i> , -ble as in <i>Bible</i>	Consonant- <i>le</i> syllables never stand alone; they always are part of a longer word. Also, they are never the accented syllable of a longer word.

Second grade, third grade, and beyond

As students enter Grade 2, they should be learning to decode a wide range of two-syllable and then multisyllable (i.e., three syllables or more) words. Instruction in decoding these longer words should include attention to common syllable division patterns and syllabication rules.

Common syllable division patterns

To decode words of more than one syllable, children need a strategy for dividing longer words into manageable parts. They can then decode the individual syllables by applying their knowledge of syllable types and common letter-sound patterns, blending those syllables back into the whole word.

The chart below provides some useful generalizations for teaching students how to divide (syllabicate) two-syllable words with various common patterns, in order to decode them. These generalizations also are useful for decoding multisyllabic words, those with three or more syllables.

Pattern	Generalization	Examples	Comments
Compound	In a compound word, divide between the two smaller words.	back/pack, lamp/shade, bed/room, bath/tub, work/book	To be a true compound word, each of the smaller words must carry meaning in the context of the word (e.g., <i>carpet</i> is <u>not</u> a compound word, because a carpet is not a pet for your car or a car for your pet).
VCCV	If a word has a VCCV (vowel-consonant-consonant-vowel) pattern, divide between the two consonants.	or/bit, ig/loo, tun/nel, lan/tern, tar/get, vel/vet	There is an exception if the two consonants form a consonant digraph (a single sound), as in <i>bishop</i> , <i>rather</i> , <i>gopher</i> , or <i>method</i> . In these cases, treat the word as a VCV word, not VCCV (see below).
-CLE	If a word ends in a consonant-le syllable, always divide immediately before the -CLE.	ma/ple, stum/ble, i/dle, nee/dle, gig/gle, mar/ble, tur/tle	
-VCV	If a word has a VCV (vowel-consonant-vowel) pattern, first try dividing before the consonant and sounding out the resulting syllables; if that does not produce a recognizable word, try dividing after the consonant.	hu/mid, ra/ven, mu/sic, go/pher; plan/et, com/et, tim/id, bish/op, meth/od, rath/er	To recognize the correct alternative, the child needs to have the word in his/her oral vocabulary. If the student does not recognize the correct alternative, we can have them try both options (e.g., <i>hu/mid</i> with a long u vs. <i>hum/id</i> with a short u). Then, if necessary, just tell the child the correct pronunciation of the word, with a brief explanation of its meaning.
Prefix	In word with a prefix, divide immediately after the prefix.	pre/view, mis/trust, un/wise, re/mind, ex/port, un/veil	See below.
Suffix	In a word with a suffix, divide immediately before the suffix.	glad/ly, wise/ly, sad/ness, care/less, hope/ful, frag/ment, state/ment, na/ture, frac/tion	Depending on its origin, the base word in a word containing prefixes or suffixes will not always be a recognizable word. However, the key point is that, when dividing a longer word, prefixes and suffixes are units that always stay together as patterns; never divide in the middle of a prefix or in the middle of a suffix.

Continue explicit phonics instruction through second grade with increasingly complex spelling patterns. By third grade, shift explicit phonics instruction mostly to explicit morphology instruction. Students move from learning about letter/sound relationships to sounds for prefixes, suffixes, roots, base words, and combining forms.

Vocabulary and spelling can be integrated with instruction in reading words. For example, as children learn to read the root *geo*, they learn that it means *earth* and that it will have a stable spelling across related words such as *geology*, *geologist*, *geological*, *geography*, *geographic*, etc.

Although many word-reading skills are developed by the end of Grade 3, children may be learning some of these skills even beyond Grade 3. Developing an understanding of etymology (word origins) is one example of this more advanced kind of skill for reading words.

For instance, *j* is pronounced /h/ in words of Spanish origin, and this pronunciation is retained in English words borrowed from Spanish, such as *jalapeno* and *junta*.

