

PD 6 CONSONANT BLENDS AND DIGRAPHS

Many short words follow the pattern of single consonants, preceding and following the vowel, like this:

cat



Others are more complex.

The blending of consonants is incredibly common in English. Here are examples:



tree



fish

There are both **blends** (**tr** being a blend of two *different* consonant sounds, pronounced *separately*) - and consonant **digraphs**¹ (**sh** being a *single* sound made up of *two* consonants).

t + r + ee



(consonant **blend**)

f + i + **sh**



(consonant **digraph**)

Let's take them one by one.

¹ A digraph is when we see two letters (di for two) representing one sound.

Consonant blends

A great many English words feature a blend of **two consonants** – which are **both pronounced** (as a continuous sound). The term “blend” is not to be confused with the action of “blending” –the successive sounding of phonemes in a word (eg c + a + t).

These sound units are sometimes called “consonant clusters”².

Here are some of the most common (at the beginning of the word):

Blends involving “r”

br ... brain, branch, bread, breakfast, brew, brick, bridge, bright, broom, brother, brown, brush

cr ... crab, crack, crane, crash, crayon, crisp, cricket, crocodile, cross, crow, crumb, crumble, crush

dr ... drag, dragon, drain, dream, drink, drop, dress, drive, drift, droop, drum

fr ... frame, free, fresh, friend, fridge, fries, fright, **frog**, front, frost, frown, fruit

gr ... grade, grape, grass, grin, greed, green, grey, grill, ground, grow

pr ... pram, pray, press, price, pride, prime, prince, print, prison, proof, prune

tr ... trace, tractor, trail, train, tram, trap, tree, tremble, trick, trumpet



Blends with “l”

bl ... black, blank, blast, bleed, blew, blind, block, bloom, blue

cl ... clap, claw, click, climb, clip, clock, clown, cliff, cling, club

fl ... flake, flag, flash, flat, float, **flower**, flight, flood, floor, fly

pl ... place, plant, plain, plan, planet, plastic, play, plug, plumber, plus

gl ... glad, glare, glass, glasses, glide, globe, glory, glove, glue

sl ... slap, slate, sleep, slice, slide, slim, slime, slip, slope, slow, slug



² Blevins, W. (2005) *Phonics from A to Z*, Scholastic

Blends with “s”

sc and **sk** ... scarf, scale, school, scooter, score, skate, ski, skin, skip, skirt, skull, sky

sl ... slam, sled, sleep, slice, slide, slim, slip, slope, slot, slow, slug, sly

sm ... small, smart, smash, smell, smile, smoke, smooth

sn ... snack, snake, snail, snap, sneeze, sniff, snip, snore, snow

sp ... space, spade, spare, speak, spear, special, speed, spell, spice, spider, spill, spin, spoil, spoon, sport, spot, spy

st ... stab, stack, stage, stair, stamp, stand, star, stare, start, stay, steak, steal, steam, step, stick, sting, stink, stir, stone, stop, store, storm, stove, stuff



sw ... **swan**, swap, sway, sweat, sweep, sweet, swim, swing, swoop

How to teach consonant blends?

Here is some worthwhile advice.³

1 Make sure the children know what a consonant blend is. It is **two consonants** that **each make their own sound** but we say them very closely together. Give plenty of examples with all necessary visual aids.

2 Use kinesthetic techniques: for example, put two hands up – use an example (eg crab), pronounce the two sounds separately and then bring the hands together and say the blend.

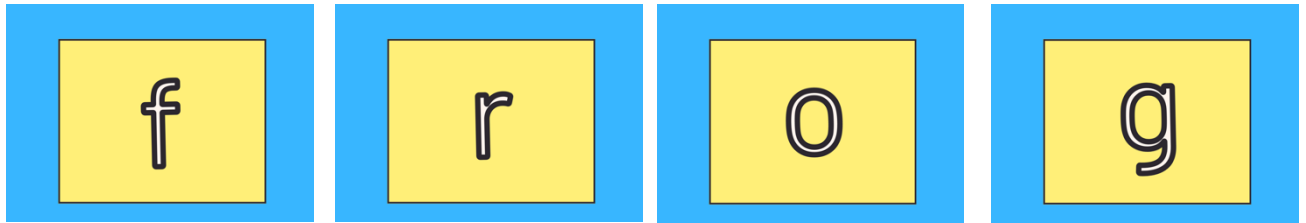
3 Make it multisensory with felt tiles, sand trays or letter blocks.

4 Move from simple words (eg frog) with only four sounds in total, before progressing to more complex words (like spear or spider).

5 When tapping, segmenting, and blending, use one tap, object or box for each letter sound in the blend (eg frog would have four taps).

6 Practise, practise, practise. It is important to try to get children to “overlearn”. Games such as Go Fish and other fun activities, cycling through the same teaching points, is a really good idea.

