

# Phonics

**What the skill is:** Knowing the sounds represented by each letter or letter combination.

Phonics knowledge allows us to read unknown words. At the earliest levels, it is learning the MOST COMMON sound that each letter makes. At the more advanced levels, it is knowing ALL the different sounds the letters or letter combinations can make *plus* using knowledge of word origin, morphology (meaning of each word part), syllable patterns and placement of the sound in a word to read unknown words.

Learning to read English, because it developed from many languages, can be very confusing. There are 44 distinct sounds in the English language. Many letters and letter combinations can make several different sounds and many sounds can be spelled multiple ways. **In the examples below, when you see / / marks, you say the sound, not the letter name.**

The letter **s** in **bus** makes the most common /s/ sound, whereas the **s** in **sugar** sounds like /sh/ and in the word **is** the **s** sounds like /z/.

The long sound /ā/ in **play** is spelled **ay**, but in **baby** it's just spelled with an **a**. In the word **rain**, it's spelled with **ai**, and in **cape**, it is the final silent letter **e** that makes the **a** say / ā /. As if that wasn't confusing enough, the /ā/ sound in **eight** is spelled **eigh** and in the word **they**, the /ā/ sound is spelled **ey**.

**What it's not:** Memorizing words or teaching that each letter makes just one sound and each sound is spelled just one way.

**Why it's important:** Phonics is the code we use to read and write.

There is no way to memorize all of the words in English. Knowing the code allows us to read and spell many more words. Phonics must be explicitly taught in kindergarten through grade 3 and reinforced beyond.

In addition to basic phonics, advanced word study helps us better understand word meanings. Adding **un** to the front of the word **tie** reverses the meaning. Adding **er** to the end of **help** changes an action word to a word describing a person.

Tools that are helpful when teaching phonics:

- Alphabet cards or letter tiles to practice 'building' words
- Dry erase board and markers
- Books, books, books, and more books

**Ways to help your child:** When your child gets “stuck” trying to read a word, there are several strategies you can use to help them.

If stuck on...	Try this sound, as in...	If that doesn't sound right, try these sounds, as in these words:
a	cat	ball
Q, U, E	baby babe	zebra
ai	rain	
ac	car	inward
au	pause	
aw	saw	
ay	play	
b	bat	debt (silent b)
c	cake	cent
ce	dance	
ch	chair	school
ci	city	special
ck	duck	
d	dog	soldier
ea	bed	see me Pete
Eu	Europe	the (uh sound)
ea	leaf	bear
ea	heart	great
	breath	
		earth
ed	waved	locked added
ei	either	
eigh	eight 8	
er	her	
ew	flew	sew
ex	key	grey
f	fan	of (v sound)
g	egg	large gem
gh	weigh	ghost (silent h)
		high (silent gh)
	rough	
gn	gnome (silent g)	
h	hat	
i	mitt	lime idea
ie	friend	movie pie
igh	right	
ik	bird	
k	key	knot (silent k)
l	log	half (silent l) walk
m	map	comb (silent b)
n	nose	autumn (silent n)
ng	ring	
o	on	go off
Q, E	bone	do lesson
oa	boat	
oe	foe	
oi	oil	
oo	moon	book flood
or	fork	world
ou	soup	cloud could
ow	dough	bought
ow	snow	cow
oy	boy	
p	pig	
ph	phone	
pn	pneumonia (silent p)	psychology (silent p)
pt	receipt (silent p)	
qu	quick	antique
r	robe	rhino (silent h)
s	bus	sugar is
sc	science	
se	choose	mouse
si	business (z sound)	pension (sh sound) vision (zh)
sh	fish	
st	Christmas (silent t)	
t	top	latch (silent t) nature (ch sound) action (sh sound)
ti	tie	
th	feather (Voiced sound)	three 3 (Unvoiced sound)
u	up	unicorn put
U, E	cube	blue
ui	build	suit
ur	turn	
v	van	
w	wave	
wh	whale (silent h)	who? (silent w)
wr	wrap (silent w)	
x	box	x-ray
y	yarn	cry
	happy	gym
z	zipper	

**Phonics Guide** – When your child is stuck on a word or misreads one, use the enclosed phonics guide, pictured above. It provides the common sounds made by those letters or letter combinations. Help your child try the sounds until they make a word that makes sense in that sentence. A small percentage of words (about 4%) do not follow any spelling pattern.

