

Phonics



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What is meant by the word *Phonics*?

The word Phonics means sounds. When teaching reading, the term Phonics refers to the method of teaching reading that focuses on teaching students the sounds spoken in their own language in this case – English, and then basing the teaching of reading on how we represent those individual sounds in writing.

Most students already know, and can say, most or all of the individual sounds in English because (if they speak clearly and fluently) they learnt each of these sounds as babies. But by the time most students get to school age, they have been focusing on learning words and the meanings of words for so long that they are no longer aware of the individual sounds in words.

So the first step in teaching reading the Phonics way is to return students' attention to those individual sounds. Then students are taught the letter (or letter team such as sh) that is used to represent that sound in writing – the Sound/Letter Combination. We focus on the sounds first because written English is based on spoken English, not the other way around.

Phonics is more than Sound/Letter Combinations

While learning the Sound/Letter combinations is the most important and time consuming part of teaching reading using Phonics, it's not the only focus of a “full Phonics” course.

Some Phonics courses teach only the sound/letter combinations for the alphabet letters, and ignore the letter team combinations (such as: sh & th).

The problem with only teaching the alphabet combinations is that while there are only 26 letters, there are about 45 sounds in English, so students who know only the alphabet sound/letter combinations only know about 60% of the sounds. This means that those students have to rely on guessing or asking other people for help with lots of words – instead of being equipped to help themselves much of the time.

In addition to teaching the combinations, students need to be taught rules (or patterns, if you prefer that term). Some phonics courses pretend that there are no rules or patterns in the way English is written. These rules often explain when an alternative sound or spelling is used, which helps students make sense of the (seemingly) random way many words are written or sounded out.

Having to learn these rules takes time and effort, but lack of this essential knowledge sets students up for failure. Students who lack this information have to rely on committing far more words to memory than is necessary, which is very time consuming. These students also don't get to practice their critical/analytical thinking skills to apply the rules in real time as they come to unfamiliar words in their reading material.

Students who know the sound/letter combinations and the rules are able to tackle much more advanced material much sooner, so they find reading challenging and interesting – instead of mind-numbingly boring.

Another common error, even among good Phonics courses, is the lack of teaching about what we usually use the alternative ways to spell sounds for – to spell foreign words. In English, we use about 150 letter/letter team combinations to represent our 45 phonics sounds; some (but not all) of these alternatives relate to foreign words.

The English have a habit of taking a fancy to words in other languages, and bringing them home – and instead of spelling them the English way, they insist on giving credit where credit's due by showing the word is from another language by using the special English letter teams that are used for foreign words (e.g. /f/* in **elephant**, /k/ **echidna**).

If students haven't been told about alternative sounds and spelling, they get the idea that lots of words are just spelt in random ways, and that there is no rhyme or reason for English spelling – which is far from the truth.

Let me summarise the problem with teaching only alphabet letter/sound combinations, so you're very clear about the size of this problem.

* A letter between slash marks represents a sound, not a letter name.

Teaching only the 26 sound/letter combinations teaches only 60% of the sounds, because we use about 45 sounds in English (depending on the dialect of English we speak).

And since we use about 150 sound/letter (and letter team) combinations to represent those 45 sounds, students who know only the most common sound represented by each of the 26 alphabet letters know less than 20% of the sound/letter combinations needed.

And we wonder why so many students struggle with reading!

But my pet hate in learn to read courses is the course that pretends to be phonics-based, but is in fact a mixture of Phonics and the Whole Word method.

There will be more about the Whole Word method later, but the idea behind Whole Word is that students should learn Sight Words – words that must be learnt by rote. This is supposed to save time and effort, but students taught using this method take forever to learn to read because it's very difficult to learn huge numbers of words off by heart.

Students taught using a mixture of Phonics and Whole Word usually end up very confused, because they never know whether to “sound out and blend the word” (Phonics) or “just look at the word and say it” (Whole Word).

The 3 Layers of English

Another important part of a quality Phonics course is that it's taught in a logical manner. Not only does it have to be taught in a way students can learn reasonably easily, it also needs to be taught in a way that's consistent with the way English was designed to work and still works.

One thing to keep in mind when teaching, is that the core knowledge needed to become an independent reader is the same for students of ALL ages, whether students are 4 years old, or 94, because all real books (not “Readers”) include words from each of the 3 layers of English.

These layers of English are:

1. the Foundational layer – one sound is represented by one letter e.g. /d/ = d in **dog**;
2. the Intermediate layer – one sound is represented by two or more letters e.g. /sh/ = sh in **ship**; the old sound/letter combinations (kn in **knife**), and the rules (**ai** – before the end of an English word e.g. **maid**, & **ay** at the end of a word **May**); and
3. the Advanced layer – how we represent sounds in foreign words e.g. /f/ = ph in **photo**, and /g/ = gh in **ghost**

Automation, Automation, Automation

We've all heard of the importance of: location, location, location when it comes to real estate.

Well automation, automation, automation is just as crucial when it comes to learning to read.

