



Everything You Need to Know About Phonics

As a parent you will probably have heard the word 'phonics' used when talking about the way that children learn to read. When you were a child it is possible that you were taught to read through learning words by sight, looking at the shape of the word as a whole.

These days, children are encouraged to break down the individual sounds in words to 'decode' them and work out what they say. These sounds may be pronounced in a different way than you are familiar with, as children are taught to only say the smallest unit of sound. For example, the letter 'm' is pronounced 'mmm' instead of 'muh'. Below we will talk about the key aspects you will need to know to help your child with their phonics learning.

Phonemes

Graphemes

Segmenting and Blending

Common Exception, High Frequency and Tricky Words

Phonemes

Phonemes can be explained as the smallest unit of sound in a word. These can be:

- Single sounds, such as r, m, n
 - Digraphs, (this means two letters in a sound) such as ch, sh, oo
 - Trigraphs, (this means three letters in a sound) such as igh, ear, air
 - Split digraphs (sometimes called split vowels) which are made up of two letters that are 'split' in the middle by another letter. For example, a_e in 'game', i_e in 'mine'. You may have heard of this referred to as 'magic e', though this term is not generally referred to or taught now.
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The English language has 44 phonemes. During your child's time in the Reception year and in Year 1, they will be taught to read and write each phoneme, forming them correctly. Please see the separate document with the 44 phonemes listed.



Remember the phonemes may not be pronounced in the same way as you are familiar with. Look at our separate pronunciation guide to check that you know how each phoneme is being taught in school. There are lots of helpful videos available on YouTube to help you if you are still unsure. Search for 'pure phonics'.

Children also need to know the names of the letters, as pronounced in the alphabet, and their alphabetical order. The letter names and sounds can be talked about alongside one another, but it is important that the children use the sounds when 'sounding out' for reading and writing.

Graphemes

Graphemes are the written symbols that represent the sounds or phonemes.

They can be a single letter or a group of letters. There are often multiple ways to write a phoneme and, in time, your child will be taught alternative spellings. For example, the 'ay' sound can be written as 'ay' as in 'play', 'ai' as in train, or as 'ey' as in 'they'.

These different ways to write each sound will be explored in more detail as your child goes through Year 1, so don't worry about it too much if your child is in Reception or is at the start of Year 1. However, you may come across these different spellings, when reading with your child, and might like to take the opportunity to talk about this.

Segmenting and Blending

Once children have started learning some phonemes, they will quickly move on to segmenting and blending them for reading and writing.

Blending is when children use their knowledge of phonemes to read words, saying the sounds in quick succession to hear the word. For example:

c-a-t = cat

g-oa-t = goat

sh-ee-p = sheep

Segmenting is the opposite of blending and is when we break down the sounds we can hear in a word for writing. Children will use segmenting skills, as well as their knowledge of phonemes, to help them to write words.



Common Exception, High Frequency and Tricky Words

As you might have already realised, the English language is complex, and not every word can be decoded into phonemes or follows traditional spelling rules.

This group of words have exceptions to the spelling rules or have a particular combination of letters to represent a sound pattern. If you try to decode words like 'was' or 'said', for example, they come out sounding different to how we usually say them! For this reason, we teach this group of words by sight, or from memory.

Many of the high frequency words are decodable, but because we come across them so often, it useful to learn these words by sight too. Learning these words by sight reduces a child's cognitive load, enabling them to focus on the parts of the text they do need to decode, or to think about other areas of reading, such as understanding and reasoning the plot.