**Fix the Sound** – Oftentimes, children are stuck on just one part of the word. Point to the word and say something like, “that can be a tricky word. Try to say the all sounds.” If he or she skips a sound or uses the wrong sound for a letter, point to that letter or letter team and ask what sound it makes.

When a student says the wrong sound for a letter or letter combination, help them by pointing out the correct sound. For example,

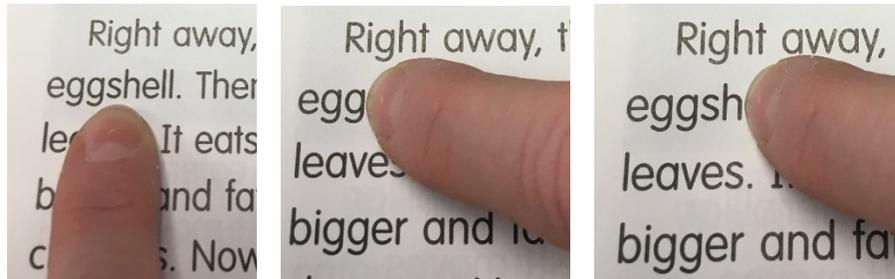


“The letters ph together always make the /f/ sound.”

“Usually ch says /ch/ as is chair, but in the word school, it says the /k/ sound.”

“Remember, c can make the /k/ or /s/ sounds. In this word it makes the /s/ sound.”

**Break it Down** – Sometimes a child mis-reads several parts of the word or seems unsure of how to even start. In that case, break the word down into smaller parts. Cover everything but the letter or letters for the first sound using your finger or a scrap of paper, ask them to make that sound, uncover the letter or letters for the next sound, and repeat. After saying each sound, have your child say all the sounds together quickly to pronounce the whole word.

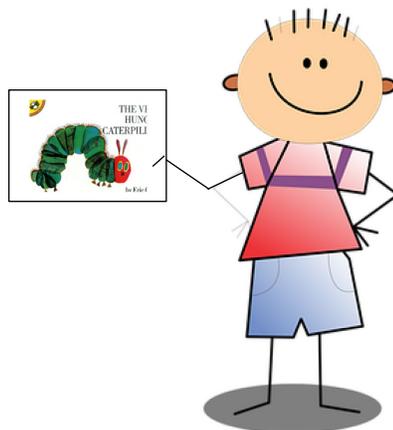


Let's say your child gets really stuck reading the word eggshell. Here is how you would help them break it down. **In the examples below, when you see // marks, you say the sound, not the letter name.**

“What sound does e make?” If they don't know, tell them “**e** can say /eee/ as in **eat**, or /eh/ as in **bed**. In this word it says /eh/.” Have them repeat the /eh/ sound. Point to the next letter, **g**, and ask “What sound?” The letter **g** can say /g/ as in **go** or /j/ as in **gym**. In this word, the letter **g** says /g/ as in **go**. “Now say both sounds together, /e/ /g/.” When a letter is repeated, as the **g** is, the sound is usually just made once.

