

Sounds: Sound/Letter Combinations



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What are the Sounds in English?

In this ebook, I'll list:

- the Sounds in English; and
- the Sound/Letter Combinations.

The list of the Sounds in English is included so that you can check that you and your students can hear and say all the sounds in your type of English. (There is information in the [How Do I start Teaching Phonics at Home?](#) ebook regarding what to do if your student cannot hear or pronounce some sounds.)

You may well find a few sounds that you don't use – just ignore them.

You will also find a few sounds that I include that are not commonly included, because I want to bring to the attention of tutors and students some of the sounds that are often not noticed e.g. the quiet sound /d/* in **d**og, that is used in the word *closed*. I often see notices that say: Close on Sunday, for example, rather than Closed on Sunday.

The list of the Sound/Letter Combinations is included so that you can check that you're aware of, and teach, the different ways each sound is commonly written.

Having these lists handy means that neither your student nor yourself have to learn this information off by heart. When in doubt, just refer to the list.

* A letter between slash lines refers to a sound, not the letter name. The sound is the one most commonly written using that letter.

The Sounds of Letters

Literate people often refer to the *sound of a letter* or the *sound a letter makes*, but people who don't yet know how to read can find that term very confusing, because, as we all know, letters don't make sounds.

The reason we use those terms is that once we know how to read, the written word tends to become more important to us than the spoken form of language.

But it is the spoken language that is fundamental, because speaking is a natural skill. A part of our brains is wired for speech - even deaf babies babble! Speaking comes first in our language development, and so it came first in the development of language, historically speaking. Also, the written form of a language is based upon its spoken form.

When children hear people speak, they naturally learn to isolate the sounds in that language. If they regularly hear speakers of more than one language, the children learn to isolate the sounds of each of those languages, and manage to distinguish between those languages.

The Brain and Literacy

When we are learning to read, we are learning to co-ordinate several parts of the brain. A brain that is reading is working on several things at the same time:

- recognizing a letter;
- recalling the sound represented by that letter;
- blending that sound with the other sounds in that word;
- holding it in our short-term memory while recalling its meaning; &
- making sense of the sentence.

And we're not going to mention other complications such as: separating letters into letter teams and applying rules! Learning to read is a complex business.

Each of these tasks is processed by a different part of the brain:

- the letter recognition part is the shape recognition part;
- the recalling the sound part is the sound recognition part;
- the blending has to do with hearing and speech parts;
- the memory part is a part all its own;
- the recalling the meaning part is separate again; &
- so is the making sense of the sentence part.

It takes time and practice to get good at co-ordinating all those different parts of the brain. And to be independent readers, students need to do all of this in real time! At speed!

Learning to read is a real achievement. As we get older, we forget all the work that went into getting to the independent reader stage. I can understand why people thought that teaching Whole Word would make life easier; but it doesn't in the long-term. Unfortunately, there are some things, you just have to struggle through. But in the last few decades we have learnt a lot about how to much, much easier.

Literacy is not something that can be Picked Up

One thing that we have learnt about literacy is that reading and writing are not things we can learn purely by being exposed to them. Being surrounded by literate people doesn't help children learn to read; it might instill in them a great desire to read, and it might help them gain some understanding of the principles underlying reading and writing (e.g. we start on this side of the page, and work our way over to the other side of the page, and we turn the page this way) – but it doesn't help them “pick up” the specifics of letters, their related sounds, and handwriting.

Instead, the relevant knowledge and the related skills have to be taught explicitly, and practiced to “automatic level”.

English includes words from many languages

Learning to read is much easier in some languages than others. In a few languages there is a very close correlation between a sound and the way that sound is represented in writing. This is especially true when only one letter is used to represent that sound. Unfortunately, this is not the case in English.

In our modern English vocabulary, we use words made up of sounds from many different languages – Latin, French, German, Anglo-Saxon, Greek, and many foreign languages.

What has added to the confusion is that often, when a word from another language was introduced into English, the English version of the word used the same spelling as the word in the original language (or the nearest equivalent). This has resulted in our having alternative ways to spell the same sound.

