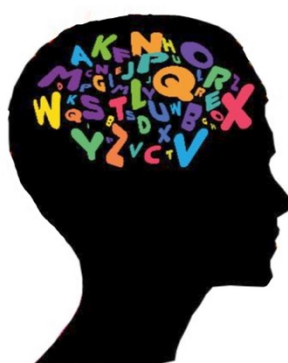


PD 2 KEY PHONEME FAMILIES

Teaching phonics is essential for children learning to read:

“When children begin to learn to read, they are building neurological connections between parts of the brain that store letters (visual information) and sounds (phonological information). ... the ability to convert the written word to the spoken word through phonological decoding is crucial in the early development of reading.”¹



This can also be seen in the biggest study ever done in the world, the National Reading Panel (2005):

“[The National Reading Panel] ... led to a definite conclusion that systematic phonics instruction gave children a faster start in learning to read than responsive instruction [‘just in time’ intervention when problems were detected] or no phonics instruction.”²

“These reviews [the National Reading Panel, the Rose Review, the Department of Science and Training] have revealed a strong scientific consensus around the importance of phonics instruction in the initial stages of learning to read.”³

This shows us that teaching children letter-sound relationships is demonstrably the best way to lead them to become competent readers.

¹ Buckingham, J., Wheldall, R. and Wheldall, K. (2019). Systematic and explicit phonics instruction: A scientific, evidence-based approach to teaching the alphabetic principle. In R. Cox, S.Feez & L Beveridge (Eds), *The alphabetic principle and beyond*. Primary English Teaching Association Australia

² Shanahan, T. (2005). *The National Reading Panel Report: Practical Advice for Teachers*, Learning Point Associates

³ Castles, A., Rastle, K. and Nation, K. (2018), *Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert*, Association for Psychological Science

The problem

Our alphabet mostly matches the sounds in English to one or more letters.

But isn't English too irregular to allow a phonics approach to work?

What about the exceptions?

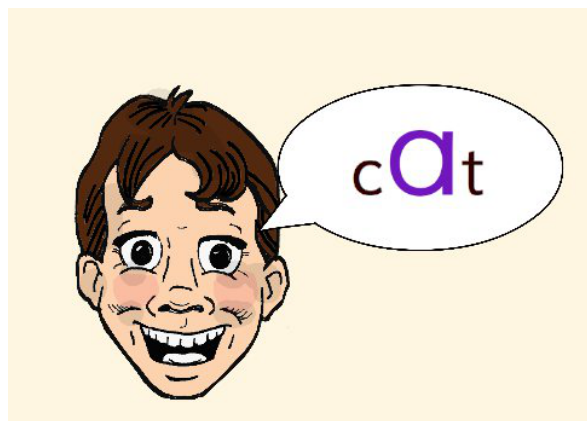
Expert on literacy studies and reading scholar Dr. Louisa Moats has studied the correspondences and gives this assurance:

“Approximately 50% of all English words can be [read] accurately by sound-symbol correspondence patterns alone, and another 36% can be [read] accurately except for one speech sound (usually a vowel). ... Truly unpredictable spellings, typically leftovers from Old English, are common ... Surprisingly, approximately only 4% of all English words in print defy explanation and are truly irregular. They are often the oldest words in the English language whose pronunciations have changed over many centuries of use.”⁴

Words this old and this irregular are exceptions (see Paper 1), and need to be taught in easy stages. They are of course essential, but need to be treated carefully. Introducing too many irregular words too soon is not a good idea.

The phoneme families

The sounds of English – the **phonemes** - are naturally divided into the vowels (open sounds, like “a”) and the consonants (the closed or “stopped” sounds, like “t”).



There are 21 open sounds (vowels), and 27 closed sounds (consonants).

Here are the 21 vowel phonemes⁵:

⁴ Moats, L. & Tolman, C. (2009). Excerpted from *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling* (LETRS) Sopris West

⁵ Victorian Education Department (2023), www.vic.gov.au/literacy-teaching-toolkit-early-childhood

PHONEMES

THE 21 VOWEL SOUNDS

SHORT VOWELS	a cat	e leg	i sit	o top	u rub	oo u book put
LONG VOWELS	ai ay paid tray	ee ea bee beat	ie igh pie high	oe ow toe flow	oo ue moon cue	
'R" CONTROLLED VOWELS	ar car	er ir ur her bird hurt		or cork		
OTHER VOWELS	au saUCE	ow ou cow out	oy oi boy void	eer ear deer near	air ere hair there	our tour
UNSTRESSED VOWEL	Schwa across balloon suppose					

Here are the 27 consonant phonemes⁶:

PHONEMES

THE 27 CONSONANT SOUNDS

STOPS	p pet	b bet	t tip	d dip	k c cap	g gap			
NASAL	m met		n net		ng sing				
FRICATIVES	f fan	v van	th thin	th this	s sue	z zoo	sh ship	ge "zh" beige	h hat
AFFRICATIVES & LATERAL	ch chain		j joy		l leg		r red		
GLIDES & OTHERS	w wagon		y yarn		k + s = x box		k + w = qu quit		

How to teach these phonemes?

There are a variety of approaches, and each state education department will have its own recommendations for best practice.

⁶ Victorian Education Department (2023), www.vic.gov.au/literacy-teaching-toolkit-early-childhood

The FivefromFive team at Macquarie University offer this more global advice for a sequence of teaching grapheme-phoneme correspondences:

1. Individual consonants — b ,c ,d...
2. Short vowels — a (cat)
3. CCVC words (stop, frog) & CVCC words (jump, best)
4. Consonant digraphs — ck (back)
5. Long vowels in CVCe words (cake)
6. Long vowels in CVVC words ai/ay (rain, may)
7. R-controlled vowels — ar (bark)
8. Diphthongs and other vowel patterns like vowel digraphs — oi/oy (join, boy), oo (spoon)⁷

The key to effective phonics instruction, however, whatever the program chosen, is that it must be

- (1) **systematic** (a carefully designed sequence)
- (2) **explicit** (teaching children directly, not expecting them to figure it out or guess)
- (3) **cumulative** (starting with simpler elements and adding more complex elements later).