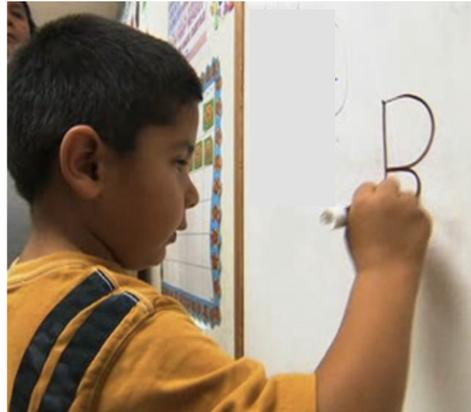
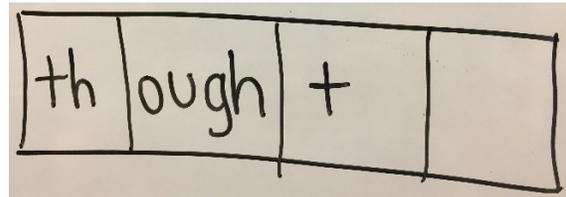
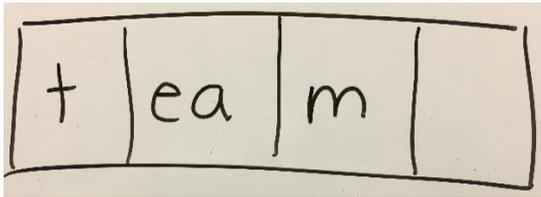
The **sh** can also be hard if your child tries to make both the /s/ and the /h/ sounds. When the letters **sh** are together, they work together as a team to make a whole new sound, /sh/. Have your child repeat the /sh/ sound, then re-read up to that point. Move on to the ‘**ell**’ part of the word using the same steps.

Finish by reading the whole word a few times to build confidence. Remember, learning to read can be HARD WORK. Making it a fun and rewarding experience is SO IMPORTANT.



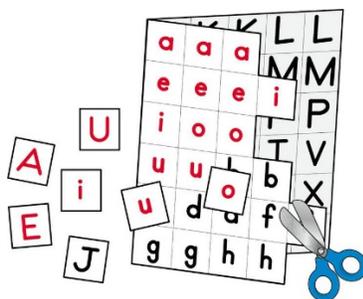
**Write it Out** – For harder words or phonics concepts they have gotten stuck on before, use a strategy that includes writing the tough words as you help your child read them. Have your child print the word clearly on a whiteboard or scrap paper, then identify the letter and letter teams that make each sound. There are two common ways to do this. One is to “dot and dash” the word by putting a dot under each single letter that makes a single sound, and a dash under any letter combinations that make a single sound. The second method is to use boxes for each sound. Each sound in English is spelled with between one and four letters. For example:

cat      ship      frog      over      there      though



NEVER encourage your child to look at the pictures and guess as a **first strategy** to reading an unknown word. As they get older there are fewer pictures to rely on. Readers who are used looking at the pictures or the first letter of a word and guessing tend to just skip hard words because they have not developed strategies for figuring out unknown words. This is devastating to comprehension because those hard words oftentimes carry a lot of the meaning. It's a bad habit we do not want students to develop. Using the pictures to ask themselves, “does that word I just read make sense?” is very appropriate.

**Build Words** – Use the word building cards or tiles to build words.



**Choose the right books!** – Some of the books are considered “easy readers” and have limited word choices. Others are “decodable books” that include many opportunities to practice a new phonics skill. These books are best for readers who need more practice with a new phonics skill.

Typically, these are not great literature or fascinating factual books, but they help your child to better remember the sound that letter or team of letters makes. Once remembering the sounds the letters and letter teams make is easy and automatic, more of your child's energy can be spent thinking about what it all means and that's really why we read!

If your child is learning a new phonics concept, like **ph** says /f/, you will want to provide lots of words for them to practice, like **phone**, **photograph** (two for one!), **alphabet**, **elephant**, **dolphin**, and **trophy**. After reading the words by themselves, we want children to read those words in sentences and paragraphs. Finding a book that has many words focused on such a skill can be a challenge. Ask your child's teacher if there are decodable skills books you can borrow that focus on the specific phonics skills your child is working on at this time.

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