By automation I mean the importance of students having sufficient practice so that they “automate” the use of their knowledge of the sound/letter combinations in sounding out and blending, and their application of the rules/patterns so that they can apply their knowledge and skills in real time with little or no effort. It's surprising how just a few minutes of drill at the end of a lesson can bring about “automation”; students don't have to put much time or effort into this for it to be effective.

What about words that break the Phonics rules?

I'm constantly asked about “all the words that break the rules”. The thing is that we're given the impression that lots of words break the rules – but that's only so if you don't know the rules. Don't be concerned – there are surprisingly few rules.

A true Phonics-trained reader is sufficiently knowledgeable to tackle most words, except those seemingly random words e.g. *yacht*. And even that word makes sense if you know the history behind it; I teach mini history lessons in my course so students can make sense of really weird words.

Keep in mind that most words that break the rules, only break the rules for one letter in the word e.g. *women*. In *women*, only letter o is representing an odd sound – o = /i/. So if students sound out the word, it's likely they'll be able to work it out. It's good for their brains to tackle tricky words like this; it makes them so proud to work out which letter is being weird, and it makes them even prouder if they work out what the word is. Nothing like a boost to the self-esteem!

Is learning Rules Worthwhile?

You might wonder whether it's worth learning rules, when we're told that lots of English words break the rules. But in spite of what we're told, most words do obey the rules - over 85% of words obey the rules.

And that's a VERY conservative estimate. There's a great deal of disagreement about just how many words obey the rules, with some estimates going as high as 95%. The main problem is that there's no agreement about what the rules are! But as only up to 15% of words break the rules, your students are still way ahead by learning them. They will still have to do some memory work to learn the really Weird Words - but nowhere near as much memory work as Whole Word students!

Why don't we just spell phonetically?

I used to think that it would be best if English was spelt as we speak, that we should spell totally phonetically. But that was before I realised just how much variation there was between all the different types of native-English speakers' pronunciation!

If I spelt phonetically, I'd spell some words in such a different way that you might not be able to read them! At the moment, all over the world, we spell English words almost identically. An increasing number of words are spelt differently in American English - but English speakers everywhere can read both British and American English.

If phonetic spelling becomes the norm, different versions of English will gradually separate into different languages (just as Latin morphed into French and Spanish). Or maybe we'll start pronouncing words the way they're written, and we'll all end up sounding much the same!

What about rule-breaking really Weird Words?

One of the most difficult things about written English is the way some of the most common words are Weird Words - words that break the rules, such as *you* (/y/ in **yawn**, /ooe/ in **moon**).

The reason some common words are so weird is because we spell them the way they were pronounced hundreds of years ago - even though we pronounce the words differently now. These words have been used for so long that no-one has been sufficiently brave to change their spelling.

Will Phonics help my student become literate?

The only way your students will become truly literate is by learning how written English works. They need to learn the sound/letter combinations, the rules, and how we write foreign words.

Once your students know these things, they'll be able to apply their knowledge and practice their reading skills. In a surprisingly short time, they will then become independent readers. Sometimes, with my Course, the time taken to become an independent reader is shorter than parents/tutors expect, so if you decide to use my Course, please heed the warning at the beginning of my Course.

How to Teach Reading

In order to be able to read confidently, an English reader needs to be able to read a minimum of about 20,000 words.

There are very few ways to teach people to read this number of words:

- Teach each word by rote as though it was a random collection of letters;
- Teach the alphabet letters and the sounds they represent, then expect students to guess words that use other sound/letter combinations;
- Teach the sounds, the alphabet letters and letter teams (e.g. sh) that represent them, then expect students to guess words that use other sound/letter combinations; or
- Teach the “whole hog” – the sounds, the alphabet letters and letter teams (e.g. sh) that represent them, the old letters and their sounds, the rule letters, and the foreign letter teams and their sounds.

This fourth method is the one I recommend. It’s used by all the comprehensive, phonics-based, synthetic courses (those that teach sounding out and blending of words).

Courses based on the fourth method require greater initial application from tutors and students than the methods mentioned earlier. But these more challenging courses result in far greater success, a high level of understanding, and far more rapid progress toward independent reading.

AMORF

Here are the steps students need to take in order to be able to read well. I’ve broken it up into several sections. I call it the AMORF list. [I pronounce it as: /ay morf/.]

All comprehensive phonics courses teach all these different types of words, each ordering the words in their own way. If you don’t want to use my course, look for a course that incorporates all the following parts:

Alphabet Spellings

Each sound is represented by its alphabet letter:

ants, box, brand, damp, din, film, fix, got, hand, in, just, lost, mend, milk, nest, plum, rat, sand, send, sit, stilts, stun, sun, swam, tin, vest, wet, yam, zip

Multiple Letter Spellings

Each sound is represented by a team of letters:

/air/: **air**plane; /ar/: **star**; /ch/: **chick**ens; /ee/: **seed**s; /ng/: **sing**

Old Spellings

Where a sound is represented by teams of letters in historical words:

ea: **br**ead; kn: **kn**ight; oa: **mo**at

Rule Spellings

Rules govern how a sound is represented in writing e.g.:

Double letters are only said once: **add**, **egg**, **ill**, **off**

Letters f, l, s, and z usually double at the end of short words:

off, **scuff**, **drill**, **ill**, **less**, **fizz**, **buzz**

Foreign Spellings

Foreign words are shown by using a “foreign way to spell” at least one of the sounds:

eau: **plateau**; ei: **reindeer**; elle: **Estelle**; gh: **ghost**

By the time students have finished this stage, they can read thousands of words with little or no help.