The full scope and sequence for the phonics program should be mapped out in advance – across the whole period of early reading instruction (one, two or three years typically). And it should be adhered to carefully.

How to get started on phonics using Ziptales?

Amongst the resources teachers might use, it is important to know that Ziptales offers its own set of phonics lessons for beginning readers.

These are called “**Easy Readers**”.

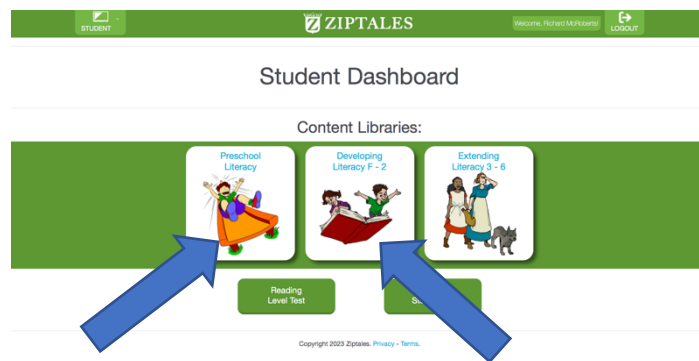


Easy Readers

⁷ Buckingham, J. et al <https://fivefromfive.com.au/phonics-teaching/essential-principles-of-systematic-and-explicit-phonics-instruction/scope-and-sequence/>



They are to be found in the early years sections of the Ziptales library.



Easy Readers

The six sets of lessons cover the most important families of phonemes – across both vowels (and vowel blends) and consonants.

The table below shows the order of the lessons.

EASY READERS

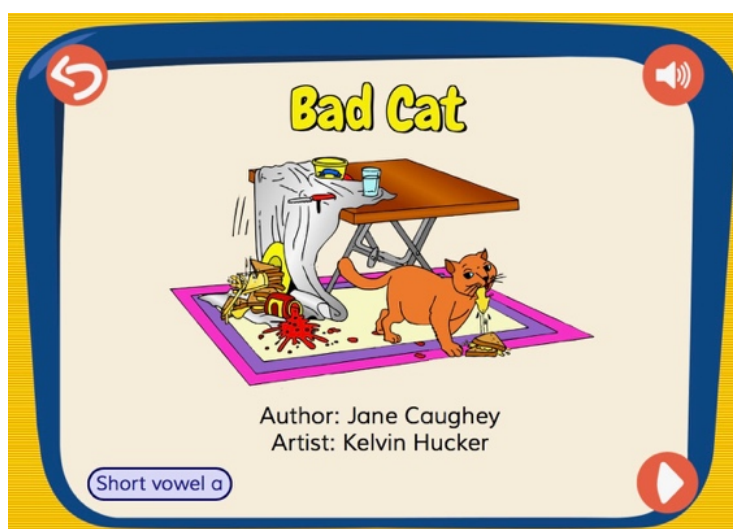
HOW THE LESSONS MAP ENGLISH PHONEMES

SHORT VOWELS	a Bad Cat	e Let's get wet	i Is it fun?	o Bob the frog	u Yum, yum yum	Revision I wish Oh No!	
CONSONANT BLENDS	l Play All Day	r The Little Green Crab	s Have you ever?			Revision At the Playground Crazy Dreams	
CONSONANT DIGRAPHS	th The Three Little Birds	sh Shower Fun	ch Charlie the Chatterbox	wh When I was One		Revision Thumps and Thuds What is Bigger Than?	
LONG VOWELS	a - e The Amazing Snake	i - e Would you like?	o - e Close your eyes	u - e Follow the Rules		Revision The Lonely Dragon Five White Mice	
VOWEL CONSONANT DIGRAPHS	-ay Rainbow Bay	-ar The Sparkly Starfish	-aw The Awful Animal Zoo	-er My Big Sister	-ow Chester the Clown	-ow What will I do tomorrow?	Revision Princess in the Tower Fun Day at the Farm
SIMPLE VOWEL DIGRAPHS	-ea What did I hear?	-ee Deep in the jungle	-oa The Grumpy Goat	-oo Looking at Books	-oo Cool School	-ou Guess what I found?	

As might be expected, the lessons start with simpler elements – like short vowels, which are largely regular and predictable phonemes (cat, wet, etc).

In later lessons, more complex elements like vowel digraphs are covered. The lessons are designed to be cumulative.

Let's take an example. The very first lesson is "Bad Cat".



It teaches the short vowel 'a'. The lesson is a funny story about a naughty cat. Rhyme, comic animation and lots of silly jokes are all used to aid concentration and recollection (accessing long-term memory).

Teachers can play the lesson as many times as they wish, to reinforce understanding of that very common phoneme (the short vowel “a” appears in 8.5% of all words)⁸. The text is only 90 words long, and there is a lot of repetition – so children hear the vowel 43 times – in context. The text itself is highlighted to make the words and sounds more obvious and there is a professional voiceover.

“Easy Readers” does not attempt to cover all 44 phonemes. However, it has lessons specifically devoted to 15 of the most common vowel sounds, 6 of the most important consonants, and incidental use of almost all the other consonants.

These lessons, taken in the order arranged, will prove an invaluable help to raising phonemic awareness and helping to teach the key phonemes in a fun and memorable way.

⁸ Spector, B. *Can you guess the most common letters in the English language?* (2023). <https://www.rd.com/article/common-letters-english-language/>