

Glossary of Phonics Terminology

Alien words

A child-friendly term for 'pseudo-words'.

Alphabetic code

The relationship between the sounds that can be identified in speech (phonemes) and the letters used to represent them in writing (graphemes).

Alternative pronunciation

A different way of pronouncing a grapheme. For example, the letters 'ow' can represent the sounds /ow/ as in 'crown' and /oa/ as in 'snow'.

Alternative spelling

A different way of spelling a phoneme. For example, the sound /w/ can be represented in writing by 'w' as in 'wave' and 'wh' as in 'what'.

Blend

To combine individual phonemes into a whole word, working all the way through from left to right. It is a skill that needs extensive practice. Phonemes need to be joined into one continuous stream of sound to make a spoken word.

Compound word

A word made by joining two individual words together, for example, 'houseboat' is 'house' + 'boat'.

Digraph

A grapheme using two letters to represent one phoneme. With children, we frequently reinforce it with the mantra 'two letters, one sound'. At the appropriate stage, it is useful for children to learn to use the term and to understand what it means.

Fluency

The ability to read accurately with speed and expression. Fluent readers read words automatically without needing to decode. It is at this point that we see them able to focus on comprehension and make sense of what is being read.

GPC

This stands for grapheme–phoneme correspondence, the sound–letter relationship between each element of the alphabetic code. Written English is quite complex and does not have one-to-one grapheme–phoneme correspondence. The same phoneme can be represented by different graphemes in different words, and the same grapheme can represent different phonemes in different words. Alternative spellings of the same phoneme, and alternative pronunciation of the same grapheme are usually taught later, mostly in Phase 5.

Grapheme

A letter or group of letters used to represent a particular phoneme when writing. With children, we sometimes call this 'a sound written down', although, as with 'phoneme', it is helpful for children to learn to use the correct term from the beginning. The way graphemes are used to represent phonemes in our written language is known as the 'alphabetic code'.

Grow the code

To systematically and incrementally teach additional GPCs so that the range of words children can read continually extends.

Homograph

Homographs are words that have the same spelling but different meanings, for example, 'pen' (writing implement) and 'pen' (animal enclosure).

Homophone

Homophones are words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings or meanings, for example, 'prey' and 'pray'.

Mnemonic

Any simple device used to assist memory.

Orthographic store

Children learn to read by first sounding and blending words, and then reading them 'straight off', without overt sounding and blending. Once this has been practised sufficiently, recognition of these words becomes automatic and they are held as an orthographic store in a highly specialised area of the brain. This orthographic store, and the instantaneous recall it enables, is the basis of fluent reading. It is important to remember that the orthographic store is most effectively built up through extensive practice of the sounding–blending–reading process.

Overt blending aloud

Sound-talking aloud every phoneme in turn before blending them together to form the word.

Phoneme

The smallest unit of sound that can be identified in words. We sometimes simply call this a 'sound', although it is helpful for children to use the term 'phoneme' from the beginning of our programme.

Phonetically plausible

Comprising grapheme–phoneme correspondences that can be found in English words, even if they are not correct spellings of the (or any) actual word, for example, 'thor' instead of 'thaw'.

Phonics screening check

A statutory national assessment in England, conducted internally by schools towards the end of Year 1. Its sole purpose is to determine whether a child can phonically decode single words to an annually predetermined national standard.

Phonics

The method by which we teach children to read by recognising the connections between the sounds of spoken words (phonemes) and the letters that are used to write them down (graphemes).

Point and slide

A technique for reinforcing the process of sounding and blending involving the teacher pointing to each phoneme in a word, in sequence from left to right, and then sweeping a finger below the word, again from left to right, to indicate the blending. It can be used with the teacher and/or children vocalising each stage, or as a reinforcement to silent sounding and blending as children become more confident.

Prefix

A recognisable unit of language added to the beginning of a word to change its meaning. For example, 'rewrite' is 'write' with 're-' added at the beginning, so 're-' is the prefix. Examples of other common prefixes are 'un-', 'dis-', 'sub-'. Prefixes usually carry a particular meaning, whatever word they are applied to.

Revisit and review

The first part of the lesson where the core purpose is to activate prior knowledge – bringing prior learning to the forefront of the children’s minds and promoting the transference of working memory into long-term memory.

Segment

To identify each of the individual phonemes in a word, working all the way through from left to right. This is an important first stage of writing (spelling) a word but needs to be practised orally first. Counting the phonemes is often helpful in reinforcing this process.

Sound button

A graphic device to help children recognise the separate phonemes in a printed word. Sound buttons can be used as a support in the early stages of learning. For each word, a dot is placed under any single-letter grapheme and a short horizontal line under the group of letters that form a digraph or trigraph, as shown below.

Sound talk

See ‘Oral blending’, above.

Speedy sounds

The rapid recall of previously taught GPCs.

Speedy words

Fluent reading of previously read words containing known GPCs that are read without blending.

Split vowel digraph

A digraph representing a vowel sound where its two letters are split by an intervening consonant (for example, ‘a_e’ in ‘take’). Despite having a consonant in between them, the two letters involved (here ‘a’ and ‘e’) still count as one digraph, making one sound. The vowel sound is pronounced at the position of the first of the two letters of the digraph (that is, in the middle of ‘take’).

Suffix

A recognisable unit of language added to the end of a word to change its form, such as the tense of a verb. For example, ‘playing’ is ‘play’ + ‘-ing’, so ‘-ing’ is the suffix. Examples of other common suffixes are ‘-er’, ‘-ed’, ‘-est’.

Tricky words

High-frequency words that, although decodable in themselves, cannot be decoded by children using the GPCs they have been taught up to that point. Not all high-frequency words are ‘tricky words’. Many tricky words cease to be tricky in the later stages of our programme, as more GPCs are learned.

Trigraph

A grapheme using three letters to represent one phoneme. With children, we frequently reinforce it with the mantra ‘three letters, one sound’. At the appropriate stage, it is useful for children to learn to use the term and to understand what it means.

Vocabulary

All of the words that a person knows and uses within their language.

Vowel sound

Although we have five vowel letters in English, each one can be pronounced in different ways and there are, therefore, far more than five vowel phonemes (vowel sounds). Each one has a short vowel form, with a fairly

staccato pronunciation; these are the vowel sounds heard, for example, in 'hat', 'bed', 'big', 'hot' and 'tub'. Each also has a more elongated pronunciation, the long vowel form heard, for example, in 'play', 'seed', 'high', 'blow' and 'tube'. There are, additionally, more complex vowel forms, for example, those heard in 'bear' and 'farm'. Graphemes for short vowel phonemes are the easiest to learn and are taught first. Most GPCs for long vowels involve digraphs or trigraphs and are taught later, generally in Phase 5.