In order for readers to be able to read fluently, they need to know these alternative spellings. Many learn to read courses only teach the sounds of the Alphabet Letters. Some courses teach some of the sounds of the other letters (e.g. th and sh). Only the comprehensive courses teach both the Alphabet and the Other sounds, and their alternative spellings.

Teaching Reading

School age is the time most children are ready to learn to read. A few children are ready to learn to read before then; older students and adults are not too old to learn to read.

Learning to read should not be a long drawn out process. A little child can learn to read independently within a year, doing 15 minutes of work a day. Older students, such as 15 year olds, can learn to read in a school term, if tutored for 1 – 2 hours each day.

Endless rote learning isn't necessary. Lots of reading practice isn't necessary. What's essential is learning the approximately 150 sound/letter combinations that make up almost all our words. Students need to be able to say the relevant sound as soon as they see the letter or letter team. Students also need to have sufficient practice blending these separate sound/letter combinations into words.

Whether your students are 4 or 64, they have to learn the same body of knowledge, and the same set of skills, in order to become independent readers. Once students have acquired the essential knowledge and skills, they can read almost anything.

What are the English Sounds?

American English has about 44 sounds; British English has about 46 sounds.

Slash marks around a letter or letter team such as: /a/ or /th/ show that I'm referring to a **sound**. When a letter name is being referred to, I will write the word *letter*, followed by the letter e.g. letter n.

In your type of English, there may be sounds in this list you don't use. If you see one of those sounds, ignore it.

The Alphabet Sounds

This list of the sounds in English is separated into two parts. The first part covers the main, or most common sound, of the alphabet letters. The second part covers the letter teams, such as /ee/ & /th/.

This is the information I use in my Course. For each sound, there is a picture that can be used to teach the sound. The point of this article is to teach students the sounds, not to teach them letters.

NOTES: The term *students* is used, to avoid having to say *him or her*.

For each sound, there is:

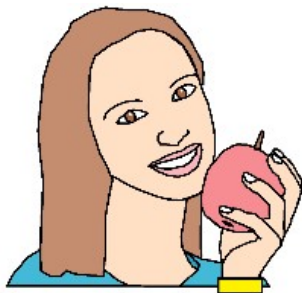
- a picture;
- the sound and name of the picture e.g. /a/ in apple; &
- a few words that use that sound and letter.

To teach a sound, point to the picture:

- say the name of the picture (apple) and get the students to repeat it;
- say the sound and the picture name, and get the students to repeat them; then
- say each of the words in the list, getting the students to repeat each word after you.

It's important to say the sounds correctly. To say a vowel correctly, it's easiest to practice saying words that **begin** with that sound, then say only the first sound in the word.

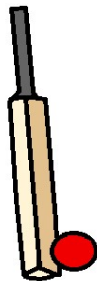
For consonants, it's easiest to say the sound correctly by practicing a word that **ends** in that consonant, then silently saying the first part of the word, and just pronouncing the last sound aloud.