As another example, words that end in *-ique* such as *boutique*, *antique*, and *mystique* are borrowed from French and retain the French pronunciation for this pattern, /eek/.

Children do not need to learn sounds for all letter patterns in every language, but if they understand that many words in English are borrowed from other languages, and that these words often retain at least part of their pronunciation in the original language, this can benefit their word reading as well as their spelling.

Phonics lesson planning

Lesson plans for explicit phonics instruction start with a clear, achievable objective. An objective may be learning two to three new consonant sounds, one new vowel sound, or a new phonics concept (e.g., in one-syllable words, *ck* spells the sound /k/ after one vowel letter and only at the end of a word). Lesson plans will likely span many days and include multiple layers of instruction and practice.

Lesson plans can start with a review and include previously taught concepts throughout the lesson. Lessons pull forward everything taught previously.

New concepts (e.g., letter sounds) are explicitly taught before being practiced. All practice should include an "I do, We do, You do" practice. In "I do," model the activity. In "We do," guide the group through practice. In "You do," have students practice individually and model proficiency.

Build scaffolded instruction and practice into activities. Each subsequent practice activity contains less scaffolding until students are independently proficient. Practice activities move from isolated skills to skills that are more complex. For example:

- Students read and spell letter name and letter sounds in isolation.
- Students read words sound by sound.
- Students read word chunks and word patterns.
- Students read whole words, sounding out only to resolve reading errors.
- Students spell words sound by sound, and practice spelling chains where only one letter changes from one word to the next (e.g., *sap* to *lap* to *lip* to *lit* to *slit*)
- Students may learn word meanings to understand sentences and passages, but vocabulary instruction is typically outside the phonics instruction block.
- Students read decodable phrases, sentences, and passages once for accuracy and again for fluency.
- Students spell short decodable sentences.

Have students read individually for accuracy and again for fluency while reading lists as well as sentences and passages. This need not be included in every activity.

Assess each student's skills individually before introducing new concepts. When individual students have not mastered the objective, use your best judgment. Should the group move forward? Should the individual student receive extra practice? The answer will vary based on the composition of the group and the proportion of students in it who are struggling.

Sample beginning phonics lessons

Phonics lessons flow naturally out of phonemic awareness activities. For example,

- In phonemic awareness, ask students to segment words with the sounds short *a*, /m/, /p/, and /t/.
- Explain that the letter *m* spells the sound /m/, etc.
- Have students individually practice saying letter names in isolation.
- Have students individually practice reading letter sounds in isolation.
- Introduce three to four irregularly spelled high-frequency words to learn by sight.
- Ask students to segment words with the sounds short *a*, /m/, /p/, and /t/, and then arrange letter tiles to spell the segmented words.
- Demonstrate how to point to each letter and say the sound. Then blend the letters to read words (called "touch and say" or "touch and read").
- Have students individually practice sounding out three to five words, then re-read the words they sounded out previously.
- Ask individual students to read a list of words (comprised of only the sounds explicitly taught and practiced to date).
 - Students read once for accuracy and again for fluency.
 - When a student misreads a word, guide the student through sounding out the word. Then the student re-reads the whole group of words to the end by reading accurately.
- Lead students in a review of the irregularly spelled high-frequency words taught earlier in the lesson and from prior lessons.
- Guide students through reading phrases, sentences, and (eventually) passages comprised of decodable words with the sounds explicitly taught and practiced to date along with some irregularly spelled high-frequency words.
 - Students read once for accuracy and again for fluency.
 - When a student misreads a word, guide the student through sounding out the word. Then the student re-reads the whole phrase, sentence, or portion of the passage to the end by reading accurately.
- Students spell letter sounds, decodable words, and short decodable sentences.

Beginning phonics lessons introduce only three or four new consonant sounds and only one new vowel sound in a lesson. Continue with this lesson until all students in the group are reading at 95–98% accuracy on a first attempt. Move to the next lesson, introducing another three or four consonant sounds and another new vowel sound.

