

Phonics Glossary

This glossary explains the terms used in the teaching of phonics, early reading and the progression of children with their literacy skills.

To support a consistent approach across school and at home, this glossary of terms has been created for adults to refer to when working with children engaging in phonics and early reading.


It is crucial that we all use the same language to avoid learners becoming confused.

Term	Definition
Phonics	Phonics is the method used to teach children to listen to and identify sounds that make up words. As a result, this helps them to be able to read and write words.
Decoding	When the printed word is translated into sounds to read. The opposite of encoding.
Encoding	When the spoken word is translated into sounds to spell. The opposite of decoding.
Pure Sound	Pronouncing each letter sound clearly and distinctly without the addition of sounds to the end e.g. 'f' not 'fuh'.
Phoneme	In terms of language, these are what you hear . These are single sounds that can be made by one or more letters. e.g. s, k, z, oo, th, igh, air When pronouncing the word 'log', three distinct sounds are blended together. These sounds are called phonemes. There are 44 phonemes in English.
Grapheme	These are what you see . A grapheme is the written representation of the phoneme (sound). A grapheme can be made up of one letter (p), two letters (ch), three letters (igh) or four letters (ough) in length. E.g. The five-letter word night consists of three phonemes (sounds) and is written using three graphemes: 'n' – 'igh' – 't'.
Letter Names	The name given to the letters of the alphabet – The ABC song. There are 26 in total



Phoneme (What you hear)	Grapheme (What you see)	Letter name (What the letter is called)
/æ/	a	A - 'Ai'
/b/	b	B - 'Bee'
/k/ or /s/	c	C - 'See'
/d/	d	D - 'Dee'

Term	Definition
GPCs (Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondences) (Alphabetic Principle)	Knowing GPCs means being able to see a grapheme and knowing the phoneme that relates to it, which is important for reading. Conversely, it also means being able to hear a phoneme and knowing what grapheme to use to represent it. This is helpful for spelling.
Vowel	The letters a, e, i, o, u
Consonant	Most letters of the alphabet, excluding the vowels. b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z
Oral Blending	This involves hearing individual phonemes (sounds) and being able to merge them together to make a word. Children need to develop this skill before they will be able to segment words to spell them.

Oral Segmenting	This involves hearing the whole word and then splitting it up into the phonemes that make it. Children need to develop this skill before they will be able to segment words to spell them.
Blending	The process of using phonics to read. Blending is saying the individual phonemes (sounds) that make up a word and then merging or blending the sounds together to say the word. Children identify and synthesise the phonemes to make a word. E.g. s-u-n, blended reads as sun. l-u-n-ch blended reads as lunch. Before children can do this to read written words, they need to be able to blend orally.
Segmenting	This is the opposite of blending. Segmenting is used when spelling and writing. It is the process of splitting a word up into individual phonemes (sounds) then choose which graphemes represents each sound heard – separating words into their constituent phonemes to spell. E.g. bat = b-a-t- splash = s-p-l-a-sh Before children can do this to write, they need to be able to segment orally.
Sounding Out	When graphemes are given sounds.
Pseudo Words Nonsense/Alien Words	Words which are not real e.g. vish, splue These words are used to assess phonetic decoding; they show that the word has not been memorised or learned by sight. Children are expected to be able to read 20 of these words in the Phonics Screening Check.
Sound Buttons/Bars	Circles/spot and lines which are written underneath graphemes to support children with reading. A button is used for phonemes represented by one letter e.g. 't', 'w', 'z'. A bar is used for phonemes represented by more than one letter e.g. 'sh', 'ear'. When the sound button or bar is touched, the phoneme (sound) is said aloud supporting children to ultimately blend the sounds to make a word. e.g. 
CVC	The abbreviation used for consonant-vowel-consonant words. This is used to describe the order of sounds. Some examples include: CVC words are: c-a-t, p-e-n, t-o-p, ch-a-t (ch is referred to as a consonant as it makes one sound). VC words e.g. on, is, it CCVC words e.g. trap and black (t-r-a-p and b-l-a-ck) CVCC words e.g. milk and fast (m-i-l-k and f-a-s-t) CCVC words e.g. fright and drip (f-r-igh-t and d-r-i-p) CCCVC words e.g. scrap and stream (s-c-r-a-p and s-t-r-e-a-m)
Digraph	Two letters merged to make one sound. e.g: ai, ee, ch, qu, th, sh, oa, ir
Trigraph	Three letters merged to make one sound. e.g. igh, ear, air, tch, dge
Consonant Digraph	Two consonants merged to make one sound e.g. sh, ch, th, qu, ss, ll, zz, ff, ng
Vowel Digraph	A digraph where at least one of the letters is a vowel. e.g. oa, ay, ir, or

Split Digraph	Two vowels which work as a pair to make one sound but are separated within the word a – e cake, tame, fade e – e cheese, these, gene i – e pine, file, spice o – e note, dome, wrote
Adjacent Consonants	Two or three consonants next to one another in a word. They still represent their individual sounds as they can be heard separately. e.g. black – ‘b’ and ‘l’ make two sounds (consonant blend) whereas ‘ck’ makes only one (consonant digraph)
Consonant Cluster	The term cluster refers to the written form. e.g. fr, lk, scr
Consonant Blend	The term blend refers to the spoken form.
Syllable	Often described as a ‘beat’ in a word that can be clapped out. It has one vowel sound and can be spoken as one unit e.g. chicken has two syllables chick-en elephant has three syllables el-e-phant
Polysyllabic Word	Words which have more than one syllable
Compound Word	Two words joined together to make one new word. e.g. rain+bow = rainbow
Chunking	A method to used to read a word by building up the sounds. This is especially good for children who can sound out well, but struggle to hear the word they make. e.g. chimpanzee ch+i+m = chim chim + p = chimp chimp + a + n = chimpan chimpan + zee = chimpanzee
Tricky Words	These are words where elements of the word do not follow the phonics rules or children have not yet been exposed to sounds within the word. These words phonetically plausible. Children are taught to apply their phonics knowledge and identify the tricky part of the word which they must remember for reading and writing. e.g. in the word ‘they’, /th/ can be heard following phonics, however ‘ey’ is making the /ai/ sound. Therefore, the tricky element in ‘they’ is ‘ey’.