apple

/a/ in **apple**

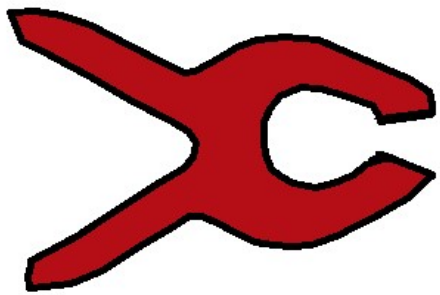
am, animal, ash, arrow



bat and ball

/b/ in **bat and ball**

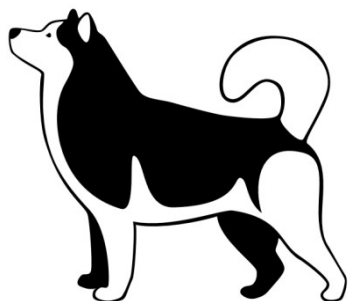
bee, back, mob, tab



clamp

/k/ in **clamp**

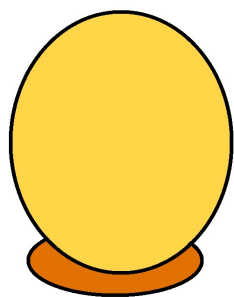
cross, crust, music, disc



dog

/d/ in **dog**

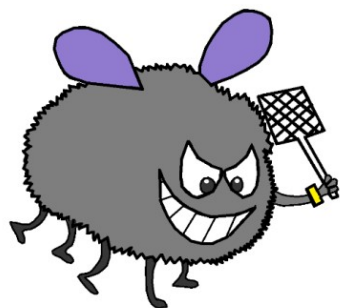
dash, dawn, hid, fed



egg

/e/ in **egg**

echo, elbow, end, enjoy



fly swat

/f/ in **fly swat**

fish, flame, cuff, stuff



grab

/g/ in **grab**

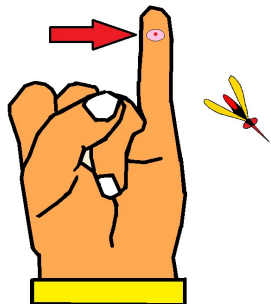
gate, glue, log, beg



here

/h/ in **here**

high, hand, hike, his



it's itchy

/i/ in **it's itchy**

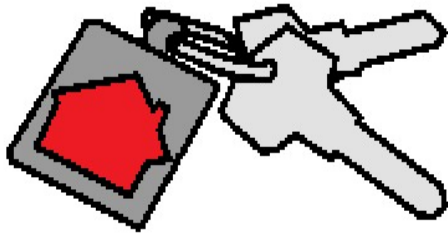
in, ill, influenza, inside



just stop right now

/j/ in **just stop right now**

jeans, jelly, jeep, jaw



keys

/k/ in **keys**

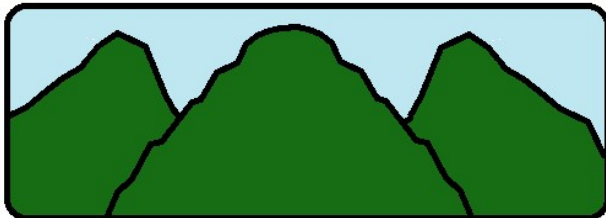
kangaroo, **k**iwi, **t**ask, **b**ook



ladder

/l/ in **ladder**

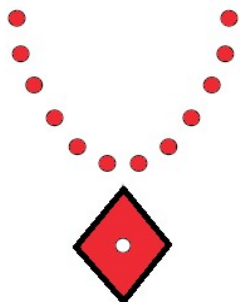
lamp, **l**unch, **f**ill, **s**till



mountains

/m/ in **mountains**

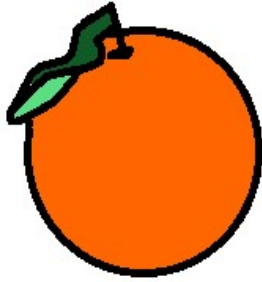
me, **m**agnet, **s**lam, **s**spam



necklace

/n/ in **necklace**

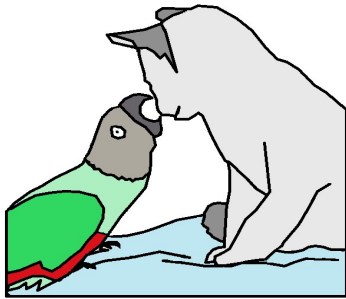
nip, **n**ail, **p**in, **l**ane



orange

/o/ in **orange**

on, off, officer, original



pinch

/p/ in **pinch**

paddock, plate, tip, ape

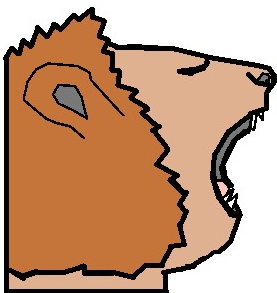


quarrel

/qu/(kw) in **quarrel**

queen, quick, quins, quilt

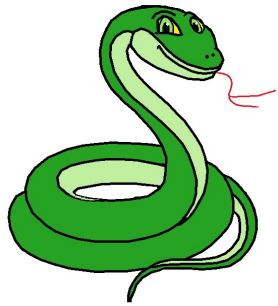
In English words, u always follows letter q.



