

Phonics in Action: Sound and Sense A Briefing for the Teacher

The first question that may come to your mind is, “Who needs phonics?” The answer is, “Anyone who cannot instantly read any word or nonsense syllable, anyone who reads very slowly, anyone who has trouble with spelling.” Also, very likely, the student who is not getting as good grades in school as his intelligence would warrant. His difficulty may lie elsewhere, but phonics and reading are the first things to check.

The simplest test for a child is to ask him to read a page out loud and see if he stumbles over the words. An older student may have learned most words as sight words and yet not know phonics, so give him a brief test of nonsense syllables, such as:

pleroid **ploy** **sprute** **gril** **Zephaniah** **treopat** **popping**

To help you teach this phonics system, here is a simple guide to the lessons that follow: First you are asked to learn to pronounce forty sounds clearly and with assurance, and to become familiar with the phonetic symbols used here, which are given on page 2. To learn these sounds, start by pronouncing the key words, and then abstracting the sounds from them and saying them by themselves. Notice that the letters are printed in boldface type and the phonetic symbols (representing sounds) in italics. **Ch** in boldface is a digraph, which can be pronounced three ways (**chair, machine, school**), while *ch* in italics represents just one sound that found at the beginning and end of **church**.

Consonant sounds should properly be whispered, because if you say them aloud you must perforce add a vowel sound, so that **b** becomes “buh,” and so on. Actually, in practice, it may be helpful to explain this to the child and then let him say “buh,” “cub,” “duh,” loudly and firmly. The extra noise reinforces the learning. This slight distortion of the sound does not seem to cause trouble in sounding out words.

Many children have been taught to say the consonant sounds improperly by teachers who were not trained in this simple procedure of extracting sounds from words. Retarded readers commonly pronounce **l** as “ell” instead of “luh,” and **r** as “er” instead of “ruh.” Then **like** and **rat** become two-syllable horrors, “ell-ike” and “er-at.” Often it is necessary to explain to the child that the sound a letter makes is not the same as its name. **B** says “buh” not “bee.”

You will notice that in the list of consonant sounds **c**, **q**, and **x** are not included. These superfluous letters do not represent additional sounds but duplicate the sounds of other letters. The letter **c** is pronounced either *s* or *k*, **qu** as *kw*, and **x** as *ks*.

The sixteen vowel sounds, in contrast with the consonants, may be said out loud, shouted if you like. The only ones that offer any difficulty are the short vowel sounds, which are the most frequently used but which we are the least aware of by themselves.

In speaking of these sounds to your student, call them “long **a**,” or the “long **a** sound,” or *ā* (making the sound), “long **e**” or *ē*, and the “short **a**” or *ǎ*. Similarly, you may speak of the “**b** sound” or *b* (making the sound), the “**d** sound” or *d*, the “long **oo** sound” or *oo*.

THE SOUNDS AND THEIR SYMBOLS

5 long sounds

ā **ate**
ē **be**
ī **ice**
ō **bone**
ū **use**

5 short vowel sounds

ă **at**
ĕ **egg**
ĭ **it**
ŏ **on**
ŭ **up**

6 special vowel symbols

oo **shoot**
oo **book**
oy **boy**
aw **paw**
ou **ouch**
ă **ah!**

18 consonant sounds

b **big**
d **dog**
f **fun**
g **go**
h **hat**
j **jump**
k **kind**
l **like**
m **me**
n **no**
p **pet**
r **run**
s **see**
t **tell**
v **very**
w **will**
y **you**
z **zero**

6 special consonant sounds

th **the, think**
ch **child**
sh **she**
zh **treasure**
ng **sing**
hw **where**

In the same way, practice the sounds of the following consonant combinations called the “blends.” With monotonous regularity children with reading problems mispronounce them as independent syllables because they have been taught to do so. **Br** becomes **bur**, **cr**, **cur**; **pl**, **pul**; **sn**, **sun**, etc., the play is read as “plu-ay.” Instead, say “brush,” “crush,” etc.

