

The Alphabetic Principle



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The Alphabetic Principle

The purpose of this article is to show why English is written the way it is, and why it's important to take this into account when we teach reading.

The information in this article is largely based on:

*Why Our Children Can't Read,
and What We Can Do About It*

by Diane McGuinness, Ph.D.

Why English is written as it is

The most important expression of a language is the way it's spoken. If that language has been written down, then the way the language is written is based upon the 'building blocks' of the spoken language.

The building blocks of spoken English are consonant sounds and vowel sounds. The written form of English is based on the consonant and vowel sounds of spoken English, since writing is 'speech made visible'.

The idea on which written English was based was that each individual sound would be represented in writing by a unique sign called a letter.

Our letters

The letters we use are ones used by the Romans to write their own language - Latin. When the Romans invaded England in 45AD, the Anglo-Saxons copied their letters. But as the Anglo-Saxon language had more sounds than Latin, the scribes had to add a few signs.

The underlying idea of an alphabet was that when a word had to be written down, it was spoken, and the scribe heard each individual sound in that word and represented each of those sounds in the correct order by writing a sign for each individual sound.

And when someone had to read a word, they just spoke the sound represented by each letter, as they read along the line. When they got good enough at saying the right sound as soon as their eyes got to the letter, they could read aloud smoothly and quickly!

So, the core skills needed for reading and writing were:

- being able to hear each separate sound in a word (Phonemic Awareness); and
- knowing which letter represented which sound (Phonics).

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics still work

Since this is the way English was designed to be written and read, phonemic awareness and phonics are still the basic skills of English literacy today.

There are few ways we can represent speech

There are only a few ways to represent speech in written form. At one time in history, it was common to use a sign that represented an entire word, but these signs were used by merchants for accounting - not for literacy.

We can represent speech in writing, by using:

- a sign to represent each syllable or word e.g. Chinese;
- a sign to represent each consonant sound (but not having a sign for any vowel sounds, because they are understood) e.g. Hebrew;
- a sign to represent a consonant + vowel pair e.g. some Japanese languages; and
- a sign to represent each consonant sound and each vowel sound e.g. Spanish, Italian, and (originally) English.

English is not a Syllable or Whole Word language

Whole Word ways of teaching literacy teach English as a language in which a spoken word = one written sign made up of a group of letters (a language in which every word has to be learnt by rote, even to the stage of learning the word by its shape). English has strayed a bit from its original written version, but it hasn't gone that far!

English could not have been written as a syllable/word-based language because there are so many different syllables in English that learning a sign for each syllable would take years. (It takes years for children using Chinese-based writing systems to become literate!)

None of the cultures that invented writing found that 'one word = one sign' worked, because there were too many words in their languages. That meant that they had trouble remembering all the signs. English-speaking Whole Word students have the same problem - the sheer volume of memorisation work required.

English is not a Consonant-only language

English could not have been written as a consonant-only alphabet, because English vowel sounds show just as much meaning as our consonant sounds. Writing only the consonants would mean that we couldn't tell the difference between words which only differed in their vowels. So dn could be: dan, den, din, don, or dun. And multiple syllable words would be even more confusing.

English is not a Consonant + Vowel language

English could not be written in a consonant+ vowel alphabet (with each sign representing two sounds - a consonant followed by a vowel), because that's not the way we speak.

Let's just show what that would mean by re-writing that last phrase (That's not the way we speak):

"Thu tu su no tu thu way we su pee ku!"

Syllables in consonant+vowel-type languages begin with a consonant sound, and end in a vowel sound.

But many English syllables do just the opposite. They begin with a vowel sound, and end in a consonant sound.

And many more words are just vowels on their own.

English is an Alphabetic language

So, English needs more flexibility than those other types of writing provide.

When we write, we are representing speech in physical form - so the written form of a language must be consistent with the structure of the spoken language. English must be written to show both consonant sounds and vowel sounds.

In English, there are about 45 sounds, and they are put together in what seems like an endless variety of ways - especially because we have increased our options by copying large numbers of words from other languages! So we need to be able to put our words together in many, many different ways.

Because spoken English building blocks are individual sounds, we have to teach the reading of each individual sound, not whole words or syllables or consonant+vowel sound pairs.

The way we speak decides how we teach

Since written English was based on the individual sounds of English, we need to teach students:

- to hear the individual sounds they use in their speech (the Phonemic Awareness skills);
- to firmly link each sound to the most common sign (letter) used to represent that sound; and
- to read words by looking at the first sign (starting on the left), saying its sound; looking at the next sound & saying its sound, etc.; When students begin this process, they sound out then blend, but eventually they'll be able to blend as they go.

We should teach English literacy this way because this is the way it was designed to work. It makes sense this way; and students don't have trouble understanding how it works, because it's just like a secret code for their speech.

If we teach this way, students have to learn about 300 essential items. These include: 26 uppercase letters, 26 lowercase letters, all the punctuation signs, the multiple letter combinations e.g. sh, th, ch, gh, etc., etc.

They also need enough practice to automate each step as they learn it.

We should Not teach English the Wrong Way

We should not teach English as though it were a syllable-based language - like Chinese. This is what Whole Word does.