roar

/r/ in **roar**

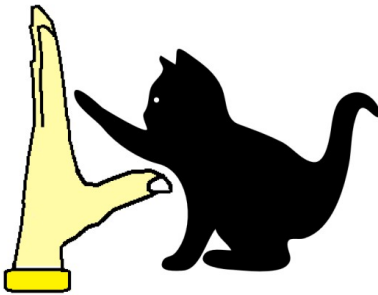
rib, rain, rot, rainbow



snake

/s/ in **snake**

sandwich, sea, hiss, miss



touch

/t/ in **touch**

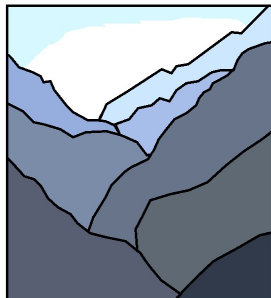
table, tooth, fit, cat



up

/u/ in **up**

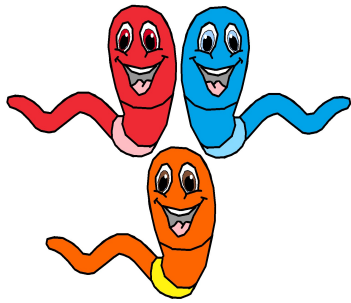
under, us, underpass, upset



valley

/v/ in **valley**

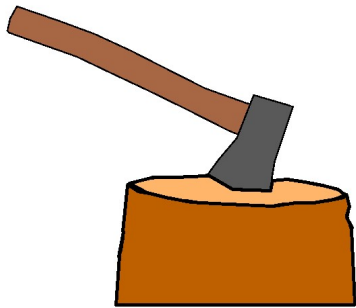
vet, vacuum, have, save



worms wiggle

/w/ in **worms wiggle**

water, wood, woof, wok



axe/ax

/x/(ks) in **axe/ax**

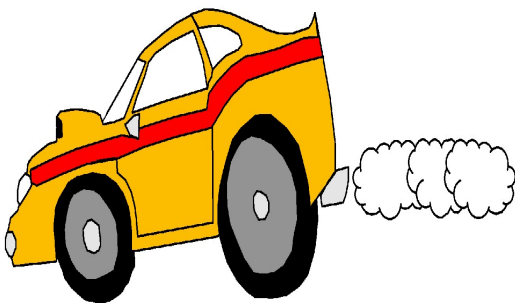
box, fix, tax, index



yawn

/y/ in **yawn**

yet, yell, you, yo-yo



zoom

/z/ in **zoom**

zoo, zest, ooze, snooze

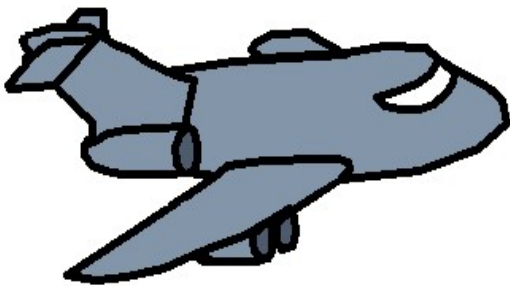
The Other Sounds



ice cream sundae **plate**

/ae/ in ice cream sundae
plate

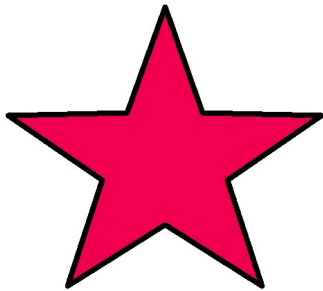
Fae, Mae, state, brake



airplane

/air/ in **airplane**

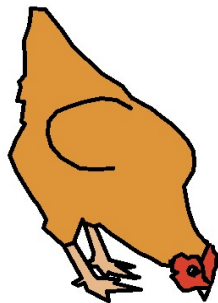
**airport, aircraft, flair,
stair**



star

/ar/ in **star**

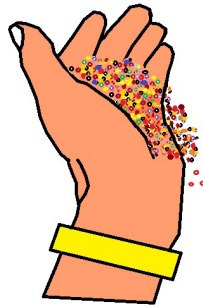
arm, start, bar, far



chickens peck

/ch/ in **chickens peck**