The blends, of course, are not new sounds but combinations of the ones already learned. However they are said so close together that they seem like new sounds and should be learned as separate entities.

Blends in the left-hand column would be represented phonetically by the same letters printed in italics, thus *br*, *cl*. There are nine exceptions, all containing **c** or **qu**. These sounds are represented by phonetic symbols in parenthesis.

THE CONSONANT BLEND

br bring cr (<i>kr</i>) crack fr from dr drink gr grow pr petty tr try chr (<i>kr</i>) chrome scr (<i>skr</i>) scrap shr shriek spr spring str string thr throw bl blue cl (<i>kl</i>) clean fl flap	gl glow pl play sl slow spl splash sc (<i>s</i>) scent sc (<i>sk</i>) scat sch (<i>sk</i>) school sk sky sm small sn snow sp spot squ (<i>skw</i>) skaw st stop sw swing tw twin
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There is one more phonetic symbol used, and it is the ə. It is called the *schwa* it sounds for the neutral sound found in unaccented syllables. In the words **bag**, **beg**, **big**, **bog**, and **bug** each vowel has its distinctive sound, but the **a** in **about**, the **e** in **taken**, and **i** in **pencil**, the **o** in **lemon**, and the **u** in **circus** are all shortened up to sound approximately the same and all are represented by ə. (as in *əbout*, *ireləvənt*). “Buh,” and “duh,” and “cuh” referred to earlier should be written *bə*, *də*, and *kə*. The concept of schwa is mentioned for the sake of accuracy and because the student will encounter it if he consults a dictionary. It explains much of our trouble with spelling. Since so many vowels are pronounced alike, we cannot always guess the spelling of a word from its sound.

The phonetic symbols printed throughout the material serve the purpose of focusing the student's attention on the sounds and help him identify them in the words he speaks and reads.

This is a simplified phonic system and differs from those in the dictionaries as follows: (1) Only one **th** sound is given (there are really two, as in **the** and **thin**, but it is not necessary to teach both to beginners. Just say, “For **th** you put your tongue between your teeth”); (2) the *hw* sound (written **wh**, as in **when**) is listed as a separate sound, whereas it is really a “blend”; and (3) two additional sounds have been omitted, both of which occur before the letter **r**. The words **air**, **bear**, **care**, **their**, etc., are listed here with the *ā* words; **here**, **beer**, **fierce**, **fear**, etc., with the *ē* words. Webster's *New World Dictionary* represents the vowels in these words by *â* and *ê*, but says they are pronounced in various ways, of which *ā* and *ē* are two. This is explained for the sake of accuracy, but don't bother the children with it.

Owing to the fact that there are more than forty sounds and only twenty-six letters, many of the letters are pronounced in more than one way and some sounds are represented by two letters. To further complicate things, all the long vowel sounds and many of the other sounds are regularly spelled in more than one way. All this will become clear as you go through the system. There are two reasons for our mixed-up system of spelling.

One is that English has borrowed words from many other languages. The other is that, historically, pronunciation has changed faster than spelling. “One” used to be pronounced in two syllables about the way a southerner would say “owner.” In English there are a large number of homonyms, or words which sound alike but have different meanings, for example, **gait** and **gate**, **wait** and **weight**, **read** and **reed**. It is a great advantage to have them spelled differently because the reader then knows at once which one is meant.

Do not be afraid that you do not know enough phonics to teach it. The happiest teaching situation is where you and the student are making discoveries together. Every step is explained in detail and will be easy to follow. Unless you are an experienced teacher of remedial reading, you will probably learn a good deal that is new to you about the spelling of so-called nonphonetic words, which follow a more regular system than most people realize. You may want to skim through the system before you start teaching it. In any case, it is recommended that you read the few pages of the advanced part so that you can see what kinds of mistakes are made and what sorts of difficulties are encountered by students who have been taught reading and spelling without the proper background in phonics.

The second way to prepare yourself to teach is to try to divest yourself of the idea that because your student has had trouble in reading and spelling he is not bright. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that no matter how poor his reading and spelling, this is not in itself any sign that he is unintelligent. One of the author’s first cases was a boy who had attended school for five years and still could read nothing except **ing**. Yet he had a high I.Q. and, once started properly, learned to read rapidly.