Children in a general education classroom will vary widely in how easily they acquire word recognition skills. We should make use of flexible groups to meet the needs of children who can move ahead quickly in their word-reading skills, or conversely, the needs of those who require more practice.

Children who consistently perform at a high rate of mastery in their word recognition skills can focus on other valuable literacy activities such as independent reading and writing, while we are working with flexible groups who require continued phonics instruction.

Phonics lesson routines

Include instructional routines in lesson activities. Instructional routines are repeatable routines used to practice a new skill.

For example, guide the reading group to use "touch and say" to read a list of words containing the lesson's focus letter sounds. The steps for the activity are:

1. Model "touch and say" with one word.
2. Have the group use "touch and say" to read three words together.
3. Have each student use "touch and say" to read five words and then re-read the list without "touch and say."
4. Ask the whole group to read the same five words chorally. Use this routine daily during the phonics lesson as the activity that precedes reading whole words.

Instructional routines reduce students' memory load. Students do not have to remember the steps in a routine while simultaneously remembering the new concept. As a result, routines provide support and stability and improve the pace of the lesson.

Moats, L. and Hall, S. (2010). [LETRS Module 7: Teaching Phonics, Word Study, and the Alphabetic Principle](#) (Second Edition). Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Instruction for all: the value of a multisensory approach

Teaching experience supports a multisensory instruction approach in the early grades to improve phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading comprehension skills. Multisensory instruction combines listening, speaking, reading, and a tactile or kinesthetic activity.

NOTE: Research does not yet have definitive answers about how multisensory instruction works. Literacy expert Tim Shanahan offers this perspective in his blog post, [What About Tracing and Other Multisensory Teaching Approaches?](#).

Phonics instruction lends itself to multisensory teaching techniques, because these techniques can be used to focus children's attention on the sequence of letters in printed words. As such, including manipulatives, gestures, and speaking and auditory cues increases students' acquisition of word recognition skills. An added benefit is that multisensory techniques are quite motivating and engaging to many children.

Multisensory activities provide needed scaffolding to beginning and struggling readers and include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile activities to enhance learning and memory. As students practice a learned concept, reduce the multisensory scaffolds until the student is using only the visual for reading. Employ the multisensory techniques to fix errors and then practice without the scaffold.

Examples of multisensory phonics activities:

1. **Dictate a word using say, touch, and spell.** Students say each sound in the word and place a manipulative (e.g., a tile with a letter or letter pattern on it, such as *sh*, *ch*, *ck*) to represent each sound in the word.

For example, when we say *fin*, students move the letter tiles for *f*, *i*, and *n*, to spell the word, while at the same time saying and stretching the sounds orally. If we then say *fish*, students replace the tile with *n* on it with one that has an *sh*.

Subsequent examples of words in the chain could be *wish*, *wig*, *wag*, *bag*, *brag*, and so on. The activity should use only letter sounds/pattern sounds that children have been taught.

Letter tiles also should represent sounds at the phoneme level. For example, *fish* would be spelled with three tiles (*f, i, sh*), because it has three phonemes, whereas *brag* would be spelled with four tiles (*b, r, a, g*), reflecting four phonemes.

Place ending spelling patterns and beginning consonants (or consonant blends) on cards. Have students work in pairs and arrange as many words as they can on a table. Do a table walk and have each pair read the words they created. Give other teams an opportunity to create a new word.

2. **Organize spelling around the vowel letter.** Assign a gesture to each vowel sound. Dictate a word and have students make the gesture for the vowel sound in the word.
3. **Assign a gesture to /sh/ and /ch/.** Dictate words. Ask students to individually make the gesture associated with /sh/ or /ch/ when they hear those sounds in a word.
4. **Paddle pop:** Teach letter clusters such as *ing* and *ink*. Write these clusters on card stock and staple to popsicle sticks. Dictate words and ask students to pop up the paddle containing the letter cluster in the word.
5. **Sounding out words:**
 - Single syllable "touch and read": Students touch each letter with a finger or pencil point and say the letter sound, then sweep left to right below the word and read the word.
 - Multi syllable touch and read: Students touch each syllable with a finger or pencil point and say the syllable, then sweep left to right below the word and read the word.