We should not teach English as though groups of consonant blends were building blocks of English. Students certainly don't need to spend time learning to recognize clusters of consonant blends. Consonants were designed to be read as individual letters, not as groups.

To learn to read several consonants one after the other, students only need to know their consonant sign/sound combinations so well that they can read them quickly one after the other - it's a bit of a different skill than reading a consonant then a vowel, or a vowel then a consonant.

Word Families are not a good idea, either

Some Whole Word courses teach students to break the words up, and then read them chunk by chunk - this is another version of syllable-type Whole Word. So the students are, again, being taught English as though it were a syllable-based type of language.

While it's OK to use word families to practice blending, it's important students sound out each word completely - instead of treating part of the word as a building block, when it isn't. For example: here is a 'word family' list:

bunch
lunch
brunch
crunch

To be consistent with the way English was designed, it should be sounded out as:

b u n c h
l u n c h
b r u n c h
c r u n c h

But what usually happens is that they're sounded out as:

b unch
l unch
br unch
cr unch

This type of sounding out makes students think that cr, br, and unch are each a single sound. Just a little of this faulty type of teaching is enough to totally confuse many students.

Automate knowledge of the Building Blocks

The foundational key to literacy success is to automate students' knowledge of the building blocks of English, so they can say the correct sound immediately.

In time, they do this so fluently that they appear to be reading or writing a 'whole word', but in fact their brains are still working through the word one letter at a time. Eventually, students can read that word automatically.

BUT, if they ever forget the whole word, they are able to sound it out again. They don't need to rely on someone else to tell them what the word is. They've become independent readers!

Having to work through the whole process - first sign = this sound, second sign = that sound,... blend all the sounds together, gives the brain the practice it needs to build a 'super highway' for each of those sound/sign combinations, and to learn the skill of automatic sounding out, and the skill of blending.

Trying to shortcut that process by teaching the whole word to start with is not effective in the long-term because, if you do that, the brain learns the word as a picture or shape (instead of a series of sounds to be spoken).

The brain processes sounds and pictures differently. Training students to break words into individual sounds, each related to its own sign (one or more letters) builds 'super highways' in the sound part of their brains. Training students to treat words as pictures results in faulty processing - what I call 'brain fry', but what is commonly referred to as dyslexia.

The purpose of basic literacy skills isn't reading!

And here is the bit I found terribly confusing for a long time: the primary aim of teaching basic literacy skills is NOT to teach the reading of whole words, phrases or sentences!

I know it sounds weird, but I'm telling you the truth.

The purpose of teaching basic literacy skills is to automate the sounding out of each of those individual sound/letter combinations.

The fact that the student will then be able to accurately and rapidly read the sounds off the page is just a sort of by-product!

We want students to be able to sound out rapidly and easily so that sufficient working memory is left available to be able to:

- hear themselves say the separate sounds;
- blend the separate sounds together into a word they can recognize; &
- recall the meaning of the word – so they understand what they've read.

Sound complicated? It is, but that's what an experienced, fluent reader does – with expression!

Teaching basic literacy can be a disaster area

English literacy has only become a disaster area because we've been teaching it using methods designed for teaching Chinese literacy.

If you teach your students written English in accordance with the way it was designed, you will see many literacy difficulties disappear almost overnight.

What is the Alphabetic Principle?

The Alphabetic Principle is the idea that each separate **sound** in our language is represented in writing by one alphabet letter (or a letter team).

So, it's the sounds the letters represent that are important, not the letter names.

Comprehending that a sound we speak is represented by a random-shaped squiggle on a page requires quite a large “mental leap” for many students.

Students make this mental leap more easily if they are specifically taught each sound and its corresponding letter (or letter team).

The trouble with the letters we use is that they truly are random. In the original language/s, a “letter” was a mini drawing of something that started with that sound, so it was easy to learn.

In my learn-to-read Course, found on my website, each sound is linked to a picture and a hand sign; both the picture and its related hand sign remind students of an English word that begins with that sound.

For the 26 alphabet letters, that hand sign also resembles the shape of the relevant letter. This means that the hand sign forms a “bridge” between the sound and the letter, so that the letter is no longer a random squiggle.

This bridge makes it easier for students to remember the sound and its letter. It’s also useful for students who are not yet ready to learn handwriting, and for students who have slight hearing or speech difficulties – as they can sign words sound by sound, so their tutor can see that they mean the correct sound – even if they can’t write it, or hear or say the sound clearly.

What is Phonics?

Phonics is the name of the method of teaching reading that explicitly teaches each sound in our spoken language and the letter/letter team used to represent that sound.

The full title of the Phonics method I recommend is systematic, direct, sequential, synthetic Phonics:

- systematic (is organized, so nothing is missed);
- direct and explicit (each sound/letter combination is taught by the teacher – students are not left to discover them for themselves);
- sequential (the easiest work is done first, and later work builds on that foundation); and

- synthetic - students are taught to segment (break apart) the sounds in words, and to blend (synthesize) sounds back into words.

The Alphabetic Principle/Phonics relationship

Students who understand the alphabetic principle and have been taught using the phonics method, understand how to break a written word into its single letters and letter teams, and know we sound the word out from left to right.