Phonics or Whole Word

In spite of what we've been told, expert readers do not 'read whole words'; instead, they notice each letter and convert it to its spoken sound silently. But they do this so quickly and efficiently that it looks as though they're 'sight reading'.

By 'sight reading', I mean reading by recalling words they've memorised. Sight reading takes a huge amount of brain energy, as well as soaking up the bulk of our very small working memory capacity.

This means that people who really are sight reading usually have very low comprehension of what they read - because they're too busy concentrating on recalling the word to be able to work on its meaning - let alone relating that word to the rest of the sentence and paragraph.

Sounding out and blending the separate sounds into a word is quite a tedious process when someone is first learning to read with phonics, but with practice, students rapidly learn to sound out quickly and smoothly.

At that stage, they're sounding out and blending at the same time. Then it's much easier for them to recognise the words they're reading because they hear themselves say the word (aloud or silently) as a normal word - instead of as individual sounds.

This ease of sounding out, blending, “hearing”, and recognition of words increases reading comprehension the brain is using less energy for the mechanics of reading, so it can use that excess capacity for comprehension.

But when a student is taught to sight read, his or her brain is trained to take a short-cut. And this short-cut bypasses the part of the brain that makes the connection between a sound and its letter.

When Whole Word students first learn to read, this short-cut helps them start reading sooner, but it cripples their reading ability in the long-term because it trains them to use a reading strategy that doesn't work once they've used up their memory capacity for learning and easily retrieving individual words.

In some students, it can take years before the Whole Word reading strategy starts to fail. These students often have excellent visual memories, or they just work very hard to memorise the Sight Words.

For these students, everything in the garden seems rosy, until third or fourth grade, when the house of cards comes tumbling down.

By this stage, the sight reading way of reading has become so deeply ingrained that a specialist tutor might be needed to help them break the habit.

Other students just never seem to grasp the idea of how Whole Words reading works. They're totally confused by the whole process and fail to learn to read.

Not being able to read using Whole Word is a Plus

Although it might not seem like it, students who have failed to learn to read the Whole Word way are in a fortunate position - because once these students grasp the way written English **really** works, they take off at great speed and usually have no major problems – because phonics makes sense. And – **the major plus** - they haven't got to unlearn a way of reading that, to their minds, has served them well in the past.

The reason the students who failed to learn to read using Whole Word had trouble in the first place was that the way they were taught to read wasn't consistent with the way written English works; it just didn't make sense, so their brains switched off.

But the full phonics courses (courses that teach **all** the necessary information) are consistent with reality; they make sense. So, the work is easy to understand, and easy to remember and put into practice - so these students don't have trouble learning it. This results in students becoming independent readers.

Whole Word Strategies

If you're trying to read the Whole Word way, you have to use a lot of brain power, because you have to recall each word as you come to it by retrieving it from memory according to its shape or other characteristics - or use a WholeWord Word Attack strategy, such as:

- breaking the word into the bits you recognize as words, and saying the bits;
- sounding out the first letter and finding a word in memory that is about the right length and makes sense in the context; or
- skipping the word and coming back to it when you have read more words in the sentence - because by then you might have a better idea of the context.

Does your student use one or more of these options? As you read this description of the Whole Word reading method, can you feel your brain cramping? Or does your brain feel as though it's flipping from one dimension to another? This is why your child or student is confused. He or she needs to learn the truth - how written English really works. Not a theory that someone THINKS or HOPES might work.

Choosing between Phonics and Whole Word

You may think that both methods look equally difficult. But think about this. What makes more sense? Reading according to the Whole Word strategies listed above, or reading according to the full phonics strategies, such as:

Sound/Letter combinations in Written English

The sound /th/ in thirsty, and in:

thing, thirsty, thrip

is written like this: th

Rules/Patterns

The sound /ee/ in seeds, and in:

feet, teen, seem

is written like this: ee

BUT those letters can also be broken apart like this:

e e

to write the same sound /ee/ in:

Pete, Steve, Zeke

Rules of Position

Sound /z/ in **zoom**, at the beginning of a word, is written as:

zip, zap, zest

BUT sound /z/ at the end of a word, is written as:

s

his, bins, shells

Writing Foreign Words

Sound /f/ is usually written as:

fall, felt, feast, shelf, beef

BUT in foreign words, sound /f/ is written as:

ph

elephant, photo, alpha

Although these rules or patterns don't help with every word, they help with well over 90% of words, so new readers who know the sound/letter combinations and the rules can become independent readers very rapidly.

Conclusion

Understanding what a comprehensive Phonics course includes informs parents and tutors so they can decide which type of Phonics course would result in better outcomes for their students.

I encourage you to provide your students with a course that will equip them to become fully independent readers.

For other free ebooks e.g. [How Do I Start Teaching Phonics at Home?](#), go to:

www.teachreadingathome.com