³ <https://www.theliteracynest.com/2018/11/teaching-consonant-blends.html>



Consonant digraphs

Here we are talking **two consonants** that have been joined together to make **one sound**. It is not a blend (two sounds). Take the “sh” in **sheep** ... it is a *single* articulation.

A digraph is **two letters** making a **single sound**. They include the fricatives **sh** and **th**, the affricative **ch** and the “glide” sound **wh**⁴.

Some of the most common are

ch ... [*initial*] chain, chair, chalk, champ, change, chap, charm, chase, chat, cheap, cheek, cheese, chest, chief, child, chill, chin, chip, chop, choice, chore
 [*final*] beach, bench, branch, bunch, couch, crunch, each, lunch, march, much, pinch, porch, punch, ranch, reach, rich, speech, such, teach, torch

sh ... [*initial*] shade, shake, shape, shark, shed, **sheep**, shell, shine, ship, shirt, shop, shore, short, shot, shout, show, shut
 [*final*] bash, blush, brush, bush, cash, crash, crush, dash, dish, fresh, flesh, push, rush, smash, trash, wash

th ... [*initial*] than, thank, that, the, their, them, then, there, they, thick, thief, thin, thigh, thing, think, third, this, three, thirst, those, thrill, throat, throne, throw, thud, thumb, thump

[*final*] bath, birth, both, cloth, death, faith, earth, month, moth, mouth, path, north, south, teeth, truth, width, with, youth

wh ... whale, what, wheat, wheel, when, where, which, while, white, why



How to teach consonant digraphs?

Here is the advice of one phonics expert⁵:

⁴ Fricatives are sounds forced through a narrow channel; affricates are sounds that begin with a stop or closed position and are then released; glides are sounds that transition into a vowel at the beginning of a syllable.

⁵ Blevins, W. (2005) *Phonics from A to Z*, Scholastic

“Introduce sound-spelling: Explain to children that when we see the letters **s** and **h** together in words they often stand for a new sound. Point out that the letters **sh** stand for the /sh/ sound as in the words ship and dish. Write the words ship and dish on the board as you display a picture of each. Make sure the pictures are labeled. Then blend each word aloud as you run your finger under each letter. Have a volunteer underline the letters sh. Point to the letters sh and ask students to chorally state the sound that the letters stand for.

Blend words: Write the following words and sentences on the board. The first line focuses on words with the /sh/ sound in the initial position... [which] focuses children's attention on the importance of each letter in the word. The second line focuses on words with the sound in the final position. The sentences contain some high frequency words previously taught: sack, shack, hop, shop, dish, fish, mash, rush.

The ship is big.
I wish I had a red dish.

Next distribute the following letter cards set to each child:

a, i, o, sh, m, f, w, p

Have children build as many words as possible. Ask them to write the words on a sheet of paper. Circulate around the room and model blending when necessary.”

How does Ziptales teach consonant blends?

There is a careful progression here. The idea of **consonant blends** (like the two adjacent letters in **frog**), sounded separately, but blended, is relatively easy to explain. It is a variation of the original alphabetical principle – separate sounds are represented by letters - these sounds can be blended together to make words.

Therefore, the Ziptales lessons start with the relatively simple **consonant blends**:

- (1) The **l** family (as in play)
- (2) The **r** family (as in crab)
- (3) The **s** family (as in snake)



These are funny little stories about playgrounds, crabs, birds, shower time, a boy who never stops talking, and various fantastic situations – all designed to engage children’s interest, as well as focussing them on the phonemes being taught.



(“Play all day”, showing the “l” family)

The stories are short (*Play all day* has only 115 words) and there is lots of repetition.

How does Ziptales teach **consonant digraphs**?

The idea of **consonant digraphs** (as in **fish**) is more challenging for beginning readers. For the student to grasp that some letters can be clustered (a digraph) but that the letters are *not* sounded *separately* (as in a blend), is a slightly more complex notion. **Two letters** making **one sound** needs careful explanation.

In the “Simple Digraphs” lessons, we progress to the **consonant digraphs**. Here are the ones chosen:

- (1) The **th** digraph (as in three or thing)
- (2) The **ch** digraph (as in chat or cheese)
- (3) The **sh** digraph (as in shower or shout)
- (4) The **wh** digraph (as in what or when)



Once again, pre-reading and planning is advised. The vocabulary is controlled to words that beginner readers will know. But to make a story convincing, and not blandly artificial, certain less common words will appear (eg chatterbox), which need preparation.



("Charlie the Chatterbox", showing the "ch" family)

Once children have been taken through the stories, and explicit connections made to other teaching of the target blends or digraphs, it is worthwhile to allow them to reread at will. The "overtaching" (or multiple exposure) can only benefit them.

These modules are a happy way to embed key phonetic concepts in the classroom program.