They know to then blend the sounds back into a word by saying the sounds close together, so they can recognize that spoken word. Then they can extract the word's meaning from their memory – or realize they don't know the word.

Phonics also helps students perform the reverse function – spelling, because when students say the word aloud, they can represent each sound in writing, and (at the very least) produce a pronounceable version of the word – even if they have not advanced sufficiently to know all the rules and conventions of modern spelling.

While written English originally had an almost perfect correspondence between its sounds and its letters – one letter for each sound, things have deteriorated significantly since then.

A number of the “conventions of modern spelling” have developed from the habit of English-speaking people of collecting words while overseas, bringing those words home, and inserting them into their own language with minimal or no changes in their pronunciation or spelling!

Other “conventions of modern spelling” can be blamed on accidents of history. For example, when the French ruled England, they made a number of arbitrary changes to the way English words should be written (e.g. they decided that *queen* should replace the English spelling, *cween*).

English has also incorporated large numbers of Latin words for use in religious words, and some Greek words for use in educational, legal, and scientific fields.

The consequence of adding all these foreign words has resulted in some sounds being represented in multiple ways. We've ended up with about 45 sounds in English, with about 150 sound/letter combinations.

With this level of complexity, it's essential that students thoroughly understand the alphabetical principle, and are specifically taught each sound/letter combination in a comprehensive phonics course.

Explaining the Alphabetic Principle

This next section explains how the Alphabetic Principle works. If you think it would be helpful, you could read it to your older students.

Spoken words are made up of sounds

Humans can make a wide variety of noises. We can even imitate noises made by such animals as: dogs, cats, chickens, and horses. But when we speak to each other, we only use a few of the sounds we can make.

A couple of thousand years ago, England was invaded by the Romans, and some of the Romans knew how to read and write. This was a skill very few English people had, so some Romans taught some English people to speak, read and write the language the Romans used - Latin. But once the Romans left England, people forgot how to read and write Latin.

Many years later reading and writing was re-introduced into England, and the Roman letters were used to write **English**. To do this, some people worked out exactly what sounds were used to speak English, and then chose a Roman letter for each English sound.

Then, when someone wanted to write a word, he said the word, then, starting at the left side of the page, he wrote the letter for the first sound in the word, then he wrote the letter for the next sound, etc., all the way to the end of the word.

And when someone wanted to read, she looked at the word, starting at the left side of the page, and said the sound for the first letter, then she said the sound for the next letter, and so on - all the way to the end of the word. Then she said the sounds closer together, and then said the whole word.

If she was an experienced reader, she would have been able to say the sounds as soon as she saw them – so she could say the sounds rapidly enough to say the word the first time she said the sounds (rather than having to say the sounds closer together before saying the whole word).

This is really all reading is.

When William the Conqueror arrived

When William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066, his staff messed around a bit with English spelling because they spoke French instead of English. In addition, the English people started using a lot of the French words, just spelling them a little differently to remind everyone that they were foreign words.

English people copy words from other countries

Since then, when English people visited other countries, they often saw things English didn't have a word for, such as elephants, and kangaroos. So, they copied those words.

Or they realised that people in those countries were explaining something we can't explain as well in English, such as: amphibian, ski, soprano, and origami - so they copied those words, too.

And when they returned to England, they told other people about those words - and soon everyone was using them. To make sure people realized they were using someone else's words, they spelt these words a little differently; we still do this now.

Being able to use all these different words means we can write about a lot more things, and it helps us notice when we use other people's words.

For example, the sound /f/ in **f**ather is written with letter f, but the word *elephant* is a foreign word, so the sound /f/ in ele**ph**ant is written with letters ph.

But the way we read and write hasn't changed

To read, we still do just what people did in Roman times - move our eyes along the line of writing from left to right, saying the sound for each letter as we go. Then we blend the sounds together.

A few things have changed. There have been some improvements, for example: We leave a space between words.

Spelling became more important

About 500 years ago, people used to spell whichever way they felt like at the time. Sometimes, they'd spell the same word two different ways in the same sentence. Then something happened that put a stop to that!

The printing press was invented. Over time, the printers decided how to spell a word, and that became the one and only **RIGHT WAY** to spell it.

Nearly all of these printers were not English. Many of them couldn't speak English, and it's likely they'd never read English. So the way they decided to spell a word, was according to the way they would say and spell the word in their language.

This means that a number of our words are spelt in ways that don't help us read them easily. We have to remember that their spelling was invented by foreigners!

Another problem with English spelling has been that although we've been using some words for hundreds of years, the way we pronounce some words has changed. And the way the word was spelt wasn't changed when the way we pronounced it changed.

The word *knife* is a good example of that. When the word *knife* was first used, people used to say sound /k/ at the beginning of the word; that's why the letter for sound /k/ is at the beginning of the word. Now, we don't say /k/ at the beginning of *knife*, but we never changed the spelling.

Reading and writing make sense, but sometimes we just need to make a few allowances because a lot has happened since English was first written.

To learn more about how to teach reading at home, go to:

www.teachreadingathome.com