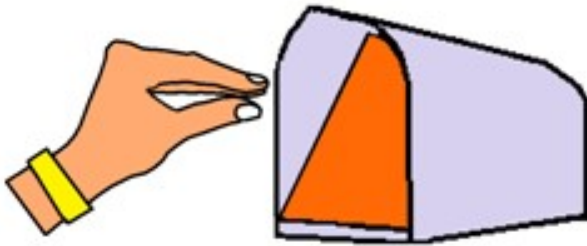
cheese, chip, beach, peach



seeds for Eve

/ee/ in **seeds for Eve**

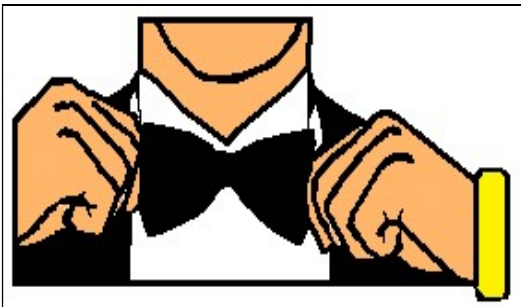
sweep, fifteen, free, see



letter

/er/ in **letter**

better, ever, her, boxer



bow ties inside

/ie/ in **bow ties inside**

magpie, lie, tide, mile



sing & fingers

/ng & ng g/ in **baby will sing**
& **hold my fingers**

bang, bring
fungus, hunger



Pink Zinc ®
/ngk/ in **Pink Zinc** ®
(This is a sunscreen.)
Sound included because
many people can't hear it.
bank, Frank, fungus,
hunger



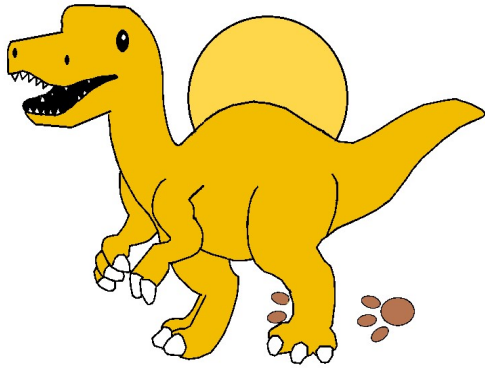
toe bone
/oe/ in **toe bone**
hoe, doe, dome, zone



look
/oo/ in **look**
hook, brook, stood, cook



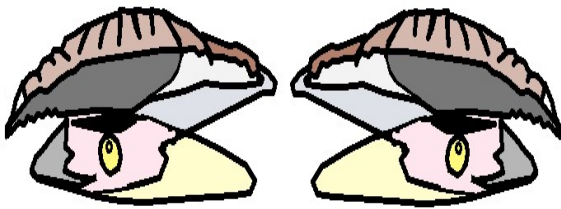
moon
/ooe/ in **moon**
doona, noodles, kangaroo,
coo



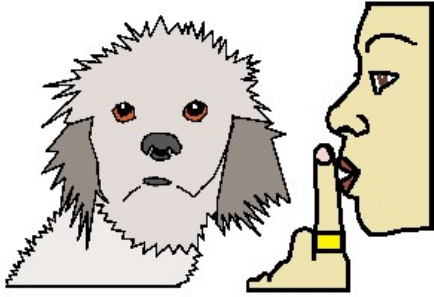
dinosaur paws
make **ordinary** dots
/or/ in dinosaur paws
make **ordinary** dots
Paul, August
raw, straw
or, for



Ouch! Ow!
/ow/ in **Ouch! Ow!**
noun, found
cow, now



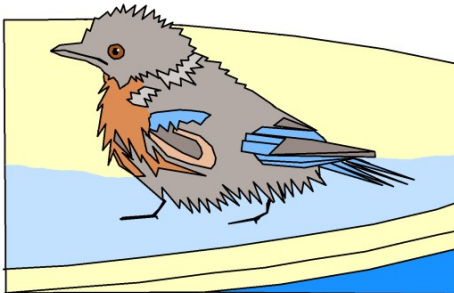
boil oysters
/oy/ in **boil oysters**
coin, point
boy, joy