You must convey to your student the idea that he is normal and that it is not his fault that he has had difficulty. Simply tell him that he was not taught properly. A child who been trained in phonics and reading, but who left with the feeling that he lacks some ability which other children have, will often still remain a problem and will not have the courage to use what he has learned.

The general teaching procedure is simple. At first the student is simply asked to repeat sounds after the teacher while looking at the letters on the page. Thus, an association is set up between the sounds and the letters. You will not have to drill him on these sounds over and over until he knows them perfectly. Indeed, you are to tell him he does not have to memorize all these things. It is sufficient if he can read a line or two at a time after you. The first five pages are a preview of the whole system—the twenty-letters, forty sounds, thirty-nine digraphs, and twenty-nine blends. On the next two pages he reads consonants and vowels combined into syllables. It is not necessary to show him how to blend letters. Simply pronounce the combinations, have him pronounce them after you, and he will understand how this blending is done.

The first two columns on the **A/a** page will be a struggle. After that he will be able to read the next phonograms on the **A/a** page and the words on the **A** page by himself. The rest of this system will go rapidly. It is not a matter of teaching and drilling over and over again. It becomes simply a matter of having the student read what is on the page.

As for timing, it works out best if you go through the system rapidly in half-hour or hour lessons. Even children as young as seven or eight can spend an hour at a time without becoming tired. By going through this period of concentrated rapid work, instead of stretching it out over weeks or months, the child has a feeling of suddenly getting insight into what it's all about. Thus, after three or four days work he changes from a state of apathy or despair to one of courage and confidence. It cannot be stressed too much that you must maintain a good steady pace and move along with speed and enthusiasm, without requiring memorizing of the first steps. All the items on the first six pages are repeated over and over again, and there is no danger of their not being learned by the time you finish.

Now for the first step: The best way to begin with a little fellow who seems to have no ability in attacking a new word is to turn first to the long words on pages 41 and 42 and ask, "What do you do when you come to a new word you don't know? How do you sound it out?", and then don't wait for an answer, but say, "Let's read this first word here." Start with **kangaroo**, divided into syllables, and say, "What does **k** say?" If he doesn't answer, say, "**k** says 'kuh,' and **a-n-g** says 'ang' so that makes **kang**. **A** 'uh' and **r** says 'ruh' and **oo** says *oo*, so that makes 'aroo.' Now let's put it all together, **kangaroo**. You know what a **kangaroo** is don't you? Now you read it twice carefully while you look at the syllables, **kangaroo**, **kangaroo**. Now read the word here where it is written together, not divided up. Good! Now you will remember that word, and you can read it any time you meet it" And he *will* be able to read it next day and any day. He will have associated the letters, the sounds, and the meaning, and the word will have become a meaningful unit, which he can recognize at a glance.

If he is interested you can teach him another word or two. For an older child who has a fairly sizable stock of sight words and knows some phonics, but gives up on long words, you may take one of the harder words down on the page, such as **concentrating**, and work through that. An astonishing number of children trained to look at the first of the word or the last of the word or the two tall things sticking up in the middle actually do not know that sounds go all the way through a word, and none of them have any idea of syllables, but they get this idea by being helped to sound out one or two words,

Perhaps your student has had a little phonics and starts sounding out the first syllable of **concentrating** by saying *k-ō-n* and then painfully combining them into **con**. Then when he starts reading the word again he goes through this whole process a second time. Explain that, "You did it just right, *k-ō-n* makes **con**, but you don't sound the syllable out a second time; that is only for the first time you read it. Once you sound it out, *k-ō-n*, then you just read it a couple of times, saying **con**, and then you know the first syllable of **concentrating** and you never have to sound it out again." Then show him that **con** is not only the beginning of **concentrating** but that it occurs in lots of other words. Show him **container** and **conversation** on the same page. Point out that once he has learned the **con** in **concentrating**, he will know that syllable wherever he meets it and it will help him in reading dozens of other words. Take the dictionary and show him how many words start

with **con**. Put the word **concentrating** in a sentence or two so you are sure he is aware of the meaning, not just of the sounds.

