

A Simple Introduction to Phonics

Phonics is a common method of reading instruction that often begins alongside letter recognition in the early primary school years. In its simplest definition, phonics relates to the sounds that individual letters or groups of letters make. So, for example, the phonics associated with the letter “T” refers to the sound the letter makes on its own: “t-t-tuh,” as in “t-op” or “t-in.” If a sound is being referred to in print, it is often written as “/t/.”

Phonics instruction refers to connecting sounds, also called phonemes, with representative symbols (letters or letter blends) known as graphemes. There are 45 common phonemes (letter sounds) used in English, and linking these sounds to their graphemes are often where traditional phonics learning begins. Note that while all 26 letters of the alphabet are included in phonemes, some letters are used in multiple phonemes or are combined with other letters to make specific sounds.

s sat	t tap	p pan	n nose	m mat	a ant	e egg	i ink	o otter
g goat	d dog	ck click	r run	h hat	u up	ai rain	ee knee	igh light
b bus	f farm	l lolly	j jam	v van	oa boat	oo cook	oo boot	ar star
w wish	x axe	y yell	z zap	qu quill	or fork	ur burn	ow now	oi boil
ch chin	sh ship	th think	th the	ng sing	ear near	air stair	ure sure	er writer

This chart of common phonemes taken from:
<https://www.theschoolrun.com/phonics-teaching-step-by-step>

We often refer to early reading as learning how to “decode” text. We encourage beginning readers to identify the sound of each grapheme (letter or letter blend) and then blend sounds (phonemes) together to sound out words on a page. Early phonics has learners focus on the sounds of each of the letters of the alphabet, and often introduces common consonants and vowels that are distinctive and easily blended into three letter words (often referred to CVC words—consonant-vowel-consonant) that can be sounded together to make a word. [Think of letters such as s, t, n and a, and how easily each can be identified by sound as well as combined into simple words.] This process, putting the sounds of letters together to build new words (the basis for learning how to spell) is known as “encoding” text. So, phonics instruction has a dual result: learning the sounds associated with letters and letter blends allows learners not only to decode (read) but also to encode (spell). Practice with both

gradually builds fluency and propels learners toward independent reading (decoding) and writing (encoding).

Phonics instruction also talks about families of words: these are often rhyming words who share a similar consonant-vowel blending, but with a different starting letter or letter blend: for example, “pan, man, ban, fan, tan and can” are all part of the same word family, as are “train, main, pain, strain, gain, and grain.” There are 10 common word families, each containing anywhere between 2-35 words in each.

There can be some confusion about the difference between phonics instruction and what is known as phonemic awareness. These two processes are often learned and used concurrently in classroom reading instruction. While phonics is meant to build understanding between the written letter and the sounds the letters make when put together, phonemics are meant to highlight the different sounds that are made in spoken or oral language. So, phonics relates to written words (ie., sounding out the letters in a word to figure out what it means) while phonemics refers to spoken words (listening for distinct sounds put together to make up a single word). If you think about it, a spelling dictation test is an excellent example of phonics and phonemics working together: the teacher reads the word aloud, and the students carefully transcribe it.

Why are Phonics so important?

The association of sound to symbol (phoneme to grapheme) becomes the basis for many of the reading and writing strategies learners use as they develop fluency and foundational skills. Learning how to associate particular sounds with particular letter or letter blends not only provides a learner with the most successful of reading strategies (“sound it out”), but also increases a learner’s sight word capability (once certain blends are immediately familiar, decoding families of words becomes faster and more automatic).

A knowledge of phonics and phonemics are tools that learners can continue to use as demands on their reading abilities increase. While strategies such as looking at pictures can be helpful, there will be times when a text will be illustration-free, and a knowledge of phonemes and common letter blends will provide more opportunity for a learner to independently decode a word. Even if a learner doesn’t recognize a sounded out word, they may be able to identify the word either by associating it with a specific word family (ie., a learner may know that a new word “nook” sounds like “book or look”) or by identifying smaller known words inside the larger decoded one (finding “fear” in “fearfully”). In addition, learning that certain letters have multiple sounds (such as long and short vowels) allows children to “try words out” to see if the sound of one is known or familiar.

How can tutors support Phonics-based learning?

Probably the most important thing for tutors to remember when supporting a learner whose focus is Phonics is that support must be intentional, or explicit. Phonics is not discovery or inquiry based: rather, it requires that a learner first be introduced to the actual sound-letter connection, then shown words that model that sound-word connection, and then be given

opportunity to read (and re-read) those words, at first with support, and then independently. Learners then continue to build and develop other words in that same word family. Repetition of the sound/letter connection, as well as repeated writing and reading of the words, are essential to phonics instruction. Pairing phonics with phonemics (the oral sounds that make up a word) also reinforces how the sounds that make up a word when it is heard aloud can help a learner figure out how that word is spelled.

When introducing a new phonics concept or letter blend, be sure to carefully show the learner how the sounds are combined, and what the resulting sound is. [*This is the same idea as “stretching” a word out by enunciating each of its sounds.*] Then, provide print opportunities (a short story, a poem, a levelled reader) where the learner can “read” that new concept or blend over and over again. Once the learner is comfortable with this, you can move to other words in the word family, or to an associated word family.

For example: Your learner is being introduced to the “at” phoneme. You begin by sounding out the individual “/a/t/” sounds that combine to make the sound “at.” Then, you introduce a few common words that are a part of the “at” word family: cat, hat, mat, sat, rat, etc. Each time you introduce a new word in the family, you reinforce the initial (starting) sound, plus the “/at/” phoneme.

Once your learner has identified several words in the “at” word family, you can introduce a story such as Dr. Seuss’ *The Cat in the Hat*. Read the story together, and have the learner identify the “at” words as they come up. If you follow the text with your finger, you can also point out other simple words (and their starting sounds) to your learner. Don’t worry about reading the entire story the first time through. Revisit the story several times, encouraging your learner to not only read the “at” words, but also to identify other words in the story as they become familiar with the line structure and rhyme. You can even have your learner imagine a new adventure for the Cat in the Hat, which you can write and illustrate together.

What if I am tutoring an older learner who still can’t seem to sound out words?

If an older learner seems unable to chunk words into phonemes or sound them out, it could be that their awareness of the relationship between the sound of the letter or letter blend is shaky. However, instead of returning to low level phonics worksheets or very junior chapter books, consider some explicit instruction in more hands-on ways: develop some word family cloze exercises that learners can complete to familiarize themselves with particular phonemes, and play games like Hangman to encourage the sounding out of letters and letter blends. Games such as Rhyming Snap and Sight Word Slapjack will also increase familiarity with the decoding of particular word families or sight words. Buenos Brothers Bean Dip can also be used to practice working with suffixes, prefixes, or to provide hands on practice for other spelling or phonics rules. And, continue to read, but look for materials such as Hi-Lo novels (high interest, low vocabulary) or other, more accessible formats that won’t be as daunting as a 200 page novel (graphic novels, comics, joke books, poetry...poets such as Shel Silverstein, Dennis Lee and Kenn Nesbitt are funny and appeal to all ages).

Phonics based Activities

Phonics doesn't just have to be worksheets! Refer to the accompanying Phonics Fun sheet for some hands-on Phonics suggestions.

Resources and References

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