Include two or three of these multisensory activities in each lesson: speaking, listening, moving, touching, reading, and writing. They fully engage the brain and make learning more memorable. These activities can be fun games or part of a daily practice routine.

Multisensory activities are the scaffold for early practice. As students become proficient in the new skill or concept, reduce and then remove the multisensory scaffolds.

Adapting instruction for different readers

Research supports explicit phonics instruction for beginning readers and for struggling readers whose reading skills did not develop as expected. Two areas that affect reading acquisition are working memory and executive function.

Working memory refers to the memory we use to hold and manipulate information. For example, when a beginning reader sounds out a word, the student holds the letter shapes, sequence, and sounds in working memory to first sound out the word, then blend the sounds and read the word. Information held in working memory is fragile and held briefly (approximately 10 seconds) unless actively engaged.

If not attended to, the information in working memory vanishes. While this is true for everyone, some of us sustain information in working memory for seconds longer, some for less time. There are techniques that help students practice attending to information in working memory. See the articles, [10 Strategies to Enhance Students' Memories](#) and [Making It Stick: Memorable Strategies to Enhance Learning](#).

Executive function refers to the part of the brain that governs attention, impulse (starting and stopping), organization, reasoning, processing speed, and other higher order functions. It is the area of the brain that gets things done. It is also the last area of the brain to fully mature (mid to late 20s). Learn more: [Executive Function Fact Sheet](#).

To support students who struggle with working memory, attention, executive function, or processing speed issues, the following instructional adaptations can be helpful:

Itemized instructions

Hand out itemized instructions, and discuss what is expected in each step. Teach students how to check each step in a process off the instruction sheet to track work completed. Students with working memory and executive function weaknesses benefit greatly from learning how to use lists.

Intermittent instructions

Whenever possible, provide intermittent instructions so students do not need to remember a long list of steps. Remind the class to check any itemized instructions.

Instructional routines

Use repeated routines to practice skills and complete assignments. Repeated routines are not boring to students. They reduce the memory load on students and enable them to focus on new skills or concepts.

Repeat-safe environment

Build into the explicit instruction, practice, and assessment an opportunity to repeat instructions or information. It can be as simple as, "Anyone need me to repeat that?" or "Can I repeat the instructions for the next steps?" or "Remember. You can always ask me to repeat something." This creates an environment in which students with attention or working memory weaknesses feel safe asking for instructions or information to be repeated.

Rehearsing

Rehearsing can include having students state something aloud before writing. It can also include briefly practicing an activity that will later be assigned as homework. By rehearsing, a procedural memory or episodic memory is created which later supports students when they attempt to work independently.

Note taking

Explicitly teach note taking and build it into classroom routines. Every student will benefit by note taking as a study skill, as a stage of writing, and as an organizational tool. There are different note taking strategies depending on the task. Explicitly teach those note-taking strategies, and build them into lesson procedures. If students learn multiple note-taking strategies, you will need to review with them which one to implement in each setting, especially for students who struggle with working memory or executive function.

Writing aids

- Provide a list of words pertinent to the writing assignment which have new or difficult spellings. This reduces the load on working memory by helping remove an obstacle to writing.
- Provide an itemized rubric of the things the writing assignment must contain and explicitly teach the class to review their writing for each item on the list. Students with working memory weaknesses cannot easily review their writing for multiple things (e.g., check punctuation at the same time as checking for at least three supporting details and the reasons they support the topic sentence).

Organizational and place-keeping strategies

Being organized and knowing how to break a complex task into subtasks are not always innate skills. This is especially true for students with working memory and executive function weaknesses.

We support all students by taking time to explicitly teach how to be organized: how to organize a binder, how to break a complex task into logical steps, how to allocate time on homework, etc. This requires more time at first, but as the school year progresses, less time is required. Students will benefit from this skill set through the rest of their academic careers.

References

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