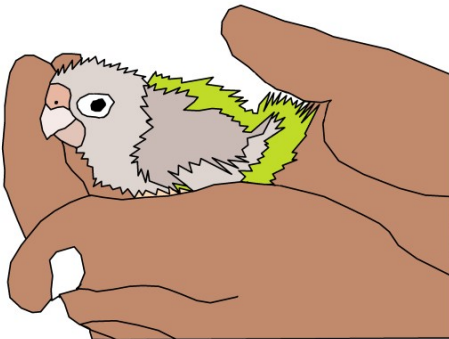
shh
/sh/ in **shh she**
shampoos show dogs
ship, she, ash, dish



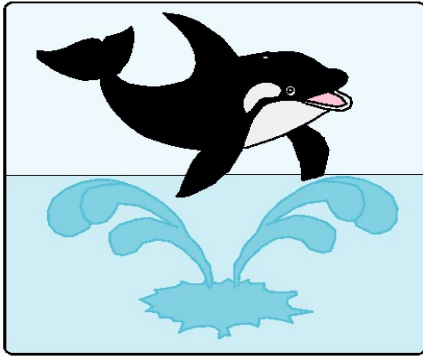
thirsty
/th/ in **thirsty**
thick, thin, Perth, fifth



there
/the/ in **there's that bird**
those, this, soothe, teethe



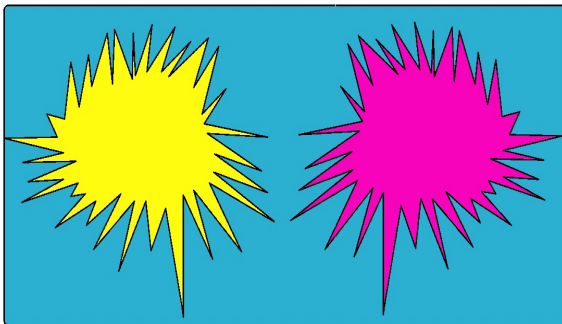
rescue the **cute** bird
/ue/ in **rescue the cute** bird
due, cue, use, emu



whale

/hw/ in **whale**

what, when, why, wheel



explosions

/zh/ in **explosions**

**Asia, Indonesia, vision,
illusion**

Sound/Letter Combinations

NB: The most common sound/letter combination in each group is first.

Sound	Letter/s	Sound Letter Combination Name	Other words
/a/	a	/a/ in apple	at, am
/ae/	a	/ae/ in taken	basin, April
	ae/a e	/ae/ in ice cream sundae plate	Fae, name
	ai/ay	Old /ae/ in mermaid display	paid, play
	e/ee	Foreign /ae/ in cafe & matinee	eclair, puree
	ea	Old /ae/ in steak	break, great
	ei/ey	Foreign /ae/ in reindeer survey	veil, they
/air/	air	/air/ in airplane	stair, pair
	are/ar	Old /air/ in share & shared	glare, blared
	ear	Foreign /air/ in bears	pear, wear
/ar/	ar	/ar/ in star	far, jar
	a	Foreign /ar/ in Ma & Pa	sultana, banana
	a	/ar/ before two consonants	glass, balm
/b/	b	/b/ in bat & ball	rib, cub
/k/	c	See /k/	
/d/	d	/d/ in dog	dent, had
	ed	Past tense /ed, d , t/ in dented, pried, & pricked	slimmed, grinned
/e/	e	/e/ in egg	end, egg
	ea	Old /e/ in bread	head, thread
/ed/	ed	Past tense /ed, d, t/ in dented, pried, & pricked	trotted, hunted