If he gets the idea and is interested, you may want to teach him other words from this page in the same way, and show him that the same syllables occur over and over again in different words. **Tion, ment, and trans** are in a great many words, so once he has learned them, he can read them right off wherever he sees them.

This same procedure should be used with an advanced student. Get him to try difficult words he does not know, perhaps those on page 43 or some in the dictionary. Tell him to start at the left and keep going until he comes out at the other end. He should read by syllables rather than by individual letters. It may be possible to introduce the basic idea of spelling right here for this older child. After he has read one of the words by syllables twice and then as a whole once or twice, you may cover the word and say, "Now write it," and he will find to his surprise that he can write it correctly. Tell him to say the syllables as he writes them, not the letters. This is a description of how gifted children seem to teach themselves reading and spelling without any effort. The first time they meet a word they spend a little time going through it from left to right by syllables, pronounce it as a whole, become aware of its meaning, and from then on recognize it instantly. After a few hours spent on this phonics system, any pupil will have acquired this knack. "Reading by syllables" does not mean that you divide a word into syllables before you start to read it. Rather you just start at the left and keep going, and the sounds fall into syllables of their own accord.

You may not believe it can all be this simple, but it is. The problem reader and speller, not having been taught the right method of learning to read and spell a word, has been using totally inadequate methods, some of which he has been taught and some of which he developed on his own. One little boy, confronted with the word **knew**, said brightly, "I know, you look at the end of the word and then you say the **k!**" Many children try to teach themselves their spelling lessons by reciting the letters of each word over and over in a sort of rhythmic chant, disregarding syllables. To learn **succeed**, for instance, after one hasty glance at the word, they gaze off into the corner of the room and say over and over **s-u c-c e-e d**. They are attempting the impossible task of memorizing a nonsense pattern of sounds instead of words, and these sound patterns desert them on the Friday test.

After this preliminary lesson on long words, the next step is to check up and see whether your student really knows all the letters of the alphabet well enough to name and print them. A typical retarded reader is still confusing **b, d, p,** and **q,** and perhaps **m, n,** and **w,** at the age of ten. You can show him that these first four letters are really all the same shape but are written in different positions, and it is the position that is important. Also **s** and **c** must face the right way. This is the first and essential step in eliminating "poor visual imagery" and a tendency to make reversals. Now you are ready to go ahead. Equip yourself with a pencil for pointing, some paper for writing out sample words, and a dictionary. You will find this work will stimulate curiosity about words and spelling, and you will refer to the dictionary often.

One last point may be made. Some of the brighter and more advanced students will start challenging the system, the rules, and the teacher. They ask questions and bring up exceptions with great gusto. This is a fine and healthy sign and should be encouraged. Get such students to go through the dictionary and make up their own rules. Let them try to find a rule for the sound of **g** before **e**, **i**, and **y**, for instance. They will learn fast this way. For younger students, it is better to avoid mention of exceptions and just state, in answer to questions, "We take that up later on." All that remains is to follow the time-honored custom of beginning teachers the world over, namely, keep one page ahead of the class!

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“**Phonics in Action: Sound and Sense**” was taken from *Reading: chaos and cure* by Sibyl Terman and Charles Child Walcutt, McGraw Hill, NY, 1958. It contains essential background information for teaching the *Through the Phonics Barrier*.

The Teacher Manual is also available. *Through the Phonics Barrier* is available for free download from the www.donpotter.net web site.

Don Potter, 11/1/03, updated 5/9/09. The recent purchase of a *Macbook Computer* gave me an opportunity to upgrade the phonics symbols and make a few changes. This was one of the first phonics methods I published on my web site and remains one of the best.

There is now an entire page of materials (including mp3 audio files) dedicated to this superb method:

http://donpotter.net/education_pages/through_the_phonics_barrier.html

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