Sound	Letter/s	Sound Letter Combination Name	Other words
/ee/	e	/ee/ in be gan, at the end of a syllable & /ee/ in be , at the end of a few short words	defrost, defend me, he
	ea	/ee/ in eat	flea, tea
	ee/e e	/ee/ in seeds for Eve	free, Steve
	ei/ey	Foreign /ee/ in seize & honey	protein, key
	i	Foreign /ee/ in ski , at the end of a word, & /ee/ in budgerigar at the end of a syllable	taxi, origami Damian, Gabrielle
	ie/i e	Foreign /ee/ in Marie's magazine	Katie, police
	y	/ee/ in baby at the end of most multi-syllable words	family, puppy
/el/	elle	Foreign /el/ in Gabrielle	Estelle, gazelle
/en/	enne	Foreign /en/ Adrienne	Lucienne, Lilienne
/er/	er	/er/ in letter	her, boxer
	ear	Foreign /er/ in search	learn, earth
	eur	Foreign /er/ in amateur	chauffeur, masseur
	ir	Old /er/ in dirty	first, girl
	or	/er/ in American favor	vapor, harbor
	our	/our/ in British favour	vapour, harbour
	re	Old /er/ in fire	here, hire
	ur	Old /er/ in spur	burp, burn
/et/	ette	Foreign /et/ in brunettes	Antoinette, Evette

Sound	Letter/s	Sound Letter Combination Name	Other words
/f/	f	/f/ in fly swat	fig, fun
	gh	Foreign /f/ in laugh , in ghosts weigh their weight and laugh	rough, cough
	ph	Foreign /f/ in photo	phone, Joseph
/g/	g	/g/ in grab	get, egg
	gh	Foreign /g/ in ghosts at the beginning of a syllable, in ghosts weigh their weight and laugh	ghee, Afghan
	gu	Foreign /g/ in guide before letters e, i or y	guilt, rogue
/h/	h	/h/ in here	huff, hen
/i/	i	/i/ in it's itchy	tin, sit
	y	Foreign /i/ in Dylan	Darryl, syrup
/ie/	i	/ie/ in Ivan at the end of a syllable	quiet, pilot
		/ie/ in find before two consonants	blind, wild
	ei/ey	/ie/ in heists & in eye witnesses	feisty, eyeball
	ie/i e	/ie/ in bow ties inside	pie, hide
	igh	/ie/ in fight	thigh, night
	uy	Old /ie/ in guy	buy, guys
	y	Foreign /ie/ in my python at the end of a short word, or at the end of a syllable	by, fry pylon, dynamite
	ye/y e	Foreign /ie/ in Goodbye Clydesdale	dye, type
/j/	g	Letter g may show sound /j/in gems , before letters e, i, or y	genius, fragile, gym
	dge/dg	3 letter /j/ in badge	fridge, fidget
	j	/j/ in just stop right now	just, jot

Sound	Letter/s	Sound Letter Combination Name	Other words
/k/	c	/k/ in cl amp	cat , music
	ch	Foreign /k/ in monarch	school , chemist
	ck	2 letter /k/ in duck	crack , brick
	k	/k/ in keys	milk , desk
	qu	Foreign /k/ in conquer	antique , raquet
/ks/		See /x/	
/kw/		See /qu/	
/l/	l	/l/ in ladder	ill , list
	le	/l/ in wobble	nibble , gobble
/m/	m	/m/ in mountains	am , him
/n/	n	/n/ in necklace	in , tin
	gn	/n/ in gnat	sign , design
	kn	Old /n/ in knaves & knights	knot , knit
/ng/	ng	/ng/ in sing	cling , gang
/ng g/	ng	/ng g/ in fingers	hunger , fungus
/ngk/	nk/nc	/ngk/ in Pink Zinc [®]	drink , franc
/o/	o	/o/ in orange	on , off
	a	Foreign /o/ after a /w/ sound in want	quarrel , swamp

Sound	Letter/s	Sound Letter Combination Name	Other words
/oe/	o	Letter o may show sound /oe/ at the end of a syllable, & at the end of a word, & before two consonants	robot, open go, video cold, hold
	eau	Foreign /oe/ in plateau	beau, beaus, beaux
	oa	Old /oe/ in moat	cloak, soap
	oe/o e	/oe/ in toe bone	hoe, note
	ow	Old /oe/ in bow & arrow	low, yellow
/oo/	oo	/oo/ in look	hoof, book
	u	Old /oo/ in push	pull, bush
/ooe/	oo	/ooe/ in moon	tattoo, zoo
	ew	Foreign /ooe/ in Andrew	flew, grew
	o	Old /ooe/ in to do	undo, who
	ou	Old /ooe/ in you	youth, group
	u	Foreign /ooe/ in futons at the end of a syllable	fluent, strudel
	ue/u e	Foreign /ooe/ in flue & June	blue, rude
/or/	or	/or/ in ordinary dots	form, corn
	a	/or/ before letter l	ball, hall
	ar	See /war/	
	au/aw	Old /or/ in dinosaur paw	Saul, saw
	oar	Old /or/ in all aboard	hoard, board
	oor	Foreign /or/ in floor	poor, door
	ore	Foreign /or/ in before	more, store
	our	Old /or/ in yours	tourist, downpour
/ow/	ou/ow	/ow/ in Ouch! Ow!	cloud, fowl
/oy/	oi/oy	/oy/ in boil oysters	coin, boy
/p/	p	/p/ in pinch	limp, map

Sound	Letter/s	Sound Letter Combination Name	Other words
/qu/	qu	/qu/ (kw) in quarrel	quit, quill
/r/	r	/r/ in roar	run, rug
	rh	Foreign /r/ in rhinoceros	rhubarb, rhea
	wr	Old /r/ in writing	wren, wrist
/s/	s	/s/ in snake	its, ants
	c	/s/ in pencil before letters e, i, or y	cell, pencil, cycle
	sc	Foreign /s/ in science	scissors, muscle
/see/	cei	Foreign /see/ in receive	deceit, ceiling
/sh/	sh	/sh/ in shhh	ash, finish
	ch	Foreign /sh/ in quiche	crochet, chef
	ci	Foreign /sh/ in special	social, facial
	si/ssi	Foreign /sh/ in tension session	expulsion, expression
	ti	Foreign /sh/ in nation	caution, addition
Silent letters	e	Silent e in wobble , so every syllable has a vowel	crumble, humble
		Silent e in impressive , because letter v must not end an English word	active, save
	gh	Foreign silent gh in ghosts weigh their weight and laugh	bough, though thought, might
		There are other silent letters spelt various ways depending on their original language.	
/t/	t	/t/ in touch	it, nit
	ed	Past tense /ed, d, t/ in dented, pried, & pricked	snicked, packed
/th/	th	/th/ in thirsty	teeth, north
/the/	th	/the/ in there	them, smooth

Sound	Letter/s	Sound Letter Combination Name	Other words
/u/	u	/u/ in up	us, sun
	a	/u/ in away , at the end of a syllable or word	vanilla, gorilla
	o	/u/ in mother , before letters m, n, th, and v	son, brother, glove
	ou	Old /u/ in trouble	touch, young
/ue/	u	/ue/ in humans , at the end of a syllable	tunic, duet
	eu/ew	Foreign /ue/ in European newspaper	feud, few
	ue/u e	/ue/ in rescue & cute	value, mute
/v/	v	/v/ in valley	vet, vest
	ve	/v/ in impressive , to end words that may not end with letter v	have, save
/w/	w	/w/ in worms wiggle	wet, well
	wh	/w/ in whale	whale, white
/war/	war	Old /wor/ in warm	warn, wardrobe
/wh/	wh	/wh/ in whale (Optional sound /hw/)	whale, white
/x/(ks)	x	/x/ in axe/ax	fix, ox
/y/	y	/y/ in yawn	yes, yap
	i	Foreign /y/ in brilliantly	onion, union
/z/	z	/z/ in zoom	fizz, jazz
	s	/z/ in his	hers, is
	x	Foreign /z/ in xylophone	Xavier, xylem
/zh/	si	Foreign /zh/ in explosions	Asian, vision
		This sound is spelt in various ways, depending on that word's original	language.

For more information, have a look at the other free ebooks, such as the How Do I Start Teaching Phonics at Home? ebook, at:

www.teachreadingathome.com